

Sunblock

‘Didn’t think of sunblock?’ I haven’t seen Mackay in over a decade. All the way down the motorway I’ve been practising what I need to tell her but this is what comes out of my mouth.

‘Never bothered.’ She gives me a wink.

In the blankness of the hospital bed, she looks older, tired and thin. I half wanted her to look monstrous so it would make me believe she was dying but, as I walk towards her, that lazy smile is just the same. Her hair, razored short on the sides, is as oil black as ever. The silver rings in her left ear glint. Mackay’s forty-seven – too old for her imminent death to be properly tragic, too young for it not to be completely and utterly ridiculous.

‘Told you you should have worn it.’

‘Do you really think this is a helpful thing to say to someone with skin cancer?’ her girlfriend snaps.

‘Depends how far back you say it.’

I can see Mackay's trying not to laugh. Meredith scrunches up her face like she wants to reply but then busies herself scowling at some green flakes she's crumbling into a saucer. She has black triangles tattooed on her arms. Her straight fringe is too high on her forehead but even this can't fully disguise how beautiful she is. I've met Meredith once before. I didn't much like her then either.

'You've always been an awkward cunt,' Mackay says.

I don't say anything because she asked me not to mention in front of Meredith that she's the one who dragged me here from Manchester. She wants a favour she can't ask over the phone. I can't imagine what.

'What's that weird smell?'

'Sage is important for purification,' Meredith snaps.

'And chicken dinners.'

She gives me a look of undisguised contempt. This takes in my blue jeans, which compared to hers I see are too baggy, and my old red t-shirt, a legacy from my rugby days and obviously not fashionable enough.

I don't like visiting London. Mackay's been here a long time now, though. I wonder if there's anything left of the seventeen-year-old, who used to wait for me underneath the Canal Street sign in a blue Kappa shellsuit with a cocky expression on her face.

'You mind getting me a coffee, babe?' this older, paler version of Mackay asks Meredith.

She scowls, doesn't ask me if I want one but gets up. 'Love you so much, Mackay.' She squeezes Mackay's hand. I shouldn't really have blundered in on her visit. As Meredith corners the bed, batting tears out of her eyes, she thinks I don't see her checking her reflection in the window. I can tell only the thought of herself as the brave yet uncomplaining player at the centre of this drama's getting her through so I have to give her that, I suppose. I raise one hand from the end of the bed. 'Ta-ra, love.'

'You came,' Mackay says once she's left.

'I did.' My eyes meet Mackay's black pupils properly for the first time. We were closer than close as kids and then we weren't and then we were again for a bit and that's all still there as we take each other in. But I've loved her for so long now. That's what I need to tell her. That's what I've been practising in the car.

My heart pounds. 'Mackay?' I say quietly.

'I'm worn out.' She stares off listlessly at a bad painting of some lupins.

‘Right.’ I try to change gear. ‘Yeah, I imagine dying’s harder work than you’d think.’

‘It’s not the fucking dying,’ she says and there’s that old look, the one she gives you, narrowing her eyes, when she wants to create the impression she’s sizing you in order to take you into her confidence. It never fails to work on people. But then she looks down, away. ‘It’s that everyone wants something from you – you to praise their particular wisdom about treasuring the moment or they choke up and start crying because they’re just so fucking sad for you and you have to console them. It’s the making it okay for everyone else that’s so exhausting.’

‘Right.’ The shadow of a tree dances across the window. I swallow hard on what I was about to tell her. ‘Dicks Unlimited?’ I say finally. ‘Is that really what your hipster t- shirt says?’

She flattens the fold that hid the second letter, a ‘u’, raises her pale brow. ‘Happy now?’

‘Disappointed actually.’

‘Okay, Sami. Enough fucking about.’

I raise an eyebrow.

‘There’s this woman,’ she says.

I try to ignore the slice of pain this causes me. 'Oh, yeah?'

'I need to see her.'

'Right.'

'And I need your help. Her name's Jenny Maguire.'

