

## 1<sup>st</sup> Place      Uffington      by Ian Critchley

It was Annie's idea, an item on her list called Things to Do Now the Kids Have Left Home. The White Horse chalk figure was over 3,000 years old, she told me, and required regular maintenance by volunteers.

'So would we, at that age,' I said.

There we stood, one muggy Saturday in July, with a bunch of people at the top of a hill. You couldn't see the whole of the horse, just bits and pieces. Below us were patchwork fields, pylons, and a car snaking along a lane. Clouds skidded across the sky as if in a hurry to get somewhere else. The organisers gave each of us a bucket of chalk and a mallet, and assigned groups to different parts of the horse. We got the arse end.

The work entailed pounding the new chalk into the old. Annie went at it like a blacksmith shaping a shoe.

'Isn't this great?' she said in between hammer blows. 'Fresh air.' *Smack!* 'Exercise.' *Bam!* 'Helping out.' *Kapow!*

'Go easy, love,' I said. 'You don't want to pull a muscle.'

*Bang! Smash!*

'Come on, Marcus,' she said. 'Give it some bloody welly.'

'OK, Thor.'

Finally she sat on her haunches and breathed deeply, sweeping stray hairs out of her eyes, her face covered in red splotches. She nodded to a plateau on the hill below the horse. 'Down there is where St George killed the dragon.'

'Oh,' I said.

‘Your trouble is you’ve no sense of history.’

‘I’m hammering the backside of a 3,000-year-old horse, and you’re telling me I’ve no sense of history? Besides, St George and the dragon aren’t history.’

‘Suit yourself.’

She’d been into this stuff ever since I’d known her. When we met she worked in a shop selling dreamcatchers and tarot decks. She told me she could read my future and catch my dreams. I liked the sound of that, and I liked the way she said it, too, in her soft Welsh voice.

*Crunch! Thud!*

‘I don’t think I’ve ever told you this,’ she said. ‘When I was little we were driving through Dorset and my mum suddenly told me not to look out the window.’

‘So of course you did.’

‘Absolutely. And there, up on the hillside, stood this bright white figure of a man holding a club.’

‘The Cerne Abbas Giant?’

Annie nodded. ‘Yes, but it wasn’t his club which drew my eye. It was his massive penis.’

‘I feel a bit inadequate.’

‘Size isn’t everything, darling.’

*Thwack!*

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We couldn't see the whole horse from the village either. It seemed a pointless thing to me.

Who had made it? Why go to all that bother?

'You've got chalk on your face,' Annie said as we got to the B&B. 'You look like a ghost.'

She had first dibs on the shower. The tiny bedroom barely had enough space for the bed. I lay back against the pillows and checked my phone. Nothing. I rang Owen, but it went straight to voicemail and I decided against leaving another message. Rhiannon picked up on the third ring.

'Dad?'

'Hi, Rhi. Everything OK?'

'Of course. Why wouldn't it be?'

'No reason. Thought I'd check in.'

'Dad, look, really sorry, but I haven't got time to chat. I'll call you, yeah?'

'Yes, but I wondered . . .'

I was speaking to the dialling tone.

The week before, Rhiannon had moved in with her boyfriend Xander, a name I'd only previously come across on *Buffy*, and which, until she told me, I hadn't realised was short for Alexander. Just one of the reasons my daughter thought me an idiot. Owen had finished his first year studying physics at Lancaster. We'd assumed he would come home for the summer, but he'd told us he had other plans. I wasn't sure when I would see either of them next.

Annie came out of the en suite wrapped in a dressing gown. Her wet hair fell in black tendrils down her neck. She sat on the edge of the bed and started dabbing at her head with a hand towel.

‘I spoke to Rhiannon,’ I said.

‘How is she?’

‘Too busy to talk.’

‘You shouldn’t ring her so often. Or Owen. They don’t want to be talking to us all the time.’

‘It’s not all the time,’ I said.

‘They barely spoke to us when they were still at home. Why should it be any different now?’

I had no answer to that, so went for my shower. Annie had lined all her potions along the edge of the bath. She’d always said I should use a body scrub. ‘Exfoliate! Exfoliate!’ she’d say in her uncannily good Dalek voice. But I never liked the idea of it, fussing around with different bottles. I’d always made do with bog-standard shower gel and didn’t feel the need to change.

When I came out, Annie was putting on lipstick.

‘Do you know what I fancy?’ she said, puckering. ‘A pint of cider. Or maybe two.’

