

Just as Hettie sat down with her coffee and biscuits the screaming started again. High-pitched, it travelled with ease all through the house and out to the porch where she'd planned to sit and read for a few minutes, or just enjoy the slant of the late afternoon sun on her face.

Hettie allowed herself a moment to hang her head in her hands, then pushed the chair back. She'd deal with this, whatever this was, and then she'd come back. With any luck, the coffee would still be warm.

Luck, she thought, felt her top lip curl. That had been in short supply lately.

The screaming got louder when she opened the front door. At least there were no neighbours. Nobody else to hear.

Hettie ducked into the dim house. The noise was almost unbearable. It was the kind of screaming you did when you feared for your life. For your child's life.

Still, she wished she could have just a single moment of peace. It didn't feel like too much to ask.

Hettie walked through the living room and down the windowless corridor. She took a deep breath, as if preparing to go underwater, and opened the door on the right. The piercing wail stopped.

"Knock, knock," she said. "What's all this racket, then? Eh?"

Mum sat up in bed, her blankets gathered up to her chest. A flash of confusion crossed her face at the sight of Hettie, and she felt a familiar lump in her throat. She'd seen that look before. It meant Mum had forgotten her only daughter was already in her forties. No longer the girl she'd surely been calling for.

Hettie pushed the feeling away. She'd deal with it later. She sat down on the edge of the bed and folded her hands around Mum's. Touch was usually the best way to call Mum back into

herself, into the present moment. She stroked the back of Mum's hands. The skin felt slippery under her touch, and so thin. "Well? Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

Mum's gaze flicked from Hettie's face to the opposite corner of the room. Hettie turned to look. An old armchair was jammed into the corner next to the chest of drawers. It had a bundle of clothes on it—Mum's pajamas and the sheet from last night, she'd have to get those washed—but otherwise there was nothing.

Mum said something.

"Sorry?" Hettie leaned closer. Mum's grip on her hands grew stronger. A good sign; some level of lucidity was returning.

"They're here," Mum whispered, still staring at some point over Hettie's shoulder.

Despite herself she shivered. The doctor had warned her that the road would get rocky further down the line. Those had been his words. As if the road still led somewhere worthwhile.

It was moments like these when Hettie wanted to punch the glasses off the man's face. Surely he'd known what was coming. What was coming for them both. And he hadn't said.

"No, *I'm* here," Hettie said, stroking Mum's knuckles. At some point they'd become so enlarged she'd no longer been able to put her rings on, not even her wedding ring. It had hit her harder than Hettie could've predicted. After that, it hadn't taken long for dad to be lost.

"I'm here," she repeated now. "No one else."

"No, no. They're *here*. *They're* here." Mum shook her head.

You had to stay calm. That's what all the booklets said. Stay calm and kind. "It's just the two of us," Hettie said. She heard it: her own tone. She was speaking to Mum as if she were a child. Another promise broken. She swallowed. "There's no one else here. Just you and—"

"Henrietta Marie," Mum snapped. "I said, they're here, and I mean, *they're here*."

Hettie stared. She hadn't realised Mum still remembered her full name. And the snapping was new. Mum had moments when she lost her temper, quite a few of them, actually: something about railing against the dying of the light, the doctor had said, unhelpfully. But usually the tantrums were quick and generalised; Mum lacked the ability to explain what exactly frustrated her, so there was never anything specific Hettie could respond to. Not like this.

“Okay,” Hettie said. “Sorry. Who’s here?”

Mum leaned forward. There was something sharp about her gaze; as if she actually saw Hettie, not just the ghost of a girl who once was.

Hettie realised she was on the verge of tears. Mum hadn't looked at her like this for almost a year.

“You have to do something for me,” Mum said.

“Yes, anything, anything at all. Tell me.” Hettie looked down so Mum wouldn't see the tears that were gathering in the corners of her eyes. She pressed Mum's palm against her cheek, and when the hand began to stroke it she began to cry in earnest. It had been a long time since Mum last touched her with love.

“Call Venla.”

Hettie frowned, made an effort to blink the tears away. Mum had fallen out with Venla years ago. Decades of friendship scrapped, just like that. Should she tell her this?

“Call her. Promise me.”

“Okay, fine. I will. I'll call Venla.” As she looked at Mum Hettie realised what was going on. It was the illness. Mum didn't remember she'd not spoken to Venla for years. Something grew soft in Hettie's chest. Maybe the two could still reconcile before it was too late. “Yes, okay. Of course I will.”

“You have to tell her, are you listening? You have to give her this message: Margaret has fallen.”

Hettie reeled back. “Mum, you haven’t fallen. You’re fine. It’s just your memory.”

“You need to listen to me, girl.” A steely tone had entered mum’s voice. “A little more listening, a little less talking now.”

“What? Mum, I—okay, fine,” Hettie mimed zipping her mouth shut.

“Tell her, Margaret has fallen. And *they’re back*.” Mum looked up in the corner behind Hettie again, and try as she might she couldn’t stop the tingle down her spine. It felt like someone had come to stand right behind her, or was—and this made no sense—*gathering* there.

Hettie began to turn her head, inch by slow inch. There was a dark mass in the corner of her eye. And the feeling of a presence, that was still there too.

Mum’s hold on Hettie’s hands began to slip.

“Mum?” Hettie turned back to mum. She squeezed Mum’s hands, hard. Maybe she could bring her back. But something flickered in Mum’s eyes, and a moment later she scooted back in the bed, pushed Hettie away. “Who are you? *Who are you?*”