

'So you're making progress with the packing,' says Judith, gesturing towards the cardboard boxes stacked in a corner of the room.

'It's endless,' sighs Heather. 'I was saying to Andrew yesterday – look at all this junk! And I'm sentimental, I suppose. I found Kirsty's milk teeth wrapped in a tissue the other day - couldn't throw them away, could I?'

'Of course not,' clucks Judith. She has never heard herself cluck before. Another string to my bow, she thinks grimly, to go along with the giggles and fatuous smiles. 'Dear little Kirsty.'

'Big Kirsty now. She's getting the place ready for us. We've hired a humungous lorry - how this stuff will fit into the annexe we have no idea. I expect we'll overspill into Kirsty's spare rooms. Baronial, she says.'

'Imagine,' murmurs Judith, thinking - *This is on purpose, she's saying this on purpose.* 'How many kids does she have now?'

'Two, and one on the way.'

'She'll be glad to have you on hand.'

'She will. Now listen, I've enjoyed a sit-down but I really must press on - '

'Let me,' interposes Judith, already on the edge of the kitchen chair. 'Let me help. I'm good at packing.'

'Ah, the legacy of St Mary's! They taught us to pack like squaddies, didn't they?'

'Give me a task.' Judith holds out her hands, palms upwards, as though a tray or a stack of linen will be balanced on them.

'Well, if you insist. You're a godsend.'

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Judith sits on the floor of Andrew's study, wedging his set of Dickens hardbacks into a Lidl box. Each forest green cover is embossed with gold foil. Bleak House gets tossed down on top of The Pickwick Papers. Flashy, thinks Judith - flashy rubbish to impress the neighbours, along with the Audi and the golf clubs, and Heather's handbags and jewellery and everything else of value – all of it haggled over in the multiplicity of Finchley's new pawn shops, and liquidated to finance the great move. It costs thousands - the travel permits, fees, bribes. All that's left is the lumber of family life, the kids' scribbles and their tiny teeth.

'Getting on ok?' calls Heather.

The two of them have rarely been so harmonious. Judith is not an easy woman to get along with, she admits that. She tries to remember anything untoward she might have said to Heather in the distant or more recent past - any playground squabbles, nasty digs, or early rivalry over Andrew, before he lost his looks? Nothing specific comes to mind, only an awareness of a deep covert lifelong antipathy towards dull, smug Heather, conveyed via looks and smiles and unkind whispers shared with conspirators who have long since disappeared. Judith's colleagues and friends are vanishing one by one, fleeing abroad on new passports procured by family contacts. Why don't I have family contacts? Judith asks herself. Or any contacts at all...

Only Heather is left, and she's leaving in a few days. Martial Law will be imposed, and soon Judith's flat in Cricklewood will be requisitioned. Urban gardens are needed for food production, like in the war. The papers anticipate another war, although they don't say who the enemy will be.

'You're indispensable,' says Heather, putting her head around the door of the study to watch Judith work.

Perhaps I could be their maid, thinks Judith. All over the country people are turning their hands to domestic service, farm work, prostitution - the perennial occupations. They're selling their blood and kidneys.

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Surely Heather wouldn't accept labour from someone she didn't intend to shelter? Oh yes, she would. Judith has no bargaining power. She's free to get up from the study floor and walk out into the street, but what would she find there? Beggars and gangs. A few extra minutes in the Finchley semi means a while longer spent in relative comfort, drinking tea poured from a china pot. More than Judith has any right to expect.

Heather considers asking Judith to clean the *en-suite*.

The house will never sell. Once the place is empty, squatters will move in. The Government's compensation fund ran dry, and all of London's property wealth drained away into the Thames. Is there still a Government, come to think of it? Heather dismisses politicians with a wave of her freckled hand. All as bad as each other, she murmurs. She's never been interested. Judith was the newshound, wasn't she? Always so repellently earnest, so judgemental of others. Well, see where that's got her now.

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'You're here again,' observes Andrew.

'Judith's been a treasure. Absolute dynamo.'

Andrew glances into his denuded study, then ducks into the understairs WC.

'I must get on with dinner,' Heather says. 'Thanks for all your help, dear. I'll drop you a note when we're settled. Night-night.'

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Judith goes to bed, although it's still light. Night-night, she thinks, recalling Heather's expression - a blank sort of triumph, a knowing emptiness. Heather has children, grandchildren, sanctuary - a physical place to go, and a legal right to be there. She'll live in the annexe of Kirsty's baronial hall, with bags of spaces, and safety, and food packed up to the rafters.

Roasting dishes full of hissing racks of lamb. Porcelain bowls of vegetables - potatoes, greens, buttery baby carrots - all of it fizzing and sizzling on the table, the baronial table, while the lamb gets carved into mauve-pink slices, tender inside, with a crackly glazed edge. Andrew will carve, or perhaps Tim - vying for supremacy, secretly hating one another. Tim will hate his father-in-law for intruding and Andrew will hate Tim for the accident of birth which places him in a safe country, with all the layers of privilege and comfort that confers.

