

THREE WOMEN.
TWO UNFORGETTABLE
ROAD TRIPS.

The Never Ending Summer



EMMA KENNEDY

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Never Ending Summer

Emma Kennedy is a bestselling author, TV writer, actress and presenter. She has written eleven books including her bestselling memoirs, *The Tent the Bucket and Me* and *I Left My Tent in San Francisco*. She wrote the Wilma Tenderfoot series for children and has also adapted *The Tent the Bucket and Me* for the BBC, renamed *The Kennedys*. *The Never-Ending Summer* is Emma's second adult novel.

As an actress Emma has appeared in many award-winning comedies including *Goodness Gracious Me*, *People Like Us* and *Miranda*. Emma won *Celebrity Masterchef* in 2012 and is a Guinness World Record holder.

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The Never Ending Summer

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For Barbara Graebe, who made me try again.

WEEK ONE

MONDAY

Between two low, fat beech trees, off in the distance, a figure was moving at full pelt.

It was a young woman, gangly, running with the lopsided effort of a just-born foal. She was wearing thick spectacles, a powder-blue cardigan done up to the neck and a pair of navy nylon trousers that any normal person would accept they'd grown out of. On her feet brown sandals, above which screamed a pair of bright red socks.

Bea was coming and everything was about to change.

Agnes stood watching and felt the same surge of relief she always felt when her friend appeared. She was looking out across Christ Church Meadow. She was between two rivers: behind her ran the Isis, ahead of her the Cherwell. In her hand a Sherbet Fountain, the end of the liquorice moist.

In front of the galloping Bea, a rowing eight – all long legs and wellingtons – were strolling back from the boathouses. There was a gracefulness to them, like gazelles slowly crossing a savannah. A few of them stopped to chat to a young woman. Her hair was up, in her arms a pile of books. They were laughing easily.

Agnes watched, sucking on the end of her liquorice. She and Bea were not a part of this world. They were the girls dumped by their parents into a secretarial college neither of them wanted to be at. Their lives were to be played out within boundaries: there were to be no adventures, no surprises. They were expected to be compliant and unremarkable.

Fine. Except Agnes wanted to be *that* girl, the one with the books who was being talked to lightly, enthusiastically, seriously. It would have been different if Agnes's parents had sent her to a run-down, concrete-clad, anonymous secretarial in Reading or Basingstoke or Slough, where she could have blended in to the background and forgotten about everything that might have been. But they hadn't. They'd sent her to Oxford, the place she could have come to, properly, if it hadn't all gone wrong. It was hard not to think it cruel.

Bea came to a halt. Her face was bright red and she was panting.

'Well?' said Agnes, as her friend stopped in front of her. She could feel herself trembling. She knew what they had come to discuss.

Bea held out a finger, slumped down to the grass and put her head in her hands. 'Hang on,' she mumbled. 'I feel a bit sick.'

Agnes sucked on the end of her liquorice again and cast a look back towards the rowers. They were heading towards Merton. She wondered what they were all studying and felt the usual pang of jealousy. No, it wasn't jealousy; it was worse than that. It was regret.

She glanced downwards. Bea abhorred all physical exercise. She must have run at least half a mile. No wonder she felt ill.

'OK,' Bea said, exhaling heavily, and pushed herself back up. 'Have you finished it?'

Agnes reached into the blue canvas bag slung across her chest and pulled out a battered-looking book. It was *The Female Eunuch*.

'I have.' She handed it to Bea.

‘What did you think?’

‘It’s the filthiest book I’ve ever read.’

Bea’s face lit up.

She was an odd-looking girl: one eye that veered in towards her nose, teeth that seemed as if they’d been thrown into her mouth and a ruddy complexion that left her wind-blasted. She would have been perfect on a farm in the middle of nowhere but here, on Christ Church Meadow, among the willowy rowers and the beech trees, she was out of place, a mongrel among the thoroughbreds.

‘Filthier than Chatterley?’ Bea narrowed her eyes.

Agnes nodded. ‘*So much filthier than Chatterley.*’

Agnes stared down at the cover, the naked female torso hanging from a hook. Bea’s hand was hovering over it, as if it might be a crystal ball. Her eyes were wide and staring. She looked delighted and astonished.

‘It’s definitely the filthiest book I have ever read. Absolutely definitely. And the most daring. And the most startling. And the most powerful. Did you like the bit about courage and independence?’

Agnes nodded.

‘And the bit about security being the denial of life?’

Agnes tilted her head. ‘I wasn’t quite sure what that meant?’

Bea gripped Agnes by the shoulders. ‘It’s about your mother. It’s about my mother. It’s about us. We have to throw it all off, Agnes. We have to wave goodbye to safety. We have to take the bull by the horns.’

‘After our exams ...’

Bea’s hands fell from Agnes’s shoulders. She gave a shrug. ‘Yes, after our exams.’

They both stood for a moment, minds racing at different speeds.

‘I liked the bit about personal responsibility.’ Agnes didn’t want Bea to think she wasn’t embracing these new ideas but, in truth, it scared her a little. It’s hard to break away from the only things you’ve ever known.

Bea gave a small nod but didn't seem overly impressed.

Agnes tried again. 'I think it's entirely dangerous. How do you feel about that?'

Bea winked. 'Thrilled.'

'Me too.' Agnes smiled. She wasn't sure she meant it. Still, Bea would be happy.

Everything was so easy with Bea. They had known each other forever, both from the same small village, the comfortable intimacy of a lifetime of scuffed knees and jokes only they understood. You have to love your family, Agnes knew this only too well, but you choose who you like.

'I think I might be a bit in love with Germaine Greer. What do you think about that?' Bea's face shone with excitement.

'Why wouldn't you be?'

'We need to become second-wave feminists immediately. They seem to be able to do whatever they want. I can't quite get over it.' She shook her head.

'Shall I give a copy to my mother?' Agnes sounded playful, as if the thought was outrageous.

Bea stopped, her mouth slightly open. 'I'm not sure she's ready for it. Are you? Women putting themselves first?'

