

“In and Out, In and Out”

As the women entered Harriet’s front room, each of them pulling balls of yarn, wooden needles, and incomplete scarves and jumpers and socks from their bags, a war was televised in the corner of the room. Guns shook silently as a man in the foreground mouthed words at the screen. Harriet wanted to take the set off ‘mute’ but a conversation had started in the group. Susan was nodding earnestly as Cathy and Diana chattered about the traffic that afternoon, about some pile-up on the ring road that had made them both minutes late for this meet-up. Harriet’s hand went slowly to the remote on the oak coffee-table as she tried to read the headlines crawling across the bottom of the screen. She’d mislaid her glasses, the headlines were unintelligible, so she pushed the button to turn the set to black.

Harriet turned to the three women removing outdoor clothing and taking seats. Diana wore that self-important tweed jacket of hers (poppy pinned in place on the breast) and a ridiculous hat that was a garish nest of feathers and flowers above a wide brim, as if she were going to Ascot. She placed the hat gently next to her armchair, on the hardwood floor. Susan, as always, kept her coat on, wrapped around her small shoulders and draped over her knees, which were nervously knocking together. A twitching leg was her anxious tick. She had pinned a red poppy to her lapel. Cathy looked the most normal, which meant she was dressed the most like Harriet. She wore a pair of gray flannel trousers and a navy wool jumper over a red checked shirt. The main difference between her outfit and Harriet’s was that Cathy wore a pair of browline glasses. That, and the obligatory red poppy on her jumper. Harriet looked at these women, whom she would probably describe to others as her ‘friends’, and wondered what they were doing in her home. While the way they looked accurately portrayed their personalities, Harriet’s appearance and home – with its gilt framed family photos and perfectly aligned furniture, everything at right angles and sensibly square or rectangular, the ugly vintage tea set (an anniversary gift from God-knew-who) on the mantelpiece – represented nothing within her. She looked around at the women and her home, and she felt like she was not the hostess but the visitor, and she couldn’t wait to leave. But where would she go?

The women were discussing children now. Diana was soon to become a grandmother, so the world for her (and subsequently for everyone else in conversation with her) was made up of children, the very young kind, and all of the ways in which women served them.

‘I’ve told her to breastfeed, of course. I breastfed each of mine, best thing for them. And not too much television, there’s far too much of that these days. Mothers ought to be engaging their children more often, conversations as often as possible.’

Conversations? What was there to talk about with a child? Until their teen years, their interests were fleeting and narrow; Harriet’s youngest daughter once babbled for five minutes about the leaf in her hand, which she dropped to examine a woodlouse, which became the topic of her next manic stream-of-consciousness. And once children had become teens, they were the ultimate solipsists. Teens didn’t realise others weren’t as interested as they were in the minutiae of their daily lives, teens assumed *everyone* was fascinated in the tweet some twit just tweeted to them. This had been the primary obstacle to Harriet fully embracing motherhood. She had done what she could, offered them every material good her children might need, hugged and loved them adequately, but she was forced to accept that she was never entirely

interested in them. Not any more interested than she was in the lives of her friends: she cared, and tried to help, and thought about them, but once they went to their own homes, she felt no shame in turning her thoughts to herself. Her children rarely visited, and she assumed they would drop by or take her up on one of her tentative offers to go see them if they were upset by the distance. But as it stood, she would next see her four grown-up children at Christmas.

Susan tried to bring Harriet into the small talk. ‘How’s your week been, Harriet? How’s Richard?’

This was how they asked each other about their lives, and it was how, in return, they each spoke about their lives: through the lens of what their husbands were doing. It never seemed to occur to the others that in doing this, they cast themselves as supporting characters in their own lives. She recited a standard response about her and Richard both being well, adding that he was away on work for a few days, and watched for the awkwardly hidden reactions from the other women. She used to find Diana’s averted gaze – there it was – and Cathy’s puckered lips – also present – and Susan’s simper – oh, that had changed, today it was a pat on Harriet’s shoulder – infuriating. She tried for a while to ignore these responses. Finally, she accepted such gestures as humourous expressions of their own inability to think *about* their responses. As the women moved on to other issues, some silliness of local gossip, Harriet considered her answer to the question of how Richard was, as if the question had been intended as something more searching than a common pleasantry. How *was* Richard?

He was fine as a father. Was that an acceptable thing to say of someone, that they were simply ‘satisfactory’ at being a parent? He wasn’t awful enough to say he was a terrible or abusive parent – surely that made him just as good as any other non-abusive father. She wouldn’t describe him as excellent, but who was? God knew she had her own failings as a mother. But she was aware of them (not that this knowledge always effected change, caused her to be better), whereas he had always displayed a profound lack of self-insight. He was always righteous, in his own eyes. He had a reason for everything he did, a ‘but’ that qualified any near-admission of anything less than saintliness: ‘Sure, I had to take the belt to the boy when he was younger, but I explained to him why he’d got it, so he’d understand what he’d done wrong.’ Actually, he’d struck their son with the belt only once, when Harriet had been out shopping, and when she returned and heard the sobbing, saw the small, red streak across the pale buttock, she screamed at Richard in a way that he would never have allowed a man to rage at him. He apologised, then recanted with a sombre, patronising explanation of the merits in spanking, and she yelled at him again with her now-hoarse voice. He never disavowed striking children, but he’d never done it since, either. The truth was, she wasn’t happy about how she’d addressed the incident. She tried to justify her screaming as being the only thing he, with his aggressive masculinity, would respond to. But she heard herself thinking this, heard it in a detached, third-person way, and she sounded like Richard justifying his outbursts of anger. The boy had been angry and spoke back to his father; his father was made angry by this and lashed out at the son; she was furious at this and had lashed out at the father, her husband. They were each chained to violence, with chains of different lengths so that each could feel more free than those with a shorter leash.

Her evaluation of this man as a husband – the word ‘lover’ felt, as she tried it on, empty, clumsy, left shoe on the right foot, a word for others, for people not her and her husband – was less middle-of-road. As a husband, he careened from one side of the street to the other. Every six to nine months, they had a renaissance of passion,

a sudden renewal of interest shown in her that had the exuberance of something completely new being discovered or invented. He almost seemed to believe in his infatuation with her, as if he were seventeen again and didn't know everything he knew about her and about sex and about marriage. But with each year, her response was a little less enthusiastic, as she was unable to portray with equal vigour the blissful naivety of someone in love, or even simply lust. It was probably much easier for him to act his part so well, given that for the previous six to nine months he'd been fucking – and then disappointing while he grew bored – someone else. He was essentially a bachelor, sleeping around to get whatever he wanted wherever he could get it, except that he returned to one particular woman every so often.

