

Wish You Were Here

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p 7-9

I had crossed the Channel and, after a long train journey, was standing in the hall of Bournemouth railway station, doubting myself, my plan and humanity, when I saw a man waving at me. I put my arm in the air and walked over to him: there was no way back now. My suitcase clattered behind me, making a terrible din, and the man held out his hand and said, “Hazel? Hi, I’m William.” I put on my most responsible face, but he just took the suitcase from me and said he didn’t have much time.

“This family needs a leader,” declared a little boy in the back seat of the gigantic family car – if it had been a family of hippos, they would all still have fitted inside.

“Don’t pay any attention to Mr. Grumpy pants,” said William, starting the car.

“That’s what she’s here for, isn’t it, Dad? To look after me?”

It was barely a five-minute drive to the Pickfords’ house. I was sitting in the front and I could feel the gaze of the boy in the back seat like a finger poking between my shoulder blades.

“She doesn’t have blond hair,” he said to his dad. “It’s brown.”

“Wasn’t there a sister too?” I asked. I was startled by my own voice.

“She talks weird too, Dad, doesn’t she?”

“Elizabeth’s asleep. I didn’t want to wake her for such a short drive,” William said to me.

“The only thing that’s right is her name. Hazel.”

And it was true. Back home, my name stank of smelly socks, but not here: Hazel. I had a good name for going to England.

We parked in front of a big, old house. The façade was full of holes, as if the house had been under fire, and the wood around the windows was covered with moss. It was so charming that it seemed to have been sketched, rather than built. In the hallway, I stumbled over trainers, and William called out that I should just dump my suitcase wherever I found a space. He had stressed in his emails that the children mattered more than dust. I’d thought he meant it philosophically at first, but he really was talking about the stuff under the cupboards and beds. He had no cause for concern.

I rolled my suitcase over to the stairs and in a flash I saw a girl with a surfboard under her arm. In the kitchen, it turned out to be just an ironing board, and the girl was the cleaning lady. William paid her and she said goodbye with a quiet “Thank you. See you next week.”

William was large and he walked with a bit of a stoop, as if afraid he might get stuck between the floor and the ceiling. He had more of a frown than in the photos I'd seen, but what I noticed most was the way his bum stuck out. I'd never met anyone before who combined a sharp 007 profile with a big backside. It really was quite remarkable, although I doubt he was aware of it himself. He probably only looked in the mirror to brush his teeth. The website had only had one fuzzy photo of the mother, Jo. William quickly showed me the kitchen, the living room and my bedroom. We trotted back down the stairs: William had to go to work, but he'd be back in a few hours.

"And the sister?" I asked.

"She's on the first floor in the room next to the stairs. The baby monitor's on, so you'll hear her."

"But won't she be startled to see a stranger's face hanging over her bed?"

"Lizzie? Noooo, she's a little ray of sunshine. She's always really happy when she wakes up."

"Yeah. But not always, Dad," said Isaac.

When the door had closed behind William, I stood face to face with the eight-year-old boy. He stared at my T-shirt and said, "Reindeers are for Christmas."

With his corduroy trousers and his checked shirt, he looked like a mini-professor; his straight hair lay flat on his head as if he were trying to hide a bald spot. I was sure he must be at a private school where all the boys looked more or less like him, and so he wouldn't even get teased about it. I didn't care anyway, because I was here for just one reason: to forget B. "Is it okay if I unpack first before we go and do something together?" I asked Isaac.

"Yes," he replied.

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"Right," said William when we were sitting in the garden with a cup of tea. "So you're Hazel."

"You already know that, Dad," said Isaac.

"We've often talked about having an au pair. There's not much time for work when you've got two little ones in the house."

"Hey, I'm eight now!"

"Is, um... Jo at work?" I asked.

"Mum doesn't want to see anyone," said Isaac.

"She's taking a time-out," William explained. "Let's just say work isn't a priority at the moment."

A "time-out" – William had used that word in his email too. Jo needed time for herself, so they were looking for an au pair for the month of July. There were photographs of her in the house, an attractive woman with a distinctly oblong face, as if smiling were too horizontal a movement. It didn't seem appropriate to ask for more details. We drank tea with biscuits so buttery that I could feel the fat sticking to the roof of my mouth. Isaac didn't take a single biscuit from the plate, and when his dad asked him why, he said, "Mum always gets Jammie Dodgers."

"Jammie Dodgers? Jesus, biscuits are biscuits, aren't they?"

Isaac blasted his dad with a glare and headed inside. "We could spread some jam on these biscuits, couldn't we?" William called after him. I'd never had – or even seen – Jammie Dodgers before, but I could tell that trying to imitate them was the kind of thing that only a sad old person would do.

The UFO was still in the sock drawer, and I hadn't looked at it for a whole hour now. It gave me strange shivers, which could be signs of all kinds of things: sadness, pride, pain, hysteria,

apathy, that entire labyrinth of emotions that I'd been wandering around lost in for weeks. Three weeks and three days, to be precise.

"Oh, and Hazel?" said William. I put on an interested face. "You don't want to miss the pubs if you're intending to soak up some British culture. I can recommend a few places if you like."