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We grabbed a table outside the nearest pub. The clouds were gone and the early evening sunshine bathed the garden. The air still hung heavy, and a trickle of sweat ran down my back. Annie drained half her glass before I’d taken a sip of my bitter.

‘I’m told they do a mean fish and chips here,’ Annie said.

‘Small portions?’

‘Not that kind of mean.’

Some of the other volunteers were grouped around the neighbouring tables. I’d expected them to be all oldsters like us, but there were young people too. Whole families together.

‘So what activity shall we do next?’ Annie said.

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Come on, Marcus. We could do anything. We’re free!’

‘I didn’t feel like a prisoner before,’ I said.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘You seem quite happy the kids have gone.’

Her face froze, the colour blazing again in her cheeks. ‘Do not say that. Do *not!*’

‘I—’

‘Why do you think I suggested coming here? If I didn’t think up ideas, we’d both be wallowing at home, not knowing what to do with ourselves.’

I remembered her pounding the earth earlier. I saw the furious determination in it, an assertion of energy.

‘It’s clear you don’t want to be here,’ she added.

‘I just think it’s a strange thing to do,’ I said. ‘I mean, you can’t even see this horse. I still don’t know what it actually looks like.’

‘Yes, it is a strange thing. *I’m* strange.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘You’ve always laughed at my interests. It’s all *woo-woo*, isn’t it? You said that to your mother once. *Annie’s woo-woo*. I heard you say it.’ She stood. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘No.’

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I lay on the bed trying to read, but my mind was elsewhere. I remembered how Annie had once surprised me with the fierceness of her kisses, the hunger in her. The soft sunlight falling on the bed in Verona and the mint gelato she discovered and couldn’t stop eating. The Suffolk beach where she cut her foot on a sharp shell and I struggled to carry her to the car. Standing together on the touchline in the rain for Owen’s rugby matches, Rhiannon’s football games. Eating in the garden, the four of us around the tiny table. Swinging first Rhiannon and then Owen between us on the walk to school. Bath time, bedtime, story time. TV dramas and cinema trips. Dentists and opticians and hospitals. Lego. Paint samples. Tantrums. Holding hands. Creating mess and clearing it up.

Gone nine and there was still no sign of Annie. Her phone went to voicemail and I left a message: *please let me know you’re OK*. I started out of the B&B but there were several directions she could have taken. I stood, paralysed.

Then I realised where she would be.

A breeze had taken the edge off the evening’s warmth, and by the time I got to the top of the hill the wind whipped me from all angles. Annie sat on the chalk, knees drawn up to her chin, dress wrapped tight around her legs.

‘Apparently,’ she said as I squatted beside her, ‘if you stand on the eye of the horse and make a wish, it will come true.’

‘What did you wish for?’

‘Nothing, nothing. How many years have we got left, Marcus?’

‘A bit morbid, isn’t it?’

‘We could have another thirty years. Forty. It’s only going to be you and me from now on. Are you ready for that?’

The lights from the village flickered below. The sky glowed pink and birds gathered singing in the trees, readying themselves for sleep. I shivered. Neither of us was dressed for the night air.

‘I don’t think we’ve seen the last of the kids,’ I said. ‘What’s Owen going to do after uni? I’m sure he’ll be back.’

‘We’re just postponing the inevitable. We’ve got to think about the future.’

‘You told me once you could predict the future,’ I said.

‘I’m serious. We need to think about what we’re going to do. Will this be enough?’

‘What are you saying?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m exhausted. Let’s go.’

Annie walked ahead of me as we made our way to the B&B, and as soon as she got into bed, she turned away. The bedsheet was scratchy and the pillow hard and I tried to block out the laughter and shouts floating in from the pub. I couldn’t tell if Annie was asleep. I stared at her outline rising and falling, hills and dips and plateaus, the whole beautiful terrain of her.

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We decided to drive back a different way. The sun shone and Annie hid behind shades. She'd been quiet all morning. I gripped the steering wheel, convinced we were going to collide with an oncoming car in those narrow lanes. I had struggled to sleep, dropping off towards dawn only to be ripped out of bed by the B&B owner knocking to say we had to hurry if we wanted breakfast. Trying to slough off my grogginess I'd looked again at Annie's shower potions and decided on a body scrub, which left me all tingly and refreshed. Perhaps I would get my own.

We'd gone a few miles when Annie shouted, 'Stop!'

