Kind of Cruel

Also by Sophie Hannah

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SOPHIE

HANNAH

Kind of Cruel

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For Juliet Emerson, who helped me to solve many mysteries, both autobiographical and fictional

If you ask someone for a memory and they tell you a story, they're lying.

Me aged five, curled in a ball behind the doll's house, hiding; scared the teacher will find me, knowing it's going to happen, trying to prepare myself – that's a memory.

Here's the story I turned it into: on my first day at primary school, I was furious with my mother for leaving me in a place I didn't know, with strangers. Running away wasn't an option, because I was a good girl – my parents were always telling me that – but on this occasion I objected so strongly to what had been inflicted on me that I decided to protest by absenting myself from Mrs Hill's classroom as thoroughly as I dared. There was a large doll's house in one corner of the room, and, when no one was looking, I tucked myself into the space between it and the wall. I don't know how long I stayed there, hidden, listening to the unappealing noises my classmates were making and Mrs Hill's attempts to impose order, but it was long enough for my deception to start to feel uncomfortable. I regretted hiding, but to show myself suddenly would be tantamount to confessing, and I had no desire to do anything so rash. I knew I'd be found eventually, and that my punishment would be severe, and I became increasingly scared and agitated, crying quietly so that no one would hear. At the same time, part of me was thinking, 'Say nothing, don't move – there's still a chance you'll get away with it.'

When I heard Mrs Hill tell all the children to sit cross-legged on the carpet so that she could take the register, I panicked. Somehow, although I'd never been to school or even nursery before, I knew what that meant: she was going to call our names, one by one. When I heard mine, I would have to say, 'Yes, Mrs Hill'. Wherever I was, I would have to say it. The possibility of remaining silent didn't occur to me; that would have involved a level of deceit and rebellion I wouldn't have been prepared to contemplate,

let alone attempt. Still, I didn't move from my hiding place. I have always been an optimist, and wasn't willing to give up until I absolutely had to. Something might happen to prevent Mrs Hill from taking the register, I thought: a bird might fly in through the classroom window, or one of my classmates could suddenly fall ill and have to be rushed to hospital. Or I might come up with a brilliant idea in the next three seconds – some amazing exit route out of this mess I'd got myself into.

None of those things happened, of course, and when Mrs Hill called my name, I decided the best course of action was a compromise. I said nothing, but raised my hand from behind the doll's house so that it was clearly visible. I was doing my bit, I thought – admitting to being present, raising my hand responsibly – yet there still remained the miraculous possibility that no one would notice, that as a reward for declaring myself, I would get to miss the entire school day. And then I could turn up the following day and do exactly the same again. That was my fantasy; the reality was that Mrs Hill spotted my protruding arm at once and demanded that I come out from behind the doll's house. Later, she told my mother what I'd done and I was punished both at school and at home. I don't remember the punishments.

How much of that story is true? At a guess, I'd say most of it. Ninety per cent, maybe. How much of it do I remember? Hardly any. Two emotional states, that's all: the mixture of fear and defiance I felt while I was behind the doll's house, and the terrible humiliating defeat of having to come out and face the class. Everyone knew I'd taken a risk, then lost my nerve and given myself up. I remember feeling shamed by the memory – seconds after the event; a memory within a memory – of my stupid bet-hedging gesture of staying hidden while silently raising my hand. I was pathetic: too good to be naughty and too naughty to be good. I remember wishing I was any other child in the class, anyone but me. I'm pretty sure I had all those feelings, though at five I didn't yet have the vocabulary to describe them.

The problem – what prevents me from being certain – is that for forty years, my story about what happened that day has been trampling all over my memories, so that by now it has effectively replaced them. True memories are frail, fragmentary apparitions, easily bulldozed into

submission by a robust narrative that has been carefully engineered to stick in the mind. Almost as soon as we've had an experience, we decide what we would like it to mean, and we construct a story around it that is going to make that possible. The story incorporates whichever relevant memories suit its purpose – positioning them strategically, like colourful brooches on the lapel of a black jacket – and discards the ones that are of no use.

For years, I told a different version of my first-day-at-school story, a version in which I emerged from my hiding place with a cocky smile on my face and said with absolute confidence, 'What? I wasn't pretending not to be here. I put my hand up, didn't I? You never said I couldn't sit behind the doll's house.' Then one day I caught myself mid-anecdote and thought, 'Can that really be what happened?' Sometimes we need to demolish our endlessly told tales in order to get to the real memories. It's a bit like stripping layer after layer of paint off a brick wall. Underneath, we find the original bricks – stained and discoloured, in poor condition after years of not being able to breathe.

The funny thing is that, now, both versions of the story – the one in which I brazen it out and the one in which I'm humiliated – feel like memories to me, because I have told both so many times, to myself and to other people. Each time we tell a story, we deepen the groove it occupies in our mind, allowing it to burrow further in and seem more real with each telling.

A true memory might be a fleeting image of a red coat, a lemon tree (you don't know where), a strong feeling, the name of someone you used to know – just the name, nothing more. Genuine memories do not have beginnings, middles and ends. There's no suspense, no obvious point to them, certainly no moral lesson learned – nothing to satisfy an audience, and by 'audience' I mean the teller, who is always the first audience for his or her own story.

All this can be applied to Christmas 2003 and what happened at Little Orchard, which – as you've probably guessed by now – is not a memory but a story. Hopefully, it's a story that can be used to retrieve a few memories embedded within it, and maybe some rejected ones too, ones that didn't fit with the overall flow and were ditched accordingly. As an experiment,

I'm going to assume, for the time being at least, that the Little Orchard story is one in which every detail is false.

None of it really happened. Nobody woke up on Christmas morning to find that four members of their family had disappeared.

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Tuesday 30 November 2010

Look: there is nothing special about this place. Look at the gaps between the bricks in the gateposts, where the pointing has fallen out. Look at the ugly UPVC window frames. This is not a place where miracles happen.

And – because I'm more than willing to shoulder my share of the blame in advance – there is nothing special about me. I am not a place where miracles happen.

This isn't going to work. So I mustn't be disappointed when it doesn't.

I'm not here because I think it's going to help. I'm here because I'm sick of having to plaster a receptive smile on my face and make pleased and surprised noises when yet another person tells me how brilliantly it worked for them. 'You should try hypnosis,' says everybody I meet, from my colleagues to my dentist to parents and teachers at the girls' school. 'I was really sceptical, and only went as an absolute last resort, but it was like magic – I never touched cigarettes/vodka/cream cakes/betting slips again.'

I've noticed that anyone who advocates a wildly implausible solution to a problem always stresses how cynically unconvinced they were at first, before they tried it. No one ever says, 'I was and am exactly the kind of desperate idiot who's ready to believe in anything. Weirdly, hypnotherapy really worked for me.'

I'm sitting in my car on Great Holling Road, outside the home of Ginny Saxon, the hypnotherapist I chose quite randomly. Well, perhaps not entirely. Great Holling is the nicest village in the Culver Valley; might as well go somewhere picturesque to waste my money, I thought. Very few places are so idyllic that one notices a backlash

against them – people describing them as being 'not the real world' or 'up their own arse' – but it's almost a cliché around these parts to thumb your nose at the beautiful seclusion of Great Holling by opting, instead, to live in a noisier, dirtier place that, coincidentally, contains cheaper houses. 'But even if I could afford to live in Great Holling, I wouldn't. It's just too perfect.' Yeah, right.

Still, maybe I should be more trusting. Plenty of people have money and choose not to use it to improve their situations. Some fools I know hand over their hard-earned cash to quacks and ask to be mesmerised, hoping they'll come round to find that all their problems have disappeared.

Ginny Saxon's address, like her brand of therapy, is a con. She doesn't live in Great Holling. I have driven all the way out here on false pretences – even more false pretences than a silly placebo treatment, I mean. I should have looked more carefully at the address and realised that the double helping of the village's name within it – 77 Great Holling Road, Great Holling, Silsford – was protesting too much. I am not in Great Holling, but on an A-road on the way to it. There are houses on one side, including Ginny Saxon's, and brown and grey sludgy-looking fields on the other. This is agricultural land masquerading as countryside. In one of the fields there's a building with a corrugated metal roof. It's the sort of landscape that makes me think of sewage, even if I'm being unfair and can't actually smell any.

You are being unfair. What's the harm in having an open mind? It might work.

Inwardly, I groan. The disappointment, when this charade I'm about to participate in leaves me exactly as it found me, is going to hurt – probably worse than after all the other stuff I've tried that hasn't worked. Hypnotherapy is the thing everybody does as a last resort. After it, there's nothing left to try.

I look at the time on my car clock. 3 p.m. on the dot; I am supposed to be arriving now. But it's warm in my Renault Clio, with the heater on, and freezing outside. No snow here, not even the kind that doesn't settle, but every night snow is forecast with

a little more glee on the part of the local news weather lady. The whole of the Culver Valley is in the grip of that peculiarly English weather condition – inspired as much by schadenfreude as by sub-zero temperatures – known as 'Don't think the snow won't come just because it hasn't yet'.

'On the count of three,' I imagine saying to myself in my best deep hypnotic voice, 'you will get out of your car, go into that house across the road and pretend to be in a trance for an hour. You will then write a cheque for seventy quid to a charlatan. It'll be ace.' I pull my written instructions out of my coat pocket: Ginny's address. I check it, put it back – a delaying tactic that establishes nothing I didn't already know. I'm in the right place.

