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Before John's mother had died, she'd sat him on her knee one hazy summer afternoon and bobbed him to the rhythm of *All You Need Is Love*. He'd been no more than five, but it had always stayed with him. The sun caught in the flecks of green in her otherwise blue eyes; the curve of her shoulders and the lilt of her neck – she had a way of holding her head to one side that always made him feel like she was listening. Most of all, he remembered the smell of rosewater that hung faintly about her.

She took his tiny hand in hers and counted his fingers, telling him their names as she went. The index, middle, ring and little finger. 'How can a finger be a ring?' he'd asked; and while he didn't know what index meant, it seemed even stranger that something long and thin as a finger be called something round like a ring. She laughed and patted his head. 'It's called that,' she said, 'because when you find someone to spend your life with, that's the finger you put the wedding ring on.' 'Oh,' he said, 'but what if you're not married? What do you call your ring finger before it gets a ring?' 'You still call it your ring finger,' she said, 'because that means it'll happen.' 'I don't think I'd ever want to spend my whole life with someone else.' 'You will,' she answered, smiling. 'It's what we're here to do – to find someone, like I have with your father.'

He thought it all very odd, but he'd never heard her lie. 'Who am I going to marry, Mum?' he asked. 'Someone who loves you very much,' she said. 'Who?' 'Only you can say that.' 'But I don't know.' 'Not yet you don't, no,' she laughed, 'but you will.'

Years later, after her funeral, his father had pressed her engagement ring into his palm and told him that the day would come when he'd find what his father before him had found, and that John should have it because he had no need for it anymore. Since that day, John and his father exchanged fewer and fewer words with each passing

year, until the time came when words lost all meaning. But what John's father said to him on that day ten years earlier stayed with him, just as what his mother said to him all those years before that.

What John chose to remember was the best of them, as they had been when happy. And yet time had a different plan; it drew from his memories the sadness of life slipping through the fingers of people unable to stem the tide. He'd fought against it, pitching one memory against the other, until he lay beaten before them both. All that had remained was that sense of loss, and no matter how he struggled on, battling once more against time and tide, it had cast him against its shore like wood, warped and strangled by the sea.

Helena had saved him. The love of his life. Without her, he'd be lost still.

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Helena checked her watch. At her feet her violin gleamed in the winter sun streaming through the window at the far end of the corridor. Other hopeful applicants sat awkwardly beside her, checking and rechecking their instruments to fill the time and conceal their nerves. A young man, too tall for his suit, wide-eyed with adrenalin, was called in as another exited, his face ashen. She told herself that she was right to want to be accepted more than any of them; that she deserved it more; that without securing her future to have one last shot at it meant nothing.

The corridor they'd been asked to wait in was oppressive. Dark wooden panelling lined the walls, a high ceiling hanging overhead. Once white, it had yellowed with time. The highly polished floor reflected electric chandeliers and showed the slightest scuff. Scores of shoeprints covered it; so much so that she had no way of knowing how many had been left with a spring in their step, or dragging their feet.

Picking up the violin, she ran a hand along its neck, and then rubbed away the prints with her cuff. Her hands were clammy. Had she sweat patches under her arms? They'd show when she played, she realised; but she couldn't look without drawing attention to herself and she already felt under a spotlight. From inside the audition room a violin squealed painfully into life. The flicker of a smile crept across her lips. A fat girl with greasy hair smiled as well. Helena saw, but the girl tried to hide it; something of the atmosphere prevented eye contact, as though it would be disrespectful of the competitive element of being there. The tall man's audition took less than five minutes. Like his predecessor, he emerged pallid. Watching him scurry along the corridor, instrument at his side, Helena wondered if she'd fare any better.

Dressed in a dark blue trouser suit, her blonde hair in a loose bun, she looked twice as old as the other applicants, their pimply faces a sign of youth at odds with their mastery of their instruments. At twenty-three and on her third attempt, she doubted her musical skill matched her years. And yet she was a picture of classical beauty. It was her greatest asset, one she'd always depended on. She'd need it now.