'What?'

'Pull over. Pull over here.'

I veered onto the verge by a gate. Annie took off her seatbelt and opened the door.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

She ran back the way we'd come. When I caught up she turned and smiled and took my hand. I saw what she had spotted. The horse was spread out across the hill in its entirety: a strange, elongated, abstract shape, with two of its legs not even attached to the rest of its body, and a head hanging by a thread from the neck. An idea of a horse, a sketch, an echo, but it was magnificent, shining bright against the hill's green, so white it made my eyes hurt, but I couldn't tear myself away.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Place Gabriel's Party by Claire Gleeson

Five and four is nine, plus their four selves, and that's before you add the two McCulloughs from over the road, invited in a fit of neighbourly exuberance now deeply regretted. There's no hope for it, she'll have to do two sittings and feed the children first, and that really defeats the purpose of the whole thing, everyone sitting around the table together and nobody having to rush off. Still, they can all come back and gather around for the birthday cake, and a glass of something that fizzes. It will still be a party.

Joanna hears her phone ring from somewhere in the depths of the house, and finds it finally down the side of the couch, where Dylan has abandoned it after taking it to play some game. He is desperate for a phone of his own, and she is determined that he will get one for Christmas, which is only - *Jesus!* - ten weeks away now. Gabriel would not agree, she knows, he thinks at eleven Dylan is too young, but she knows better the norms of fifth class. She wants nothing more than for her children to fit in.

The ringing has stopped by the time she fishes it out, but she hits redial and Niamh answers straight away.

“Sorry. The kids had my phone.”

“No worries. How's everything?”

“Fine, fine. Just prepping the veg. I'm going to have it all ready to go in the morning.”

“Jo. Listen. I know I've said this before, but you really don't have to do all this. We can just call for a drink tomorrow, wish him a happy birthday. You don't need to be feeding everyone.”

“Would you stop. It's only lunch. I've it all done, sure.”

There is a silence, a heavy one, and then Niamh sighs. “Well, let me know if there’s anything we can bring.”

“Maybe a few big serving spoons, I never seem to have enough.”

“All right.” A child shouts in the background, aggrieved, and Niamh’s voice changes. “I’ll give you a ring in the morning, see if there’s anything else.”

“Great. Talk to you.”

Eleven o’clock. She leaves the kitchen and goes to the door of the front room, pausing for a moment to press her ear to it and listen. There is no sound. She knocks once - it is important, this courtesy, although it serves no practical purpose - and pushes the door open. The chair faces the window, and although the slatted blinds prevent passers-by from seeing in, he has a fairly good view down the road to the green and the church spire beyond. A room at the back would have been better, of course, but there wasn’t one that worked; there is only so much magic she can do within the constraints of a suburban semi-d. This room is where they used to have the computer, and the electric piano, both of which are currently crammed into her bedroom upstairs, and no prospect of them being moved anytime soon.

“Gabriel.”

She moves towards him, standing where he can see her face. His mouth curls into that half-smile that she has chosen to believe is a reaction to seeing her, rather than a spasm of the muscles that will no longer bend to his will.

“Time to get you back into bed.”

She turns to move the hoist into position, and fits the straps around his unresisting body. It is reflex now, although the first time she was shown how to do it, the nurse endlessly

patient with her fumbling fingers, she had cried tears of frustration and rage. It was all rage then, still, months after the accident; rage, and disbelief, and the unending, soul-sucking fear that kept her awake long into those airless summer nights.

Gabriel is patient as she secures, and lifts, and settles him into bed; or, at least, if there is impatience he gives no sign of it, although God knows he was never the patient type, and she does not believe even the worst blow to the head could have fixed that one. She remembers him on the mornings of holiday travel with the kids, itching to get to the airport hours before they really needed to, standing tapping his keys against the open front door while she frantically ran over the packing list in her head, sure that something had been forgotten. But he would relax when he got there, at least; once in the heat of a Balearic sun with a beer in his hand he would unwind, and he always had the stamina for endless games of beach soccer with the kids, and piggyback rides in the water, while she read her way through thick paperbacks from behind her sunglasses. Blood-red wine and coconut sun lotion and the scratch of hot sand under her feet; sometimes, on a wet March day when the wind screeched through the garden and the kids were crotchety under her feet, she had lived only for those holidays.

