

# **The Fetch**

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I remember the night Rachel burst into my room. It was a brilliant October night with a full moon. Light was spilling from the stars. Outside, car headlights made strings of colour on the road, and the houses looked creamy and luminous. Rachel seemed to bring the glitter into the house with her; her hair caught the light and her eyes sparkled.

'I'm so glad you're up,' she said, hurling her black wrap on to my bed. 'I must talk to somebody.'

'Had a good time?' I said. I knew where she'd been and who she'd been with, so I wasn't that excited, to tell the truth. Still she wouldn't have noticed.

'Brilliant,' she said 'absolutely brilliant. Except - oh - it was really weird. No, I'll tell you that bit later. First, the opera. It was -it was like walking into your best dreams.'

'And Mr Creep,' I said. 'Was he out of your dreams, too? Or a nightmare?'

'Mr Craig - Geoffrey, actually, if you must know - was great. We had a great time. Okay? Is that allowed? '

I knew how Rachel could suddenly go from bubbling away to boiling over, and frankly I was too sleepy for that. So I decided not to say any more to my sister about the wisdom of going out with a teacher, twice her age, who had a wife and two children at home in Ealing. We'd been through all that anyway. 'His wife knows all about it,' Rachel had said, a little defensively 'She can't use the ticket, so she's only too glad that it's not going to be wasted.'

Still, Rachel must have felt that something wasn't quite right - she'd made me promise not to tell the parents just who it was taking her to the opera.

So that was why she felt obliged to tell me all about it. We'd done the overture, the leading tenor, and Act 1. It was half past twelve, I had to be up at seven, and it looked as though hyped-up Rachel could have gone on all night. I changed tack.

'What did you mean,' I asked 'about something really weird?'

Rachel blinked, and came back to Planet Earth. 'Oh that' she said 'Yes, I'd almost forgotten. It was at Notting Hill Gate. I left Ge...Mr Craig on the train. He wanted to see me home, but I said...'

'Really weird,' I said 'That's the story you're telling. Stick to it.'

'You're a hard man, little brother.' The little brother thing is one of our jokes. Rachel is all of twenty minutes older than me. 'Okay. I was coming out of Notting Hill and just for a moment - I know it sounds crazy- I saw myself.'

'What? In a mirror, you mean?'

'No, it wasn't a mirror. I was just putting my ticket through the machine, I looked up, and there I - she - was. Looking at me. Wearing just what I was wearing, white shirt, black skirt, wrap, the lot. I looked down just for a second, to get my ticket out of the machine - it stuck a bit, you know what they're like - and when I looked up again, I - she - was gone. I told you, weird.'

'Weird,' I agreed. To tell the truth, I thought my sister wasn't in possession of the full set just at present. I expected her to tell me she'd been Cleopatra or somebody in a former life. Mr Creep - Mr Craig - Geoffrey - had got to her. I'd met him a few months ago, when I'd been dragged to a concert at Rachel's school. He had the air of someone who thinks a lot of himself. Green velvet jacket. Lots of black hair, but beginning to go bald. Just the age

when you can do with a sixteen year old girl gazing adoringly at you. I remember how he stood with a hand on Rachel's shoulder : 'The lovely Rachel,' he said, and Rachel glowed and giggled, as though he were doing her an honour.

I love Rach to death, though she can be a real pain in the bum. But being brainy doesn't necessarily make you sensible. Me, I'm a bit lower on the food chain, but there are times when I think I've more common sense.

Still, that's what they try to tell me at home. I read somewhere every member of a family is handed a script from the moment they're born. Mine said ,solid, sensible, reliable, trustworthy. So that's what I was, most of the time, anyway. 'Our lovely Matt - makes sure we all have our feet on the ground,' 'Mum said reassuringly. And more recently 'Matt - our computer wizard. ' I wasn't really a computer wizard, just averagely good. But that was what I'd been given. My consolation prize.

At breakfast the next morning, my mother ( we call our parents by their Christian names, Alexa and Tom but I can't tell people that as it just makes them squirm) was as always organising the troops.