So much secret hatred, thinks Judith. Perhaps most of the world's supply is secret, flowing faster and stronger for being contained. She remembers the piped Westbourne River over the tracks at South Kensington tube station. Her head is stacked with useless information like that, laid in as though for a siege. I know about

physics and geography and sonnets, she might say. I deserve to live, she'll say - choose me to live.

But none of her knowledge will save her, and it's not much comfort, either.

She turns up the radio so she can't hear the fighting out in the street.

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Early morning was once a safe time of day, but has become dangerous in recent months. It's when the scavengers are busiest, picking the streets clean of fallen food and coins. Sometimes there are bodies to be stripped. This morning, for example, across the road, there's a huddle in a front garden, groaning with mingled disgust and delight.

She walks briskly towards Heather and Andrew's house, and it's barely nine when she arrives.

'I thought I should help you with the loading,' she tells a disconcerted Heather, who is still in her dressing gown. 'For old time's sake?'

'You again!' cries Andrew at the sight of her, but he doesn't refuse assistance. There's a whole house to be lugged into the van and he needs to be across the border by nightfall. If Judith chooses to graft, that's her look-out. 'Start with the books,' he instructs.

Heather keeps them supplied with tea. An elderly neighbour watches as the van is filled.

'Got somewhere to go?' she calls.

'Still deciding,' replies Andrew, blocking any potential appeals from Mrs O'Hara.

The old are being left behind, in terraces and on the top floors of tower blocks. Mrs O'Hara looks as though she's about to argue that she's small, she wouldn't eat much, she'd be no trouble.

Am I any trouble? Judith wonders. She decides that yes, on balance, she's been nothing but trouble. Again she searches her memory for conflicts with Heather and again comes up with nothing. But many years ago, in the spring term before university, Judith had crept in after-hours to St Mary's and rapped lightly on Heather's dormitory window. 'Let me in,' she'd mouthed as Heather appeared. And Heather had shaken her head in reply, and let the curtain fall back across the window, so that Judith was left cold and exposed on the quad, awaiting inevitable discovery by the Bursar.

Lucky Heather, her schoolmates had sniggered, because she wasn't lucky at all - she was fat and plain and boring. Judith, by contrast, would have a career and many lovers, and if she had kids she'd simply tuck them under her arms and carry on gallivanting... But it hadn't worked out like that. She'd served long frustrating years in some backwater of the BBC while Heather had - yes, flowered.

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'You're quite butch, I've always thought,' says Andrew.

'Oh yes?'

The two of them are pausing on the kerbside to drink their tea, both sweating hard. The van's half-loaded. A standard lamp stands like a chaperone on the pavement next to them.

'Don't you agree?'

'What, that I'm butch? No. I'm capable.'

'Oh. *Capable*,' smiles Andrew, savouring some joke she can't share. He can say anything to her now, anything at all. What's Judith going to do, refuse to pack David Copperfield? She thinks of all the weeks and months spent simpering in people's houses, trying to make herself agreeable while they packed up around her. She thinks of the question they all asked, as an afterthought, out of some residual politeness - 'What will you do?'

She'd lied that she had plans, she had an aunt, she had many offers. She was emigrating to Dubai. She was an Irish citizen, she would be fine. She'd lied out of pride, and also to cover the mounting desperation that made it less and less likely anyone would invite her to share their escape. Deirdre, Jo, Sarah - they'd all bolted without her, in Luton vans and on ferries, not for a moment believing in the aunt or the Irishness but content to leave her to her fate.

She'd like to thump Andrew. She knows he'd grab her wrist and force it back down to her side, laughing at her as he did so - the servant who worked for nothing, who connived at her own dismissal.

'Nearly there?' asks Heather, coming outside to fiddle with the lamp. It's a rule of her marriage that she doesn't undertake anything too physical. She'd once confided to Judith that she'd never used a corkscrew and didn't know how. Both women are running out of things to say. They both want to duck the looming question - What will you do?

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'So.'

'Here we are then. Thanks for all your help. As I said, I'll write to you when we're - '

'Yes. Safe travels.'

They mime a kiss. Andrew's in the driver's seat, investigating the dashboard.

'I know you'll be alright,' gabbles Heather. 'Anyway, must make tracks, see you soon, lots of love - '

And that's Heather gone, bustling off down the side of the van and beginning her ascent of the passenger side, a round little matron dragging herself up the narrow steps that will lead, after hours and hours of cross-country driving, to Kirsty and the baronial hall.

'Andrew!' squawks Heather. 'I can't manage - it's too steep!'

And as Heather hauls her body higher, Judith thrusts and twists a purloined key into the van's rear door and climbs inside. She finds a spot beside the Lidl box, so at least she'll have something to read. Heather is still making a fuss and now Andrew has climbed out of the cab and gone around the side to put his shoulder against her bottom and shove it upwards. For once Heather's uselessness is proving useful.

What will they do when they find me? wonders Judith. But she doesn't really care. She'll be in Scotland by then, where she'll claim asylum.

That's what I'll do, she thinks, reaching into the box for Great Expectations.