As a young man, he'd been impulsive, a romantic quality that had led to adventure and turned the commonplace into something exciting. As he'd aged, that impulsiveness had become thoughtlessness. With the same foolhardy (no, simply foolish) abandon that had once led to sex in a park, selling his clothes to pay for a trip to Morocco, moving in together, marriage, he began diving into every nearby bed with every willing girl. Yes, she thought of them as girls deliberately, making a point of their relatively few years compared to herself; god forbid he be at least original in his philandering, maybe bed a few pensioners. Not that she knew of every affair he'd had, and it was possible that one or two of those she'd accepted as having been committed might never have happened, but in all of those that she knew had taken place, the other person had invariably been roughly twenty-five years younger than Harriet.

Sometimes she longed for a more conventionally mundane relationship, the kind where they could form a rut which, along with the boredom and claustrophobia, at least came with enough structure to know where she was. She was tired. She'd once played the game, she used to get angry, heartbroken, righteously furious about his perfidious wandering. She screamed and cried, she threw him out of the house, she even once (hot shame flushed through her face at the memory) threw a tin of tuna at a woman who'd condescended to Harriet that they were 'sisters' who had both been wronged by this man. It was the first Harriet had heard of this particular affair, the first time her suspicions had been vindicated, laid out with no room for doubt. Harriet was paying for groceries at the supermarket, aware that the gaunt, spotty boy scanning her cheap bra and box of tampons was watching, that others in the queue behind Harriet and this young woman talking at her were watching. Perversely, Harriet found she wanted every detail, but she didn't want to have to ask, to actually engage in talking with this woman (this girl, this not-much-more-than-a-teen, this saccharine voice and sincere smile – Harriet might have imagined the braces – this collection of ridiculous attributes pretending to be a whole person). While pretending that everything was perfectly normal, smiling inanely and not looking directly at anyone, she stared at the can in her hand and noticed it was tuna and not the baked beans she'd meant to pick up. As she realised this, the girl patted her shoulder in a way that might have been intended as an act of solidarity but came off as presumptuous, and in the act of tossing the can into the empty basket at the end of the lane, Harriet pulled away sharply from the touch and the can flew past the girl's head. It hit no one, landed harmlessly on a bag of peas, but there was a theatrical hiss from the onlookers, tutting at what they thought was an outburst of anger, and then Harriet did get angry at the collective stupidity of the voyeurs around her, eagerly leaning in to see something they could judge.

Everyone had an opinion on how she ought to live her life. But she thought, with something of a thrill at her own acerbity, *Fuck you, you don't have to live my*

life. She knew these women thought she was weak or lacking in self-respect for putting up with her husband's well known extra-marital dealings (although she wasn't sure about Diana, who had never brought up the issue and changed the subject every time Cathy, trying to proselytise, discussed Richard's adultery). None of them knew the truth of why she had not left him, why she seemed to have given up on chastising him for his deceits, did not seem to want to change him and his ways; the truth was, she didn't know now how to react to his cheating, because she didn't know who she wanted to be anymore. She didn't know if she was still, or wanted to remain, a wife, in which case why get angry at the man she might well leave? At the same time, kicking him out or leaving before she'd thought things through could land her in a difficult place, practically speaking. Her parents had both died early of cancers, and she did not want to burden her kids with putting her up, or burden herself with being in their pockets, and how would she support herself? She supposed she could get a job, but what would a life-long housewife do for an income now?

Harriet realised that the other women were looking at her expectantly, as if she were somehow in charge, as if she were supposed to give some order to proceedings, to say, 'Ready, and ... knit!' They treated her like this every time, probably because it was her home where they convened, possibly because they were content to follow, wanted someone else to lead.

'Anyone fancy a drink? Kettle's just boiled if anyone fancies a tea or coffee. Or there's juice.'

'Ooh, what kind of juice?' Susan asked.

'Um ... I think it's pomegranate?'

'Sounds lovely.'

The other two agreed, so it was three glasses of pomegranate juice for them. As Harriet left for the kitchen, she wondered why she felt relieved to be away from the group for a moment. She didn't need to invite them round if she didn't want to see them. Why had she? Just because she hadn't bothered to cancel? And why hadn't she bothered? She knew why – because there would be questions, they would want a reason for the cancellation, and she didn't have one to offer them. Nothing that would make sense to them anyway.

She went to the fridge and removed the carton. Richard had torn the corner of the top, graceless as ever, and she could picture him tipping his head back to pour the juice down his gullet. She huffed as she took a pair of scissors from the cutlery drawer and poked a hole in the top of the carton. This stopped the juice glugging out in waves that poured over the glass and the counter, but Richard never bothered with it. She told him every time to poke a hole but – no, she refused to have the argument right now, especially as he wasn't even present for it. She poured the juice into glasses, then put the drinks onto a tray. As she lifted the last one, her fingers slid along the glass, pushing it between her wet fingertips, which met as the glass suddenly flipped through the air.

'*Fuck,*' she hissed. The glass had not cracked, but the juice in it had been thrown over her feet and was soaking into the crack that ran along the join between the linoleum and the counter. She knelt and lifted the glass, dropping a tea towel onto the puddle, watching the dark stain spread across the cream cotton. 'Shit.'

She had recently taken up swearing. She smiled a little, a sardonic, get-over-yourself smile, at this phrasing – as if she had adopted a habit as tangible as pilates or smoking. But there was no other way to express it. Swearing had never been a feature of her vocabulary. There were the half-hearted yet thrilling moments in teenage years when she experimented with 'shit' and 'damn', nervous excitement at rebelling

against her conservative parents. But it was a benign rebellion because, of course, her parents never heard it. And her friends were mostly of the same background but, unlike her, eager to emulate the adulthood of their own parents, so they weren't receptive to this kind of language. So that never went anywhere. Then the children began arriving in her early twenties, and for a time – when the first was learning to speak and Harriet, for some anomalous reason, released a 'goddamnit' – she consciously refrained from any aggressive language. And Richard never liked Harriet to 'speak like a sailor' (a received phrase he often used), so she didn't swear when they were alone, or when the children began leaving home. In reality, swearing was not a big deal, not something she missed or had to work that hard to abstain from. But a month or so ago, during a stressful day of tedious home-chores that wouldn't go right, she noticed she was swearing in her internal monologue: *Fucking sweater, and fucking moths. Why won't they die?* She felt a spasm of pleasure, not because these were curse words, but because they were new. This was a new attribute, small but somehow defining, in the way that each chip from a slab of stone was only a cut, an angle, a line here or there, but combined and seen at a distance they described a complete figure.