'All right, folks,' she said' it's real breakfast this morning. Porridge. Cooked all night on the Aga. Admire my dedication.'

'Wonderful,' boomed Tom. 'Bet I'm not allowed cream on it, though.'

'Oh yuk, ' I said. 'Can I just have Weetabix?'

'Porridge is the new miracle food, 'said Clara, my older sister.'In California they eat it all the time, apparently.'

'Ooh good,' said Daisy, my youngest sister brightly,'I feel quite Californian this morning. Heaps and heaps please.' Nothing fazed Daisy. Effortless talent, said Daisy's script. No hang-ups. 'Is honey Californian too?'

'Oh honey's very Californian,' said my father.'Honey's about the most Californian thing you can get.'

'Ah,' said Clara 'But only the right sort of honey. It has to be organic, toxin-free honey.'

'Aerobic honey,' said Daisy.

'Honey that's seen a therapist,'said my brother Josh.

'Oh definitely. Honey that's had a face-lift. And colonic irrigation, of course.'

'Honey that says, oh my gawd, I'm so stressed out,' went on Josh. My family can go on like this for ages.

Rachel appeared in the doorway. She looked pale and bedraggled.'Do you know how stupid you all sound?' she said in irritation.

'Porridge?' said my mother.

After last night, I'd expected Rachel to look glowing and otherworldly this morning.'No time,' she said 'I've got a Latin prose to do by lunch. I must dash.'

'But have something to eat,' my mother called after her.

'I'll grab some crisps on the way,' she said. 'Don't worry. Bye.'

And I heard the front door slam behind her.

I didn't see much of Rachel for a bit. That sounds odd, I know, since we live in the same

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house. But you see we're not talking your average family here. These are the Corrigan's, Holland Park's most talented. All bright, all musical, all at genius schools. All of course, except good old Reliable Matt. Me, I go to the local comprehensive. I watched Clara and Josh and Rachel getting in a stew about entrance exams, and I put my foot down. No thanks, I said. Not for me.

I wouldn't have got the exams, anyway. Top half a percent of the top one percent, or whatever. Not good old Reliable.

Actually I like it where I am. There was a bad time in the first year when this big lad was getting money off me. But Rachel was throwing so many scenes about how hard it was to juggle oboe practice with the three and a half hours homework she was expected to do, and how everyone worked so hard and was so brilliant, and she was stupid and fat with it, that I thought it would be unkind of me to make waves simply because I was being blackmailed. I handed over all my pocket money for a year and did a paper round. For a year I had no sweets, no magazines, no c.d.s, no new clothes. No-body noticed, and in the end the job got expelled anyway. They left me alone after that. Funny how if you have to, you can just get on with things and cope. Rachel had counselling and Lord knows what, but she was all right in the end too.

Anyway, us Corrigan's all rattle around in this big house, getting on with our own lives. There's a small black and white television in the games room. No-body exactly tries to stop you watching, but they're all so busy with practice and prep.

Then there was the concert. Every Christmas the Corrigan's and some of their equally clever friends do the famous concert, for charity in the church hall. It even got written up in the Evening Standard last year - one of London's Christmas fixtures, they said. So we're especially busy in the weeks leading up to it.

Guess who prints out the programmes and sells tickets at the door.

So there was Rachel, and there was me, doing our different things. I'd just started going out with someone new. Maya, from my tutor group at school. I was quite keen, actually. Maya was good fun, and bright without being bright in the way my family were. She just wanted to go for things. You felt relaxed but more alive with her. At least, I did. I hoped she felt the same as I did. But I didn't mention Maya to anyone at home, not even Rachel.

So it was a few days later before I really looked at Rachel again. I noticed that she seemed a bit less sparky than usual. 'Everything okay?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'Sure. Course it is. Why shouldn't it be?'

When you know someone as well as I knew Rach, you know when things aren't quite right. I guessed that there was something a bit heavy going on, somewhere, not a million miles from Geoffrey Craig. I wanted to punch him in the face.

Then, just like the other time, Rachel was out late somewhere. I'd just walked Maya back home and I was full of mixed up feelings about her. My head was in outer space, but as soon as I saw Rachel on the steps I slammed back to earth. 'What is it? What's wrong?' I said.