Or the wrong one.

Here goes.

As I walk towards the house, I see that the car parked in the driveway is not empty. There's a woman in it, wearing a black coat with a furry collar, a red scarf and bright red lipstick. There's a notebook open on her lap and a pen in her hand. She's smoking a cigarette and has opened her window, despite the temperature. Her ungloved hands are mottled from the cold. Smoking and writing are obviously more important to her than comfort, I think, seeing a pair of woolly gloves lying next to the Marlboro Lights packet on the passenger seat. She looks up and smiles at me, says hi.

I decide she can't be Ginny Saxon, whose website lists giving up smoking as one of the things she can help with. Sitting in her car outside her house with a fag in her gob would be an odd form for that help to take, unless it's a carefully thought-out double bluff. Then I notice something I couldn't see from the road: a small free-standing wooden building in the back garden with a sign on it saying 'Great Holling Hypnotherapy Clinic – Ginny Saxon MA PGCE Dip Couns Adv Dip Hyp'.

'That's where it all happens,' says the smoker, with more than a trace of bitterness in her voice. 'In her garden shed. Inspires confidence, doesn't it?'

'It's more attractive than the house,' I say, slipping easily into

nasty-girl-at-the-back-of-the-school-bus mode, praying that Ginny Saxon won't pop up behind me and catch me slagging off her home. Why do I care about ingratiating myself with this chippy stranger? 'At least it hasn't got UPVC windows,' I add, aware of the absurdity of my behaviour but powerless to do anything about it.

The woman grins, then turns away as if she's had second thoughts about talking to me. She looks down at her notebook. I know how she feels; it would have been better if we'd pretended not to notice one another. We can be as sarcastic as we like, but we're both here because we've got problems we can't sort out on our own, and we know it – about ourselves and about each other.

'She's running an hour late. My appointment was for two o'clock.'

I try to look as if this doesn't bother me; I'm not sure I succeed. That'll mean . . . Ginny Saxon won't be able to see me until four, and at ten past I'll have to leave if I'm going to be home in time to meet Dinah and Nonie off the school bus.

'Don't worry, you can have my slot,' says my new friend, tossing her cigarette end out of the window. If Dinah were here, she would say, 'Go and pick up your litter, right now, and put it in a bin.' It wouldn't occur to her that she's only eight, and not in a position to give orders to a stranger more than five times her age. I make a mental note to retrieve the cigarette stub and put it in the nearest wheelie bin if I get the chance, if I can do it without the woman seeing me and taking it as a criticism.

'Don't you mind?' I ask.

'I wouldn't have offered if I minded,' she says, sounding noticeably jollier. Because she's off the hook? 'Either I'll come back at four, or . . .' – she shrugs – '. . . or I won't.'

She closes her car window and starts to reverse out of the driveway, waving at me in a way that makes me feel I've been conned – a mixture of flippant and superior, a wave that seems to say, 'You're on your own, sucker'.

'Do come in out of the cold,' says a voice behind me. I turn and see a plump woman with a round pretty face and blonde hair in a ponytail so limp and casual that most of the hair has fallen out of

it. She's wearing an olive green corduroy skirt, black ankle boots with black tights and a cream polo-neck top that clings around her waist, drawing attention to the extra weight she's carrying. I guess that she's between forty and fifty, closer to forty.

I follow her into the wooden building, which is not and has clearly never been a shed. The wood, both inside and out, looks too new – there are no marks to suggest that a muddy trowel or an oily lawnmower has ever lived here. One wall is covered from top to bottom with framed botanical prints, and there are curvaceous sky-blue vases filled with flowers in three of the room's four corners. A white rug with a thick blue border takes up most of the wooden floor. On one side of it, there's a maroon leather swivel recliner chair and matching footstool, and on the other, a brown distressed leather sofa next to a small table piled high with books and magazines about hypnotherapy.

This last detail irks me, just as it annoys me when I go to the hairdresser and find piles of magazines about hair and nothing else. The symbolism is too crass; it smacks of a desperation to ram home one's professional message, and always makes me think, 'Yes, I know what you do for a living. That's why I'm here.' Do I really need to immerse myself in exclusively hairy thoughts while I wait for a suet-faced teenager to ram my head into a basin and pour boiling water over it? What if I'd like to read about the stock market, or modern ballet? I wouldn't, as it happens, but the point is still valid.

Hypnotherapy is, admittedly, marginally more interesting than split ends (though, in fairness, at least my quarterly visits to Salon 32 leave me in no doubt that an actual service has been performed).

'You're welcome to have a look at the books and magazines,' Ginny Saxon says, more enthusiastically than is warranted. Her accent is what I think of as 'media' – it doesn't belong to anywhere, and tells me nothing about where she's from. Not the Culver Valley would be my guess. 'Borrow as many as you like, as long as you bring them back.' Either she's putting a lot of effort into her act or she's a nice person. I hope she's nice – nice enough that she'll still want to help me even when she realises I'm not.

Pretending to be a better person than I am is exhausting; having to make a constant effort to produce behaviour that doesn't match my mental state.

Ginny holds out a magazine called *Hypnotherapy Monthly*. I can't not take it. It falls open at the centrefold, home to an article called 'Hypnotherapeutic Olfactory Conditioning Examined'. What was I expecting: a full frontal shot of a swinging stopwatch?

'Have a seat,' says Ginny, indicating the swivel recliner and footstool. 'Sorry to keep you waiting an hour.'

'You haven't,' I tell her. 'I'm Amber Hewerdine. My appointment's for now. The other woman said I could have her slot, and she'll come back later.'

Ginny smiles. 'And then she said?'

Oh, God, please don't let her have heard our entire conversation. How thick are these wooden walls? How loud were we?

'I didn't hear anything, don't worry. But from what little I know of her, I'm guessing she said more than what you've told me.'

Don't worry? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Last night I asked Luke if he thought a person would only train to be a hypnotherapist if they enjoyed messing with people's minds, and he laughed at me. 'God help anyone who tries to tangle with yours,' he said. He didn't know how right he was.

'She said, "Either I'll come back at four, or I won't",' I tell Ginny.

'Made you feel like an idiot for sticking around, did she? Relax. She's the idiot. I don't think she'll come back. She chickened out last week as well – booked an initial consultation, didn't turn up for it. She hadn't given me any notice of cancellation, so I billed her for the full amount.'

Should she be saying these things to me? Isn't it unprofessional? Will she bitch about me to her next client?

'Why don't you tell me why you're here?' Ginny unzips her ankle boots, kicks them off, curls herself into a ball on the leather sofa. Is that supposed to make me feel less inhibited? It doesn't; it irritates me. I've only just met her. She's supposed to be a professional. How does she dress for a second appointment – camisole and knickers?

It doesn't matter; there isn't going to be a second appointment.

'I'm an insomniac,' I tell her. 'A proper one.'

'Which forces me to ask: what's an improper insomniac?'

'Someone who has difficulty falling asleep, but when they do, they sleep for eight hours solid. Or someone who falls asleep straight away, but wakes up too early – four a.m. instead of seven. All the people who say, "Oh, I never sleep properly" and it turns out they mean they wake up twice or three times a night to go to the loo – that's not a sleep problem, that's a bladder problem.'

'People who use "insomniac" to mean "light sleeper"?' Ginny suggests. 'Any little noise wakes them? Or who can only fall asleep if they've got earphones piping music into their ears, or with the radio on?'

I nod, trying not to be impressed that she appears to know all the people I hate. 'They're the most infuriating of pretend insomniacs. Anyone who says, "I can only get to sleep *if*" and then names a requirement – that's not insomnia. They satisfy the "if" and they get to sleep.'

'Do you resent people who sleep well?' Ginny asks.

'Not if they admit it.' I might be too exhausted to be nice, but I like to think I'm still reasonable. 'What I object to is people who don't have a problem pretending that they do.'

'So people who say, "I sleep like a log, me – nothing wakes me" – they're okay?'

Is she trying to catch me out? I'm tempted to lie, but what would be the point of that? This woman doesn't have to like me. She's obliged to try to help me whether she likes me or not. That's what I'm paying for. 'No, they're smug beyond belief,' I say.

'And yet if it's true – if they *do* sleep like logs – what should they say?'

If she mentions logs again, I'm leaving. 'There are ways and ways of telling people you're a good sleeper,' I say, perilously close to tears. 'They could say, "No, I don't have a problem sleeping", and then quickly point out that they have plenty of other problems. Everyone has problems, right?'

'Absolutely,' says Ginny, looking as if she has never worried about a single thing in her entire life. I stare past her, out of the two large windows behind the leather sofa. Her back garden is a long, skinny strip of green. At the far end, I can see a small brown patch of wooden fence, and fields beyond it that look greener and more promising than the ones I saw on the other side of the road. If I lived here, I would worry about a developer buying up the land and cramming it full of as many houses as he could squash in.

'Tell me about your sleeping problem,' Ginny says. 'After that build-up, I'm expecting a horror story. There's a wooden lever under the arm of your chair, if you want to lie back.'

I don't want to, but I do it anyway, putting my feet up on the footstool so that I'm almost horizontal. It's easier if I can't see her face; I can pretend I'm talking to a recorded voice.