Still crouched over the damp tea towel on the floor, she noticed the silence in the other room. Harriet waited, knowing they too were waiting, but something stubborn made her stay kneeling and quiet, forcing their hand.

'Harriet? Everything okay in there?'

Harriet stood and put the glass into the sink. She called back that she was fine, no, she didn't need a hand, carry on and she'd be with them in a moment. They began speaking again, leaving her to it.

Harriet heard knocking at the front door. She didn't know who it was, wasn't expecting anyone to be coming by. She called out, 'Can somebody answer that, please?'

'I've got it!' Susan replied.

As Harriet poured a fresh glass of juice into a new glass, she heard the door open, voices speaking in jovial tones in the hallway, footsteps, then group chatter in the front room, the others greeting the newcomer. Harriet fantasised briefly of slipping out of the house through the back door, so no one would know she'd gone, and getting in a taxi, maybe then a train, or even a plane ... But she stopped there, saving the fantasy for later, when she had more time to herself for imagining such things, maybe while she did some ironing. Harriet lifted the tray and slipped back into her role as hostess.

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'Anyone fancy a drink? Kettle's just boiled if anyone fancies a tea or coffee. Or there's juice.'

'Ooh, what kind of juice?' Susan asked, a little too eagerly, hoping to cheer up Harriet, who had seemed troubled by something for the last few minutes. She was probably fretting about Richard's absence. Everyone knew he wasn't to be trusted around other women.

'Um ... I think it's pomegranate?'

'Sounds lovely.'

As Harriet vanished into the kitchen, Susan took a seat and listened to the other two chatting. Diana looked fantastic, as always. Susan liked the hat she'd had on when they arrived, all those colours. Susan could never pull off anything like that. She

wouldn't like to draw that much attention to herself. Still, at least she was pleased with her lot. She didn't envy Diana's clothing, or wish she herself were different. She was who she was, and that was fine. Shame today's young women couldn't feel that way. There would be less of this cattiness, the competing with men in binge-drinking (there was a headline about it yesterday), and competing with other women, placing work above the home, putting off having kids and complaining when it was too late. Yes, there was that egg freezing that was becoming trendy, but it wasn't natural. Susan knew not to say this out loud, because Cathy tended to snigger when they discussed what was and wasn't natural, as if Cathy couldn't see these things for herself. Cathy had funny ideas about nature and nurture.

The idea of 'nature' reminded Susan of the carrier bag between her feet. Inside were some eggs, a few with feathers stuck to them, six muddy carrots, some knobbly broad beans, two thick leeks, and two potatoes. The potatoes were too small, she suddenly wished she hadn't been so mean in selecting them. Still, this was what she had to offer, and Harriet was never ungrateful. And it wasn't as if the others ever brought gifts for the group or the host. These had come from her own garden, grown with love and care, picked (and laid, in the case of the eggs) only this morning. And when she didn't have anything from the garden, she brought chocolates or little nibbles for everyone to share. Not once had any of the others thought to do this. These were the little things that held communities together. It was the lack of these things in the city that had so many people visiting their town every weekend, crowding their farmer's market and racing ridiculous cars along the narrow roads to the outlying countryside.

She was going to take the bag through to Harriet when they heard the sound of something hard hit the floor in the kitchen, then a splash.

'*Fuck ...*'

The women in the front room froze when they heard the curse word. Susan winced when Harriet, more loudly, said, 'Shit.'

Cathy called out, 'Harriet? Everything okay in there?'

'Fine, I'm fine.'

'Can I give you a hand with anything?'

'No, please carry on, I'll be with you in a minute.'

Cathy lowered her voice and said to the group, 'What do you think's got *her* stressed out?' She was thinking of Richard. Diana shrugged, and Susan didn't know what to say. Poor Harriet, it couldn't have been an easy situation. And it wasn't made easier by others trying to tell her how she ought to handle the situation. He was *her* husband, after all. Cathy had made it clear she thought that anything less than righteous anger and immediately kicking Richard out was a betrayal to women everywhere. She was a bit of a feminist like that. To be fair, Harriet had been like that, once. She'd had some very public arguments with her spouse, and had stayed in Susan's guest room twice, years ago, when she'd been considering divorce. And there was that awful scene in the supermarket, somebody had told Susan about it. Apparently Harriet had screamed at some woman who'd been involved with Richard and threw some tins at her head. Still, she'd calmed down in recent years, and perhaps things were working out in her marriage now. It was Harriet's business, no one else's.

Susan brought up the topic of this year's Royal Christmas Message. She talked about what she anticipated the focus of the speech to be, and she lamented the ignorance of those who ignored the tradition.

'I was speaking to someone just the other day,' she said, 'who had *never* seen a Christmas speech. *Never*. I didn't know what to say.'

‘God, I can’t believe Christmas is already on everyone’s minds.’ This was Cathy, of course. ‘The stores begin stocking for it earlier every year. I saw a pack of Christmas crackers for sale in August.’

‘It’s a very important occasion,’ said Diana. ‘Not that anyone remembers what it’s really about.’

‘It’s not important to everyone,’ Cathy retorted.

Susan was not enjoying this turn in the conversation, but before she could correct it, there was knocking at the front door.

Harriet called from the kitchen, ‘Can somebody answer that, please?’

Susan got up from her chair. ‘I’ve got it!’

She left the room and went to the front door in the hallway. She could make out the shape of someone standing on the other side of the stained glass door, a distorted person of spring greens, autumnal ochre, summer yellows, and winter blues. These were also the colours of the wools she had with her, the pretty names printed on the wrapper that held them together. She opened the door to a young woman and an icy breeze. The sun was already setting at four in the afternoon.

‘You must be Collette,’ she said, stepping aside to let her in. ‘I’m Susan.’