The name doesn't mean much to me, if I'm honest, apart from a vague memory of a black bob. 'You went out with her for a bit, didn't you?'

'Yeah, year and a half. She came to see me the other day.'

'Right.'

'You drove down here, didn't you?'

'Yeah,' I say slowly but I feel sick because I know what's coming.

'So will you take me? She lives off Amhurst Road.'

I hesitate, my gaze sneaking down to the flat sheet where her left leg should be. 'You're not serious? How would we even make it work with all this gear?' I nod towards the drip attached to her left arm and get a scowl.

'Fuck's sake, Sami—'

I'm glad when Meredith barges in with two coffees and bangs them down on the tray-table. 'Can you believe they didn't have any oat milk?'

Mackay gives me a look that says this isn't finished, then shakes her head. 'How can a hospital not have vegan options in 2019?'

'No wonder people are ill if they're being forced into unhealthy diets.'

I don't say anything but I feel tense even at the thought of taking Mackay out of the hospital. How could she ask this?

'Darling!' The woman wafting down the ward is tall with dyed red hair and tanned, bare arms and a black ribbon wrapped round her neck.

Meredith's up out of her chair. 'Justine, thank you so much for coming.'

I'm glad of the distraction because I know how stubborn Mackay can be. Justine's leading a thin dog with a haughty face and feathery ears. God knows how she managed to get a pet into the hospital but she has the breezy half-smile of a woman who's certain she's always the exception to the rule. 'Jonah's been so worried about you, dearest!'

I see Mackay take a breath and try to relax the pain in her face so she can smile as she bends her head to the dog. ‘Jonah, you bad boy, you don’t need to worry about Uncle Mac.’

‘He can’t help it,’ Justine pouts.

The saluki sits down abruptly and begins to lick its balls. I try not to let out a snort of laughter.

‘Mackay, what are we both going to do without you? I can’t even imagine.’ She folds into a chair, face crumpling in a tragic pantomime, and clutches at Mackay.

‘You’ll just have to struggle on as best you can.’ Her smile’s a wince.

Justine bursts into tears and hides her face in the hospital sheet. I see Mackay close her eyes briefly as Meredith crouches down and rubs Justine’s back.

I lean over against my better judgement. ‘You’re on. Just tell me when.’

It’s hard going with one leg. Mackay’s top heavy and her weight seems to twist away from her crutch as we come out of the lift. The plastic pouch from the drip falls out of the front pocket of her hoodie and I have to scoop it up. She barely makes it to the car and I can see the woman on reception is tempted to intervene, despite Mackay’s breezy, ‘Won’t be long, love.’

I have a sudden flash of Mackay just before she moved to London. She'd split up with her girlfriend. 'New year, new start,' she'd said and winked at me as she'd boarded the National Express from Chorlton Street with a bag slung over her shoulder. I'd waved brightly until the coach disappeared round the corner and misery pulled me under. That's when I'd known Mackay didn't feel the same way about me as I did about her.

'Lot of stuff in here, Sami,' is all she says as, sweating, I lower her into the passenger seat.

I squash down the duvet and pillow in the back hoping she won't notice. I've nowhere else to put it. I roll the window down, pull out onto Mare Street.

'Thanks for coming.'

'No problem,' I say. 'Wasn't doing a lot else.'

The houses near Hackney Downs that used to be boarded up or painted green and blue are all tarted up now, white with wooden blinds in the windows. New developments of flats fill what used to be patches of weedy tarmac.

'I loved Jenny, you know. I really loved her.' Mackay's low voice crackles like a fire.

I swing the wheel left.

'I was gutted when she left me.'

'Right,' I say, then, 'I can see why you didn't want Meredith to take you.'

Mackay snorts. 'She doesn't actually hate you, you know.' Mackay turns towards me but I keep looking forwards because I'm driving. 'She's just jealous. You're this intimidating silent hulk. You don't realise how much presence you have.'