A voice called. 'Miss Helena Reynolds?' A woman in her sixties peered through thick glasses perched on the tip of her bony nose. She held a clipboard under her arm.

Wracked with nerves, Helena passed into the audition room. The door clunked shut behind her, making her feel a prisoner in the room in which she knew her fate lay; where, if she did what she needed to, her life could turn around in a heartbeat, her place at The London School of Music secured along with her dreams. Without it, it was back to her old life, struggling to find employment, waking up day after day next to John.

The room was the antithesis of the corridor: brightly-coloured wallpaper stretched along its vast walls and sunlight flooded onto the blood-red carpet from a massive

window, curtains billowing. Two men, both wearing tweed jackets, were seated before an ancient-looking desk. On the end, a mousey woman with a down-turned mouth was scribbling something on a notepad.

Helena nestled her violin in the crook of her neck. It all rested on this moment. Her fingers felt unresponsive; the bow made of stone. The arms of her blouse stuck to her skin. For a second she imagined the other musicians listening eagerly for a mistake, as she had done. With her first stroke she knew they were smiling; the bow drew raggedly over the strings, enough for her to wince at the sound herself. The panel instantly scrawled on their notes with scratchy pencils. ‘Damn,’ she sighed through gritted teeth, and played on.

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John pulled up outside the building Helena had been sent to for her audition and tapped the steering wheel with the solid, dirt-lined fingernails of his left hand while pulling on a cigarette held in his right. Smoke billowed from his lips and escaped out the crack in the window into the cool, bright sunshine beyond, whipped away instantly by the strong breeze to float down the street behind him. Usually he’d be at work now, mixing pug or shifting endless concrete blocks from one part of a site to another, with always more to do and not enough hours in the day to do it. But he’d booked the day off to be there for Helena; and though it hardly felt like a holiday, he was glad to have a day to rest his bones, even if he was worried for her. Were she to fail, he feared where her future may lie. This was it. They both knew it. And the alternative was unthinkable. No, he’d tell himself. She will be accepted. She’s more

than good enough; and she's wanted it too long to fuck it up now. In truth, he never really doubted it.

She rounded the corner, her mobile pressed to her ear. As he watched her idle in the courtyard, obscured here and there by the leafless branches of the small clutch of tress planted in the middle of the courtyard, she paced back and forth. He wanted nothing more than to run out to her, to sweep her up and hear the good news he knew she had to tell. But he didn't. He chose to give her the space he saw she needed, confident she would tell him when she was ready.

But as the minutes ebbed away, her on the phone, he waiting patiently, he started to wonder. She seemed by turns happy and anxious; whoever it was on the other end she obviously wanted to talk to, but seemed so ill at ease at the same time. He'd never seen her like that. A few minutes later she looked up and saw him waiting in his run-down, beaten car. He lifted a hand to wave, but she turned before it had lifted more than a few inches from his lap. A moment later she'd hung up, stuffed her mobile into her bag, and was climbing into the car alongside him.

'And?' he asked.

'I got it,' she replied. He sensed no excitement in her voice, only relief. 'Bad start, but I pulled it together.'

'There's my girl!' he said, and reached for a kiss. Their lips met, and he laid a hand on her leg. He was so happy for her, and to hear her say she'd got the placement, to confirm they'd soon turn their lives upside down in pursuit of her dreams of studying music professionally, made it all the more exciting. But it was getting late, and if they were to make it back to Hastings in time to get ready for the special dinner that evening, they'd better get a move on. He turned the key in the ignition and sped

away from the curb, negotiating the London traffic that seemed so foreign to the small-town driving of their coastal hometown.

‘Tell me all about it,’ he said.

‘Later. I’ll tell you later.’

