

## 7

I hear my mother before I see her. She's chatting and laughing with the neighbours in the driveway. Within minutes of meeting people, she's their best friend: she knows all about their family sagas, their children's graduate jobs and how they got them, their to-die-for salad recipes, their top-ten reads, their job woes, allergies, stabled horses, burgeoning hernias, and trips to Galway, Copenhagen and Kyoto. She remembers who likes panettone and who prefers mejool dates, and buys them some for Christmas; buys others flower seeds and wine of their preferred grape variety and gives big tips, making her a very popular client and diner.

Bertie, our neighbours' son, broke his leg last week on a school ski trip, so their current topic of conversations is skiing accidents. My mother says that one raucous night post-uni, ten of them fell down a piste in San Moritz, tied together, and three in the tangle ended up with broken bones. 'Not me!' she laughs. 'I rolled over Polly James just in time. Great cushion, it turns out, but she broke her tibia and had to be airlifted away. And it was

only day two of the trip.’ They laugh, even though I’m not sure how funny that is. ‘Top tip,’ my mother says, ‘if you tie yourself to someone on a mountain, make sure it’s someone plump!’ Her voice and her laugh are loud, and they laugh loudly to match it. I wonder if we turn up the volume of our laughs depending on the decibel level of the current conversation. I decide to pay more attention to this in future.

‘Hilarious,’ Minty says. ‘You never fail to cheer me up. We’re so lucky to have such wonderful neighbours, aren’t we, James?’

‘Absolutely. You must come over again, Monica,’ James says. ‘Not tied to anyone, preferably. Except maybe Elliot.’ They laugh again.

When my mother walks through the door saying, ‘Hello? Hellooo? Where are you all?’ we greet her in the hallway and then I’m exiled upstairs to study. Tonight, though, I decide not to. Instead, I put noise-cancelling headphones on and hunker down in my wardrobe to finish *Rebecca*. Black journal in hand, I note my favourite phrases and wonder why the narrator doesn’t ever just ask for information, which would be the obvious and most simple course of action. Half the time you want to strangle her. Then there’s the line I like best: ‘*But what goes on in the twisted tortuous minds of women would baffle anyone.*’ And not just because ‘baffle’ is a bodacious word.

Along with Daphne du Maurier, Emily Brontë is also in the wardrobe. Well, not Emily Brontë herself, although that would be fun. I imagine for a moment having a succession of authors visit me in my wardrobe. They would tell me stories about how things were when they were alive, insist that pies are not what they once were, and gripe about rainy carriage travel on muddy roads for morning calls, which, as the decorum of the day

denoted, lasted an hour exactly and it was unfitting to remove their bonnets or shawls. In turn, I'd ask why they were so obsessed with the decorum of the day and marrying rich, boring husbands, whether winters were dull or actually much more fun before the days of electricity and why they wore countless long skirts and petticoats when they didn't have washing machines and servants had a dire old time washing them all by hand.

Talking to them would be like time travel. Mind you, by reading their novels, isn't that more or less what's happening anyway?

I sit facing Emily Brontë. Her novel, *Wuthering Heights*, is filled with people talking spitefully to each other in between bouts of searing passion. I tell her this, seeing as she's visiting me in my wardrobe today. I have read three quarters of it and liked not very much. Heathcliff is heinous and Cathy is a cow. Dad thinks I'll feel differently with age and a reread. Only time will tell.

With Emily, I soften the sting of my criticism (authors are sensitive creatures) by adding that despite the clear and cruel abuse, there's a line I'm remarkably fond of: *'I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches and every word he says. I love all his looks, and all his actions and him entirely and altogether.'*

I wonder whether I'll ever feel that way about someone.

Emily Brontë reckons I will.

I explain to her, once she's calmed down about the feedback, that Moses comes close, but I don't know him well enough to know whether every word he says is worth loving. The ground under his feet, yes. The air over his head, yes. The things he touches, yes. His looks. His actions. The way he moves. Him entirely and altogether I'm not certain about just yet.

Emily Brontë says that's normal.

I tell her that's the first time anyone's used that word around me for a very long time.