'What? Me, in my dirty t-shirt? Do me a favour.'

'You've known me since I was fifteen. She feels she can't compete with that.'

'She's got nothing to worry about.'

Mackay twists her mouth, changes the subject. 'I was thinking of having "Come on, Eileen" at my funeral.'

I glance at her sharply. 'Why the fuck would you have such an awful song?'

Mackay laughs like a kettle boiling over. 'I won't be there to listen to it, will I?'

Her eyes shine with mischief and I know I'm supposed to laugh and say, 'So why would you make the rest of us sit through it then, you cunt?' and then she'll be relieved and

a little more of the little time she has left will have passed but instead sadness floods me and I can't bring myself to say anything.

The flat is in a quiet street and I try not to let Mackay see how relieved I am that there's no stairs. She leans on the bell.

Jenny Maguire doesn't have a black bob any more. I remember her now but God she looks different. Her grey, wiry hair is in a long plait, though she's a bit younger than us, if I remember right. Weight has settled on her breasts and around her middle. She's wearing pink tracksuit bottoms and a white t-shirt that's too tight. She looks, bluntly, miserable.

'Mackay?' I can see Jenny's Maguire's trying to smile but her eyes flicker away and she doesn't make any move to let us in. It's like a bucket of water has been thrown over any fire inside her that once burned hot.

'Can I come in?'

Jenny's head twitches. 'It's not a great time, Mackay,' she says, 'Sharon's not in.'

'Well, I've not come to see Sharon, have I?'

There's a long moment when I think she's going to refuse but then she moves back and Mackay thumps in after her. The house, an old Victorian terrace, with the baggy

woodchip wallpaper and unloved air of the long-term rental is unexpectedly tidy. A folded washing up cloth hangs neatly from the draining rack. Pale light like disinfectant falls through the bay window. Someone once tried to brighten the living room by tacking up unframed pictures – a black and white Eiffel tower, some red desert mountains – but they droop from their failing sellotape.

‘Sharon’ll be sorry to have missed you.’ Who the fuck is Sharon? ‘She’ll be gutted. Maybe you could come back when she’s back from work?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Mackay says gently.

‘Do you want a tea?’

‘No, I’m okay, ta.’

‘Glass of water? I’ve got squash?’

‘Water then, fine, great.’

I can tell Mackay doesn’t want a drink but she’s right – you have to make it okay for people.

Mackay waits until Jenny has set the glass down on the sofa arm. ‘There’s something I want to say to you.’

I can't leave in case Mackay needs me to help her back to the car but I edge towards the door and try to fade into the background.

'I really appreciated you coming to see me in hospital the other day.'

'That's okay,' she says softly.

'After you'd gone I thought a lot about what you'd told me about you and Sharon.'

'Oh, no, I didn't mean to make her sound bad. I get upset sometimes but—'

'I'm dying, Jenny – the doctors have said I've got days left – I don't have time to argue.'

Mackay hunches onto one side and tugs a roll of notes from her jeans pocket. 'Here.'

She tosses it to Jenny who catches the money and looks surprised at her own dexterity. 'I want you to leave Sharon.'

Jenny Maguire looks up and surprises me by not bursting into tears. Instead I see a spark catch in her eyes and I begin to think there might just be a hope for her.

When I look towards the sofa, I see Mackay as she used to be. And she's not nearly fifty or pale or depleted by illness any more. She's strong again, her wide, tanned forearms bulging, the span of her strong, thick hands, the black hair she gets from her Sicilian mother glossy, not dry and limp, and the way she crooks her face into that smile that's first a wrenching, then it's a blessing.

And then, as Jenny moves to sit next to Mackay on the sofa, I think it's amazing that we can still talk to Mackay because soon we won't be able to and then that will last forever. For the entire rest of the world until the sun flames out Mackay will be dead and I won't be able to speak to her.

Jenny's got one hand on Mackay's knee.

'I'll wait in the car,' I say.

