

reasons to go outside

ESME KING

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1st August 1976

It was the hottest summer for three hundred and fifty years, the driest in more than a century. Newspaper headlines proclaimed the country to be in the grip of a record-breaking heatwave. Under the sun's unrelenting glare, the tarmac on the M1 softened, and swarms of ruby-red ladybirds took the whole nation by surprise. The Thames receded, revealing shores of dank, fetid mud, embedded with the oil drums and shopping trolleys that usually went unseen below the deep, dark water. The capital's landmark had become a tributary of its former self, withered, and reduced. The government declared a state of emergency, standpipes rose out of the pavements, and neighbours stood shoulder to shoulder in the streets with plastic buckets to fill. Queues formed and conversations began about the forest fires that had raged for weeks, and the government's request that each household member save water by bathing with a friend. Nobody knew how long it would last. The unforgettable summer of 1976.

At the height of it, Ray Johnson got in his car and drove Lana Winter and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Pearl, all the way from Godalming to Devon.

In the close confines of the car, they spoke very little. It wasn't like any of them to be silent and especially not Ray. Her mother had described him as the life and soul of the party when they met, a person other people warmed to instantly. He didn't have children or a wife of his own, Pearl knew, but treated Lana and

herself as if they were exactly that. It had been good to see her mother smile again too after Mr Winter had left them so suddenly and moved in with a woman who worked in the launderette. But during the journey from Godalming to Devon Ray spoke only to ask Lana if she would light him another one of his cigarettes. On the back seat, Pearl sat amongst the swirls of dove-grey smoke and concentrated on counting seconds, and then minutes, anything to avoid thinking about the reason they had to leave Godalming. Instead, she focused on the permanently changing landscape outside as the wide motorways and dusty roads gave way to narrow country lanes and sage-coloured fields.

As dusk descended, they reached a town where the cottages were washed in pastel shades of pink, blue and yellow. Each was topped with a bristly thatched roof. A sign read 'Welcome to Westdown'. Pearl wound down her window and listened to the sound of a juke-box coming from inside a nearby public house, its doors wide open to encourage in a change of air. Outside, there were two hanging baskets containing the desiccated remains of plants. All that was left were their tinder-dry stems trembling in the early evening breeze. Pearl's hair whipped across her face as they drove along the deserted street, so she wound her window back up until it was closed.

Ray pushed his foot on the accelerator pedal and drove out the other side of the town, over a cattle grid and onto an expanse of grassland so vast and impressive Pearl forgot to keep counting minutes. Acres of rugged green earth, dry and scorched in place, and dotted with rocky outcrops, rippled lazily away into the distance, below a striking sunset of vermilion red and gold. Black-faced sheep grazed amiably alongside wild ponies. Pearl noticed their fur was muddy in places. The animals looked up only briefly as if a speeding car was nothing to be troubled by.

'Not much further,' Ray promised. 'Then we'll be there.' Pearl felt relieved. The sooner they reached their new home the better.

He drove on across the moor, taking only one turning off the main road, and after a short distance, pulling up outside a large, stone-built house with a wide front lawn. This had a concrete path running through the centre of it, all the way up to a heavy oak door. Faded blooms of late, lilac wisteria cascaded down one side of the house, and a determined ivy strangled a broken drainpipe on the other. There was a black metal box marked Mail attached to the gate post, and a low wooden fence that ringed the boundary.

Ray turned off the car's engine and Lana got out. 'There's nobody else but us.' She said. Pearl listened for a sound. Save for the flap of unseen wings in the towering oak trees nearby, there was nothing. No distant hum of traffic or dogs barking.

'I'll get the suitcases, if you two want to go in,' Ray said helpfully, already lifting the lid of the boot. 'Our furniture will arrive tomorrow in the van. Then Highview will feel more like a home.'

It was just a short distance to the door, through the gate and up the path, but it felt like a mile. Pearl kept her head down as she made her way along it, concentrating on the small explosions of emerald-green moss bursting out of the cracks in the concrete. Ahead, Lana unlocked the front door and pushed it open. Pearl didn't stop to think about the terrifying truth of what had happened in Godalming that heatwave summer. To reflect on it, she knew, only served to invite in an unbearable feeling; a fear that threatened to overwhelm her completely and fell her where she stood.

So, as fast as her legs would carry her, Pearl Winter hurried inside.



PEARL

1st August – 43 Years Later

Out on the road, a gang of crows tug at two-day-old roadkill with beaks hooked like daggers. They pull at the sun-baked remains below a dancing circle of flies. This way and that, backward and forward, the dry matter slides. Pearl finds herself squinting in order to see clearly as she has done so many times lately. Her focus is not what it used to be. Almost sixty-year-old eyes. Almost sixty-year-old knees.