‘Yep, I’m Collette. Letty, actually. I’m glad I found the right house, I wasn’t sure if I’d remembered the right address. Should I take my shoes off?’

‘No, I think it’s fine. You can hang your coat there. Come on through, meet everyone.’

Susan pulled her own jacket a little tighter around her thin body. She always felt the cold, even at home where she kept the heating turned up, despite her husband’s grumbling about the electricity. This time of year, she also needed the fire lit in the lounge. The wind that slipped in when she’d opened the door chilled her bones.

Collette followed her into the front room, where the young woman was greeted with warm, if slightly hesitant, smiles. Susan had not thought Collette would turn up, so she hadn’t mentioned anything to the others. Still, it wasn’t as if there was an entrance policy. They were just friendly women who met up to knit and chat. Everyone was welcome, probably.

‘This is Collette – sorry, she prefers Letty. Letty, this is Diana, and this is Cathy. Harriet is in the kitchen – oh, there you are.’

Harriet had brought in the drinks on a tray. She placed them on the coffee table and shook Collette’s hand, which seemed a little formal to Susan. Harriet offered her a drink, but Collette said she was fine without one. Susan turned back to the introductions to explain what had happened.

‘I know Collette’s – Letty’s – mum, we went to school together. I bumped into her last week, and she told me her daughter was interested in knitting. I invited her along.’ Susan hesitated, feeling as if she ought to ask the others directly if this was all right, but she changed her mind. Instead, to say something as her mouth was hanging open and the others were clearly waiting for more, she said, ‘Letty lives in the city.’

Nothing more was said for a few minutes as Collette took a seat on the wicker chair between Susan and the sofa on which Harriet and Diana were sitting. Nobody seemed to have thought about offering Collette a starting point with knitting, or even if she had the required tools. Before Susan could speak, Collette swung her canvas bag onto the floor and pulled out three balls of wool and a pair of knitting needles. Just like that, the five of them were quietly seeing to their own projects.

Susan was halfway through a winter blue jumper. As she set to work on a purl row, she looked around at the others. There seemed to be something of a spotlight on Collette. She stood out without trying. It was her age. The four regulars to the group

were not all the same age: Cathy was leaving her forties behind, Diana was greeting her sixties, and Susan and Harriet were both somewhere in the middle. Still, the new woman was so much younger that there seemed to be only two age groups at the meeting: young and old. A girl and some women. Apparently Collette had finished university a couple of years ago, so she was in her early twenties. She wouldn't have told anyone, but Susan had forgotten that she'd made the invitation through Collette's mother, and it hadn't been particularly sincere. She hadn't really thought the invitation would be accepted, so the offer was extended without consideration. Now that Collette had turned up, Susan wished she had kept her mouth closed. She didn't want another city person arriving in her neighbourhood to exploit the so-called 'quaint' aspects of her life. This group was not some silly, anti-trendy fad for young people to attach to their lives like their ridiculous hairdos and lifestyle choices. Not long ago, there had been an article about hipsters in the weekly magazine Susan read. Susan wondered if Collette was a hipster. It was difficult to tell. It seemed to come down to a sense of irony.

'I like your dress,' Susan said to Collette, who was wearing a blue floral dress and red cardigan, with grey wool tights.

'Thanks, I got it from a brilliant vintage place near where I live.'

Why did she shop at vintage stores? That sounded like a hipster thing. Was it a statement? Still, it was a very nice dress.

Harriet said, 'How long have you been knitting, Letty?'

'I got into it at uni, I found it really soothing, a good way of relaxing between lectures, after exams. It was that or binge-drinking every weekend.'

Diana raised an eyebrow. 'You don't drink alcohol?'

'Oh, I drink, obviously. I just don't like getting trashed.'

'Ah.'

'I mean, I'm not an idiot. I pay attention to the news, I know all about my generation's drinking, all the problems we get ourselves into.'

Cathy glanced at Susan, who noticed this and that the other two dropped their heads suddenly, self-consciously staring at the knitting they were doing. She knew why they were uncomfortable and wished they weren't.

Susan had only had one child. She and her husband had tried for three years to get pregnant before she finally did, and she had never succeeded in having any more. Her husband had talked about doctors for a long time, but she didn't want to hear it. She didn't want to know what was wrong with her, if something was, because hearing it wouldn't change it. If she couldn't have any more, she couldn't have any more. She was more than happy with her beautiful daughter, Penelope. She knew when she named her that it was a bit of an old fashioned name, but Susan liked it and thought people could call her Penny, which they did. Five years ago, Penny passed away. She was twenty-five, and her boyfriend had driven them off the road, killing them both. The police said something about alcohol. Susan didn't know if they meant Penny or the boyfriend had been drinking, but she asked them not to say any more. Whatever else had happened, her daughter was dead. Susan had a knack for seeing what information was vital, and cutting away all the nonsense others got obsessed with.

For the first year after Penny's death, Susan's friends rarely spoke about their own children, or did so tersely. Maybe they thought it would upset Susan that their kids were still alive. Of course, Susan did not hold it against them that their children were alive. She was too busy to be bitter, she was getting on with what mattered to her: contacting Penny in the afterlife. Susan knew people who went to see mediums, and at first she'd shied away from it. She told her friends it seemed like it might be

wicked, one of those things she had been raised to believe were of the devil. But she soon realised that this was a kind of religion she didn't believe in anymore, the kind from America that put God at the centre of everything. God, to Susan, was a kindly figure whose existence was irrelevant, because what Susan needed was the church and its members, the fabric of her social network. She realised that what she really feared was the possibility of actually hearing from Penny, although she didn't know why that scared her. Eventually, she decided to face her fear and give it a go.

At the first few meetings she cautiously attended, she only stayed for the readings and left before people began mixing and sharing stories. She didn't speak to anyone beforehand either, when others were expressing their hopes that Uncle Bill would forgive them, or Joey would simply say hello. Penny never came through. But Susan saw other things, readings that hit the mark for others, and their tears were proof of the medium's abilities. So she attended more meetings and became a regular. Once she opened up and began telling others about her daughter, Penny finally spoke to her. It must have been because Susan had dropped those defensive walls that had prevented Penny connecting. She didn't stay long, but she told her mother she was happy, and that she loved her, and then she was gone again. This instance inspired Susan to help others like her find the solace she'd found. And she continued to try to speak with Penny, even if the contact was brief, or if Penny said the same things, which she did the next few times a medium received her. So Susan didn't need sympathy or pity, and she wished these women didn't feel so awkward about the topic of Penny, because she could still talk to her daughter.