Agnes laughed. 'Her brain would explode.' She paused. 'Maybe she needs her brain to explode.'

'Maybe everyone needs their brains to explode?'

Agnes looked back towards the rowers.

'After we've finished our exams.'

'Yes,' nodded Bea. 'After we've finished our exams. Agnes,' she said, gripping her friend's arm, 'there's a revolution going on, right now, out there ...' She turned and pointed off towards the distance. 'And we need to be a part of it.'

'Yes, we do.'

'I have given this some thought,' said Bea, her face settling into seriousness, 'and I think the first thing we need to do, after we've finished our exams, is lose our virginity. I can think of

nothing more important. We cannot be full-blown second-wave feminists until we have had sex.'

It was a subject Agnes felt uncomfortable about. Kissing, after all, had ruined her life back then when everything had still seemed possible: one kiss in a village disco and that was that. She was done for. It had been a friend's seventeenth birthday party, a village hall decked with faded bunting. There had been sausage rolls and someone had brought vodka and there had been dancing in the dark and he had grabbed her and slid his hands around her waist. She had felt, for the nineteen minutes they had been together, special, desired, liked. His breath smelled of cigarettes and ethanol. She'd never been kissed, properly, by someone who made her feel wanted. He had made her dizzy. And then he had made her very, very ill. It had been heartbreaking, not least because Agnes had found it so impossible to escape its after-effects.

She frowned, unsure of how to respond. Bea was different from her: enthusiastic, confident, irrepressible. She was a whirlwind of ideas and possibilities. She was everything Agnes was not.

Bea gripped her forearm tighter.

'We need to seize the day, Agnes Ledbury. We need to knuckle down or be left behind. I mean it. The minute we have finished our exams we must have sexual intercourse as soon as is humanly possible. The rest of our lives is waiting for us!' She thrust her hand out. 'Are you with me?'

There was so much to be nervous of. Agnes glanced back again, towards the rowers who were now far dots on the horizon. They were not, like her, passive participants in a life carved out by others. They were forging their own destiny. Agnes didn't have a brave bone in her body, but Bea did. It was impossible not to hang on to her.

Agnes dropped her liquorice into the tube of sherbet and took Bea's hand. She shook it firmly. 'I am with you, Beatrice Morgan.'

'Then the pact is made. You've got sherbet all down your front.' Bea gestured towards Agnes's blouse. She eyed the sugary tube. 'Have you got another one?'

Agnes licked her finger and dabbed up the wayward sherbet. 'No. Do you want the dry end?' She pulled out her liquorice stick and offered it up. 'We can share the rest. There's always too much anyway.'

'Yes, all right,' said Bea, taking it. She licked the end and dipped it into the tube in Agnes's hand. 'Do you know anyone you could have sex with?'

'Not a single person.' Agnes wasn't entirely sure she minded.

'Me neither,' said Bea. 'But that needs to change, doesn't it?' She gave a broad smile and sucked the end of her stick.

Agnes mustered a smile in return but her mind was tumbling. It wasn't so much the prospect of having to lose her virginity that terrified her, it was the idea that she might do whatever she liked.

It was an impossible thought.

Florence sat, her hands on the steering wheel, knuckles white from tension. She could have done without this.

Glancing up towards the front door beyond the driveway, she saw her eldest daughter, Eleanor. She was standing, leaning against the open doorway into the house, exactly as she used to when she was child. It startled her momentarily, the flashback to what once was. But Eleanor wasn't a child any more and she no longer lived here. She looked relaxed, untroubled, the opposite of how Florence felt.

What was she doing here?

She gave a casual wave down towards her and Florence, force of habit, gave a tight wave back.

She hadn't rung to say she was coming. The inconvenience fluttered through her.

She glanced up at herself in the rear-view mirror and ran a fingertip under her bottom eyelid, gathered her things from the well of the passenger seat and got out.

'You look in a frightful mood,' said Eleanor, as Florence walked towards her. She strode with purpose, businesslike, as

if she had been sent to deliver grave news. 'Has something terrible happened?'

Florence shook her head as if the suggestion was an affront. 'No. I thought I was having lunch with Marjory but she didn't turn up. I must have got the wrong day.'

She walked up the steps, stopped as if remembering there was something expected of her, leaned towards Eleanor and kissed her on the cheek before moving past her into the hallway.

'You? Get the wrong day?' said Eleanor, kissing her back. 'The tides are more likely to forget to come in.'

'Well, I must have been stood up then. I must be easily forgotten.' The words drifted away.

She needed to tether herself, reacquaint herself with the familiar. She hung her coat up, smoothed down her blouse and placed her handbag on the top of the sideboard. Her car keys were placed carefully onto a flat silver tray next to some unopened envelopes ready for her husband when he returned home. She glanced down at them and quickly fingered them into a neater pile.

'What are you doing here?' she said, as if it were an afterthought. 'Are you staying for supper? Is Charlie with you?'

She was in bustling mode, wanting to shake off the humiliation. She didn't look at Eleanor as she spoke.

'No and no,' said Eleanor, shutting the door behind her. 'I wanted to chat to you about Saturday.'

'I should call her. Perhaps I should call her?' Florence's mind was still lingering. 'Perhaps something's wrong?'

'You don't need to go begging, Mother.'

Florence ignored the slight and walked to the kitchen, Eleanor just behind her.

'Do you want tea?' She frowned and fingered the top of her forehead, trying to soothe away her own thoughts.

'No, thanks.' Eleanor pulled a glass down from a cupboard to the left of the sink and placed it under the tap.

Florence watched her. She didn't like it. Eleanor didn't live here any more. She was a guest. She went to reach for a plastic cup to replace the one in her daughter's hand but, as she held it out, Eleanor was already drinking. She swallowed and eyed her mother.

'Did you want me to fill that for you?' She glanced towards the childlike beaker in her mother's hand.

Florence stared down at it and put it quietly down on the counter behind her.

'Your father will be home in an hour. I need to get changed.' She shot a quick look towards the large clock on the wall above the sink.