Now Joanna gives the pillow under her husband's head one final tug into place, and steps back. He keeps his eyes on her, unblinking; the left one droops slightly still, although it has improved since he first came home, she thinks, and certainly it is better than the first time the kids were allowed in to see him in the hospital, nearly a month after they had waved him off to work that final morning. Then the heavy, half-lidded eye had unnerved Jessica so much that she had fled to the refuge of her mother's arms, while Dylan had stood trembling at the foot of the bed. Gabriel had become so agitated that he started to pull at his tubes, and eventually they were all shooed from the room by the nurse, the nice one with the red hair,

and as Joanna pulled her broken children down the corridor she could hear the nurse's voice, low and soothing, murmuring to her husband as a mother comforts a fretful child.

That was the worst day, maybe; it all seemed so hopeless.

It has been seven months now, since the accident. Seven months, and so this is the first family occasion they have been able to celebrate. Her own birthday, falling sometime in July, didn't count - she had spent most of it going over the new equipment for the house with the occupational therapist - and poor Jessica's, barely two weeks after the day of that terrible phone call, Joanna had literally forgotten about. That still haunts her, now, the fact that the anniversary of her younger child's birth had vanished completely from her mind, driven out by the nightmare tentacles of everything else that had been going on. Niamh had come to the rescue then, arriving at the hospital the night before with an enormous gift-wrapped box to be transferred briskly to the boot of Jo's car, so that her poor bewildered child would have something to open the next morning. Jo had met her sister in the lobby, where she stared at the present, uncomprehending, as if she had never seen such a thing before.

This, though, is Gabriel's fortieth birthday, and so they will celebrate properly, with a lunch party, for lunchtime is the best part of his day. The evenings are too unpredictable; he is inclined to tears as the day presses on, and exhausted by eight o'clock. The guests are her guests, really, but Gabe has no siblings, and his mother lives in a nursing home from where she does not stir. So Joanna's sister will come, and her brother, with their families in tow, and the nice McCulloughs from over the way; a slightly older couple, their children grown and gone now, but they had always got on well with them, Gabe and Joanna, and around Christmas they would call over for drinks that often went on well into the night. Jo had thought about asking a few from Gabe's work, but she had ultimately balked at this. He

would feel it a betrayal, to be exhibited in front of his former colleagues; she could not deceive herself into thinking that he would be all right with it.

He would not be all right with any of this, a part of her knows; but God, she has to have something else to think about or she will go mad.

Joanna wakes with a start, as if from a bad dream, although the details of whatever cine reel was playing through her mind remain just out of reach; an empty city street; a wind, sharp and cruel. She is still on the couch; she must have fallen asleep here, in front of the TV, and it is late now because the heating has gone off and the room - always the coldest room in the house, this one - is frigid. She looks at her watch; just after midnight. Inertia holds her, and it is a full ten minutes more before she swings her legs over the side of the couch and stands up, her vision blurring momentarily as it always does. Drink more water, the doctor has told her, and although this seems like it should be an easy adjustment to make, she often reaches two, three o'clock in the afternoon before realising that she has had nothing to drink all morning beyond the mugs of coffee with which she marks out her day.

The house is quiet. The children asleep, she knows without having to check; they are in that calm oasis of middle childhood where their sleep is not something she ever has to think about. She makes sure the front door is locked, and switches off the sockets in the kitchen; closes the door of the dishwasher, which someone has left ajar. She pauses at the foot of the stairs, outside the door to Gabriel's room. It is so quiet. She lifts a palm to the door, her fingers splayed, and then presses her cheek to the cool of the wood, and closes her eyes.

She misses him, her husband. Oh, how she misses him.

There is a noise, from inside the room. A tiny noise, only, but she jerks away from the door guiltily, as if she has been caught at something deviant. The noise does not come again, but she opens the door and waits for her eyes to adjust to the gloom, which is broken only by the weak glow of the nightlight in the corner. Gabriel is in bed, where she and the evening carer had settled him just after nine o'clock. But his eyes are open, and he is gazing towards the window.

She says his name as she moves to the side of the bed. He turns his head - a slow, uneven movement; she would not have believed it, the complexity of something so simple, but now every component of even the tiniest action is laid bare. She waits for his eyes to respond to the sight of her; she feels like she has been waiting for this forever. And when some change does come into them, she does not know if she can trust it, or if her fervent imagination is showing her only what she wants to see.