He knew she must be exhausted, and they would, he assumed, have plenty of time to go over the audition and their plans for the future later on. But she didn’t want to talk about it. Not then, nor any other time. And certainly not with John.

‘Who was that on the phone?’ he asked after some time. ‘Rose?’

‘Yeah,’ she stammered, her heart suddenly racing, ‘Rose.’

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Unbuckling his seat belt, Ozzie stepped from the car straight into a puddle. Murky water seeped through his trainer until it wrapped around his foot, soaking into the leg of his jeans. Withdrawing it, he imagined his trainer’s pristine white leather ruined beyond recovery. ‘Mum, how much longer?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rose said tiredly, burying her head under the bonnet of the car again. ‘Damn you, Simon,’ she muttered under her breath so Ozzie couldn’t hear.

He heard it anyway.

Her brow furrowed as she unscrewed caps in the bowels of the engine, peered into unlit crannies and rattled pipes – only to re-attach the caps, and be faced with darkness. It was useless; neither had the first idea about cars, nor how long they’d be stuck there. She noticed a black smudge cutting a line across the front of her blouse and jacket and swore to herself.

Ozzie sat in the passenger seat again and picked at a loose thread on his shirt. He hated wearing shirts, especially for special occasions. Outside, a streetlamp flickered too dimly for him to read the book he'd smuggled aboard against his mother's wishes; bored, he would've run the risk of reading it just to while away the time.

'Have a look again,' Rose called from under the bonnet.

'You left it charging,' he called back, rummaging through her handbag as token gesture. 'I thought you'd pick it up.'

'Yes, thank you,' she said, popping up from the exposed engine to throw him a frown.

'I'm only saying.' He plucked the loose thread. It unravelled along the breast of his shirt. 'It was stupid to leave it behind.'

Another frown. Taking meditative breaths, she peered into the gloom. Dotted with puddles, the road seemed to lead nowhere, at least not by foot. She had no idea how far along the road they had travelled before the car spluttered feebly and broken down. Having spent all day rushed off her feet, ferrying plates of food back and forth for customers who never, ever, left a tip, she was in no mood for a long walk back to civilisation. Grudgingly, she got into the car and pulled her jacket around her thin frame, shivering with the cold. 'God!' she sighed. 'I hate being late.'

The luminescent green blocks of the dashboard clock flicked to a new minute, and she knew they'd be late for her sister's last supper before her wedding, just as they were always late for everything.

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Helena wriggled in the passenger seat trying to wring out the creases in her skirt, and checked her watch. Sighing, she felt like she'd done nothing else all day. That, and lying; and one seemed as bound by time as the other. 'Put your foot down or we'll be late for dinner and Antonia and Richard will think we don't care at all about their wedding.' She plucked a cigarette from her handbag and rooted for her lighter.

'No one'll mind if we're a few minutes late,' John replied, shrugging off the scowl he could sense boring into him. His voice came out much higher than his natural lilt in a conscious effort on his part to ease her concerns. He pulled at the trouser leg that kept riding uncomfortably towards his crotch and tugged childishly at the tie knot pressing into his Adam's apple. The pained clunking of the car, worn into the ground and showing every bit of its eighteen years, drowned out his sigh.

'God, John,' she said, and puffed her cigarette alight. 'Do you have to be so upbeat?' She felt like pushing his temper, but knew she wanted to because of herself, not him.

'I'm in a good mood,' he replied, ignoring her whining tone. 'God knows, Richard and Antonia deserve a good night before the stresses of tomorrow. And it'll be good to see Rose – she never gets out these days, not since Simon started... Well, that's the point. Tonight we don't have to think about any of that real life stuff.' He clicked his fingers for the cigarette and, after she had passed it over, took a long drag while negotiating a hairpin bend, one of many on the Marsh Road that linked Hastings to Eastbourne. 'You know,' he added, smiling to himself, 'I'm glad it went so well for you today.' He pulled on the cigarette again, inhaling thoughtfully. They still hadn't talked through the audition, and, if not fuelled by her excitement, he was beginning to wonder if they ever would.