'So. Are you the world's worst-afflicted insomniac?'

Is she mocking me? I can't help noticing I'm not in any kind of trance yet. When's she going to get started? We've got less than an hour.

'No,' I say stiffly. 'I'm better off than people who never sleep. I sleep for stretches of fifteen, twenty minutes at a time, on and off throughout the night. And always in front of the TV in the evening. That's the best chunk of sleep I get, usually, between eight thirty and nine thirty – a whole hour, if I'm lucky.'

'Anyone who never slept would die,' says Ginny. This throws me, until I realise she must be talking about the insomniacs I mentioned in passing, those less fortunate than me.

'People do die,' I tell her. 'People with FFI.'

I sense she's waiting for me to continue.

'Fatal Familial Insomnia. It's a hereditary condition. As diseases go, it's not much fun. Total sleeplessness, panic attacks, phobias, hallucinations, dementia, death.'

'Go on.'

Is this woman a moron? 'That's it,' I say. 'Death's the last item on the agenda. Not much tends to happen to them after that. Which would be a relief, if only they weren't too dead to appreciate it.'

When she doesn't laugh, I decide to take it darker. 'Course, for some people, FFI would have the added bonus that all their family die too.' I listen for her reaction. One small chuckle would make me feel so much more confident about her. Is she secure enough in herself and her abilities to let that one pass, to let my joke be a joke? Only a desperate therapist would pounce on such an obviously frivolous comment at this early stage.

'Do you want your family to die?'

Predictably disappointing. Disappointingly predictable.

'No. That's not what I said.'

'Have you always had trouble sleeping?'

I'm not comfortable with how quickly and smoothly she's changed the subject. 'No.'

'When did it start?'

'A year and a half ago.' I could give her an exact date.

'Do you know *why* it started? Why you can't sleep?'

'Stress. At work and at home.' I put it in the broadest possible terms, hoping she won't ask for more detail.

'And if a fairy godmother were to wave her wand and remove the sources of that stress – what do you think would happen then, sleep-wise?'

Is it a trick question? 'I'd sleep fine,' I say. 'I always used to sleep well.'

'That's good. The causes of your insomnia are external rather than internal. It isn't that *you*, Amber Hewerdine, can't sleep because of something *in you*. You can't sleep because your current life situation is putting you under unbearable pressure. Anyone in your predicament would be finding it difficult, right?'

'I think so.'

'That's better. That's the kind of insomnia you want.' I can hear her beaming at me. How is that possible? 'There's nothing wrong with *you*. Your responses are absolutely normal and understandable. Can you change your life situation to eliminate the sources of stress?'

'No. Look, I'm not being funny but . . . don't you think that

might have occurred to me? All those nights I've lain awake, dwelling on everything that's wrong . . .' *Don't get emotional. Think of this as a business meeting – you're a dissatisfied customer*. 'I can't eliminate the causes of stress from my life. They *are* my life. I was hoping that hypnotherapy might be able to . . .' I can't say what I was going to say. It would sound too ridiculous if I put it into words.

'You're hoping I can deceive your brain,' Ginny summarises. 'You know, and it knows, that it has reason to be anxious, but you're hoping hypnosis might hoodwink it into believing everything's fine.' Now she's mocking me for sure.

'If you think that's such a ridiculous proposition, why did you choose this line of work?' I say curtly.

She says something that sounds like, 'Let's try the Tree Shaker.'

'What?'

I must have sounded alarmed. 'Trust me,' Ginny says. 'It's just an exercise.'

She'll have to settle for my acquiescing without further argument. Trust is too precious a commodity to demand from a stranger.

'You'll probably want to close your eyes – it might make it easier.'

I wouldn't bet on it.

'You might be relieved to hear that you won't have to speak hardly at all. For most of the time, you'll just be listening and letting memories come to mind.'

That sounds easy enough. Though 'hardly at all' suggests that I'm going to have to say something at some point. What? I'd like to be able to prepare for it.

When Ginny next speaks, I nearly burst out laughing. Her voice is slower, deeper, more trance-like, similar to the joke-hypnotist voice I had in my head: *You are falling into a deep, deep sleep*. That's not quite what Ginny's saying but it's not too far off. 'And so I'd like you to focus on your breathing,' she intones, 'and the very top of your head. And just . . . let it . . . relax.'

Why is she doing this? She must know that she sounds like a cliché. Wouldn't she be better off talking normally?

'And then your forehead . . . let it relax. And moving down to your nose . . . breathing slowly and deeply, calmly and quietly, just let your nose relax. And then your mouth, your lips . . . let them relax.'

What about the bit between my nose and my lips, whatever its name is? What if that part's rigid with tension? She missed it out.

This is hopeless. I'm rubbish at being hypnotised. I knew I would be.

Ginny has reached my shoulders. 'Feel them drop and relax, all the pressure melting away. Breathing slowly and deeply, calmly and quietly, letting go of all stress and tension. And then moving down to your chest, your lungs – let *them* relax. There's no such thing as a hypnotised feeling, only a feeling of total calm and total relaxation.'

Really? Then why am I paying seventy quid? If all I have to do is relax, I could do that at home on my own.

No, I correct myself. I couldn't. Can't.

'Total calm . . . and total relaxation. And moving down to your stomach . . . let it relax.'

Septum. No, that's the bit between your nostrils. I used to know the name of that indentation between the nose and top lip. What do people mean when they talk about someone's elevens being up? No, that's the groove at the back of the neck. It looks more like the number 11 the closer a person is to death. I'm almost certain the same isn't true of the . . . philtrum, that's what it's called. Now that the name's come back to me, I have a clear picture of Luke announcing it triumphantly. *A pub quiz. The kind of question he always gets right, the kind I'm useless at.*

I force myself to pay attention to Ginny's droning voice. Has she got to my toes yet? I haven't been listening. She could save time by grouping all the parts together and instructing the whole body to relax. I try to breathe evenly and keep my impatience at bay.

'Some people feel incredibly light, as if they might float away,' she's saying. 'And some people feel a heaviness in their limbs, like they couldn't move even if they wanted to.'

She sounds like a children's TV presenter, doing 'light' and 'heavy' voices to match her words. Has she ever experimented with a more deadpan delivery? It's something I've often wondered about actors on Radio 4: why doesn't anyone tell them the phony voices really don't help?

'And some people feel a tingling in their fingers. But everybody feels lovely and calm, nice and relaxed.'

My fingers are tingling quite a lot. They were even before she said it. Does that mean I'm hypnotised? I don't feel relaxed, though I suppose I'm more aware of the buzzing neuroses in my mind than I was before, more intently focused on them. It's as if they and I are trapped together in a dark box, one that's drifted away from the rest of the world. Is that a good thing? Hard to see how it can be.

'And now, breathing slowly and deeply, calmly and quietly, I'd like you to imagine the most beautiful staircase in the world.'

What? She's springing this on me with no warning? A dozen desirable staircase images crowd into my mind and start scrapping with each other. Spiral, with wrought-iron fretwork? Or those open, slatty steps that look as if they're floating on air, with a glass or stainless steel balustrade – nice and modern, clean lines. On the other hand, a bit soulless, too much like an office building.

'Your perfect staircase has ten steps,' Ginny goes on. 'I'm now going to take you down those steps, one by one . . .'

Hang on a second. I'm not ready to move anywhere yet. I still haven't got my staircase sorted out. Traditional's the safest bet: dark wood, with a runner. I'm seeing something stripy . . .

'As you descend, I want you to see yourself drifting down into calm, and into relaxation. So, moving down one step – calm and relaxed. And moving down another step, taking another step towards peace and towards relaxation . . .'

How can she be going too fast while speaking soporifically slowly?

What about stone? That's also traditional, and grander than wood, but possibly a bit cold. Though with a runner . . .

Ginny's ahead of me but I don't care. My plan is to take all the

time I need to get my staircase designed – if I cut corners at this crucial stage, I'm bound to regret it later – and then leap down to the bottom all in one go. As long as I get there when she does, what difference does it make?

'And now you're taking the last step, and you've arrived at a place of total calm, total peace. You are completely relaxed. And so I'd like you to think back to when you were a very small child, and the world was new. I'd like you to remember a moment when you felt joy, such intense joy that you thought you might explode.'

This throws me. What's happened to the staircase? Was it just a device, to get me to the calm, relaxed place? I have already missed my chance to produce a joyful memory; Ginny has moved on, and is now ordering me – if a demand made so drowsily can be considered an order – to remember feeling desperately sad, as if my heart was breaking. Sad, sad, I think, worried about having dropped behind. She moves on again, to angry – incandescent, burning with rage – and I can't think of a single thing. I'm about to miss my third deadline. *Might as well give up*.

As she progresses from fear ('your heart pounding as the ground seems to fall away beneath your feet') to loneliness ('like a cold vacuum all around you and inside you, separating you from every single other human being'), I wonder how many times Ginny has recited this spiel. Her descriptions are pretty powerful – perhaps a little too powerful. My childhood wasn't especially dramatic; there's nothing in it, or in my memory of it, to match the kind of extreme states she's describing. I was a happy child: loved, secure. I was heartbroken when my parents died within two years of one another, but I was in my early twenties by then. Should I ask Ginny if a memory from adulthood will do as a substitute? She specified early childhood, but surely a more recent memory would be better than nothing.