'Right, now we're getting somewhere.' She grins at me as we pull away from the curb and I catch a flash of the younger, crafty Mackay, the woman who built a business for herself and outsmarted all those homophobic old gits who used to run security in London. It feels good, like we're in it together.

'Ready to head back?'

'You know what? I wasn't going to ask you this but I'm feeling that good off the back of sorting Jenny out. There's one last favour you could do me.'

Unease zaps my belly. 'Oh, yeah?'

'Drive me to Manchester.'

'Nah, that's mental. Don't be daft.'

Mackay is careful to busy herself, rearranging the seatbelt around her drip pouch.

‘Come on, I want to see where we grew up one last time.’

‘What? Now? Won’t Meredith be wondering where you’ve gone?’

‘She won’t visit again until tomorrow morning. I’ll be back by then.’

‘What about the nurses?’

‘Fuck the nurses.’ She flashes me a smile and I feel that old, familiar glow inside my chest. Why not, I think. And maybe I’ll find a way to say what I wanted to say to her.

Besides, how can I refuse one final trip? We’re riding high on Jenny Maguire, cruising through Hackney – the grand, grimy rows of peeling stucco houses, the orange flash of an Overground sign, the clumps of buses and the fountain of Clapton Pond. For a laugh I put on an old CD of M People and Mackay sings along with me joining in, loud and out of tune. We fly past the green of Hackney Marshes, out through Stratford. We make it all the way to the M11 before Mackay shits herself. There’s a horrible squelch, then a diarrhoea stink fills the car.

‘Fuck. Find us a toilet will you, Sami?’

I swing off the motorway into suburbia and drive, scanning frantically, twisted up with guilt. I should have taken her straight back to the hospital. Eventually there’s a park

and in one corner a pebble-dashed block. I hoik Mackay over there, not even stopping to lock the car. I'm racking my brains to come up with a joke to lighten the situation when I see that Mackay's using her nails to pinch a fold of grey skin under her t-shirt, something she used to do as a teenager whenever someone asked her what had happened to her mum and she wanted to stop herself from crying. I don't say anything but concentrate on powering us through the remaining steps to the toilet block.

The door bangs behind her. I wait.

There's the long, horrible silence of someone trying to keep their dignity.

'You okay in there?'

No answer. Being shut out is more terrible than being in there with her. I'm imagining Mackay's slipped and fallen, is lying unconscious on the filthy toilet floor haemorrhaging. I should never have taken her out of the hospital. She's too ill. I'm dancing with agitation.

'You okay, Mackay? You okay in there?'

There are some muffled, scraping noises and the toilet flushes but this could just be automatic.

'You alright? You've not fainted or anything?'

'Sami?' Mackay's voice is hoarse, ghostly. It's poised on laughter but then it saddens.

'I don't think I can save these jeans.'

Fuck. That's all I can think. This isn't like those Hollywood films where you take someone who's dying on a roadtrip and it's all soulful conversations and wry, bonding laughter. 'Do you, erm, need me to go and buy you some new trousers?'

'And what? I'm going to wait here while you go shopping?'

'Right, yeah, okay.'

'Have you got anything in the car?'

For a moment I can't think. 'I dunno. Duvet cover?'

'Go on then, that'll do.'

As I run across the grass, my head clears.

When Mackay finally comes out her face is crumpled like a dirty, old sheet. She's wrapped the duvet cover round under her armpits like a kid with a towel at the beach.

'Alright?'

'I've been better.' It kills me how she won't meet my eyes.

She still smells like shit. She leans on me so heavily on the way back to the car, every hop a shuddering effort, that my shoulder muscles burn but I know I can't shift without unbalancing her. The suspension twangs as she half-falls into the passenger seat.

I turn the car around. As we head back on the M11, each stab of sunlight off the oncoming windscreens is a reproach.

‘Do you know what I’d really like? A burger.’ Mackay’s breathing hard and her face, taut with pain, is the grey of a leaden, Manchester sky.

‘You’re fucking kidding me.’

