

The
Pieces of
Ourselves

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USBORNE

For my mother, who would have said “I told you so”.
(And yes. She did.)

“What’s past is prologue.”
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

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One

I have picked the worst possible moment to be standing on the pavement outside the village shop: the *exact* moment the bus to the sixth-form college goes past on its last morning run of the term.

If only I hadn't agreed to pick up my brother's parcel from the post office counter before work.

If only Mr Parkins and his stupid package to Australia hadn't been ahead of me in the queue.

If only I hadn't told my friend Mira that I'd meet her and we could walk back up to the hotel to start our housekeeping shifts together.

If.

Only.

But here I am, and here's the bus, and as it stops to let Mr Parkins cross the road with agonizing slowness, every single face behind the bus windows turns to look at me – and I am fixed to the spot as firmly and definitively as if

someone had driven iron spikes through my shoes.

Everything stops: time, my heart, the movement of the Earth through space. *Everything*. I am trapped in this moment, pinned like a butterfly on a board. Me on one side of the windows; the people I used to go to school with, the people I used to know – the people I *used to be friends with* – staring at me from the other.

And then Mr Parkins has made it to the other side of the street and, just like that, the world is moving again and the bus is gone. I step off the pavement to watch it disappear from view between the hedges and the green overhanging branches of trees.

There goes the life I could have had.

Almost did have.

A strange, horrible screeching sound fills my head, drowning everything else out – and at first I wonder if it's just in my head or whether it's me and I'm doing it out loud...and then I realize that Mrs Rolfe from the Old Vicarage has stopped in the middle of the pavement and is staring at me, and the screech stops and there's a new noise. One that sounds a bit like...like a car horn.

A car horn coming from behind me.

I'm in the middle of the road, aren't I? That screech was brakes.

Slowly, I turn around.

It's an old green car – one of those vintage things that looks like a squashed frog.

More blasts on the horn, sharp and angry, then long. One-two-three-foooooouuuurrrr.

Sweat prickles along the back of my neck, along the lines of my palms.

Is everybody looking? Has anyone else seen? Are people peering from behind their curtains to see what all the noise is in this tiny little nothing village at this time of the morning?

No big deal – just Flora Sutherland, standing in the middle of the road.

I make myself take a step sideways, back to the safety of the pavement, and hope that's enough. I wish the car would go, that the ground could swallow me, that nobody has noticed or shaken their heads and thought, *Well, what do you expect from someone like her?* But the driver's door swings open with a creak.

“What the hell are you doing? I almost hit you!”

Red hair, sunglasses above a dark T-shirt, and a face bleached pale with shock.

“Are you *crazy*? Hello? HELLO?!”

The word “crazy” hits me harder than the car could ever have done. I flinch – then panic in case he saw, but he whisks straight past me and drops into a crouch in front of the car.

He's checking it for damage. Buffing at the paint with the palm of his hand.

He doesn't care whether he nearly hit me. He cares

whether I somehow dinged his paint job.

I take a deep breath, hugging Charlie's parcel tighter to my chest like a shield.

Is this a balanced reaction?

Satisfied I haven't magically dented his paintwork, he turns back to me and sees me watching him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, just standing there in the road? Have you got some kind of death wish?" He pulls the sunglasses off his face and waves them around him like he's conducting the orchestra at an outrage concert. "If I hadn't looked up right then..." he starts – then stops himself.

"Maybe," I say quietly, "you should look where you're going." I almost add, "Instead of calling other people crazy..." but decide it's better if I don't.

"Maybe," he snaps back, "you shouldn't stand in traffic." He's younger than someone with that kind of car should be. My age, maybe a couple of years older. Eighteen? Nineteen? His eyes are a washed-out shade somewhere between blue and green, and he squints against the bright sunshine.

"Yes. Traffic. There's so much of it round here," I mutter, turning my face away again and letting his gaze slide off me.

I hear him open his mouth to speak, but there's no other sound.

Just go. Get in your car and go. Leave me alone.

He still hasn't moved. Why won't he go?

"Look, seriously, are you okay?" He says it gently now – there's real concern in his voice. "Do you need me to call some—"

"I'm fine," I snap. "You can go now. Really." The edges of the parcel dig into my ribs, and there's a pounding in my ears – I can't tell if it's my heart or my brain that's thumping, but something is. Maybe it's both of them.

"Can you just leave? Please?"

"Wow. Okay." He leans away, his eyes as wide as if I'd slapped him. "Fine. Whatever. I mean... Jesus. I was just trying to find this hotel..."

His lips keep moving, but it doesn't matter; I can't hear a word.