'And now I'd like you to imagine that you're drowning. Everywhere you turn, there's water, touching every part of you, flooding into your nose and mouth. You can't breathe. What memory springs to mind in connection with that? Anything?'

My philtrum would be getting soaked. Sorry, that's all I've got.

What's Ginny aiming to uncover here? I'm not thinking about feelings any more, I'm thinking about submarine disaster movies.

When she tells me to imagine myself in a burning house, trapped by flames, I feel sick in the pit of my stomach. This is so seriously lacking in feelgood factor that I'm praying I'll be handed an evaluation form at the end of all this so that I can make my objection official.

I don't want to do this any more.

'Okay, that's great,' Ginny says. 'You're doing great.' I hear a slight sharpening in her tone, and I know the moment has come: audience participation time. 'Now I'd like you to let a memory come into your mind, and tell me about it. Any memory, from any time in your life. Don't analyse it. It doesn't have to be significant. What are you remembering, right now?'

Sharon. I can't say that. Unless I've misunderstood, Ginny wants something new from me now, not leftovers from the last exercise.

'Don't try to select something good,' she says in her regular voice. 'Anything will do.'

Right. Nice to know how little all this matters.

Not Sharon and her burning house. Not unless you want to leave here in pieces.

Little Orchard, then. The story of my disappearing relatives. No death, no tragedy, only a never-to-be-solved mystery. I open my mouth, then remember that Ginny told me not to pick something good. Little Orchard is too showy and attention-seeking. She won't believe it genuinely 'came up', and she'll be right. It's permanently 'up' in my mind; I wonder about it constantly, even now, after so many years. It gives me something to do, when I'm lying awake at night and I've already worried about every aspect of my life that can be worried about.

'What are you remembering?' Ginny asks. 'Right now.'

Oh, God, this is a nightmare. What should I say? Anything, anything.

'Kind. Cruel. Kind of Cruel.'

What does that mean?

'Can you repeat that?' says Ginny.

This is really strange. What just happened? Ginny said something odd, but why would she ask me to repeat it? I wasn't paying attention; my mind must have drifted off for a second, back to Little Orchard, or to Sharon . . .

'Can you repeat those words?'

'Kind. Cruel. Kind of Cruel,' I say, not sure I've got it right. 'What does it mean?' Is it a magic spell, designed to drag recalcitrant memories to the surface?

'You tell me,' says Ginny.

'How can I? You were the one who said it.'

'No, I didn't. You said it.'

There's a long pause. Why am I still horizontal, with my eyes closed? I ought to sit up and insist that this stranger stops lying about me.

'You said it,' I snap, annoyed that I should have to convince her when she must know the truth as well as I do. 'And then you asked me to repeat it.'

'All right, Amber, I'm going to count to five to bring you out of hypnosis. When I reach five, I want you to open your eyes. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.'

It's strange to see the room again. I pull the lever under the arm of my chair and it tilts me upright. Ginny is staring at me, not smiling. She looks worried.

'I didn't say anything,' I tell her. 'You said it.'

~

In my haste to escape, I nearly run into the woman with the red lipstick. 'All better?' she says. The sight of her shocks me; at first I can't work out why. How could I have erased her from my mind so completely? I ought to have known I might open the door and find her here, waiting. My brain is not operating at its usual speed; I'm not sure if it's tiredness or the after-effects of hypnosis.

Her notebook. You forgot that you saw her writing in her notebook. What was she writing?

I struggle to pretend nothing has changed: my customary reaction when I'm ambushed by the unexpected.

It doesn't work.

Why would Ginny Saxon pretend I'd said something I hadn't? Before today she didn't know me; she has nothing to gain from lying about me. Why is this only occurring to me now?

I should say something. Red Lipstick Woman asked me a question. *All better?* In the hour since I last saw her, her bitterness has transmuted into good-humoured resignation: she doesn't believe that Ginny is capable of curing either of us, but we must participate in the charade all the same. I stare at the clouds of breath in the air between us and imagine they are a barrier through which words and understanding cannot pass. I can't speak. Day is already turning into night; the fields look like flat dark cloths spread out beside the empty road. They make me think of the magician we hired for Nonie's seventh birthday party, the black satin throw he draped over his small table.

What's wrong with me? How long have I let this silence last? My thoughts are either moving too fast or unbearably slowly; I can't tell the difference.

Her hands mottled from the cold, black woolly gloves on the passenger seat beside her, a notebook open on her lap, words on the page . . .

I resist the urge to run back to the warmth of Ginny's wooden den and beg for her mercy. I went to her for help – help I still need. How did I end up calling her a liar, refusing to pay and storming out in a rage?

Kind, Cruel, Kind of Cruel.

'An hour ago you could talk and now you can't,' says Red Lipstick Woman. 'What did she do to you in there? Blink your answers – two for yes, one for no. Did she programme you to assassinate her political enemies?'

I can't ask. I have to. I might only have a few seconds before Ginny summons her inside. 'Your notebook,' I say. 'The one you

had in the car. This is going to sound strange, but . . . were you writing some kind of poem?'

She laughs. 'No. Nothing so ambitious. Why?'

If it wasn't a poem, why the short lines?

Kind

Cruel

Kind of Cruel

'What was the name of that guy who dictated a whole book by blinking his left eyelid?' she asks, looking over her shoulder towards the road as if there's someone there who might know the answer. She doesn't want to talk about what I want to talk about. Her private notebook; why would she?

'"Kind, Cruel, Kind of Cruel" – is that what you were writing? I'm not asking you to tell me what it means . . .'

'I don't know what it means,' she says. Reaching into her handbag, she pulls out a packet of Marlboro Lights and a silver lighter. 'Apart from the obvious: kind means kind, cruel means cruel, etc.'

'Could I have seen those words in your notebook?' *And you have the right to ask this because?*

I wait while she lights a cigarette. She takes two deep drags, savouring each one: an advertisement for the bad habit of which she hopes to be cured. Though I suppose I shouldn't assume that's why she's here.

Assume nothing. Especially not that you must be right, and the person trying to help you must be a liar.

Why do I have the sense that she's stalling? 'No, you couldn't have seen those words,' she says when she's ready. 'Maybe you saw them somewhere else. Since we're asking intrusive questions, what's your name?'

'Amber. Amber Hewerdine.'

'Bauby,' she announces, startling me. 'That was his name – the blink-writer.'

I'm going to have to press the point; I can't help myself. 'Are you sure? Maybe you wrote it a while ago, or . . .' I stop short of suggesting that the words might be there without her knowing, that

someone else might have written them. That's crazy – crazier than the idea of Ginny brainwashing would-be assassins in her back-garden treatment room in the Culver Valley. I don't trust my judgement at the moment; everything that comes into my mind must be forced through the filter of normality and plausibility. *Don't ask her if she shares the notebook with anyone; no one shares their notebooks*.

I decide my best bet is to be as straightforward as I can. 'I remember seeing it.' *Like you remember Ginny saying it and asking you to repeat it?* 'Like a list: "Kind" on one line, then a couple of line spaces, then "Cruel" underneath, and "Kind of Cruel" a few lines beneath that.'

She shakes her head, and I want to scream. Can I call two people liars in one day, or is that excessive? It occurs to me, way too late, that I ought to tell her why I'm asking. Maybe that would make a difference to her willingness to talk. 'I'm not prying,' I start to say.

'Yes, you are.'

'I've never been hypnotised before.' I didn't realise how pathetic that would sound until I said it. She flinches. *Great*. Now I've embarrassed us both. 'I'm trying to check my memory's working properly, that's all.'

'And we've established that it isn't,' she says. Why isn't she more freaked out by this, by me? I know how oddly I'm behaving, or at least I think I know; her matter-of-fact responses are making me doubt it.

Kind, Cruel, Kind of Cruel. I can see the words on the page, and more than that: an equally strong image of myself looking, seeing. I'm part of the same memory as the words; I'm in the scene. So is she, so is her notebook, her cigarette . . .

'You're describing lined paper,' she says.

I nod. *Pale blue horizontal lines, with a pink vertical line running down the left hand side to denote the margin*.

'The pages in my notebook aren't lined.'

Which ought to be the end of the matter. She's looking at me as if she knows it isn't.

If Ginny didn't say those words and ask me to repeat them, if I didn't see them written down in this woman's notebook . . .

But I *did*. I know I did. Just because I was wrong about Ginny doesn't mean I must be wrong about this.

'Could I have a look?' I ask. 'Please? I won't read anything. I'm just . . .' *Just what? Too stupid and stubborn to take her word for it without checking?* Why don't I care that I'm behaving outrageously? I can't take this any further; I have no right to. 'Show me any page, and if it hasn't got lines on it—'

'It hasn't.' She glances at her watch, nods towards the garden. 'I'd better go in. I'm more than two hours late for my appointment, and sixty-five minutes late for yours. And even if most of that lateness isn't my fault . . .' She shrugs. 'Believe it or not, I'd rather carry on talking to you. And I might show you my notebook one day, maybe even one day soon – but not now.' She gives me a loaded look as she delivers this peculiar speech. Is she coming on to me? There must be a reason why she isn't as angry with me as she would have every right to be.

Maybe even one day soon. Why does she think she's going to see me again? It makes no sense.