She cast her mind over the day. 'Should I say anything about it? I don't want to steal the limelight.'

'You worry too much. They might actually enjoy having a break from all this wedding talk, even if it is Richard's last day as a free man.'

She slapped him playfully, reclaiming the cigarette for herself. 'He knows what he's getting himself into.'

'Does he, Helena? Does he?'

After a mile or so of twisting roads, steep verges and overhanging hedges, they passed a broken down car. He glanced at Helena, questioning if they should stop. Her expression answered him. 'Oh look!' she shrieked, laughing to herself. 'What's Rose doing out here?'

'Looks like Simon's car,' he said, and pulled onto the verge a few metres in front of it. 'Makes this old rust-bucket look like a Bentley.'

Helena wound down the window and leaned out. 'Well,' she said as Rose ran over, 'nice night for it.'

'Isn't it just,' Rose sighed. 'Simon let me down. His bloody useless car... I thought we'd be stuck here all night.'

'We?' Helena asked.

Rose wafted a hand towards her broken down car.

'Grab the little man,' John cut in warmly, trying to dispel Rose's concerns that he and Helena disapproved of her bringing her eleven year old son Ozzie. 'Jump in.'

'Hang on.' She ran back, retrieved Ozzie and suddenly noticed the pulled thread on his shirt. 'Ozzie?' she asked in a hushed voice as they neared the car, 'what happened to your shirt?' Ozzie mumbled an unlikely explanation. 'We'll talk about it later,' she whispered as they climbed in.

John turned in his seat and smiled broadly ‘Ozbert!’ He hadn’t seen Ozzie for months, and was surprised how much he’d changed. Where once he’d been short for his age, now approaching puberty he was little more than a tangle of limbs.

‘It’s *Oscar*, actually.’ He folded his arms to hide his shirt from his mother’s prying eyes.

They set off for the Lamb Inn, leaving the broken down car at the side of the road, making their way along the dark, winding country lane. As they pulled into the car park, so did their friends, Antonia and Richard.

Antonia was Rose’s younger, prettier sister, the one they both considered to be lucky for having found Richard and who, the following morning, would marry him. And since John had been with Helena, he’d struck up a deep friendship with Richard, despite their differences: John so used to working with his hands, Richard used only to working a pen or keyboard. Yet none of the old divisions seemed to matter. Now age and circumstance had brought them together, they were all friends through and through, and greeted each other warmly.

Antonia, wearing a grey dress that looked as if it was tailored just for her, was every bit the bride to be. Her mousy hair fell about her shoulders and flicked out at the ends. Her beauty was matched only by Helena in a matching red skirt and jacket, finished off with a cream blouse that emphasised her full bust and the tight curve of her waist, leading to long, slender legs. They took it in turns admiring each other’s outfits, sharing the names of the shops where they’d bought them in between excited giggles. Without thinking, they didn’t do the same for the dark trouser suit Rose wore, but she knew already she didn’t match up. Over the years she’d seen enough men want for Antonia or Helena instead of her to know that making a fuss achieved nothing. And yet, so used to it as she had become, it barely registered.

Only Ozzie felt out of place, surrounded by adults he had nothing to talk about with. It took a moment before Richard and Antonia realised he was there at all. ‘Oz,’ Richard said, bending to him. ‘This time tomorrow it’ll be official. I’ll be your *Uncle* Richard. And your auntie Antonia will be *Mrs Crofter*.’

Ozzie extended his hand for a shake, making an obvious attempt to be seen as the man he was growing into, not the child he’d always been. Smiling to the others, Richard shook it.

‘Simon double-booked.’ Rose said, an apologetic frown creeping onto her face. ‘He couldn’t baby-sit.’

‘Mum!’ Ozzie growled in a whisper.