I suddenly wondered if my mum had been in touch with William too. "Alec from the au-pair organisation mentioned The Lion Inn," I said.

"Perfect!" said William. "Nice place, not far from here, lots of young folk. It'll give you a chance to recover from these two little monkeys."

Isaac came shuffling up and threw a few grubby stuffed toys onto my lap. He solemnly announced: "These are my cuddly animals."

I looked at them, one by one. "Can I pick them up?" I asked.

"Yes. They're dead anyway," said Isaac. They all had names ending in y, along the lines of Winky and such like. I made no attempt to remember them.

Then he went to fetch his real pet. "Hazel, this is Frank," he said, "and you can't hold him, because he's alive." Frank was a snail. As Frank began to crawl, Isaac said, "Whoa! Calm down, Frank!" He cupped one hand and put the other on top as a lid. "I'm the only one who's allowed to hold him. Aren't I, Dad?"

William nodded. "Animals don't like being picked up by everyone. They're just like people."

Isaac looked at me triumphantly.

"Go and put him back in his house," William said. "And show Hazel where it is, would you?"

"Yes. But he's already in his house," giggled Isaac.

"Very smart, clever clogs. I meant his country residence."

I followed Isaac into the pantry and asked him why the snail was called Frank. "Don't you ever call him Franky or something?"

"No. Because his name is Frank."

On a rickety table was a tank with a lid made of wire mesh. Isaac carefully deposited Frank on a pile of earth, and the snail immediately retreated, and all we could see was his house.

"I've seen lots of different pets, but I've never met a pet snail before," I said.

"Yes. But Frank is more fun than any other pet ever."

"So what does Frank have that other pets don't?"

"Eyes on stalks," said Isaac.

And it was true. Frank had eyes on stalks.

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We were all out of bananas.

Isaac and Elizabeth were sitting on opposite sides of the table; the Weetabix box was in front of Isaac's face like a shield. I'd slept in so I'd sprinted downstairs in the same clothes as the day before. William had warned me about Isaac's mood just before closing the door behind himself.

"What about apple?" I asked. He gave me a look of disgust. Apple with breakfast was a path he did not want to go down. I knew all about integral calculus, could work out the length of a curve, I could draw a diagram to explain the difference between activation and reaction energy, I could conjugate French verbs, including the *subjonctif imparfait*, knew not one, but three, of Newton's laws, I was a meticulously cultivated hothouse flower, and the latest technological devices had been employed to ensure that I would blossom and grow, but I was not prepared for this problem: we were out of bananas, wtf!

I went upstairs to fetch my phone. I'd keep it with me one last day. I slipped it into the top left pocket of my shirt: it could cover my exposed heart all day or, for all I cared, cause the cells to run rampant, resulting in my premature death, something that B would hopefully never get over. In my room, my eye fell on the banana sweets I'd taken to eat on the train. I grabbed the bag, dashed back downstairs and, feeling completely wired, I yelled: "Salvation is near!"

Like a good fairy, I dropped a sweet into Isaac's Weetabix. It was kind of magic too, because one sour banana tastes like a hundred real ones.

Isaac stared at the yellow slowly spreading through the brown mush. "Yep. Now it's completely ruined," he said. He pushed his bowl to the middle of the table and laid his head on his arm.

Elizabeth tried to reach Isaac's bowl with her spoon, and when that didn't work she put her head on her arm too. There they lay, brother and sister, spread out over the kitchen table.

"Weetabix without banana is not the end of the world, Isaac." I looked outside: the sun was shining on the wall at the bottom of the garden; the dead people must be getting nice and tanned, I thought. In the kitchen, it was still dark. I considered simply walking out and ditching the whole au-pair plan. I had the UFO in my pocket; I didn't need anything else. I would go straight to B's place and demonstrate that I was now the unhappiest person in the world, and the most pathetic too. But then Elizabeth stuck out her hand, and her spoon fell noisily to the floor. Shaken awake, I said that breakfast was over.

"You have to go," said Isaac.

"I can't. I have to look after you two."

"Yes. But you're not my mother."

"Well, until she gets back then." I picked up the bowl off the table and emptied it into the rubbish bin. Then Isaac started yelling for his mummy. I felt his cry deep in my marrow. Where is she though? I wanted to ask, but it wasn't the right moment. I sat back down with them at the table, picked up the bag of sweets and placed one banana in front of Isaac and one in front of Elizabeth. They were never given sweets.

Isaac picked it up between his fingers like a worm and gave it a sniff, still sobbing a little. His little sister immediately started exploring the thing with her mouth – it turned her hands yellow, and then the entire bottom half of her face.

"Lizzie! Oh Lizzie, you look like Tweety," Isaac squawked through his tears. He was laughing so much that, in all the excitement, he threw the banana into his mouth – hup! Then he chewed it with a sweaty red face; you could see the sourness making his pores expand. He used his finger to scratch out what was still sticking to his teeth. I gave him another one and took one myself. He sucked away, his chest going slowly up and down, the sobbing had come to a stop.