Before I can ask, she's walking past me and into Ginny's back garden. Watching her move convinces me that I couldn't do anything so ambitious; I stay rooted to the spot. Maybe I'll wait for her to come out in an hour. Except I can't. I have to get back for the girls. I need to leave now, or I'll be late. Still, I don't move – not until the sound of knocking galvanises me and I realise that in a matter of seconds, Ginny will open the door of her wooden office. I can't let her see me here, not after the way I yelled at her. If there's one thing I am absolutely sure of, it's that Ginny Saxon must never see me again, and vice versa. I'll post her an apologetic note with a cheque for seventy quid pinned to it, and then find a different hypnotherapist – one closer to home, in Rawndesley, who has never seen me behave like an obnoxious brat. Luke will laugh and call me a coward and he'll be right. In my defence, I could point out that, as cowards go, surely the paying, apologising kind are the best.

Who am I kidding? I'm not going to tell Luke how badly I behaved.

You never do. I push the thought away.

Inside my now freezing car, I rest my head on the steering wheel and groan. Ginny could have argued with me, but she didn't. She agreed to waive her fee for the session, since I clearly felt badly let down by her. Maybe I'll send her a cheque for double the amount I owe. No, that looks desperate; might as well change my will, leave her everything on one condition – that she promises not to spend the rest of her life thinking I'm the biggest arsehole she's ever met.

It's nine minutes past four. If I set off now, I'll make it. If I stay here another ten minutes, then drive dangerously fast all the way back to Rawndesley, I'll make it. I won't even need ten minutes, because Red Lipstick Woman will have locked her car, and I'll be back in mine and heading home thirty seconds from now.

I don't know what it means. She said it as if she was more frustrated than I was by her inability to understand the words in her notebook; she didn't seem to care if I knew it. Then why deny having written them?

Without allowing myself to think about what I'm doing, I get out of my car, cross the road and walk up Ginny's drive, exactly as I did an hour ago. I'm glad it's dark, glad Culver Valley County Council is more scared of the anti-light-pollution lobby than of their opponents, who petition endlessly for a solid flank of lampposts along every rural A-road, so that pensioners and teenage girls can see the muggers and rapists lying in wait for them.

There are no criminals anywhere in sight, I'm happy to report. Only a crazy woman in search of a notebook.

Everything will be fine as long as Red Lipstick Woman has remembered to lock her car; I will be prevented from doing something insane and illegal. What law would I be breaking, I wonder. Something to do with trespass, probably. It can't be breaking and entering if I don't break anything. Unlawful entry?

I try the driver door. It opens. Immediately, I feel more unlawful

than I have ever felt. My gasps of breath hang like foggy graffiti on the air: visible evidence that I am here, where I shouldn't be.

All I've done is open a car door. Is that so bad? I could still close it and walk away.

And never find out if you saw the words you think you saw.

What if they're not there? Will I go back to believing they must have come from Ginny – that she asked me to repeat them and then, for some impossible-to-imagine reason, denied it?

The notebook lies open on the passenger seat, next to the black gloves. My hands shake as I reach over and pick it up. I start to flick through the pages. There's lots of writing in here, but I can only make out the odd word; the sky is too dark, nearly as black as the surrounding fields. There's a light on in the car – it came on when I opened the door – but in order to benefit from it I'd have to . . .

Don't think about it. Just do it.

My heart pounding, I sit in the driver's seat, leaving the door open and my legs outside in the cold, so that only part of my body is doing something wrong. I open the notebook again. At first I can't concentrate; my focus is on my out-of-control heartbeat, which feels as if it's about to spring out of my mouth. Will I be found at five o'clock, dead from a heart attack in a stranger's car? At least I've shaken off my post-hypnosis stupor, finally – nothing like a bit of law-breaking to detrancify the mind.

There's no such thing as a hypnotised feeling. That's what Ginny said. I'm no expert, but I think she might be wrong.

When I'm calm enough to concentrate, I see that the notebook is full of letters, if you can call something that isn't addressed to anyone or signed from anyone a letter. Which you can't, I don't think. My guess is that these diatribes were not written for sending but to make the writer feel better. Each one is several pages long, angry, full of accusations. I start to read the first one, then stop after a couple of lines as a tremor of panic rolls through me.

What the hell am I doing? I'm not here to immerse myself in a stranger's bitterness – I need to find what I'm looking for and get

out of here. Now that I've glimpsed the verbal wrath Red Lipstick woman unleashes on anyone who crosses her, I'm even less keen than I was to be caught rifling through her possessions.

I flick through the pages quickly: diatribe, diatribe, diatribe, shopping list, diatribe . . . After a while I stop looking at the content. There is too much writing on these pages for any of them to be the page I'm looking for: one with only five words on it, surrounded by lots of space; a mostly blank page.

I'm an idiot. These pages aren't lined. Why wasn't that the first thing I spotted when I opened the notebook? Why am I still sitting here? Can hypnotherapy cause permanent brain damage?

I carry on flicking through, although I'm guessing the notebook is unlikely to develop lines at its halfway point.

Give up.

Just one more.

I turn the page, barely see the words before I hear the click of a door opening. *Oh, no, oh, God, this is not happening*. Harbouring an overpowering desire for something not to happen feels the same as forbidding it to happen. The drawback is that it doesn't work.

I'm trapped in an elongated rectangle of light. The woman whose car I have invaded is marching towards me. Trying to work out if I'd have time to get out and run away before she reaches me, I end up staying where I am. Why did I take such an insane risk? How could I be so stupid? Dinah and Nonie will be getting off the school bus at half past four, and I won't be there to collect them. Where will I be? In a police cell? My stomach churns in sudden, urgent pain; adrenaline forces beads of sweat through my skin. Is this a panic attack?

'Put down my notebook and get out of my car.' Her efficient calm chills me. There's something wrong about this situation, wronger than me being here without permission. She ought to be angrier. *She ought to be inside*. Why did she come out? Was it a trap? Maybe she knew what I was likely to do – knew it before I did, even – and deliberately left her car unlocked, giving me the opportunity to incriminate myself, and her the chance to catch me.

Ginny Saxon stands in the doorway of her wooden room, watching us. 'Everything okay?' she calls out. I can't look at her. I stare at the open notebook in my hands.

Then I close it, pass it to its owner.

'Go home, Amber,' she says wearily, as if I'm a naughty child whose detention has come to an end. 'Stay at home. We'll do the explanations part later, shall we?'

I've no idea what she means, but I'm more than happy to make both our lives easier by getting the hell away from her, away from Ginny, away from 77 Great Holling Road, the scene of too many catastrophically humiliating events for me ever to be willing to come back here.

~

Back in my car, I force my mind to go blank. If I'm thinking anything, it's 'Drive, drive, drive'. I can just make it in time for the girls, if I'm ruthless. As I approach the Crozier Bridge roundabout, I get into the lane on the far left, the only one that isn't clogged with queueing cars. Once I'm on the roundabout, I swerve over, attracting irate beeps from other drivers, and get into the lane I need to be in. I perform the same stunt at three more roundabouts and save nearly ten minutes of queueing time.

You are ruthless, and not only today. Don't try to pretend this behaviour is new.

Hypnotherapy seems to have amplified the voice in my head that's always trying to make me feel guilty. Or maybe it hasn't. It's certainly magnified my paranoia.

Drive, drive, drive. Drive, drive, drive.

My heart rate finally slows to a manageable level when I realise that I will, after all, be there in time to meet the bus. I've never missed it yet, not once, and I'm determined that I never will. The downside of seeing off my bus-related worries is that there is now space in my mind for other thoughts.

She lied to me.

The words were there in her notebook, exactly as I said: 'Kind,

Cruel, Kind of Cruel'. Written as a list on an otherwise blank page. No printed lines, true, but apart from that detail my description was spot on. So why did she tell me I couldn't have seen it?

I need another perspective on this to orientate my own – not that I know what mine is yet, other than confusion. If I tell Luke what happened, he'll tell me it's obvious why Red Lipstick Woman lied. Since Little Orchard, his default mode has been to listen to whatever's puzzling me, then deny the existence of the puzzling element in case I become obsessed. 'You're looking at it from the wrong angle,' he'll say. 'It would have been odd if she *hadn't* lied. She doesn't care if your memory's misfiring – why should she? All she's going to care about is preserving what's left of her privacy. She's written something weird in her notebook, you've seen it, and she doesn't want to explain what it is. No mystery there.'

Song lyrics? A poem? A description of her emotional state, or her personality? It was kind of her to let me have her appointment, cruel of her to sneer at Ginny for basing her hypnotherapy practice in a shed in her back garden.

Kind of cruel to lie to me about what she'd written in her notebook?

I shake my head, disgusted by the absurdity of my line of reasoning. How many people write lists of their own character traits in notebooks that they carry around with them?

Jo's the person I'm itching to discuss it with, but I'm not going to allow myself to ring her as soon as I get in, however much I'd like to. On a day when I've already done too many bad things, I'm going to exercise some self-restraint for once in my life and stop myself from adding another to the list. Since Little Orchard, I have often drawn other people's inexplicable behaviour to Jo's attention and asked her if she can think of any reason why someone might behave so bizarrely. I do it to make her feel awkward; I am trying to tell her without actually telling her that I have not forgotten her and Neil's mystifying disappearing act that Christmas – never referred to by any of us and never accounted for.