Eleanor gave a small laugh. 'You don't still do that, do you?'

'Do what?' There were things she needed to do. Eleanor was preventing her.

Florence walked towards the fridge and opened it. She pulled out a chicken pie she'd made earlier and shut the door with her elbow.

'Get spruced up for Daddy coming home?' Eleanor took another gulp from her glass.

Florence ignored the provocation and slid the pie into the oven. She picked up a plastic egg timer, shaped like a fat hen, moved it to forty-five minutes and placed it neatly down.

'Eleanor, I'm really not in the mood for this. Agnes will be home soon. You can make yourself useful. Go and pick some green beans from the garden.'

'But I want to talk to you about Saturday.' She swirled her water and stared down into it as if it might be far more interesting than the conversation she was trying to have.

'Not now,' said Florence, walking away. 'Later. Go and pick the beans.'

She trotted briskly towards the stairs. She could feel Eleanor's eyes boring into her, the silent judgements being made. She didn't need to be told. She knew her faults all too well. She'd never change. She was a woman for whom every moment of

every day was rigid and defined. If she didn't keep moving, Florence knew, she'd feel every inch of the sadness of her life.

She glanced back towards Eleanor in the kitchen. She was draining the last of the water from her glass and Florence watched as she slowly looked around the room. Nothing was out of place, everything was immaculate: the chairs were all tucked to attention under the table; the white linen cloth on top of it was crisp, ironed and gleaming; a pot of fresh flowers cut from the garden stood proud at its centre; the work surfaces were clear of all clutter; the floor was spotless. It was as if nobody lived here, a home for show only. She could see it in Eleanor's face: she didn't know how her mother did it. Or why. It was a space for living that nobody was allowed to live in.

'The bowl is in the cupboard to your right.' Florence stopped on the stairs, her hand gripping the banister. She knew full well Eleanor was aware of where it was.

Eleanor went to the cupboard and pulled out a dark blue Tupperware bowl.

'Are you still doing your plastic parties?' she called up, turning it in her hands. 'For the Tupperware.' She rolled the word in the mouth. She was making fun of her.

'Yes,' Florence replied.

Eleanor gave a small nod and walked off towards the long sitting room that looked out over the garden. Florence watched her, waiting for what, exactly? The murmurs of appreciation? Like the kitchen, it was immaculate: the chintz sofa, the matching armchairs, the coffee table with the porcelain geese, the tassled lampshades, the framed photographs of her grandparents, a picture of her father in his war uniform; it was all sitting, waiting to be approved and instantly ignored.

It was a waste of a room, really. They never used it. If Eleanor ever came back to live here, it would be perfect for a studio: all the light that poured in, begging to be noticed. Eleanor's own studio, a converted hut at the bottom of her garden, wasn't quite

fit for purpose now she was being taken seriously. Florence had never expected Eleanor to be successful. It seemed to have happened by accident. It hadn't, of course, but the right gallery owner had come to the right end-of-year show and there had been no looking back. Now her paintings commanded vast sums. She was in demand. She needed somewhere bigger. Florence quietly totted up in her mind when Eleanor might be able to move in but dismissed the idea. It felt ghoulish.

Florence continued up the stairs. There was a heaviness to her. She had been stood up, dropped for something better. Marjory was her most glamorous friend, an old chum from schooldays who had done rather well for herself. Married money, all that. She even had a cook.

She drifted along the corridor into her bedroom and sat on the end of the bed. She'd been looking forward to today. All for nothing. Her days out were few and far between. Instead, she'd sat staring into a bowl of soup, embarrassed and alone. She should call Marjory, she really should, tell her off. It wasn't the first time. It wasn't on. All that time, effort, hope. She let her fingers tangle themselves together on her knees. She knew she'd say nothing.

She slipped out of her shoes and stood to unzip her skirt.

Florence glanced down from her bedroom window.

She was not a natural gardener: she had a few containable rose bushes and a row of lavender for the bees but, other than that, it was all vegetables, a hangover from coming through the war and the clarion call of self-sufficiency. The garden was for function, not pleasure. Everything had to have a purpose, to be useful, to do its bit.

She watched as Eleanor stepped down onto the lawn, walked towards the rows of beans and slipped between the sticks of willow. She was doing as asked. It made Florence visibly relax.

Routine. That would settle her.

She changed quickly into a floral dress, belted at the waist, short sleeves, round collar, and put on her string of evening

pearls. She touched up her day make-up to add a bit of night-time glamour and applied a thick coat of blood-red lipstick.

Better. She felt better.

She stepped back and looked at herself in the full-length swing mirror that stood to the right of the window. She let her hands drift to her stomach, stroking the flatness of a belly that had been swollen not once but twice. She turned sideways to admire herself. She was still slight and would, if she weren't married, think herself attractive to other men.

Eleanor had her looks. She was naturally beautiful, all big blue eyes and golden curls. She could be even more beautiful if she made more of an effort but Florence had long given up nagging. Girls these days didn't seem to be interested in making the best of themselves. As for Agnes, well. She would always be something of the pit pony.

She touched lightly at the back of her hair, a convoluted bun in the style of Grace Kelly. She looked neat, in control, unflappable.

Satisfied she passed muster, Florence reached for a pair of heels tucked to the left of her vanity table. She dipped her feet into the shapely black teardrop pumps and fastened the buckle at the side. Her attitude was brisk and efficient.

This was the same thing she did every day at precisely the same time. She wasn't going back out. She would be spending the evening at home serving her husband his supper, washing up and sitting in near silence until he decided he wanted to go to bed.

This was her life. It was all she knew. There was nothing else.

A voice drifted up from the garden. Agnes was back.

‘She’s got you at it already?’ Agnes pushed open the garden gate and walked halfway up the path. She stopped and watched her elder sister dropping beans into the blue bowl. She was always pleased to see her but was careful not to show it.

‘Yes,’ said Eleanor, casting a glance towards her. ‘She’s in a frightful mood. Stood up by Marjory. I think I know why too.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ll tell you later. For maximum effect.’ She raised her eyebrows. She was looking forward to it.