John said dropped to Ozzie’s height and extended his hand. ‘So, do I get one of those now you’re growing into such a strapping young lad? Or are you still annoyed with the whole Ozbert thing?’

‘No,’ Ozzie replied. He took John’s hand nonetheless. It dwarfed his. ‘But my name *is* Oscar. I was just saying.’

‘He’s good like that,’ Rose put in, laughing weakly.

‘I’m sure he is. Big lad like...*Ozymandias*.’

Richard burst into laughter, slapping John’s back and playfully mussing Ozzie’s hair.

‘It’s *Oscar*.’

‘He knows it is,’ Rose said diplomatically, and gestured to the restaurant. ‘Shall we?’

A few minutes later they were led to a round table. Wood smoke, tempered by the welcoming odour of food, hung faintly in the air. In the corner a fire flickered merrily to itself. A blackened mantelpiece lined with animal carvings nestled between pewter

mugs stood proudly above it. Weathered oak beams curved upwards from walls decorated with ornate brasses; they met high above to form an arch held in place by sturdy iron rivets. Their table was as ancient-looking as the roof beams. Chairs with moth-eaten felt padding creaked as they sat, the couples next to each other. Rose sat beside her son. Two seats between Rose and Helena remained vacant, but Rose gestured for Ozzie to take one, and then tapped her sister Antonia on the arm. 'Where's Dad?'

Antonia's smile faded. 'He wanted to get a good night's sleep before tomorrow.'

'Oh,' Rose replied, masking her own disappointment at his not being there, and for not having told her. She always felt left on the outside. 'I'm sure he didn't mean to let you down.'

'We're all disappointed,' Richard sighed. 'Hell, my parents aren't even flying in till the morning. So much for me ol' Dad shouting his son a drink on his last day...' He trailed off.

'Last day,' Antonia pressed, half-joking, 'before *what*?'

John and Helena exchanged a glance, grinning. Ever since Antonia and Richard have been together, they'd bickered. It took long-standing friends to see the affection that underpinned their relationship.

Richard sat bolt upright and took a sip of water. 'Before my life of wedded bliss begins, my love.'

A smile crept onto Antonia's lips once more as she threw Richard a sly wink. 'You're right. It's good to share *my* last night of freedom with you all.' She squealed in a cathartic release of tension. 'I never knew getting married would be so stressful!'

'Tell me about it!' Richard chortled.

'I mean,' Antonia added, 'it's not every day you get married!'

‘Once is quite enough,’ John said and, thinking of his young self on his mother’s knee, smiled.

‘What about your dad, John?’ Richard asked, his eyebrow cocked inquisitively. ‘Any news if he can make it tomorrow?’

John slumped into his chair, the cheer draining from his face. ‘We’ll see,’ he said, and caught Helena’s eye. Only she and Rose knew how John’s father had declined, especially in recent years. And while Richard only enquired as a friend, even he hadn’t realised how noticeably John felt the absence of his father from his life after the loss of his wife, John’s mother, too much to take.

Helena laid a hand on his knee and smiled weakly. ‘He said he’d come, and I’m sure he will.’

‘Well,’ Richard added, watching John’s inability to voice his own sense of loss, ‘here’s hoping he does.’

‘Yeah,’ John added sullenly, then smiled brightly, overcompensating for one of the rare times he’d allowed his best friend to witness how much the strained relationship with his father bothered him. He was usually so carefree; yet blamed himself for missing the father who had abandoned him.

Rising from the table, and trying to fill the ensuing silence, Richard asked who wanted a drink, adding that, it being a special occasion, he’d slip a little wine to Ozzie too. Ozzie’s face lit up.

‘And for you, John?’ Richard asked, having taken the others’ orders.

‘Just an orange juice.’

‘Party never stops, eh?’ Richard quipped, digging a hand in his pocket for his wallet.

‘Four years this week,’ John added, a slight smile on his lips.

‘Good for you...’ Rose began.

Helena cut her off. ‘Oh, go on,’ she said, goading John gently with her elbow. ‘One won’t hurt.’