If Jo is conscious of my hidden agenda, she's expert at concealing it; my frequent observations about the irrationality of this person or that person never seem to throw her off track. I'd like to think she's as aware as I am of all the important things we don't say to one another when we get the chance – aware, crucially, that these gaps between us are her fault – but I'm starting to wonder if she has deleted Little Orchard from her mind, and is genuinely oblivious to its continued occupation of mine. From the way she says, 'That *is* odd' and 'What a weirdo!' when I describe the strange behaviour of my various colleagues, it's pretty clear she's offering that response as someone who wouldn't dream of behaving so oddly herself.

I arrive at the corner of Spilling Road and Clavering Road at my usual time of twenty-eight minutes past four. Dinah and Nonie's school bus has two drop-off points in the centre of Rawndesley – here and the station car park. The station is the more popular one, but for me this one has two advantages: hardly anybody uses it, and it's no more than five or six strides from my front door. Luke and I bought number 9 Clavering Road just over a year ago in order to have somewhere big enough for the girls to move into. I was determined to buy the biggest house I could afford; nothing else mattered. It still doesn't. I don't care that the carpeting throughout is hideous, synthetic and bright red, or that all the curtains are faded floral and so heavily swagged that you can barely see any window between the loops and folds of fabric; I don't care that we can't afford to replace any of it. What I love about my house is that even though it's on a main road, even though I live with three other people, two of whom are children, I can always find a silent, empty room when I need one. Luke's and my old house had a ground floor that was entirely open plan apart from a downstairs loo; this one has floor after floor of square rooms with closable doors. When I mentioned this to Jo as a major attraction, it was obvious she disapproved. 'Who do you want to shut out?' she asked. She didn't say so, but I knew she doubted my ability to look after Dinah and Nonie properly – Saint Jo, who believes no one can nurture quite as well

as she can, who loves nothing more than to surround herself with as many dependent relatives as possible.

I told her the truth: that the only person I want to shut out – need to, sometimes – is myself. I remember what I said. I chose my words carefully to tempt her interest: 'My mind can be a harsh environment. Sometimes I need to take it far away from the people I care about, to make sure I don't contaminate anybody.' Jo's reply shocked me. 'Ignore me,' she said. 'I'm just jealous. Dinah and Nonie are amazing kids. You're so lucky.' At the time, I laughed and said, 'As if you haven't got enough people on your plate.' It was only later, lying awake that night in bed, that I replayed the scene and decided I was angry with her – or rather, I decided I ought to be, I would have every right to be. I spend a lot of time wondering how I ought to feel about Jo, while having no idea how I actually feel.

She called me lucky, knowing my best friend was dead, knowing that Luke and I probably wouldn't now have children of our own. She avoided responding to what I'd said about feeling the need to shut myself out because she didn't want our conversation to go beyond the superficial. She never does any more; I'm convinced that her apparent determination to spend every waking hour catering for at least ten people is an escape strategy – how can anyone expect you to engage in meaningful conversation with them when you're dashing around your too-small kitchen putting together a cream tea that would make the Ritz Hotel's equivalent look paltry?

I look at my watch. The bus is late. It always is. We've been told in an official letter from the school that while we must be prompt and prepared to wait for up to twenty minutes, the bus will never wait for us. If we are not there to pick up on the dot of half past four, the children will be returned to school and put in something called 'Fun Club'. I was instantly suspicious when I read this: if things are fun, one doesn't generally need to be 'put in' them. I wanted to write to the school and point out that its bus needs a lesson in give-and-take, but Dinah forbade me. 'You're going to need to fight the school over more important things,' she told me, as if toppling the board of governors was something she'd been

mulling over recently, even if she hadn't yet wholeheartedly committed to the plan. 'Save your energy for a fight that matters.' This made me smile; it's something Luke and I are always telling her. 'Just make sure you're on time for the bus. It's easier for us to be on time than it is for any other family at the school,' she added, sounding like a headmistress. I submitted because I was so relieved to hear her describe us as a family.

Luke and I didn't know when we bought our house that the girls' school bus dropped off and picked up right outside; when we found out, Luke said, 'It's a sign. It's got to be. Someone's on our side.' On yours, maybe, I thought. The kind of Someone he had in mind would have had access to information about me that I was fairly sure would result in an instant withdrawal of all supernatural support. Knowing I couldn't say that to Luke, angry to be trapped with a secret I hated and wished would go away, I snapped at him unfairly. 'Would that be the same Someone who let Sharon die?' He apologised. I didn't and still haven't.

Another cheery memory. Ginny Saxon would be proud.

I can say sorry to strangers, and even send them cheques for seventy pounds that I've told them they don't deserve, but I can't apologise to my own husband, not any more; I would feel like a hypocrite. Any 'sorry' I might say would be nothing more than a shield for the 'sorry' I'm not saying, the one I can never say.

Hypnotherapy and me are a bad match, I decide. I need something that's going to pull me out of my endlessly churning interior world, not plunge me deeper into it.

I've never been less in the mood to make polite conversation than I am now, so Sod's Law dictates that, on the exterior world front, today there are three mothers waiting on the corner for the bus. Usually there's only one, who cuts me dead because I once said the wrong thing. I've forgotten her name and the name of her shaggy-headed child, but I think of her as OCB, which stands for organic cereal bar. She brings one every afternoon for her son, whose hair, she once told me, has never been cut because she can't bear the thought of vandalising any precious part of him, and certainly not

when he's perfectly happy as he is, and why should she, purely for the sake of convention and to please the bigot contingent? She detained me for nearly fifteen minutes with a full explanation that veered into gender-role-redefining manifesto towards the end, even though I'd been polite enough not to ask her why her son resembled a sheepskin rug.

Before she decided I was beyond the pale and not worth talking to, I learned a lot about what it means to be a parent from listening to OCB. It seems fairly straightforward: if you have a child that behaves like a savage, deflect attention from his shortcomings by accusing the teachers of 'pathologising' him and failing to meet his individual needs, especially if these include the need to poke other children in the eye with a fork. If your son fails a test, accuse the school of being too outcome-focused; if he is lazy and says everything is boring, blame the teacher for not stretching or stimulating him in the right way; if your child is not particularly bright, couch the problem in terms of the school failing to identify and plug a 'skills gap'; crucially, ostracise anyone who dares to suggest that some gaps – those belonging to clever children, specifically – are easier to fill with skills than others, and that, hypothetically, a teacher might try endlessly to lob into the chasm some fairly basic proficiencies and fail to lodge them there, owing to an inherently unsympathetic micro-climate of massive stupidity.

I probably shouldn't have said that, but it had been a long day, and my freedom went to my head – the freedom of being a guardian and not a parent. I can see exactly how Dinah and Nonie make life harder for themselves, their classmates and their teachers, just as I can see their talents and their strong points, the personal and intellectual qualities that are going to make life easier for them. I feel no urge to feign modesty about the good or pretend the bad doesn't exist, not having made the girls myself, and so I don't need to enter into any reciprocal delusion-bolstering deals of the sort that many of the parents rely on: 'It doesn't surprise me *at all* that Mr Maskell hasn't spotted that Jerome's gifted, Susan – he hasn't noticed that Rhiannon is either.'

Dinah and Nonie are first off the bus when it arrives, as they usually are. I hang back behind the mothers, as per Dinah's instructions. In the very early days, she told me that I wasn't allowed to run forward and give her a hug or a kiss, that Sharon hadn't been allowed to either – any display of affection in a public place is embarrassing and therefore forbidden. I am, however, allowed to smile enthusiastically, and this I do as the girls walk towards me with quick neat steps, like purposeful businesswomen on their way to an important meeting. I can see from Dinah's face that she has something significant to say to me. She always does, every day. Nonie is worried about how I will react to whatever it is, and how Dinah will react to my reaction, as she always is. I can feel myself mentally limbering up as they approach, knowing that whatever's about to pass between us will seem to fly by at a million miles an hour, and I'm going to need to be on my toes, mentally. Luke has the knack of relaxing with the girls; he can coax them into winding down in a way that I've never been able to. My conversations with them often feel like super-fast games of verbal ping-pong, in which I'm desperate to let them win, but never quite sure how to.

'Are you and Luke ever going to have a baby?' Dinah asks, handing me her and Nonie's book bags; it is my job to carry them to the house.

'No. Why, what makes you ask that?'

'Someone on the bus asked us, because you're not our mum and dad. This girl, Venetia, said that if you had a baby of your own, you'd love it more than you love us, and Nonie got upset.'

'If we did have a baby, we wouldn't love it any more than we love you,' I say to Nonie, making sure to look only at her, knowing Dinah's pride would rebel at the slightest suggestion that she too might need reassurance. 'Not one single bit more. But we're not going to have a baby. We talked about it, and we decided. We're going to stay as we are: a family of four.'

'Good, because there'd be no point,' says Dinah.

'In our having a baby?'

'No. It'd only grow up and work in an office. Has anyone from school phoned you today?'

'No,' I say. 'Should they have?'

'Dinah's in trouble, and it's not her fault,' says Nonie, picking at the skin on her lip.

'I told you.' Her sister turns on her. 'Mrs Truscott didn't ring because she knew Amber'd stick up for me.'

'Stick up for you over what?'

'Is Luke home yet?' Dinah ignores my question, unwinds her school scarf from round her neck and hands it to me along with her gloves.