To be fair, Diana wasn't always hypersensitive around her about the issue of children. She often spoke of her own kids, and the coming grandchild. She was a proud mother and rightly so. Susan admired her commitment to her maternal role. Cathy, on the other hand, had very different ideas about motherhood. She was always insisting that she didn't want kids, that she never had and never would. Susan thought of that saying from Shakespeare that people often recited about the lady protesting too much. A long time ago, Diana had asked Cathy something that Susan herself had wondered. After Cathy had told them that children held no interest for her, Diana said, 'Can't you have children?' Cathy had pursed her lips, which she did often, and ignored the question, which seemed a bit rude. It was a fair question. If she couldn't have kids, that would explain her vocal opposition to having them. It would be a way of protecting herself from the pain of being unable to be a mother herself. To be honest, Susan had assumed that Cathy must have tried already for kids and discovered she couldn't have them. As Cathy had never answered the question, they didn't know if they were wrong.

Susan's attention returned to what the others were saying. She realised that the conversation had resumed and had been going on for the last few minutes, while she had been lost in her thoughts about Penny. She looked down at the jumper she was knitting. It was coming together nicely, and it was Penny's favourite colour. Susan had another meeting with a medium tomorrow evening. She left the women to their talking and knitting, while she thought about what she hoped to hear Penny say tomorrow.

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'I like your dress,' Susan told Letty. Diana liked it too, appreciated the whole outfit, the cute blue dress with the flowers printed on it and the poppy red cardigan, though Diana would have preferred her to wear an actual poppy. Harriet was not

wearing one either, but she was at home and was not expected to wear hers round the clock, as long as it was visible to proudly proclaim its message when Harriet was outdoors.

‘Thanks, I got it from a brilliant vintage place near where I live.’

Letty was also wearing wool tights, a touch that suggested a modicum of modesty, especially as they were covered to the knees by the dress, which went against this awful trend of wearing leggings as trousers and exposing one’s underwear wherever possible. It was sad that this girl needed to find a vintage store for clothes like that, especially as Diana could remember buying clothes just like that from Woolies in her own early twenties, or making them with her mother. These days, young people were stuck with buying flimsy scraps of fabric with hideous logos, and there was no chance of them sewing anything for themselves. Look at Letty – for her, a basic skill like knitting was at best a hobby, a quirky pastime that set her apart from her peers.

Harriet asked, ‘How long have you been knitting, Letty?’

‘I got into it at uni, I found it really soothing, a good way of relaxing between lectures, after exams. It was that or binge-drinking every weekend.’

Goodness, now she abstained from alcohol? The more Diana found to like about this girl, the more she resented the direction in which society had been heading for almost fifty years, away from traditional values, from those stalwart traits of Britishness which had served them so well for so long. As much as Letty was to be commended for these qualities, it was shameful that she stood out for that which ought to be the norm. Diana wanted to know more about what had led Letty this way. ‘You don’t drink alcohol?’

‘Oh, I drink, obviously. I just don’t like getting trashed.’

‘Ah.’ Diana was more frustrated with herself than with Letty – she ought to have known better than to have such easily shattered illusions about today’s youth.

‘I mean, I’m not an idiot,’ Letty continued. ‘I pay attention to the news, I know all about my generation’s drinking, all the problems we get ourselves into.’

There was a sudden silence, and Diana suspected the others had gone red or were avoiding eye-contact with Susan, but she couldn’t be sure because her recourse had been dropping her head to stare intently at her knitting. She was working on a purl-less rib for a long, moss green scarf. After a safe minute, she looked back up and reached for her drink, taking a sip of the juice. Susan seemed to be deep in thought, somewhere far from here. Then again, she hadn’t fully been ‘there’ since Penelope had died. Susan had stopped when that had happened. Her life halted, and she became fixated on psychics and the nonsense those charlatans foisted onto the grieving. Diana had tried several times to have Susan meet with the parish priest, for a lesson against the fraud of mediums and their ilk, and perhaps some Christian comfort too.

‘What are you working on?’ Diana asked Letty.

‘Well ... it started out as my first attempt at mittens,’ she held up one finished mitten and one unfinished bundle that could become another mitten, ‘but somehow they’ve ended up different sizes.’

‘You can always start again.’

‘I will, but I’ve started this one now, so I’ll finish, then make another pair of odd sizes, then match the mittens up.’

‘That seems a difficult solution to the problem,’ Diana said, frowning.

Cathy said, ‘I think it’s quite clever. You’ll have two pairs at the end of it, and you’ll have practiced making mittens of different sizes.’

‘There isn’t any difference in method,’ Diana argued. ‘There’s no harm in starting over.’

‘And there’s no harm in doing it her way,’ said Cathy, who must have been in one of her moods. She and Diana occasionally clashed, but they were capable of enjoying each other’s company and had learned to avoid contentious subjects, such as contraception for teens, integration of Muslims into British culture, abortion, and any of the many other topics liberals liked to complicate for God knew what reason. There was a reason there were only ten commandments, not because the list was exhaustive, but because they distilled morality into its essential elements and demonstrated that the good life was, at bottom, not that complicated. Childrearing was yet another matter on which they disagreed, and on which Cathy was very vocal with her opinion. The group had heard often about how annoying Cathy found it to be, as she saw it, constantly seen as a baby-making machine by society at large. She went on and on about having no interest in children, in wanting to do more with her life, as if being a mother was a second-rate existence, and eventually Diana got fed up of having her own life choices condemned. She was tired of being made to feel as if she had let down her gender because she wasn’t a feminist – which was itself ironic, that feminism was supposed to liberate women, and yet it constantly trampled over her right to accept the traditional role for herself as a woman. One could only be a true feminist, a true *woman*, if one chose what the feminists approved of. All of this frustration finally needed somewhere to go, and so after listening to a list of reasons Cathy would not have children, she asked her, ‘Can’t you have children?’ The effect was immediate, Cathy went silent, and Diana felt satisfied at last. *If you can’t take it, she thought, don’t dish it out.*

‘Do you have any music?’ Letty asked.

Diana looked up from her scarf. ‘We don’t usually ...’

Cathy said, ‘We could listen to some music. Harriet, do you have a CD player in here?’