There was something unobtainable about Eleanor; she always felt out of reach. Her life was too interesting, too unique for Agnes to be able to catch hold of any of it. Now, she only told people she had a famous sister if she had to. She’d gone through a phase of telling anyone who cared to listen but she was showing off, asking people to like her because of someone else, someone they would never meet. A few people were jealous. The glamour of it! A famous artist for a sister! Agnes had seen Eleanor being sick into a shoe. She’d seen her cry until snot came out of her nose. She’d seen her naked in the bath, ill with

flu; she'd seen her get ready on her wedding day. All the same, it was intoxicating: the glitzy parties, the requests for interviews in glossy magazines. Eleanor was sought after. They were hungry for her in a way Agnes couldn't fathom, so she had mentioned her sister at every opportunity; but it was no good, not really. Agnes wanted people to like *her*. Not her sister. There should be nothing left to know about her elder sister, but Agnes didn't really feel she knew her at all.

She stood, bag slung over the back of her shoulder, and wondered if she should pursue the Marjory thing. No point. Eleanor clearly wanted to make a grand announcement.

'Are you staying for supper? Is Charlie here?' Agnes glanced towards the house.

'No and no. We need to work out what we're doing on Saturday. My exhibition. Daddy's birthday.'

'And Charlie's birthday.' Agnes reached for a bag of boiled sweets in her pocket. She held them out. 'Do you want one?'

'No. Come and help me.' Eleanor waved the Tupperware bowl in Agnes's direction. 'Did you have exams today?'

'Yes. Last one in two days. Shorthand.' She pulled a face.

Stepping between two lavender bushes, Agnes dumped her bag on the lawn and wandered over towards the vegetable beds. Summer still felt as if it needed to get going but today was warm and woozy, a day for lying on your back in the buttercups.

'How are they going? Think you've passed? Here,' Eleanor added, passing her sister the Tupperware bowl, 'you have that. I can use the bottom of my smock.'

Agnes noted her sister's outfit: a loose cheesecloth top with a daisy motif around the wrists. She was wearing a pair of bright red shorts with large pockets at the front, on her feet a pair of Jesus creepers. Her legs looked amazing.

She stared down at her own legs: shapeless with thick ankles and a slightly unattractive fuzz of hair tufting across her shins. Her hair was unstyled and dirty, the overgrown remains of an ill-thought-out pixie cut done six months ago that didn't suit

her then and didn't suit her now. She had the pale, greasy look of someone who needed a week in the sun. Her clothes were a decade out of date and she had the aura of someone who would always be running but never catching up. There was something about Agnes that was intensely sad. She seemed incapable of doing anything about it.

It had taken its toll, that year of being so unwell. It wasn't just the exams that crumbled to nothing; it was the anxiety it had left her with, the self-confidence withered to the ground, the fear of falling back to how she had been, how she had felt.

'I don't think it's possible not to pass secretarial exams, is it?' said Agnes, taking the bowl. 'They may as well point at a typewriter and a telephone and ask, "What are those?" and then, for a distinction, ask you to refill a stapler. I can't quite believe I've spent the last year preparing for this.'

Agnes was painfully aware of how embarrassed she was. Her path was already limited, her choices closing down. It was only now, at the end of this dull, dull year, that she was starting to fully appreciate how limited her options were. This was it for her. Nobody was coming to save her. She was trapped into a life that would never make her happy.

'You should have gone to university, Ag,' said Eleanor, picking a bean and dropping it into her upturned top. 'You're going to be wasted on secretarial.'

'I couldn't go, remember?' Her voice fell away to a mumble. 'I mucked it up.' She shot her sister a small sideways glance.

'No,' said Eleanor, pinching a bean away from its stalk, 'you gave up.' She reached sideways into a row of peas and snapped off a shell.

Agnes said nothing. She was so used to feeling despondent, it was impossible to feel cross at the slight. Besides, her sister was right. She had given up.

'Anyway. Do you want to know about Saturday?'

Eleanor ran her thumbnail along the seam of the casing and pushed the row of bright fresh peas into her mouth.

‘Yes, all right.’

‘I thought we could roll everything into one,’ she said. ‘There’ll be booze and nibbles and whatnots. If we sort out two cakes for Daddy and Charlie then we don’t have to bother with anything else.’

She turned and smiled.

Agnes watched her carefully. It was hard not to feel her own inadequacies. Her sister was beautiful, successful, lived life on her own terms. She had everything Agnes did not. She always had. Agnes loved her, looked up to her, admired her, but she wasn’t sure she liked her. No, it wasn’t that she didn’t like her. It was that Eleanor reminded Agnes of how little she liked herself.

A flash of stubbornness kicked in. She didn’t know if she was in the mood to quietly acquiesce. Eleanor always got her own way.

‘Birthdays are supposed to be about the people whose birthday it is, though, Eleanor. Not you.’

‘It will be about them.’

‘No, it won’t; it’s your exhibition. It’ll be all about you.’

Eleanor glanced towards the house. Their mother was striding towards them.

‘She’s coming,’ she said and turned back to picking the beans.

‘How many have you got?’ Florence called out as she walked towards them. ‘Don’t go mad. We only need enough for three.’

Agnes held out the Tupperware bowl to show her hoard. ‘How’s that?’

‘Plenty. Are you sure you don’t want to stay for supper, Eleanor? Your father would be so pleased to see you.’ She creased her face into a polite smile.

‘Really?’ Eleanor emptied the contents of her smock into the bowl. ‘Are you sure that’s true?’

A moment of something brittle flittered across Florence’s face but she composed herself immediately.

‘Of course it’s true. What a strange thing to suggest.’

She took the bowl from Agnes's hands and turned to walk back to the house.

'Are you going to ask me how my exam went?' Agnes called after her.

But her mother didn't reply.

Agnes's face fell. Ignored, again.

'What are you going to do with your summer?' Eleanor asked, stepping out from the peas. 'When you've finished your exams? One last hoorah and all that?'