'I don't know. I've not been into the house, I've only just—'

'I'll tell him first and then I'll tell you.'

'That's stupid,' says Nonie. 'He'll tell her.'

'*I*'ll tell her. But she won't worry as much once she sees Luke thinks it's funny, which he will.'

All this before we get to the front door. 'What's wrong with working in an office?' I ask as I fumble in my handbag for my house keys. 'I work in an office.'

'It's boring,' says Dinah. 'Not for you, if you like it – that's fine. I just mean, when you think how many people work in offices – almost everybody – *then* it's boring. It'd be silly to have a baby just so that it could grow up and do a boring thing that too many people do already.'

I drop my keys on the doorstep, bend to pick them up, say, 'People do different things in their offices – interesting things, sometimes.' I notice I'm not demanding to know what Dinah is putting off telling me; I also like the idea of waiting until Luke's here to soften the blow by finding it hilarious.

'I'm going to be a stonemason, like Luke,' says Dinah. 'I could take over running his business when he gets too old. He's quite old already.'

Can girls be stonemasons? Luke is forever lugging around huge chunks of York and Bath stone that I'm sure no female could lift. 'Last week you wanted to be a baroness,' I remind Dinah as I unlock the door. 'I think that's a better fit, I have to say.'

Nonie hangs back. 'How much money have we got?' she asks. OCB, who is conducting an inventory of Sheepskin Rug's possessions on the pavement nearby, adjusts her stance in the hope of hearing my reply.

'That's a funny question, Nones. Why?'

'Enver in my class – his mum and dad have got so much money that he won't ever have to get a job. We haven't got that much, have we?'

I try to usher her inside, but she sticks determinedly to the doorstep. 'You don't need to worry about money, or about getting a job,' I tell her. 'You're a child. Let the grown-ups do the worrying.' Her frown lines deepen, and I realise I've said the wrong thing. 'Not that Luke and I have anything to worry about. We're fine, Nones, financially and in every other way. Everything's fine.'

'I'd like to get a job when I'm older, but I don't know how to,' she says. 'Or how to buy a house, or a car, or find a husband.'

'You're not supposed to know about any of that stuff yet. You're only seven,' I say.

She shakes her head sorrowfully. 'Everyone in my class already knows who they're marrying, apart from me.'

'Dinah – airlock!' I call out, seeing that the inner door is wide open, the one that's supposed to stay shut until the outer door's closed. 'Come on, Nones, can we go in? It's freezing.' She sighs, but does as she's told. Disappointment rises from her small body like steam. She hoped to be able to solve her matrimonial problem before crossing the threshold, and it didn't happen; now she's having to go inside with it still unresolved.

I give her a hug and promise that as soon as she's old enough, I will find the most amazing, handsome, clever, kind, rich, wonderful man for her to marry. She looks delighted for a second, then worried. 'Dinah'll need one too,' she says. Nonie's obsessed with fairness. I restrain myself from voicing my sudden strong hunch that Dinah will need at least three, as I hang up coats, arrange discarded shoes in pairs and pick up the envelopes that are scattered on the floor. One is from Social Services. I wish I could tear it up and not have to read what's inside.

I'm about to close and lock the outer door when I hear a voice say, 'Amber Hewerdine?' I look outside and see a short, wiry man with black hair, dark brown bloodshot eyes and sallow skin. He looks as if he's been doing too much or too little of something. Automatically, I wonder if he sleeps well. 'DC Gibbs,' he says, producing a card from his pocket that he holds in front of my face.

That was quick. Aren't mistakes meant to take a while to catch up with you? Obviously the in-denial period of imagining I might get away with it has given its appointment to the horrible retribution that was booked in for a later slot.

'Put that thing away,' I tell him, looking over my shoulder into the house. Thankfully, we seem to be alone; he missed Nonie by a few seconds. 'Listen, because this is important – more important than me looking at that woman's stupid notebook,' I hiss at him. 'I've got two girls inside who *cannot* find out that you're a cop. Okay? If they see you, you're selling something: double-glazing, feather dusters, take your pick.'

'Kind, Cruel, Kind of Cruel,' he says, and I have that unnerving feeling again, the same one I had outside Ginny's house, when I was caught in the act: *this is wrong*. His reaction is off by a few degrees. Why isn't he telling me that helping oneself to the contents of someone else's car is a serious offence? Why is he quoting those strange words at me? Then it hits me, what the problem is: this is like something that would only happen in a dream – a stranger accosts you outside your house and says the very words that have been going round and round in your mind.

'What does it mean?' he asks. *In a dream, neither of you would know what the words meant.*

'You're asking the wrong person,' I say.

'Amber?' I look over the DC's shoulder and see Luke walking towards us fast. He must sense that something's wrong. I feel irrationally encouraged by the idea that there are three of us now, and two of us are on my side. Luke smells of sweat, and of the dust that's coating his skin and clothes; he's been at the quarry all day.

'This guy's police,' I tell him, mouthing the last word. 'Go in

and keep an eye on the girls, tell them I'm talking to someone from work.'

'What's going on?' he asks us both, as if we're conspiring to exclude him.

'I need to talk to your wife,' DC Gibbs tells him. To me, he says, 'You can agree to come in or I can arrest you – your choice.'

'Arrest me?' I laugh. 'So that you can ask me why I looked at some woman's notebook?'

'So that I can ask you what you know about the murder of Katharine Allen,' he says.

What is the difference between a story and a legend? In which category does Little Orchard belong? I'd say it falls squarely into the 'legend' category. It has a name, for one thing: Little Orchard. Those two words suggest more than a house in Surrey. They're enough to call to mind a complex sequence of events and an even more multi-layered collection of opinions and emotions. Wherever we have a mental shortcut phrase for a story from our past, that provides a clue that the story has become a legend.

Does it matter that, apart from one Italian nanny, the only people who know it are all members of the same extended family? I don't think so. For all those people, it stands out. It will always stand out. It's unique: a banned story, one they have tacitly agreed never to mention to one another and one that, as a result, they probably dwell on far more than they would if they were allowed to discuss it freely. It is certainly the most intriguing story the family owns – a mystery that seems unlikely ever to be solved. No progress has been made towards solving it in seven years, and the reasons why this is the case are almost as interesting as the mystery itself.

What sort of mind would invent something so bizarre, and why? If I'm pretending, for now, that the story – the legend – is a lie from start to finish, then that's a question that has to be asked of every event, every utterance and every emotion within the overall sequence – asked, and if possible, answered.

First, though, we must look at the sequence. Which is a practice we've grown unused to, ever since Little Orchard acquired legend status. When a story becomes a legend, our mental shortcut phrase tends to evoke not what actually happened, stage by stage – that would be far too labour-intensive – but a convenient wrapping that covers the whole. For Little Orchard, several obvious wrapping concepts spring to mind: 'We'll probably never know', 'It only goes to show that you can never truly know a person,

however close to them you think you are', perhaps even the treacherous 'We're better off not knowing', since many people collude with whoever is attempting to pull the wool over their eyes.

Do you see what I'm saying? How a memory loses itself within the hard shell of a story, and how a story is then further twisted out of shape and consolidated in its most easily consumable form when it becomes a legend?

I want to take the Little Orchard legend back to the level of story. Treating it exactly as I would a work of fiction, I'm going to tell it as if I don't know any of the characters in it – I haven't met any of them yet, and so I trust no one character more than the others. I'm also going to bring to the story the same expectation I would bring to a work of fiction: that I can and will find out exactly what it all means, that any other outcome would be an outrageous betrayal on the part of the storyteller. Like all mystery stories, this one must have a solution. Not knowing, never finding out, is unacceptable. I am stressing this before I start to describe what happened; in doing so, I am signalling to the solution that I know it's there and I expect it to reveal itself when the time is right.

December 2003: Johannah and Neil Utting, a married couple in their mid-thirties, splash out on hiring a big house over Christmas, one that can accommodate all their relatives. It will be their Christmas present to everybody. Their own house is too small, with only three bedrooms.

After searching on the internet, Johannah, known as Jo, chooses a house called Little Orchard in Cobham, Surrey. It has five double bedrooms and four twins, which is perfect. The whole extended family is invited, and everybody accepts: Neil's brother and sister-in-law, Luke and Amber; Jo's mother Hilary, Jo's sister Kirsty and her brother Ritchie; Neil's parents, Pam and Quentin; Jo and Neil's nanny Sabina, their five-year-old son William and their newborn baby, Barney.

On Christmas Eve, Sabina stays in with William and Barney while everyone else walks to the nearest pub, the Plough, to have dinner. Everybody seems to have a good time. Nothing out of the ordinary happens. At about ten thirty, the party returns to Little Orchard. William and Barney are fast asleep. Pam and Quentin, Neil's parents, are the first adults to go to bed, shortly followed by Sabina, the nanny. Neil, Luke and Amber decide to call it a night half an hour later. Amber and Luke hear Neil say to Jo,

'Are you coming to bed?' and see him look puzzled when she says, 'No, not yet.' Amber and Luke are surprised too. Neil and Jo always go to bed at the same time – they are 'one of those couples', as Amber comments to Luke later. Neil seems put out by Jo's negative response. He shrugs and stomps off upstairs. Everyone listens to his footsteps, which echo through the house for a long time. He and Jo are in the master suite, on the top floor.