‘In the kitchen.’

Letty picked up her canvas bag. ‘I have an iPod and speakers.’ She pulled the iThingy out of the bag, as well as a pair of gourd shaped devices with a wire wrapped around them. She placed the strange speakers on the floor at her feet, unwrapped the wire and plugged it into the shiny rectangle in her hand. Diana actually owned one of these, a gift from her children years ago, but she hadn’t taken it out of the box, and wore her ignorance of these things with pride. She had no real problem with the thing itself, but she found the immediacy of modern life distasteful. Everything had to be now, now, now, and that was why the quality of things was in decline: it didn’t matter if these toys were rubbish, the next would be along now, now, *now*.

‘Is folk music all right?’

The older women nodded. Folk music was all about violins and cellos, traditional lyrics, mellow enough to be inoffensive, ignorable. The group continued to knit as the music began, not too loud, so they could still talk with each other.

‘I like this,’ Cathy said. ‘Who is it?’

‘Her name’s Anaïs Mitchell. I thought this song suited the group because of the “in and out” line, like knitting, and she talks about sewing a party dress.’

‘I like her voice,’ said Susan.

‘It’s unique, isn’t it?’ said Harriet.

‘I like the sharpness,’ said Cathy, having to have one up on the others again, having to demonstrate that she was thinking more profoundly than those around. ‘It’s a bit sarcastic, this song. Can you play it again?’

The song started over, and they all listened quietly, knitting left aside for a few minutes.

‘I like the way she’s trying to be everything for this guy, and then when he leaves, she’s trying to be everything he doesn’t want.’ There went Cathy again, unable to take things as they were, unable to enjoy a pretty song for being nothing more than a pretty song. ‘She can’t win, she’s defining herself based on what he wants or doesn’t want. It’s sad. You wish she could define herself on her own terms.’

Diana tried to remove the pressure on Letty to think of the music in these analytical terms, to reassure her they were not all as stubbornly dull or confrontational as Cathy was being. ‘Well, I think it’s a very pretty song.’

Cathy cut in, ‘Yes, it’s that too, it’s lovely. And that it makes you think as well is commendable.’

‘Yes, but sometimes one doesn’t want to have to think deeply about everything one listens to. Sometimes it’s nice simply to enjoy things.’

This time Letty answered. ‘I guess for some people the enjoyment is in analysing the music, or the book, or the film, and for others that gets in the way. I don’t think there’s a right way to approach it. At least, that’s what I got out of my A-level course in English Lit. There are no right or wrong answers.’

Diana appreciated the tactful way she had sought a middle ground, and she was happy to take it if it meant no more of Cathy’s nonsense. But something about the phrasing – ‘no right or wrong answers’ – made her itch the way she did when she heard the word ‘tolerance’ in the media; she was forever being admonished to ‘tolerate’ this and that about other people and their strange ways, including their more destructive tendencies. What irked her about this was that the word ‘tolerance’ was used synonymously with ‘acceptance,’ when the first meant to put up with in spite of differing opinions, and the second meant to truly feel the tolerated thing was good. As long as she felt something was wrong, she could not tolerate it. This was what it meant to have values, a sense of morality, that there were indeed, despite current trendy ideas, such things as right and wrong.

It seemed as though Harriet had fallen for the nonsense of tolerance with regard to her husband’s breaking of the wedding vows. There had been a time when she showed passionate abandon in her arguments with the man, and these displays were the talk of many people in the area. But in recent times, there was nothing from Harriet, not a reaction or word, despite the fact that it was common knowledge that Richard was still offering it about as if he were a younger, single man. Richard’s behaviour was of the kind that fell into the ‘wrong’ category, *definitely* wrong and not simply wrong in Diana’s *opinion*. The solution was as clear as the immorality itself: they ought to see a marriage counselor, work on whatever issues were at the heart of Richard’s behaviour, and agree on changes to address the problem – on his part, he could be more honest about his needs, and on her side, she could ensure a home he would *want* to return to. Crucially, this should have been done in private. None of this business of yelling at each other in public, certainly no more attacking women in supermarkets with tinned food. Some degree of modesty, of shame (another untrendy concept, God forbid anyone should have felt shame or guilt), of – all right, it was what Diana really thought – propriety. When clear rules were put in place and every member of the community agreed to them and acted in accordance with them, and when those who broke them were punished, rather than dismissed as having had a ‘troubled childhood,’ then these complications would not arise. Not that Diana would ever tell Harriet any of this; that would contravene the principle of keeping one’s place and keeping one’s silence on matters that were someone else’s concern. But she

knew Harriet was not doing as Diana believed she should, there was no marriage counselor, because that would have become a topic of discussion in the group. No, Harriet's current silence was only because she had nothing to say. She had given up on right and wrong within her marriage.

She realised, as she finished the rib she'd been working on, how frustrated she felt. It was clear that Cathy was in one of her confrontational moods and was gearing up to something, perhaps a recruitment drive for whatever women's lib group she probably volunteered for, and today Diana felt like biting back. It went against everything she believed in, and she would not be as direct as some others, but she would not stand for any nonsense. Not today. Today, somebody ought to make a case for real values, for right and wrong. If Cathy wanted to argue, they would argue, but Diana would do it with some grace and style.

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'I like this,' Cathy said of the music playing. 'Who is it?'

'Her name's Anaïs Mitchell. I thought this song suited the group because of the 'in and out' line, like knitting, and she talks about sewing a party dress.'

Susan and Harriet agreed that they liked the singer's unique voice, which was certainly different, but Cathy was more interested in the lyrics. She told Letty, 'I like the sharpness. It's a bit sarcastic, this song. Can you play it again?'

The song began again, and Cathy paid close attention to its message, her knitting put aside for the moment. The song was somewhat at odds with the picture of femininity that Letty portrayed, at least as she presented herself here today. The anachronistic dress, the bow tied at the back of her head, the dainty, impractical shoes, these gave the impression of a young girl impersonating her mother. Her vibrant red lipstick was unsubtle, and the pink blusher gave her doll's cheeks. There was also her saccharine voice, which sounded affectedly 'cute,' and the off-putting way she used upspeak, turning each sentence into a question, as if she were too timid to make a declarative statement. Cathy's concern was that Letty appeared to have bought into ('internalised' was the popular word, she believed) conservative notions of femininity, the damaging kind that Cathy had rejected and yet been constantly subjected to her whole life. She wanted to warn Letty, because things were only going to get more difficult as she got older. Cathy knew this firsthand: she was not only a woman, an offence for which the punishment was having one's tongue metaphorically cut out, she was an *older* woman, the fairer sex past its culturally ascribed best-by date. For these two combined crimes she was, as far as society was concerned, mute. Barely seen, not heard.