'I don't know. I need to talk to Bea.' Agnes raised a hand to her forehead and looked out towards the long horizon beyond the garden. 'It really is very hot, isn't it?'

'Yes. I suppose it is. Come on,' Eleanor said, touching her sister's arm. 'I've got something to show you.'

'What is it?'

'You'll see ...'

Eleanor wandered up the garden, following their mother back to the kitchen. Agnes stood for a moment, the usual deadened sense of her current predicament enveloping her. There was no point in feeling upset. Even she wasn't interested in how her exams were going. She picked up her bag and brought up the rear.

'Shut your eyes.'

Agnes dropped her bag to the floor of the kitchen and joined her mother. There was a soft sound of something being placed on the table.

'OK. You can look.'

Agnes and Florence opened their eyes and stared down at the odd, rough-skinned green thing that sat in front of them. Agnes touched it gently with her finger.

'What is it?'

'It's an avocado pear.'

They all tilted their heads.

'Is it really?' said Florence, peering. 'I've heard about these. What do you do with it? Put it in a fruit salad?'

Eleanor smiled. 'No, it's savoury. Do you want to try it?'

Florence glanced back towards the clock. 'You have it, Agnes.' She turned away back to the stove and the beans.

'Pass me a knife, Ag,' said Eleanor, taking a plate from a cupboard behind her. 'By the way, I think I might know why Marjory didn't turn up. Did I tell you I bumped into her?'

Florence stared at her. 'No. Why didn't you mention it earlier?'

'Forgot.'

Eleanor was clearly lying.

'Well. I have quite the news. She's getting a divorce.'

Agnes glanced towards her mother. She was visibly shaken.

'What? That can't be true!'

Agnes watched Eleanor's face. There was the fizz of something excited behind her eyes, a sharp little enjoyment. She wished she had the capacity to shock their mother like that.

'It is. From the horse's mouth.' Eleanor took the knife from Agnes and gripped the avocado in one hand. 'She's getting one of those new ones where nobody's to blame. Irreconcilable differences, she said. She applied for one as soon as it was made legal. You have to be separated for two years. Five years if your husband won't agree.' She slid the knife into the skin.

'I don't know what to say.' Florence backed herself up against the work surface, shoving herself as far away from this news as possible.

'She looked absolutely delighted. I don't think I've ever seen her more happy. There.' Eleanor pulled the avocado open. 'Look at that. You have to take the stone out. And you don't eat the skin. Put a bit of salt and pepper on it. Give it a go.'

Florence was still floundering. 'But why? Did she tell you why?' She wrapped her arms around her torso, protecting herself from this dangerous information.

Eleanor shook her head. 'Not really. I think she'd just had enough. She's young. What is she? Same age as you? Forty-five?

Forty-six? She's got ages to have fun. She looked fabulous too. New hair-do. Lovely togs. Very with it.'

Agnes's eyes flitted between them. Eleanor was standing tall while her mother had folded in on herself. She dug a teaspoon into the avocado and lifted it to her nose. 'Doesn't really smell of anything,' she muttered but nobody was paying her any attention.

'I don't understand why it's happened.' Florence's voice drifted off, her eyes filled with confusion.

'Perhaps she read *The Female Eunuch*,' said Agnes, trying to insert herself back into the conversation.

Florence blinked. 'What do you mean, "read *The Female Eunuch*"?'

'You must know,' said Agnes. 'It's that new book. Everyone's banging on about it. It's all about female empowerment and how women must leave their husbands and have loads of sex and orgasms.' She put the spoon into her mouth, frowned and then widened her eyes. 'Oh! It's lovely!'

Eleanor beamed. 'It *is*, isn't it?'

'Have you read it, Eleanor?' Agnes dug her spoon back into the avocado.

'*The Female Eunuch*? Of course I have. It's all anyone's talking about.'

'You're not going to leave Charlie, though, are you?' Agnes took another mouthful.

'No, I'm not going to leave Charlie.' Eleanor leaned forward, her hands resting palms down on the top of the kitchen table.

'See,' said Agnes, wagging the spoon in her direction. 'I expect that's because Charlie gives you loads of orgasms.'

'Agnes!' said Florence, sharply. 'That's not the sort of conversation that's going to get you anywhere.'

Agnes turned and looked at her mother who was now angrily tossing new potatoes into a pan of water. 'Nothing is going to get *me* anywhere, Mother.' She paused. 'Have you ever had an orgasm?'

Florence shot a glare in her direction, wiped her hands again on the faded tea towel of the Queen and left the room, her daughters watching her as she went.

'That's a no then,' said Eleanor. She looked back at the plate. 'Hey, leave some for me.'

TUESDAY

Florence stood in the hallway, her ears straining to hear William's car door shutting. She was motionless, poised like a cat, terrified of moving a muscle until she knew it was safe to do so.

She had thought of little else since finding out. She was up to no good and she knew it.

The familiar deep thud sounded from the driveway and, as if a starter gun had rung out, Florence turned and paced towards the telephone in the small sitting room. It was an old black Bakelite: a telephone engineer had tried to sell her a more modern turquoise model back in 1967 but Florence was having none of it. She liked the weight of the receiver in her hand and the handy pull-out tray for numbers.

Florence flicked it out and ran her index finger down the line. 'Marjory,' she mumbled and dialled.

She cradled the receiver tight to her chin, consumed with a need to be furtive. Her shoulders were rounded, her eyes wide and staring. She was aware of holding her breath. The news had shocked her and she had thought of little else since being told. As to whether she would bring it up over the phone, that was a different matter. No, it didn't seem right. Besides, she had a plan.

'Chelsea 4967!'

Florence breathed out. 'Marjory! It's Florence!'

'Oh darling! I was just thinking about you! I bumped into Eleanor. Did she tell you?' Her voice was light and untroubled.

'No.' Florence hesitated as she lied. 'Mind you, my girls tell me nothing these days. You know how it is.' She stared down at her shoes, comfortable tan slingbacks. Lying did not come easy to her. She was worried it made her sound nervous.