"God made bananas," he said with his mouth full.

"Including the sweets?" I asked.

"Yep, them too." He dried his nose on his pyjama sleeve and said: "Did you know my mum's only got two letters in her name?"

I nodded. "Mine's got five," I said. "Gerda."

"What about your dad?"

"Five as well. Fritz."

"Fritz." He counted the letters and let out a deep sigh. Order had been restored: I had a mum and dad, just like him, and they had good names with five letters each, just like my own.

That was when Elizabeth started retching. Her eyes filled with tears and she smiled as she fished a bit of sweet out of her mouth with her fat little finger, as though she had set the entire scene in motion for this very reason. She popped it straight back into her mouth and I fished it back out again just as quickly. Isaac looked at us with an all-knowing gaze, as if he had warned me and so would not help in an emergency.

I picked up the flannel, which was still there from the day before, but then I had a better idea. I could give Elizabeth a bath, and then we'd be half an hour further along in the day.

The first thing she did in the bath was drink an entire cup of foamy water. Isaac came into the bathroom and said there was far too much water in the bath. "That's dangerous for her," he said as if he'd just finished a course in childcare or something, and before he went back downstairs he added: "And it's a waste of water."

"Why don't you hop in too? It'll be fun," I said.

"Baths aren't for fun," he replied.

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A few days later, Isaac solved my problem, or at least the practical side of it.

It was one afternoon and we were sitting in the park. Every day we went to that park, where he baked his sand pies, which I had to buy with hard currency from around the pond, and I meekly did his bidding – but that day I was not in the mood. After spending a while listlessly scrolling through other people's summers, as I felt no urge to open up old messages and photos – for once, B wasn't online – I threw the phone into the nappy bag, unbuckled Elizabeth and put her on my lap.

"You could bake some more complicated pies," I said to Isaac.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I'm tired of these ones."

"But they're not real anyway, are they?"

"No. Exactly. How about decorating them a bit? With pebbles or leaves or something?"

He gave me a pitying look.

"Okay, suit yourself," I said. "I'm going for a walk with your sister. Keep an eye on the buggy and the stuff. Right?" I said. He nodded firmly: I could count on him.

After a painfully slow walk around the pond, we got back to Isaac. The pies he'd prepared for me looked exactly the same as usual, primitive and rough, like something a toddler would make. All he'd changed was the size: these ones were real sand mountains.

"Pick one," he said.

"Well, they're big, yes, but they're not really decorated," I said.

"No. But your phone's inside one of them."

"I hope that's a joke."

"No. Choose which one it's in."

"Isaac! Sand is very bad for telephones."

"I left it in its case."

In a daze, I pointed and said: "That one."

"Chakka!" he went with the side of his palm, as if chopping a brick in half. No phone.

"This one, then?" I said.

"Chakka!" Nothing again.

"Then it has to be this one."

"Chakka!" I'd lost my phone.

"But it was in there just now," said Isaac, looking genuinely surprised.

"In which one?" I said.

"The middle one, I think. Or maybe the one on the right."

"You don't even know for sure?"

"Definitely not the one on the left," he said, giving the heaps of sand a few more karate chops.

"Is this a joke, Isaac?" I asked.

"No," he said. "It's a game."

We searched the entire sandpit, first around the bench and then in ever-widening circles, but we couldn't find it. Isaac kept giving me guilty looks, but I didn't get angry. Quite the opposite. The longer it went on, the happier I was that the UFO was buried under a layer of coarse, dirty sand.

Talk to the grains of sand, B, I said to myself. We didn't find anything that gave me even the slightest hope. What we did find was a beer bottle, a packet of tobacco, a nail file, and a torn flip-flop. For a moment I considered taking the flip-flop with me, putting it in my bag and stroking and petting it occasionally, to beat the worst of the withdrawal symptoms. But then I thought about the toes that had been on and around the plastic, and I abandoned the idea.

"It's gone," said Isaac after a while, neatly summing up the situation.

"What now?" asked Isaac on the way home. As always, he was resting his hand on the handle of the buggy, as if helping to steer – it was annoying because it made the wheels constantly drift off in different directions, but it also made me happy. We were a cluster, a little group.

"Now? Nothing," I said.

"I could pray about it," he offered.

"No!" I said sternly. And then, more gently, "There's no need. You already have enough praying to do with your mum."

"Yes," he replied. "But what's Dad going to say?"

"He doesn't need to know," I said. "It's our secret. Okay?"

"But aren't you angry?"

"No," I said, and I meant it. My heart had received a boost of oxygen: the UFO was gone, B was even further away, I would have to learn to live with it, chakka! Isaac didn't need to feel guilty, it was just a silly accident. Cold turkey – that was the only way, and if I didn't have the willpower to stop staring dumbly at the screen, then I would have to succeed with a little help from an eight-year-old tiny terror. He would restore my self-respect. I resisted the urge to give him a high-five.

This is crazy, B had said.

But maybe the real craziness was only just beginning...

I wanted action. To break hearts. To pass hearts on. To juggle with hearts. Something! With hearts.