I finish reading *Wuthering Heights* so I can give her a full and comprehensive disclosure of my thoughts. It seems unfair to pass judgement without reading it all. Once I do, Emily wants to hit me on the head with one of my hiking boots, which tells you a lot about her characters and their behaviour.

I put Emily down (which sounds strange), pick up my black journal and start writing. I make notes about Dr Kumar's hands, about my choosing to not to choose five words in my visit today, about my dislike of the word 'feedback'; about my near altercation with Emily Brontë.

'Unbelievable!' my mother shouts. I can hear her easily from upstairs. 'Would you look at this?' Other people might exclaim phrases like this when reading the newspaper, but she doesn't read newspapers so I rule that one out. Perhaps she's spotted a speck of dust on a surface or a smudge on a wall, but my guess is she's holding my phone up to Dad. She knows my password because she set it, allegedly so she can supervise the murky quagmire of my mind. And I can guess what she's showing him. An email from Mr Fowler. One he's sent to me.

I dive out of the wardrobe and scramble to my bed as her feet clap up the stairs.

My mother, attired in her home clothing of silk pyjamas, or maybe they're satin, is now standing in my room. She walks in without knocking. She is not a knocker. I notice she's not particularly relaxed at the moment, despite wearing lounge clothes, and one of her lower buttons is undone. I don't tell her there's an imperfection about her person. I just enjoy it.

By this point, I'm writing in my red journal – the one I leave lying around and know she reads. She thinks I don't know, but she's not exactly subtle. I only write random words in it, which I hope drives her batty. This type of writing doesn't count as schoolwork, so she is not overly pleased.

'What the—? What are you doing? Why aren't you studying? I told you to— *Tsk*. Put that bloody thing away, will you. You have a ton to catch up on and you know it. You're so far behind. God. Do I have to watch you night and day?'

As I slot the journal under my pillow, mind my plays with: 'You're so far behind God,' which is no surprise to anyone, and, 'God, do I have to watch you night and day?' I wonder how God would answer that. Depends who's asking, I suppose.

My mother, her hand angry, her fingers jabby, holds up my phone. 'Two more detentions. What's wrong with you? Fail at school and you have nothing. Don't you understand?'

I wince. The timing is terrible. But then it always is.

She walks out with it, leaving my bedroom door open.

I don't mind that she's taken my phone. I do mind that she's left the door open. Obviously, I like looking up fun facts and cast info when I'm watching films, doing the world geography quizzes Becca tries to beat me at and never does, checking the definitions of 'meretricious', 'ribald', 'timorous', 'wizened' and 'limpid' when I come across them and feeling like a modern human being who's connected even vaguely to the rest of the planet. But phones don't provide me with the things I prize most highly. Yes, I can read free samples of books when I'm waiting for the bus, and communicate with Dad or Becca, but I always carry a book in my bag, and I see Dad and Becca every day. There's nothing so urgent it can't wait.

Now, though, with the suitcase situation, things do feel significantly more urgent. I may need that phone after all.

Champ's shaking, judgemental head appears in the open door space. 'Asking for it,' he says.

'Definitely not.'

'Not very smart, are you? What did you think would happen?' he asks. 'Obvious.' And he goes back to his room. I'm not sure if he's being supportive or snide. Maybe both.

I would kick myself for this phone foible, but why bother when a big brother will do it for you?

When my mother returns, she holds my phone out in front of my face again. I dutifully read the email that she's sent from *my* school email account to Mr Fowler. I have apologised, it appears, for 'acting like a small child and being annoying, rude and lazy', and, she's added, 'because I'm clearly the brightest in my class, I will be diligent and conscientious and get As in every subject from now on.'

Diligent and conscientious are basically synonyms. I wouldn't use both in one sentence, but I don't say so. My mother wedges my phone under her arm, picks up my blazer and checks the pockets. When she doesn't find whatever it is she expects to find, she says, 'And clear up this mess.' The mess consists of two homework handouts on my desk, a jumper slung on the chair – and my slippers, which instead of being parallel under the chest of drawers, are a fraction misaligned. Otherwise, my room is immaculate.

At least he'll know the email's not from me.