“You all right, my love?” She sits, and takes his hand - God, how she loves his hands, how they used to make her thrill with pleasure - and holds it to her lips. His eyes are on her still. She rests her head on the white bedsheet, on the soft middle of him; the slight paunch that he had become self-conscious about as the last years of his thirties slipped by. She wants to tell him he was perfect then; how silly of him to have worried.

“Happy birthday, Gabriel.”

She lifts his beautiful hand and places it on her hair, and she closes her eyes. If she keeps very still, she can almost imagine that nothing has changed.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place The Attraction of Cacti by Maria Burke

Marcus had arrived at the station café far too early. Now he sits at a table facing the window, trying to read his book.

Half an hour after their arranged time, a woman with wild red hair emerges from the car park, an orange suitcase trundling behind her. A green dress sticks to her long legs and clumpy black boots. She's talking animatedly on her phone.

His heart kicks up a notch. Almost like he's on a date. Which this is not.

The woman takes the swing doors backwards, still on the phone. The case gets caught and she wrestles with it for a moment. Marcus stands up, wavering, but then she's through and manoeuvring round tables to the counter. He raises his hand and she comes over.

'You must be Marcus.'

'And you must be Elodie.'

She grins and gestures at the suitcase. 'Sorry for breaking the padlock but there was no label on the outside. At least I'd labelled mine.'

'The label must have come off,' he says defensively.

He wheels another suitcase from under the table and pushes it to her. Both are tangerine orange, but where one is battered, the other is pristine.

'Strange, I thought having a distinctive colour would make it easier to spot in baggage reclaim. But clearly not. Next time, check the label before you take it?' She reaches for the battered case.

‘It wasn’t me that took the wrong one. This was the only case left. The woman on the desk told me to take it because she said it would be quicker to swap them back ourselves than go through airline procedures.’

‘No way! Was it me took the wrong one? Mea culpa!’ she laughs. ‘So tell me, what’s with the cacti?’

Annoyingly, he blushes.

‘When I opened it up and saw all that bubble wrap, I thought there could be something really valuable in there. But hey, lots of little cacti all tucked up tight. I said to Desdemona – that’s my cat - ‘what kind of a weirdo carries cacti in their suitcase?’ Better meet him somewhere nice and public!’

Marcus grits his teeth. He realises the couple at the next table are watching avidly. In the mirror behind the counter, he sees himself, a tall thin man with reddening cheeks.

‘It was for a conference. In Belfast. The British Society of ...never mind.’

She raises her eyebrows, which are much darker than her hair, almost black. There are laughter lines around her eyes. She’s older than he’d first thought.

‘Right,’ he says, squirming. ‘This weirdo is now going to take his inappropriate suitcase and disappear.’

Her eyes flick to his book which he is clumsily trying to squash into his backpack.

‘One Hundred Years of Solitude?’ she asks, sounding surprised.

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Marcus stands at the window in his Barbican apartment fourteen floors up, cradling a whiskey. It should be working its warm magic by now. But he can’t stop thinking about the

red-haired woman - so bright, so confident, so irritating. About all the cutting things he could have said to her.

Dark streaks of rain appear across a gunmetal-grey sky. Below him the wide Barbican plaza is defined by stone benches and concrete walkways. Once, Marcus found the symmetry pleasing. But for a while now he has craved colour and curves.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Here he is, at fifty-one, both body and bank balance healthy, no commitments to speak of, living at the heart of one of the most exciting cities in the world. This is the life he wanted. Isn't it? Not for him the big house in the Home Counties, commuting to the City, tennis and golf and dinner parties. He had chosen what he thought of as freedom and independence to the despair and bemusement of his family. But at the expense of what?

This afternoon at the café he'd seen himself through the woman's amused eyes - grey, stiff, serious. 'Am I a weirdo?' he asks his reflection.

He turns back to the open-plan living room. It seems the greyness has leaked inside, dulling even the 1970s orange kitchen. Marcus hasn't touched the flat since he bought it twenty years ago. He'd worked hard, his coding skills in demand at the banks of Zurich, Tokyo, New York. But now he's at home all the time. If anyone asks, he says he's between jobs, but sometimes he wonders if he hasn't retired accidentally.

Just like he is unintentionally single. It isn't that he doesn't like women. There'd been a handful of lovers over the years. Lucy, his first love at university, gentle and shy. She'd ditched him for a sax player. Martha, a fellow back-office star at the bank, much beloved of his mother and sister. Clever, kind, funny. His match in so many ways and yet she'd wanted a house in the suburbs to fill with kids and dogs. That wasn't on his agenda. Then Astrid, his New York girl, twenty years younger, in love with his Englishness.