He's a *guest*.

He's talking about Hopwood Home Hotel. There are no other hotels for miles around. There's *nothing else at all* for miles around, not out here.

Oh god, he's a guest he's a guest he's a guest.

Get it together, Flora.

He reaches into the car, pulling a sheet of paper from the dashboard. The sheet of paper he must have been looking at when he nearly hit me. He holds it out. "I don't suppose you know where it is, do you? It's not on my satnav and there's *no* phone reception out here."

"I work there." It falls out of my mouth before I can stop it. I end up half-swallowing the last part of "there" and feel stupid. He, however, brightens.

“Oh, amazing. I’m so lost. Totally, totally lost.” Running a hand back through his hair, he looks around – as though to say that the only reason he’d be anywhere near a village like Hopwood-in-the-Hollows is to pass through it on the way to somewhere else. With that kind of car, and dressed the way he is – carefully, neatly, probably expensively – it seems about right.

And if he’s staying at the Hopwood, and I’ve been stupid enough to let slip that I work there, the last thing I need is him complaining about the super-unhelpful staff member standing in the road on his way to check in.

Get it together, Flora. The sooner he gets directions, the sooner he’ll be gone.

“You’re going the wrong way.”

“I am?” He squints along the road, the same way the bus went, then turns around to look behind him. “But…”

“You need to turn around then go back through the village, past the pub and take a right. Go past the farm with the ice-cream sign shaped like a cow, then keep going until the road gets narrow and forks off to the left. Take the left fork, and there’ll be a metal gate with a gatehouse and an intercom. That’s the hotel.”

There’s a long silence, then: “So that was a left at the farm?”

“Do you have a pen?”

He hands me the paper, and reaches back into the car to pull out a biro with a chewed end. I slide the parcel under

one arm, and sketch out a quick map. It’s not good, and I realize it was a mistake to try and make the cow-shaped sign actually cow-shaped so I label it “cow”, but at least it should get him to the Hopwood. And away from me.

I pass the paper back and he takes it, nodding. “Thanks,” he says – and hesitates. “You sure you’re okay?”

Am I sure I’m okay?

Ask me that a year ago.

“Fine. Thanks.” I slide the parcel back around to my chest and look down at the floor. “Please just go?”

The almost-smile on his face disappears behind a frown. “No problem. Thanks for…whatever.”

I wince as he slams his door, starting the engine with a loud roar… and just like that, he’s driving away.

And there – coming up the street with perfect timing – is Mira, rounding the corner from her house with her bag over her shoulder, sunglasses pulled down over her eyes and her housekeeping uniform looking like she slept in it. She raises her head and smiles when she sees me, stuffing the envelope she’s carrying into her pocket.

“What’s that?” She nods at the package in my arms.

“Charlie’s anniversary present for Felix. He asked me to pick it up for him.” And on every level possible, I wish I’d said I couldn’t.

Mira makes a thoughtful noise as – tyres screeching – the green car goes past the other way, vanishing around the corner behind the village primary school with its row

of sunflowers along the front wall.

“What happened to your uniform?” I ask, but Mira just shakes her head.

“No asking questions, thank you,” she mutters – and when I open my mouth to do exactly that, she growls something in Polish at me. My Polish is non-existent, but this being Mira, I’m willing to bet that what she said is very, very rude.

See? Everything’s normal. Everything’s *fine*.

Except she’s eyeing me suspiciously. “You’re not right.”

“I’m perfectly right, thanks.”

“Also a terrible liar. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Honestly.”

“No. Really.” She peers at me over her sunglasses. “You had one of your mad head things?”

“Can we not call them that?” I drop my bag from my shoulder and squeeze the parcel into it, forcing the zip of my backpack shut over the top.

“But that’s what you called them!”

Which is true, because how else was I meant to explain the stuff that goes on in my head to my best friend? Charlie knows all the proper words for it, and what they all mean, because he’s my big brother. I know all the proper words for it and what they all *feel* like because...well, it’s my head. But how do you explain the inside of your mind to somebody else – particularly when it doesn’t work quite the way it’s meant to? Besides, nothing seemed to do the job of

describing the anxiety or the swings between crazy energy and slow heavy despair better than “a mad head thing”. Trying to describe what my brain is doing at any given point to someone who isn’t inside it is kind of like...trying to explain the point of an octopus to an apple.

“You’re okay, yes?”

You’re okay, Flora. You’re okay. Be okay.

“I’m okay.”

“Good, because...you know. Tick tock.” She waves her wrist in front of my face, trying to make a point about the time.

“Your watch is on upside down.”