Wanting to explore Letty's views on such issues, Cathy used the song as a prompt. 'I like the way she's trying to be everything for this guy, and then when he leaves, she's trying to be everything he doesn't want. She can't win, she's defining herself based on what he wants or what he doesn't want. It's sad, too. You wish she could define herself on her own terms.'

Diana huffed, 'Well, I think it's a very pretty song.'

Cathy said, 'Yes, it's that too, it's lovely. And that it makes you think as well is commendable.'

'Yes, but sometimes one doesn't want to have to think deeply about everything one listens to. Sometimes it's nice simply to enjoy things.'

Christ, something was rubbing Diana the wrong way this afternoon.

Letty said, 'I guess for some people the enjoyment is in analysing the music, or the book, or the film, and for others that gets in the way. I don't think there's a right way to approach it. At least, that's what I got out of my A-level course in English Lit. There are no right or wrong answers.'

After a half hour of knitting to the accompaniment of Letty's soft music and an occasional comment on someone's progressing project, the women began questioning the group's new member on her life.

'Do you have a boyfriend, Letty?' asked Susan.

'No. I was seeing somebody, but that didn't go anywhere. I thought it was more serious than it was.'

'Plenty more fish, though.' Susan genuinely believed in the power of platitudes.

'I guess I'm not interested in casual dating, I'm a bit old fashioned really.'

Cathy noticed Diana's arched eyebrow and wondered if that was a sincere smile or a smirk on her face. Susan pressed on for more.

'Would you like a family one day?'

'I have a picture of how I'd like to be one day,' said Letty, the blusher on her cheeks fading into the red that spread over her face. 'It's silly, but I'd like a little cottage and a dog, and I would like to be married.'

'How many kids would you like?'

'I don't know about kids. I'm not sure if I'm the mothering type. Not that I'm saying never, but I'm not in a rush.' There was an uncomfortable pause in which Diana and Susan looked to each other and then back to their knitting, and Cathy saw Letty trying to understand what she'd said wrong. Then she said, 'Don't get me wrong, it's not like I'm a feminist.' Letty pulled a face, tongue poked out in distaste. 'I believe everyone is equal, and it doesn't matter what gender you are.'

Cathy spoke up. 'Feminists believe that too.'

'I guess ... But I don't agree with the way feminists blame men for everything. Shouldn't part of being a strong woman be taking responsibility for yourself, not blaming the other sex for all your problems?'

Cathy shook her head, unable to unpack everything that was wrong with Letty's last statement, unable to decide where to begin. How could somebody who grew up with the benefits of all that Cathy's generation had struggled for be so ill-informed about what that movement stood for? But all eyes were on Cathy (except for Letty's – she went on knitting, oblivious to the tension around her), the other women were anticipating some kind of outburst. Cathy knew what they thought of her, and she knew that sometimes her passion could become obnoxious; rather than provide them any satisfaction, she simply cleared her throat and returned her attention to her knitting.

Diana wouldn't leave the original matter alone. 'Just don't leave it so long to have kids that you regret not doing it sooner.'

Harriet said, 'No need to rush it either.'

Cathy was pleased that this had been said, and more pleased that it hadn't been left to her to say it. Honestly, she got tired of saying the same things over and over to people who didn't seem to take any of it in. She'd had entire conversations with strangers (the fact that they had just met never proved much of a barrier to invasive questions about uterine matters) which ended with the other person walking away knowing nothing about Cathy other than that she had no children, and possibly, if they'd paid attention, her reasons. (She prefaced these reasons with the wasted assertion that she did not need a reason *not* to have children, for her it was enough

that she had no reason to become a mother.) It was as if there was nothing more to know of her, that her character was entirely fleshed out by that one detail. This was especially frustrating as she did not encourage this, and when others wanted to show her a slideshow on their touchscreen phones of children she'd never met doing the same thing in a dozen microscopically different poses, she never gave the false impression that she was interested in even one more photo. Despite this disinterest in their children, they were invariably fascinated by the non-existence of hers. Aphoristic advice came from everywhere, and was the same no matter who said it, but it changed as she aged: 'You'll feel different about kids when you're older,' developed into, 'Time is running out, you should start getting serious,' and had changed more recently to a question, 'Do you regret not having children yet?' Her partner, Timothy, also received the same kind of unhelpful, unsolicited opinion, except for him it was, 'Of course you don't want kids, you're a man.' God forbid she and he have their own opinions, that they not match exactly to majority experience, that anyone accept their views at face value.

But Cathy abandoned these thoughts when she saw that Diana was frowning in confusion at Harriet, who rushed to explain why she'd said what she had.

'You don't get a second chance to decide if having kids was for you or not. Once you've had kids, you've got them. It's not like trying on a piece of clothing.' This time, Harriet went red. 'Not that I think you would see it that way, of course. You're obviously an intelligent young woman.'

Still,' said Diana, with the stern tone Cathy had heard her use with her children, 'I suspect far fewer people regret having had children than regret not having them.'

'You're probably right,' conceded Harriet, 'and I don't regret having had my children. But I think young women need more room to make the choice for themselves. It's not easy to know if you want to be a mother because you want to be a mother, or because you're expected to be a mother.'

Diana looked offended in the pantomime-like way she looked when she recounted to the group the article she'd read about a paedophile getting a suspended sentence, or an immigrant family receiving benefits. And now just as then, Cathy pitied and resented Diana's ignorance as she turned on their host.

'It's all well and good for *you* to say this, as you've had children and don't have to live with the what-ifs of missing out on motherhood.'

Harriet and Diana locked eyes for a moment that lasted a second or two at most but seemed to hold its breath and wait an eternity, and Cathy dropped a stitch as she waited for the outcome. Harriet had it in her to speak her mind, to be truthful and forceful, to demand that others respect her. But that seemed like a Harriet from years ago, a younger Harriet, perhaps a less life-weary Harriet. Cathy remembered hearing about the incident at the supermarket, and though she wouldn't have wanted the can thrown at that other woman's head to connect, she was proud of Harriet's fury. But it went nowhere; Harriet had never followed through and removed that man from her home and life. She seemed instead to have accepted her lot and grown apathetic. Cathy found herself willing Harriet – as if they shared some telepathic bond, a unity of the spirit of strong women – to stand up for herself, not to back down from her position.