But now it's just him, and that's fine, because he's always been happy in his own company. And he has his books and his music and, of course, his cacti. So if sometimes in the middle of the night, when the whiskey bottle is half empty, his solitude appears to have morphed into loneliness - what of it?

'No, I'm not a weirdo. Just somebody who likes cacti. It's not like I talk to them. Not like people who talk to cats.'

It's after midnight and several whiskies later when his phone pings. It's the suitcase woman. 'You still up?' the message says.

'What? Is she stalking me now? I thought I was the weirdo here.' But he can't resist. 'Yes,' he taps.

Immediately, the phone rings. He considers ignoring it but then picks up.

'It's me, Elodie. Of the orange suitcase. The thing is ...' she clears her throat. 'I feel really bad.'

'Go on.'

'The thing is I took one of your plants.'

'You stole a cactus?'

'I'm very sorry. I don't why I did it. I can be a bit ... impetuous sometimes, and anyway it's been preying on my mind. Also I'm sorry I took the wrong suitcase.' Her words tumble out.

'So I'd like to return the cactus. I wasn't sure I should post it. I thought I could buy you a coffee or a beer or something by way of an apology?'

'Keep it. You're welcome to it,' he might have said. But he didn't.

'Are you still there?' she asks.

‘I’m thinking.’

‘Right. Are you thinking I might be a psychopath? Are you thinking I might be luring you to your death?’

‘I was wondering why you’d want to risk meeting a weirdo. But now you mention it, perhaps it’s me that should be worried.’

She laughs. ‘You see, you were reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. And that’s my favourite book. No-one who reads Gabriel Garcia Marquez can be all that bad.’

Is it the whiskey? He feels energised and, at the same time, curiously breathless like the sensation of flying downhill on a bike.

‘While you’re thinking, tell me about the cacti. I love plants. My garden is my passion. But I could never see the attraction of cacti.’

Marcus exhales. Why not, he thinks. ‘It’s been a bit of a thing with me since I was a boy. I found this wild area behind the greenhouse in our garden where there were all these exotic plants, a whole new world.’

‘Like the Secret Garden!’

He doesn’t care if she’s laughing at him. The urge to tell his story is too strong.

‘My father put up a greenhouse for me. When other boys were joining the Scouts, I signed up to the British Society of Cacti. I went to meetings with my Dad, it was fun.’

‘Right,’ she says drily.

‘I know. I was always a bit different.’

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ she says firmly. ‘I’m a bit different myself.’

‘Cacti might not be very beautiful but they’re incredibly tough. They can survive all types of hostile environments. I only started collecting again recently when I took pity on some sorry-looking specimens in Waitrose. Brought them back to life. Invested in a few unusual ones. Got back into my old hobby.’

‘That’s a nice story, especially the bit about your father. Doing all that for you. Having a shared interest.’

‘I guess so.’

‘I never knew my Dad,’ she says thoughtfully. ‘That’s why I was in Belfast. I was searching for my roots.’

‘And did you find them?’

‘I did. The only thing I’d ever known before about my Dad was his name. It was just me and mum forever. But she never talked about him. Then I found a newspaper cutting in a book of my mum’s.’

Marcus registers a flicker of alarm. Is this getting a bit personal?

‘The photo was of an Irish football team on tour in Liverpool, 1972. That’s where she worked when she came over from France. I knew that much. Anyway, a guy on the back row had mad red hair like me and, when I checked, the same name.’

Marcus remembers her long thick curls. ‘So you tracked him down?’ he asks, despite himself.

‘It wasn’t difficult. He’d been an artist, quite well-known. Dead now, but I met my uncles, all farmers. My dad ploughed his own furrow, they said. Did you look inside my suitcase?’

‘No!’

She chuckles. ‘I didn’t think you would. You look too...’

‘What?’ he prompts, heart sinking.

She chuckles again. ‘Honest, you look too honest. But if you had peeped inside, then you’d have seen all these drawings of my mother. They’re excellent. She was beautiful, my mother. The ones that really got me though were the ones where she’s cradling a baby with oodles of red hair. So he stuck around for a bit, my Dad.’

He searches for the right words.

‘I don’t know why I’m telling you this,’ she says softly.

‘Nor me.’

‘So that’s a no for a coffee?’

‘Actually, I would like to get my cactus back. So that’s a yes for a beer.’