More Polish swearing, but at least she’s laughing as she switches it round. “Upside down or not, we’re going to be late. Tell me whatever it is bothering you on the way. And you’ve got your parcel, so?”

I sling my bag back up onto my shoulder, wondering if becoming friends with Mira was some kind of cosmic trade-off for losing everything else. I nod. “So. Let’s go.”

We take the usual shortcut round the back of the village and head for the grounds of the hotel, clambering over a stile and cutting through a field. The tall grass is splashed with patches of red poppies, and swifts screech and wheel overhead as I tell Mira about the bus and about the guy with the green car. She nods, and even though I know she can’t completely understand *why* it’s set me so much on edge, she understands that it has – and that’s all I need.

When I get to the bit about the guy turning out to be a guest, she winces. When I admit that I told him I work at the Hopwood, she laughs as we climb over the low wooden fence marking the Hopwood estate boundary into the woods.

“But you know he will already have forgotten you, right? Staff don’t have faces to them. We’re just…part of the furniture.”

“Them” being the kind of people who come to stay at Hopwood Home. And she’s right. Nobody notices us.

Which is one of the reasons I came here.

The hotel grounds unspool over miles of gardens, woods, fields, river, deer park – even estate cottages for some of the staff, like the one I live in. Hopwood Home used to be one of those big wealthy family mansions before the First World War, but now it’s a hotel: one of, according to the brochure, the top thirty-five boutique country house hotels in the country. Which has always sounded like a bit of a weird number to me, but I don’t write the marketing material. All I have to do is clean the rooms.

Also, not be late.

After working here for nine months full-time, and a whole year of weekend and summer hours before that, I’m still struggling with that second one.

I try a change of subject. “What was that post you had?”

Even from behind her sunglasses, I can feel her blinking at me. “Post?”

“When you were coming up the road earlier.”

“No?”

“That envelope you put in your pocket – I mean, god, I’m just trying to make conversation.”

“Oh. Junk mail.” She straightens her sunglasses and sniffs. To anyone who doesn’t know Mira like I do, it might seem like she’s kind of grumpy – but I do know Mira, and that’s not it at all. If she was really grumpy or prickly, she wouldn’t be so patient. She wouldn’t be the one who crosses her arms and tells me I’ve got into “one of those bad thinking circles” when my thoughts start spiralling down into the darkness, or that I’m being an idiot when my mania kicks in – because that’s what it looks like from outside. The thing about Mira is that mostly she’s just not good at mornings – which I guess is a bit problematic when your job is all about mornings.

The woods give way to the gardens: mown and rolled lawns spread out like green velvet around the gravelled drive, still sparkling with dew, and the sun makes the front of the hotel look like it’s glowing. We walk round to the staff entrance at the side, down the narrow stone steps and along the corridor to the locker room. Already in her uniform, all Mira has to do is throw her bag and sunglasses in her locker, leaving me to cram my backpack into my own with one hand while yanking out my uniform on its hanger with the other. Miraculously, I manage to change into my dress and apron, kick off my trainers and shove my

feet into my work plimsolls *and* make it into the staff room a full five seconds before Mrs Tilney walks in with the worksheets for the day.

If only I wasn't so out of breath, she might have thought I'd actually been there ages.

She hands out the day's room lists, checking off our names on her clipboard as she goes, and giving Mira a very long hard look as she passes, one eyebrow raised. Mira tries to smooth some of the creases out of her dress with her hand. It doesn't work. Between us, we've got six rooms to do – all changeovers, needing a full clean and fresh sheets and towels ahead of new arrivals – and something on the list that I've not seen before. A room marked with a green star.

When Mrs Tilney asks if there are questions, I raise my hand. "Mrs T? What's the mark next to room fifteen?"

"Hmm?"

"The star. Is it important?"

"Oh, number fifteen. Yes. I wanted to talk to you and Mira about that one." She looks over her shoulder at the rest of the staff – three of them today, all pretty new. "The rest of you can go make a start," she says, before turning back to us. "Room fifteen. It's a long-stay booking – ten nights – so it needs a few extras."

"Ten nights?" Mira says it, but I'm thinking it too. Ten nights here is a long time – nobody ever stays for ten nights. Two or three, sure. Four at the very most. But *ten*? Out

here? Being in the middle of nowhere is one of the things Hopwood Home sells itself on – other than a handful of villages and a couple of National Trust houses, there's nothing but fields and trees for miles around. No big towns, no cities, nothing.

The perfect place to escape from absolutely everything. The kind of place to run away to.

And whatever the reason they're coming, a ten-night stay means they're obviously *loaded*.