Either side of the gate, there is a falling-down section of the fence, and up against it a sweep of tall grass, grown overly thin and longer than is good for it. Pearl reluctantly takes in the sight of it as well as the sharp brambles below her windowsill. She sees the abundance of sticky chickweed on the ledge, and the gate at the end of the path hanging at a jaunty angle, on account of its only having one hinge. The other lies on the ground, turning ochre with rust in the burning sun. Pearl sighs deeply. If only she could step outside and set the mower in motion, dig up the rampant brambles, and re-attach the hinge to the gate. There is no getting away from it. It is time to make the call she has been putting off for more days than she cares to remember.

In the hallway, on a darkwood table, sits an elephant-grey slab of plastic with extra-large buttons. Next to it is a

yellowing pad of A4 paper, flipped open in the middle and revealing the jagged edges of the lined sheets ripped out before. On the open page there is a shopping list, a reminder to have the chimney swept, an order for milk, and a note, all in her mother's unmistakable handwriting: *Should you need help with the garden, my dearest Pearl, please put a postcard in the newsagent's window.* Lana Winter had included a number to call. Seeing the carefully written words, Pearl feels the pain of losing someone so close to her, just as she had done three years previously. It had been unexpected, Lana dying only six years after Ray. It was as if she couldn't bear to continue without the partner she loved. When Lana left Highview for the last time she was wrapped in a pea-green blanket and seated in an NHS wheelchair. Pearl watched the ambulance light flashing its urgency over the dark moor as it disappeared, and for a long time after she stood standing at the window. The hospital rang the next morning with the news. Lana had passed away in her sleep, unable to fight the chest infection that had plagued her for months. From that moment, Highview had seemed so very quiet. Just Pearl and the crows.

There are few visitors to the house, just the postman with his headphones who knocks infrequently and rarely speaks, and the grocery-delivery driver who arrives briefly and without fail once a week, sometimes a tall man with a limp, sometimes a woman with short, auburn hair and incredibly strong arms. Occasionally there are substitutions on the shopping list. An opportunity to talk; a few words concerning the replacement of wholemeal bread with white, apples for pears, and one time, bananas instead of bleach.

Standing beside the telephone table now, she takes a deep breath, followed shortly after by another. Thinking of the garden once more she decides there is no time to lose. When she makes the call, it rings through while she nervously taps out a beat with her right foot. The rubber sole of her moccasin slippers makes a rat-tat-tat sound on the flagstone floor. *One, two, thr—*

‘Good morning, Westdown News.’

‘Hello.’

‘How can I help?’

‘I’d like to place a card in the window. . . for a gardener, please.’

‘No problem,’ the man replies. ‘Is it part-time or full-time you were looking for?’

Pearl thinks of the three-foot grass covering the lawns. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not absolutely sure how long the job will take but I think full time.’

‘I’ll put five days a week. Monday to Friday?’

‘Monday to Friday. Thank you.’

‘Monday to Friday with weekends off?’ he adds. ‘Then you can see how it goes.’

Pearl nods, even though she isn’t facing the man. This is going better than she expected.

‘And what sort of hourly rate were you thinking of?’

Pearl remembers details about acceptable levels of pay on a government website she’d found on her mother’s old computer that sits in a corner of the spare room. It had taken longer to log on to the elderly piece of equipment than to read the information provided about minimum pay scales.

‘Nine pounds per hour.’

‘Nine pounds,’ the man repeats. ‘And a mobile number?’

Pearl gazes at the solid-looking telephone on the table before her, fixed securely and firmly in place with four squares of sticky-back plastic. That could be a problem.

‘I’m afraid I don’t have one.’

‘Right,’ he says, unable to hide the surprise in his voice. ‘I can take the landline off the caller display. I’m sorry, but could you just bear with me one moment?’

Pearl loses the newsagent to a woman with an American accent asking about the price of clotted-cream fudge. £10.72 for the small box and £19.80 for the large.

On the line, in his absence, there is the sound of people talking and coughing and the shrill of a buzzer. Pearl imagines a line of customers waiting, all hoping to buy ice creams and cold drinks, sweets, and a copy of the day’s newspaper to read in the sun.

‘Sorry about that,’ the busy man says, returning to the call. ‘If I can just take your card details for the payment, then I think that’s everything.’

Pearl picks up the debit card from the telephone table and is immediately reminded of Ray’s comforting words. *There’s an account. Enough money for all the years to come.*

The silver digits making up the long number, expiry date and security pin shimmer in the gloom. She reads them out clearly.

‘Your ad’ll go up this afternoon,’ the man confirms. ‘Just as soon as I can get it in the window.’

A woman speaks so close to him Pearl can hear every word. The woman says that he is needed urgently to deal

with a delivery of magnums. She is quite insistent. It is such a diverting piece of information Pearl is almost moved to speak up and ask in what quantities the delivery is made. Newsagents selling bottles of champagne! How times have changed.

‘Good luck,’ the man says. ‘Just give us a call if you need another week and we’ll keep it in the window.’

And with a click, he is gone. Pearl looks down at the telephone cord, connecting her like a plastic umbilical cord to the grey plastic telephone. It is still wrapped around her wrist, and so tightly the skin on her hand has turned the colour of delphiniums.