'She looked terribly well. She's got your looks all right! Charlie's a lucky fellow. She invited me to her exhibition. Is that why you're calling? Oh wait, was I supposed to see you for lunch? When was it?'

Florence hesitated. It made no sense to make a meal of it.

'Why I was calling you, actually; I wasn't sure myself.'

'Phew, thought I'd forgotten it.'

'I was wondering if you're free tomorrow? For lunch?'

'In Brill?' She said it as if it were a ridiculous thought.

'No, in town. I'm coming up to get a few things. It's William's birthday on Saturday. And Charlie's. All go. As per.'

'You never stop, Florence.'

'No, and I suddenly thought of you and how I haven't seen you in an age ...' Her voice trailed off.

'But I will be seeing you on Saturday ...' Marjory let the thought hang. She clearly wasn't keen to do lunch but Florence had to persist.

'Yes, but you know how it'll be.' Florence grappled to control the situation. 'Those things are hopeless for catching up. You spend the first half saying hello and the second half saying goodbye.'

She stopped and waited. If Marjory pushed back again there would be no undoing it. Florence understood how these things worked.

'You're right. Well,' said Marjory, 'I've got a game of tennis at ten but that won't last long. Barbara Grimble. Have you seen

her lately? Size of a house! I'll be surprised if she lasts a set. So yes. Why not? What time shall we say? Midday? At the Savoy Grill?'

Florence felt herself relax. 'Yes. That would be lovely.'

'Forgot the crossword.' A voice sounded behind her. Florence span round.

William was walking towards her. He leaned towards an occasional table to her left and picked up a navy-blue fountain pen and the folded newspaper underneath it. Florence felt a surge of panic.

'I'm just on the phone to Marjory!' she said, smiling and pointing towards the receiver.

'Hello, William!' shouted Marjory.

Florence mustered an awkward laugh. 'Marjory says hello!'

William glanced towards her but nothing registered in his face. Tucking the pen into his jacket pocket and the paper under his arm, he turned and walked back towards the hallway.

'He's waving hello,' Florence lied. She was gripping the receiver so hard she could feel the blood pumping through her fingers. Her voice was little more than a whisper, as if her words were retreating in terror.

'So sweet. Well,' said Marjory. 'I shall see you tomorrow! Heaps to tell you. Heaps.'

'Yes. Bye-bye, then. Savoy at midday. Bye-bye.'

Florence put the receiver down and stood for a moment, her heart beating. She thought about running out to William. Did he suspect anything? Did he disapprove? She paced briskly across the sitting room, out into the hallway and down towards the front door. Pulling it open, she waved towards William as he reversed the car out from the driveway.

'I'm going up to town tomorrow!' she shouted, brightly. 'To have lunch with Marjory!' She attempted a smile.

William glanced sideways, gave a cursory nod and put his foot down on the accelerator.

Florence stood watching, not quite knowing what to do. She felt grimly electrified; embarrassed, yes, but she had clawed back a little sanity for herself.

Now she wouldn't have to lie and that, she decided, was worth the small moment of shame.

WEDNESDAY

Agnes lifted her face up towards the sky and closed her eyes. That was it. Last exam finished. She never had to go back to that stuffy room that smelled of boiled cabbage or use the ancient typewriter with the Q that always stuck. She never had to take dictation, to stare down at the spider scrawls of her shorthand that withheld all sense. She no longer had to sit, staring out the window at the doorways into St John's or Balliol, and wonder if her life might be different had it taken the turn it was supposed to.

She should be feeling unencumbered, relieved, raring to go, but she wasn't. Instead, all she felt was gnawing dread at the thought that a conveyor belt was laid out before her. She had taken her exams and she would pass and she would spend the rest of her life sitting behind a typewriter tapping out other people's careers.

It's a terrible thing, to feel trapped. Eleanor was right. She was wasted on secretarial. She should be sitting in the Bodleian Library, hunched up against a stack of books that smelled of a hundred years, a Victorian novel pressed open in front of her, pen in hand, ink on her forefinger, dreaming of who she might become and where knowledge might take her.

'I feel magnificent,' said Bea, hands on hips. She was standing legs apart, as if she might be considering getting on a horse. 'I've always hated exams. Revision is simply awful, sitting them's even worse, and then suddenly they're all over and you feel like a gambolling lamb. Or a kite. Or a bicycle. Maybe not a bicycle.'

Agnes wished she felt that way.

Bea shoved her specs up her nose and gave a fulsome nod. 'So it's sort of worth it. Anyway. I feel super. Shall we go to the Bird?' She nudged her nose in the direction of the Eagle and Child.

'Is everyone else going there?' Agnes glanced over Bea's shoulder to the other secretarial students. They were petite and well turned out, all of them chomping at the bit to marry the first boss that would have them. She and Bea had absolutely nothing in common with those girls but were well used to it: they were forever the outsiders. It had been the same at school and was the same now.

'Probably. We can tuck ourselves away in the Rabbit Room. Come on.' Bea gave Agnes's upper arm a punch. 'I'm gasping for a half of apple cider. We could go mad and order a cheese sandwich.'

Agnes's eyes widened. 'To share?'

'Obviously.'

The Rabbit Room was a snug of sorts: wood-panelled walls covered with memorabilia of the infamous Inklings Club. Once upon a time, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis and all manner of literary brainboxes had sat there to discuss matters of great import. Now it was a little less snug, having been opened out in a recent renovation, and was being used to discuss different matters of great importance: namely, how to get laid.

'I have drawn up a list,' said Bea, taking a small sip of her cloudy apple cider. She reached into the pocket of her trousers and pulled out a scrap of folded-up paper. 'We need to take a scientific approach to our quest for sexual equality and I always find lists are a very good place to start.'

She opened it out and flattened it down on the table with the palm of her hand.

Agnes peered at the list. There was one name on it.

'Mr Hannity? The baker in Brill?' Agnes looked up, astonished. 'Bea! He's about fifty! What on earth are you thinking?'

'He's also a widow,' Bea said, holding up a finger to pause any further criticism. 'So he'll have done it before and will be grateful that anything is on offer.'