'I *do* live with what-ifs, Diana. I wonder all the time: what if I hadn't had kids, and instead I'd travelled? What if I hadn't married so young? What if I'd seen more of the world, discovered more options? What if I hadn't spent my twenties cleaning

up shit and piss, hadn't married the first man who came along, had spent a little time *alone?*'

Diana's eyes bulged, Susan had drawn her coat tighter around herself at the swearing, and Letty was avoiding looking at anyone. Cathy wanted to support Harriet, to let her know she was not on her own.

'I'd like to point out, while we're on the subject, that I don't have any what-ifs at all, regarding children. I know you do your best, Diana, to disbelieve it, but some women don't need to live exactly the way you do.'

Diana turned her glare to Cathy and snapped, 'Why do you hate children?'

This was not the first time this assumption had been made of her, and it was one she'd heard levied often at her pro-choice friends when she was younger and more active in her activism. Usually, it failed to offend, too ridiculous to have a serious impact. But this came from Diana, and though they had disagreed in the past, it seemed as if they were heading toward a friendship. They at least had a friendly truce. Today, she seemed to be particularly bitter about everything Cathy said. This stung all the more deeply because Letty was witness to it, which injured – oh, god, this was embarrassing to realise – her pride. She wanted to impress this young woman, and she suspected it was not only to encourage her to question patriarchy.

'I don't hate children. I adore children. I love being in their company. I just also enjoy having them leave again, so I can focus on myself.'

'And isn't that just the point of everything?' Diana's head snapped up to stare Cathy in the eye. 'It's all about yourself, isn't it? When you don't live for someone else, or something higher than yourself, life is all about me, me, me. That's fine if it works for you, but don't make the rest of us feel like sell-outs for being able to commit to a child, or a husband.'

Silence fell on the women, most of whom looked shocked, while Cathy and Diana glared at each other. This was not the first time Diana had been so rude to Cathy, though her disdain for Cathy's beliefs was usually of the snide and offhand variety. Cathy still, from time to time, rehearsed the retorts she wished she'd slapped Diana's smug superiority with when she'd asked Cathy whether her decision not to have children was due to infertility. Annoyingly, she'd been so surprised at the sudden vindictiveness in the way the question had been asked that she said nothing, and then she was stunned by the sheer ignorance, at best, stupidity at worst, of the question. Diana didn't accept that Cathy could be sincere about the logic she had laid out, the rationale behind her decision, believed that at some level Cathy was being disingenuous and that she must *really* feel the same way that Diana (and all other women, of course) did about children. Her choice to remain childless could not be based on reason and seeing the world differently, it must be emotional, a bad reaction to being unable to be a 'whole' woman. Well – and there was no more eloquent way to put it – *fuck that*. She imagined saying that to her face, then asking, *How's that for an emotional response?*

The sound of keys grinding into the lock on the front door caught everyone's attention. Harriet frowned, then stood and swooped out of the room. Voices in the hall signaled a conversation between their host and the newcomer, and Cathy identified the low, male grumbling as belonging to Richard. The rest of them got on with knitting, though Cathy noticed Diana wasn't looking at her work but glaring at a wall, and Susan's knee was shaking so much it seemed to vibrate. With a sigh that interrupted the silence in the room, Cathy wondered (not for the first time) why she still attended these meetings. If she stopped coming along, she would almost never have to see Diana, and as nice as Susan was, Cathy's life would not suffer greatly in

her absence. But Harriet was a good friend, and with the other demands on time their lives made, these fortnightly meet-ups were often the most time they were able to share together.

Harriet returned, and through the door, they saw Richard pass through the hallway. He stopped to wave uncertainly at the women, apologising for the interruption. He was home from work a day earlier than planned, but he promised to stay out of their hair. Before he left, he noticed Letty in the room and sent her a smile. At this, the women all stared as one at Richard. They weren't united in their reasons for this reaction, but it had the satisfying effect of visibly unnerving the man. He asked if anyone wanted to introduce him to their friend. No one said a thing. Letty glanced around at them nervously, picking up on the tension.

'I'm Letty ...'

Richard's foot had only just landed inside the room, but before he could trespass further, Harriet asked to see him in the kitchen. Richard smiled at Letty and followed his wife out of the room.

This seemed to be the moment the women took as a cue to leave. Diana stood and put on her absurd hat. She asked the remaining women to thank Harriet for having had her there and explain that she had just remembered something that needed attending to. A minute later, Susan told the group, 'Do you know, I'm not feeling all that well. No, no, I'm fine, don't worry. But I think I may go home and have a lie down. One of my headaches. It was lovely to meet you, Collette. Letty.' As she stood, her foot brushed a plastic bag she'd left there. 'Oh, I almost forgot. I brought Harriet some vegetables from the garden, a few eggs as well. Cathy, would you make sure she gets them? Thank you.'

Ten minutes later, Harriet returned from the kitchen alone and looked at the two women left in her front room. Cathy passed on the messages from the departed women, and Harriet raised her hands, palms up, shoulders lifted into a shrug, as if to say, *What do we do now?*

'Actually,' said Collette, 'I didn't know how long we would meet for, so I assumed an hour and arranged a lift with a friend. He'll be here soon.'

After Collette, Cathy left with her needles and wool, thanking Harriet for having them at her house and insisting she would call Harriet in the week, so they could meet for a coffee. Harriet smiled and agreed that would be nice. Neither woman admitted to themselves that this likely wouldn't happen.

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Harriet went back inside her house, closing the front door against a cold wind and approaching rain. Along the street, meals were being prepared and, with the workday done, the men were returning to their homes. The women waited for their husbands. From the street outside, the houses were identical, and inside these homes the meals all the same, the greetings between spouses performed just as they were every weekday evening: a key in the door, woman in apron standing in the hall, chaste kiss and, 'How was your day?' Every day it was like this, always the same, in and out. And the people in these routines were summed up just as easily: the men were husbands, fathers, and the women were wives and mums.

'In and Out, In and Out' is taken from the collection "Burn the Pages"