She tries to picture the person who might answer her advertisement; the call for help she has put out, somewhat recklessly now she comes to think of it, into the world. Her prayer, when she says it, echoes around the quiet hallway.

‘Please let it be someone who won’t run a mile when I tell them, someone who might understand why the grass has grown so high without being cut down...please let it be someone kind.’

But for the life of her, Pearl can’t imagine who such a person could be.

CONNOR

Connor Matthews stands in his bedroom and stares at walls infected with irregular blobs of bright pink paint. It reminds him of when he had chicken pox, aged five. Itchy, irritating chicken pox. The spots on the walls are increasing in number, just like the ones that sprouted on every inch of his body, and are all a different shade from one another, but only marginally. Rocket Ship Rose, Hazy Harlem, and Strawberry Sundae. He checks the names on the corresponding tester pots that are lined up against the skirting board and thinks about throwing them out the window.

‘I see you. You like the new colours, yes?!’

When he turns around she is there. Yvo Martens. Belgian. Room invader. His father’s girlfriend.

‘I cannot decide,’ she sighs. ‘So many to choose from.’

She is dressed in cycling shorts and a fluorescent long-sleeved cycling top. It matches the neon strips on the downtube of her road bike leant up against the front porch. Now he thinks about it, he’s not sure if Yvo is short for something longer. He’s not actually sure of very much when it comes to the woman standing uninvited in his room, except that she met his father at the local cycling club a year ago and they share a passion for all things Lycra and two-wheeled. His father, as he’d explained it, had coveted her carbon-fibre frame, and she his Campagnolo wheels. It had

been nauseating to watch at the time, Donald Matthews acting more like a lovestruck teenager than a man with a mortgage, a Volvo, and a receding hairline. And, to make the whole situation weirder, as soon as Yvo had moved in, she'd begun changing the interior of the house like someone from one of those makeover shows on the television. It had happened so fast. No room untouched. Like a highly organised, multi-lingual cuckoo, she had landed in the Matthews family nest, B&Q colour chart in hand, and immediately made it her own.

'I liked the room as it was,' he says. 'I'm happy with Magnolia. Just saying.'

'But you will be gone to university soon, no? Then you will have different walls to look at. You could paint them the colour you like. And this happy pink,' Yvo says, bending down and picking up a tester pot marked Flamingo Fandango, 'It brings joy, no? After all the. . . sadness.'

Connor swallows hard. Has the room become suddenly darker or is he just imagining it?

'I don't know,' he mumbles, wishing he was anywhere else but standing here now facing questions about what happened two years ago. His room feels nothing like the teenage sanctuary he's sure it's supposed to be, all blackout curtains, PlayStation consoles, and unwritten rules about knocking before entering.

Yvo looks at him oddly, as if she's thinking about saying something more. 'I have new paint in the car. . .'

'OK.'

'Your father will be home soon. I think he will like it. And this one. But I will choose.'

She points to a stain that looks slightly darker than the others. Connor thinks of a name for it. Ten-day-old Dried Blood seems to cover it. Then he pictures his father walking in at the front door after a busy day at his solicitors' practice in town, seeing splats of paint on every wall in every room. The ones in the hall are bright yellow. Despite the fact they look uncannily like carefully aimed jets of bile, he knows Donald will agree the colours are an improvement and say no more on the subject than that. Nothing, in fact, that will change the uncomfortable way things are at number five Fern Crescent. Connor looks around at the pockmarked walls and can't help thinking about the time before two years ago when it wasn't odd. Then they talked, and went fishing; easy conversations alongside a lake, road trips in the Volvo in search of rivers and waterways they'd read about and couldn't wait to explore. Now, their collection of rods and equipment are gathering dust in the garage, and they haven't had the conversation they so obviously need. The one that might just save their fractured relationship.

'I'll go to the car, get the paint and look for some more brushes. . . and the spirit that is white.' Yvo's voice breaks his train of thought. 'I'll be back,' she says, her voice as deep as his father's and not softened any by her accent. It reminds Connor of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

When she has gone, he immediately takes his phone out of his back pocket. There will be enough time. Enough for him to make a call and see if the job is still available. It has been on his mind since he saw it two days ago. The post-card in the newsagent's window, hanging at a precarious angle; the sort of half upside-down way that makes you

turn your head ninety degrees to read it. He'd stood studying it while the owner was busy shutting up his shop for the evening. Just as the man disappeared from view, the Blu Tack holding it in place had given up its grip and the card had slipped behind the display, down amongst the dust and old till receipts on the floor.

It had felt like a message, a well-timed lifeline. A job for the summer. An escape from the home that doesn't feel or look like it used to. The home where Yvo and his dad so clearly want to be left alone to get on with the next chapter of their lives, painting walls, riding bikes, and acting as if everything is fine when it isn't.

So, while he has his oddly painted room to himself, Connor telephones the number on the advertisement, and waits anxiously for an answer. He hopes the person who placed the advertisement will be kind because he really needs this job.