'He's got false teeth. Is that it? Is that the only person you've got?' Agnes picked up the piece of paper and turned it over to look at the other side. 'Oh Bea,' she said, on seeing that really was the only name on her friend's list, 'I think you can do better than that.'

'Oh, it's not for me. That was my suggestion for you.' Bea took another sip of her drink.

Agnes stared at her.

'He's only a hundred yards from your house,' Bea added, with an encouraging smile.

'No. Thank you. I do not want to journey into the brave new world of the sexual revolution by having sex with a man who has no front teeth and smells of yeast. I mean, really, Bea. Come on.'

'He's got a van.'

'Stop it. No.' Agnes took the cheese sandwich on the plate between them and bit into it: chunky white bread with a decent crust, the Cheddar good and strong with just the right amount of pickle. 'I mean, there might be free buns.'

'Exactly.'

'But still. No. I couldn't. I don't remotely fancy him. This Cheddar's excellent.' She waved her half-sandwich towards Bea.

'Are we factoring in actually being sexually attracted to someone?' Bea asked, picking up her own half. 'Because that rather narrows the field.' She took a bite. 'Ooh. It is good.'

'Why wouldn't we?' said Agnes, swallowing. 'The point is we're supposed to have fun ... I know there's the temptation to

get it over with but it would be preferable if we actually enjoyed it.'

'Yes,' nodded Bea. 'That would be preferable. Who's on your list?'

'I haven't really got one. There's nobody from college.'

'Well, they're all women.' Bea shook her head, dismissing the thought.

'I know. And as for Brill ...' Agnes shrugged her shoulders.

Bea wiped a few crumbs delicately from the corner of her mouth. 'I wasn't going to suggest this. But let's throw caution to the wind. I have a rather daring proposal.' She leaned forward.

Agnes eyed her suspiciously. 'Oh yes?'

'You know Daphne and Brenda and Lois?' Bea lowered her voice to a conspiratorial hush.

'The Terrible Trio? From the course?' Agnes curled her lip. They were the rotten cabal, the top of the food chain, the ones to whom all deferred.

'The Terrible Trio. They're off to Europe for a month.'

'Right.'

'And I wondered ...'

Agnes held her hand up. 'There is absolutely no way I am going anywhere with them. A very small potato is more use than Brenda Williams. I couldn't care less if she's got tits that could take your eye out. *She's useless*. Besides, they *hate* us.'

Bea tightened her lips. 'No, that's not the daring proposal. The daring proposal is that we *pretend* we're going to Europe with them. Our parents are far more likely to agree to a cultural sojourn. But we don't. We don't go to Europe with them *at all*.' She sat back and grinned.

Agnes paused. 'Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, is going to believe the Terrible Trio invited us anywhere. They *loathe* us.'

'Doesn't matter. Our parents have no idea who or what they are. Our parents will totally believe us.'

'But what's the point?'

'Because, Agnes, we can go somewhere else. Like *London*.' Bea said the word as if it were a fictional wonderland. 'What do you think of that?'

'Can't we just go to London?'

'Will your parents let you go to London?'

'I doubt it.'

'Precisely. They'll be gung-ho about a cultural trip to Europe; London – forget it. My brother's got a friend.'

'Your brother's got a friend?' Agnes made a small scoffing noise. '*Really?*'

'Honestly. He has. They play in a chess club or something. Anyway, he's got a friend whose sister's a model. And she lives in London. And she's said I can go and stay.'

'Stop it.'

'It's true. We can go and stay with an actual model in actual London. Think about it! She'll know loads of chaps. They'll be like bees to the honey.' Bea looked very pleased with herself.

Agnes chewed her lip. 'What if we're found out? What if we bump into someone we know? Someone our parents know? How are we convincing our parents we're where we say we are?'

Bea held up her finger. 'I have already thought this through. We both write letters home to our mothers. One for each week we're supposed to be away. And we pretend we're in the place where Daphne and Brenda and Lois are. And then Daphne or Brenda or Lois will take the letters with them and post them from the European city we're supposed to be in. As for the rest, don't worry about it. If we're found out, we're found out. What's the worst that can happen?'

'The Terrible Trio aren't going to take letters for us and post them. They hate us, Bea. Daphne calls me Quasimodo.'

Bea looked over her shoulder to check no one was listening and reduced her voice to a whisper. 'You know the long typing exercise we had to hand in?'

'Yes.'

'I did it for Lois. She owes me.'

There was something different about Bea, Agnes thought. She was emboldened.

'And then, when we've joined the sexual revolution,' Bea added, 'we shall start the real business of taking complete and utter control of our lives.'

Bea was brimming with enthusiasm. It filled Agnes with a flush of hope.

'All right. Let's do it. I'm mildly terrified, but let's do it.'

'Thank you.'

'But let's not give the letters to Brenda. She is *useless*.'

'Agreed. Then let us shake on it, Agnes Ledbury.'

'Yes, let's, Beatrice Morgan. I'm in.' Agnes withdrew her hand and leaned back into her chair.

Bea took another bite of her sandwich. 'Did I tell you about Joanna Peel?'

'No.' Agnes shook her head and also took a bite.

'Gave a postman a blow job. They were all talking about it. I haven't done one. I imagine it's like blowing a trumpet.'

She made a fist and blew into the top of it. 'Bit like that.'

Agnes watched her friend carefully. There was something so adorable about her. 'I'm feeling thrilled with this plan, Bea. Shall we have another sandwich?'

'Yes,' said Bea, with a grin. 'Let's.'

'Here you are!' Marjory stood up from the table and, with a touch to Florence's forearm, kissed sideways off into the air. 'This is fun, isn't it?' She grinned and sat back down. 'I expect you're thrilled to be up in town. Makes a change from sleepy old Brill.'

'Yes,' said Florence, lightly. She could have screamed it from the rooftops, she was so relieved to be there. She was also relieved Marjory had deigned to turn up but she'd keep that to herself.