‘I’m not.’

‘We should head back,’ I say. It’s not like when we left Jenny Maguire’s. The car smells of grease, shit and stale bedding. Mackay’s half dressed, wrapped in a duvet cover, and she looks awful.

‘Yeah, a burger. With loads of onions and one of those slices of fake cheese.’

As I stare back at her, my throat tightens. ‘No,’ I say. ‘We need to get back to the hospital.’

‘We need to get back?’

‘You. You need to get back to hospital.’

'I called you because I thought you were different but you're not.' She turns her face away. I can tell by her locked jaw and the straining-in-place of her posture that if she could physically get out of the car, she would. 'This is about what you need, not what I need. You're scared.'

'Yeah, I'm scared you look fucking awful and you're far away from medical help. Anyone who cared about you would do what I'm doing.' I turn the key and the engine coughs to life.

'So that's it, is it?' Mackay hunches down. I can tell she means this to be belligerent but it comes out sad and flat.

I put the car in gear. I didn't realise loving someone could feel so awful.

For a long time she's silent and I just drive. I'm almost certain she's asleep, head tilted back, when she opens her eyes and says, 'Remember when I left for London and you saw me off at Chorlton Street Bus Station?'

I shrug, keep both hands on the wheel.

'I know you do. I knew you were gutted and that you'd miss me but I didn't try and soft-soap you and make out like it would all be okay when I didn't know if it would. I just left. I didn't try and control how you felt or tell you what you should do.' Mackay nods, staring out at the scrubby fields and blue motorway signs. 'I did you that courtesy.'

I buy a burger from a takeaway in Woodford that smells of burnt grease. Mackay's mouth crinkles in a smile when I hand it over.

'Some fucking vegan you are.'

'Can you take me up to the reservoir in Walthamstow? That's where I want to eat it.'

The burger sits in Mackay's lap congealing as I drive.

'Do you remember that flat I used to have on Deansgate? We'd get stoned and watch the traffic lights changing.'

'Yeah, I remember,' I say. Not too rough, though. She nods. That seems to be all she needs.

Mackay gives directions and I follow these into Walthamstow and park on a quiet street. There are bungalows on one side and on the other a chain-link fence then a high bank. I end up half dragging Mackay up the concrete stairs and the duvet cover slips but then we reach the lip of a huge reservoir which stretches away, the water tinged orange by the setting sun.

'Where do you want to sit? Here? Or maybe that slope's better with your leg?'

‘Stop fussing.’ She drops down.

I lower myself down beside her, trying to avoid the goose shit. ‘Did you actually think we were going to get to Manchester? Or did you just want to give me a chance to feel useful?’

Mackay smiles, lifts her burger up.

‘I’m not a total fucking idiot, Mackay. I’m pretty sure you could have got a taxi to north London, to Manchester for that matter. Why have you dragged me all the way down here?’

She puts the burger down. Her hand burrows into her hoodie pocket and she pulls out a roll of notes as thick as her fist. ‘This is for you.’

Jammy light glints off the water. A few seagulls drift overhead. I can see she wants it to be this last thing between us. This final burst of freedom but it isn’t. It’s just the sun setting. It doesn’t matter that I love her, have done since we were fifteen. There’s nothing to take away. No lessons. No consolation. Soon Mackay will be dead. I’ll be back in Manchester. I’ll use her money to rent somewhere to live. Life will go on. Until it doesn’t. Everyone wants to say something profound at times like this but the truth is there’s nothing. That’s what we’re all trying to paper over.

She presses the roll of fifties into my hand, picks up her burger and manages a small nip at the bun before she sets it down again.

We watch as the sun falls into the trees on the far side of the reservoir. It's a relief when it goes. The dusk light is thick and grainy.

'That Jenny Maguire,' I say, 'Was she the one you always loved?'

'No,' Mackay says gently, then after a while. 'Not her.'

We sit next to each other for a little while longer, not quite touching, until it's time to go.