Everyone but John paused, unsure if Helena realised how difficult she’d made it for him to refuse now. She never had managed to understand what a struggle he had been through with drink; and yet he didn’t blame her. He knew she only wanted him to relax and take his mind of his father. And maybe she was right, he thought. Maybe one wouldn’t hurt.

Only Rose’s expression made him feel otherwise. ‘Leave him be,’ she said. ‘We could all learn from John’s self-control.’

‘Rose is right,’ John said, smiling to let Helena’s efforts down gently.

Richard nodded and made for the bar with a spring in his step.

The awkwardness subsiding, Rose patted Antonia’s stomach with a laugh. ‘Talking of self-control...’ she said.

‘I am not!’ Antonia insisted playfully, batting her sister’s hand away.

Everyone burst into laughter, ribbing Antonia on why, despite being in the final year of her degree, she’d chosen now to marry Richard; and how, they jokingly surmised, it must be so Richard could legitimately be her sugar-daddy.

But Helena, laughing to herself, barely thinking about what she said, turned it back on Rose. ‘God!’ she baulked, chuckling with a high-pitch. ‘That’s not the only way to bag a man!’

And suddenly, like wind dropping from a sail, they fell silent.

Helena had meant it as a joke, but something of her tone had been tinged with spite. All eyes fell on Rose. No one meant to stare – if anything they’d have chosen to look anywhere but in her direction, especially with Ozzie present. They couldn’t help

it; they all knew how sensitive Rose was about being on her own – a single mum, endlessly trying to make her relationship with Ozzie’s father Simon work, taking his inadequacies as her own. The silence became palpable.

‘I’m so sorry, Rose,’ Helena stammered. ‘Honestly. I didn’t mean anything by it.’ A flush prickled her forehead and upper lip and she looked to John, then to Antonia.

Tears teetered on Rose’s eyelashes like raindrops on the tip of a thunderhead. ‘I’m just...’ Her voice faltered, a lump in her throat. ‘I’m sorry, Antonia.’ Rushing from the table she headed outside and into the car park, a hand pressed to her mouth.

Helena slumped against the backrest of her chair and snapped a breadstick in two. ‘For God’s sake,’ she sighed, her cheeks mottled pink. ‘I was only joking.’

‘You know what she’s like,’ Antonia muttered dismissively.

John discarded his crumpled napkin on the table and wiped a hand over his face. ‘I’ll talk to her...’

But Helena clasped his hand, rising. ‘It’s my fault.’ She hoped someone, anyone, would reassure her it wasn’t as cruel as it had come out as, or that Rose was being oversensitive. But she realised that even if they had, it wouldn’t have mattered. No one put the words in her mouth but her. No one else could soften them. Making her way outside to catch up with Rose, a flurry of regrets fought against each other as she rehearsed in her mind what she’d say.

In her wake John, Antonia and Ozzie sat in silence. There seemed so little to say. Richard blustered back to their table carrying a tray of wine bottles and an orange juice for John, over-decorated with an umbrella and colourful straws. He paused, looking to Antonia, John, and finally, to Ozzie. Sullen expressions met his eyes. ‘What did I miss?’

Despite the tension, or because of it, they laughed. And as they tried to reclaim the ambience that had surrounded them only moments earlier, laughing at Richard's characteristic bad-timing, pouring the wine while serving Ozzie a meagre helping heavily diluted by lemonade, John watched Helena sheepishly approach Rose through the window. Somehow, he thought, they seemed like strangers to each other.

He saw Helena mouth the words, 'I'm sorry.'

Rose didn't turn to greet her, or to accept her apology. John couldn't see what she murmured in reply. But he judged by the rigidness of her back, the stiffness of her arm as she spoke, that she didn't like saying it almost as much as Helena refused to hear it. For a moment he felt a flutter in his chest, as though someone had walked over his grave. He didn't know why.