The immaculately dressed maître d' who had escorted Florence to the table gently pulled out the chair opposite Marjory and waited for Florence to sit.

'Can I take your coat?' he asked, casting a glance at her tweed jacket.

'Oh. Yes. Thank you.' Florence slipped it off and handed it to him.

'Tweed? On a day like this?' Marjory nodded towards the window. 'Aren't you boiling?'

'I was, rather. But you know me. Never go anywhere without a jacket.'

Florence mustered a smile. She sat back and looked at Marjory, properly, for the first time. Eleanor was right. She looked entirely different. Her hair, once done up into a military knot, was now cascading down, loose curls bouncing just above her shoulders. A rich chestnut wash gave her a lustrous, expensive look and her make-up – gone were the prim bow lips and grey eyeshadow – was now an explosion of brash colour. Her bright blue eyes popped out from dark smoky pools, her cheekbones highlighted with a bold blusher and her lips glossed with a provocative red. She looked glamorous, confident, sexual.

Florence felt jealous.

‘How are you, darling? In rude health, as always. You always look so wholesome, Florence. All that clean Brill air. Shall we have wine? White?’ Marjory was taking charge, as she often did, and, before Florence could reply, she had already summoned a waiter. ‘Bottle of the Chablis, please. On ice. Thank you.’

She dispatched the waiter with a dazzling smile and then turned her attentions back to Florence.

‘So, I have news,’ she said. ‘I have left Derek.’

Florence, prepared for this moment, widened her eyes and tried to look shocked.

‘Oh Marjory,’ she said, her fingers locking together in her lap, ‘I’m so sorry.’

She tried to form more words but her mouth seemed to dry to nothing. Her mind plunged away from her. She didn’t know what else to say.

‘Don’t be. Best thing I’ve ever done. I feel like a new woman. Technically, I haven’t left him. I’ve thrown him out. Changed the locks. The lot.’

Florence sat, trying to pay sharp attention to what was being said but instead feeling consumed with a cold terror.

Marjory was staring at her, waiting for a response. ‘What do you think of that?’ she asked. Her voice was coquettish, almost

as if she were flirting. She was pleased with herself. Florence hadn't expected that.

'Isn't that a little extreme? Changing the locks? Really?'

Marjory leapt in, waving her hand to dismiss the idea. 'Absolutely necessary, darling. If I want that divorce we have to be separated. If I don't change the locks he can argue he's still coming and going. Bread?' She held out the round wicker basket in front of her.

'No, thank you.' Florence looked down at the rolls staring up at her and then to Marjory. She's not remotely embarrassed, she thought. She's not frightened or ashamed.

Marjory plucked a plump white roll and ripped it open with her thumbs. 'I haven't been entirely awful. He's staying at the cottage in Henley. I've agreed not to go there at all. Two years. That's all we have to manage. And then I'm free. Could you pass the butter?'

Florence pushed the small silver butter boat across the table. She needed to dig down, pick at the edges, see where the unravelling had begun. 'The last time I saw the pair of you everything seemed fine.'

Marjory dipped her knife into the ridged swirl of butter and smeared it thickly onto her roll. 'All for show, darling. But you'll know that.' She shot Florence a knowing wink.

'I'm not sure I do.' Florence felt herself bristle.

'Oh, come on,' said Marjory, brightly, 'we're all friends here. No need to be coy. All those years stuck in a loveless marriage, toeing the line, playing the dutiful wife. Well. No more. Times are changing. I can have a life of my own. One I enjoy. And I intend', she said, taking a hearty bite of her roll, 'to enjoy it to the full.'

'Would you like to taste the wine?'

The waiter had reappeared. Marjory glanced up towards him.

'No need. You can pour, thank you.' She turned her attention back to Florence. 'Have you looked at the menu? I gave it a thorough read before you got here.'

'No, I ...' She reached for her handbag and opened it. 'Goodness,' she said, rummaging through, 'I seem to have left my reading glasses. Silly. I can't quite ...'

She never forgot her reading glasses.

'Shall I tell you what you can have or order for you?' Marjory was smearing the other half of her roll with butter. 'I don't normally have the bread. But I seem to be ravenous.'

'I could have sworn I ...' Florence was still peering into the dark corners of her bag.

'Never mind,' said Marjory, wanting to move things along, 'we've all done it. Shall I do the ordering?'

'It's fine,' said Florence, putting her handbag back down to the floor. 'I'll have whatever you're having.'

'Super. Two lemon sole please, waiter. You do eat fish, yes?' Florence nodded. 'And there we are. That was easy.' Marjory smiled again at the waiter, a young, handsome man with large brown eyes, and handed him her menu. She watched him as he walked away. 'Honestly,' she said, her eyes sparkling, 'I've gone sex mad. You have no idea how many younger men want to sleep with women old enough to be their mothers.'

'Marjory!' Florence glanced quickly at the adjacent tables, not wanting anyone to hear their conversation.

Marjory's lips slid into a curl of satisfaction. 'You're such a prude. There's a world beyond the four walls of King and Castle, you know. I haven't a single regret. And stop looking so worried. I'm having a fabulous time. You'd love it too. Nothing wrong with a little adventure in your life, Florence.'

Florence sat, rigid. She couldn't recall ever feeling less relaxed. She felt as if she were being told dangerous things, things that might threaten the fabric of her being. It terrified her. She shook her head. 'But I don't understand, Marjory. What went wrong?'

'Nothing went wrong, darling!' Marjory's hands were resting on the edge of the table. 'Everything went right. I woke up one morning and thought, Is this it? Is this all there is? Boiling

his egg. Waving him off. Plumping cushions. Staring at the walls. There's a world out there, Florence. I want to be a part of it. I like myself and I'm getting a divorce and I've never been happier.'

Florence didn't know quite how to respond. She wanted to ask her when she knew, what had been the final straw; she wanted to know whether there had been ultimatums, tears. She wanted to know how she had done it.

Marjory tilted her head. 'Do you like yourself, Florence?'

Florence blinked. 'Of course I do.'

But Florence knew she was lying.

THURSDAY