Amber and Luke say goodnight and head upstairs to their bedroom on the first floor, leaving Jo, Hilary, Kirsty and Ritchie downstairs in the lounge.

The next morning, Christmas morning, four people who should be there are not. Jo, Neil, William and Barney have disappeared. So has their car. Sabina, the children's nanny, is mystified. Jo would never go anywhere without her, she says, not if the children were going. 'Even if William or Barney were ill, and needed to be taken quickly to hospital?' Hilary asks. 'Especially then,' says Sabina. No note has been left anywhere in the house. All mobile phones are checked, but no explanatory messages have been left. Jo's handbag and Neil's wallet have gone, but all the Christmas presents are still there, wrapped and waiting beneath the tree. Most of them are for William and Barney. Sabina bursts into tears. 'Jo would never take her boys away on Christmas morning before they'd opened their presents,' she says. 'Something has happened to them.' She tries to ring first Jo's mobile phone and then Neil's, but both are switched off.

Sabina and Hilary want to contact the police, but the others persuade them that it's too soon, and would be, at this stage, an overreaction. By two o'clock, everybody has come round to their worst-case-scenario way of thinking, and Sabina makes the call.

A detective turns up, asks a lot of questions, says he thinks it unlikely that Jo, Neil and the boys have been removed from Little Orchard against their will. Sabina accuses him of not having listened properly. She tells him to go back to the police station and recharge his solitary brain cell. He nods and stands up to leave, as if he thinks this is a sensible suggestion, and says he will call round again the following day to see if Jo and Neil have been in touch. At the front door, he pauses to announce that Christmas – especially Christmas spent with one's entire family – can be a very stressful time of year; he tells everybody to bear that in mind.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of tension and misery, punctuated by occasional hysterical outbursts from Pam and Hilary, William and Barney's two grandmothers, and from Sabina, who keeps saying that she will throw herself off a tall building or swallow a bottle of pills if anything has happened to Jo, Neil and the boys – that's how much she loves them. Luke gets angry and snaps at her to 'give it a rest with the suicide talk'. Pam remarks, at one point, that Kirsty is lucky. 'Ignorance is bliss,' she says. 'She doesn't even know they're missing.' Does Amber wonder about what Kirsty does or doesn't know? She doesn't even know if there's a name for what's wrong with Kirsty; Jo has never volunteered the information.

No presents are opened and no turkey is eaten. That night, nobody sleeps well. Pam and Hilary don't sleep at all.

The following morning, Amber comes downstairs at quarter past seven and finds Jo in the kitchen with William and Barney. The tips of the boys' noses are red, the lenses of Jo's glasses misted over. They look as if they have just walked in. Neil's jacket and mobile phone are on the counter. 'Wake everyone up,' Jo orders, before Amber has a chance to ask her anything. 'Get everyone together in the lounge.' She doesn't look at Amber as she says this.

Amber does as she's told, and soon the whole family plus Sabina is assembled in the lounge, not daring to move, waiting for the announcement that will explain everything. Jo and Neil are heard whispering in the hall, but no one can make out what they're saying. Luke and Amber exchange a look that says, 'This had bloody well better be good'. Only Sabina is irrepressibly relieved and happy, clapping her hands together and saying, 'Thank God they are back safe and sound.' Pam and Hilary have bypassed the relief stage altogether, and are waiting in petrified silence for some piece of catastrophic news to be delivered; both are certain it's on its way.

After keeping everybody waiting for nearly fifteen minutes, Jo finally appears. 'Neil's taken the boys upstairs for a bath,' she says. 'They were filthy.' She sighs and stares out of the window at the split-level garden that looks like an enormous grass staircase, with a perfectly square lawn on each step. 'Look, I know you've all been waiting and wondering, but if it's all right with you, I'm going to keep this brief.' Jo sounds like a politician at a press conference. Almost as if she has listened to herself and not liked the way

she sounded, she changes her tone – makes it warmer, more personal. Now there is plenty of eye contact. 'I'm really sorry about yesterday. Neil's sorry too. We're . . . sorrier than we can say. Truly. We know how worried you must have been . . .' She pauses. Her eyes fill with tears. Then she sniffs, pulls herself together. 'Anyway, the important thing is that there's nothing wrong and nothing for any of you to worry about. Everything's fine – and that's the truth. And I promise we will never mysteriously vanish again. Now, please tell me we can forget all about yesterday and have our Christmas Day today instead.'

'Of course, Jo,' says Sabina. 'We are just happy you are all okay.'

'We're more than okay.' Jo looks at each of us in turn, trying to drive the point home. 'We're fine. There's no problem, there's nothing we're not telling you. Honestly.' Her voice is full of warmth, confidence and authority – the sort of voice you want to trust.

'Fair enough,' says Ritchie. Hasn't he noticed that Jo has told a very obvious untruth, in her bid to be believed? *There's nothing we're not telling you*. Of course there is; everyone listening knows there is. No one points this out, however. Everyone assumes Jo meant to say that there was nothing *significant* she and Neil were withholding.

'Well . . . thank goodness,' says Pam. Quentin nods. Hilary is busy wiping Kirsty's mouth and doesn't say anything.

Amber and Luke exchange another look. Luke opens his mouth to speak – to demand a proper explanation, he tells Amber later – but Jo cuts him off, saying, 'Please, Luke, don't make this worse for me than it already is. Can't we put it behind us? I've been so looking forward to being here with everyone. I can't bear to think that I've ruined Christmas.' She attempts a joke: 'If you knew how much Neil and I paid for this place, I promise you you'd understand.'

Luke wouldn't have let Neil get away with it, but this is Jo – a woman trying not to cry, trying very obviously to put a brave face on something. Luke doesn't want to make her break down in front of everyone by pushing her to reveal details she doesn't want to share. He also gets the impression that most people in the room would rather not know; if they are not party to the problem, they can't be expected to contribute to its resolution, and doing nothing is always easier than doing something. And, given Jo's reluctance to talk about it, it

could well be deeply private – even more reason to steer clear. Luke can feel everyone around him deciding to take Jo at her word and believe that everything is 'more than okay' and 'fine'.

Amber is thinking along the same lines: if it were not something private, Jo would tell them. She's not generally a secretive person. If it hadn't been an unavoidable emergency, Jo wouldn't have taken her branch of the family and disappeared without a word of explanation to anybody. Jo is neither thoughtless nor unreliable. It is inconceivable that she would do such a thing.

Officially, the incident is never mentioned again. In fact, it gets several more mentions over the years, most of which Jo and Neil know nothing about. Amber keeps track of the references, like a sort of unofficial verbal cuttings agency, which is both appropriate and easy because Amber is often the person who brings it up. Two years after the event, she finds herself alone with Sabina and dares to ask her if she knows any more than the rest of them do. 'No,' says Sabina. 'In Italy, I would know. English families don't talk about anything.' Amber believes her.

About a year later, Amber confides in Pam, her mother-in-law, that she still often wonders what really happened, still wants to know. 'Well,' says Pam, wrinkling her nose as if Amber has raised a distasteful subject. 'You do and you don't, really.' Amber thinks this is a ridiculous thing to say. What on earth is it supposed to mean?

Luke is the only person with whom Amber can talk freely about Little Orchard, though it annoys her that he often appears to be humouring her. He is no longer interested. As he puts it, 'The moment's passed. It was a blip, that's all. Neil and Jo have been fine ever since. What does it matter any more?'

It matters to Amber. So much that she has even considered asking William, now twelve, if he can remember anything of that night. Why?

Amber is reluctant to claim sole ownership of her curiosity. She suspects everyone is secretly desperate to know; certainly all the women who were there. Hilary and Sabina have both wondered ever since that night – they must have; how could they not? – whether the happy-seeming surface of Neil and Jo's relationship is nothing more than an optical illusion. Pam, before she died in January from liver cancer, must have wondered too.

And is Amber really the only member of the Little Orchard party who still listens carefully whenever William and Barney open their mouths, in case they let a clue slip out? If something strange is going on between their parents, or in their home, there's no way that, bright as they are, they're unaware of it.

Why doesn't Amber simply ask Jo straight out, if she's so curious? Maybe, after all these years, Jo would simply laugh and tell her. And even if not, surely the worst that would happen is that Jo would say, 'I'm sorry, that's private.'

When Amber thinks about it, she realises that she knows the answer to this question, and, as answers go, it's a baffling one. It isn't that she is worried Jo won't want to tell her. On the contrary, and odd though it sounds, *it is Amber who doesn't want to tell Jo*. She feels as if that would be a terribly impolite, almost a violent thing to do. Jo appears to have erased the incident from her memory entirely. She walked out of the lounge at Little Orchard on Boxing Day 2003, having made her announcement, and immediately – instantaneously – created an alternative version of the universe, one in which *it did not happen*. That is the world in which she now lives happily, and for Amber to ask her about Little Orchard would be to drag her out of it. 'Like going up to someone you see having fun at a party and telling them that you happen to know they were a victim of genocide in a previous life,' says Amber to Luke, who thinks she is being melodramatic. His take on it is different: 'I still don't see why they didn't just make up a plausible lie, if they didn't want to tell us the truth,' he says. 'That's what I'd have done.'

Which rather goes to prove my point: that there's nothing most of us love more than a plausible lie. A good story, in other words.