She didn't answer, but looked at me puzzled.

'Are you okay?' I repeated.  
She nodded. 'Yeah. Great.'  
'Did you have a good evening?'  
'Why shouldn't I?'  
'I don't know. Why shouldn't you?'  
'Yeah. No. It was fine, really fine. Except....'  
'Except what?'  
'Oh nothing. I guess I'm just being stupid.'  
'Fancy some cocoa?'  
'Cocoa? Do me a favour. Yuk.'  
'You used to like cocoa.'

'Matt dear, I used to like Barbie dolls.' Which wasn't true. Rachel was never into Barbie dolls. Still, we did without the cocoa. I didn't want cocoa either. I just thought Rachel might be in the mood for a chat about whatever it was. But apparently not. We both went off to bed. I dreamed about Maya.

October shambled into November. November was cold, bleary. The last gold leaves fluttered from trees, and collected in the gutters. Holland Park was a network of black. Maya and I walked in the empty gardens by the fountain and talked about life. I confessed about the family concert - the first time I'd mentioned it to anyone at school, and swore her to secrecy.

'What's wrong with that? It sounds cool,' said Maya.

'Nothing's wrong with it,' I said. 'But...oh I don't know. I wish I had a normal family like everyone else.'

'A normal family!' said Maya. 'Tell me about it. So when am I going to meet these geniuses? Or aren't I good enough?'

'Oh it's not like that. They're nice and all that. But...'

'But...'

'Just but.'

'I'd like to meet your twin, Rachel. She sounds nice.'

'Nice but mad,' I said. 'Barking sometimes.'

'Join the club.'

'No, you aren't mad. Neither is Rach, I suppose.' But I didn't tell Maya about Geoffrey Craig. Somehow I felt that the fewer people who knew about that the better. And I couldn't talk about the other thing that was on Rachel's mind.

She'd mentioned it again the other day. We were in the kitchen, and she was frantically cake-making. Rachel makes cakes when she's in a state. She makes huge and wonderful chocolate cakes piled high with goo and cream. They look like something out of a book. I dived around her trying to scoop bits of chocolate out of the mixing bowl, to get a rise out of her as much as anything else.

She rapped my hand with a wooden spoon. 'Go away, scavenger.'

She paused and frowned. 'Now look what you've made me do. All that mess.'

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'I'll clean it. So why the cookery, Rachel? What's on your mind?.'

She put the spoon down and clenched her hands. 'Oh for God's sake, why does everyone think there has to be something wrong. Why can't you all just LEAVE ME ALONE?'

'I wonder why not?' I said casually.

She sniffed angrily, slammed the spoon down, and then sat down. 'Actually, there is...I mean..'

'What?'

'No, it's stupid.'

'Maybe it isn't. Tell me.'

'No I can't.'

'You can.'

'Well, it was just seeing...'

'What?'

'Me again. Or the person like me. See, I told you it was stupid.'

'Tell me what you saw.'

'Well, I was coming back from school. I wanted to get some shoes, so I came via Ken High Street. I didn't get the shoes, that shop's no good any more, but I was just coming out, and there she was, looking in the window. She turned and looked at me.'

'And...'

'It was ...she was...hell, Matt, I know what I look like. And even the clothes. The coat I wear to school, my beret, Doc Martens, everything.'

'Everyone dresses like you. '

'You know your own clothes, even so.'

'Did you talk to her?'

'No of course not. I panicked. I ran . It was all over in a second. And at the corner, at Safeways, I thought, this is stupid, so I went back, but there was no sign.'

'We've all got doubles. That's what they used to say at Primary school.'

'Yes, but I don't believe that. Neither do you. '

'Maybe you imagined it.'

'And what about the other times?'

'Other times?'

'One I told you about. And the second time, it was just a glimpse, someone turning away as I went past. I wasn't sure . And the next time, just a face in a bus. I wasn't sure, either. But now, it's happened too often. Matt, I don't like it.'

'Look,' I said, trying to sound reassuring. ' You're under a lot of strain at the moment. Exams and all that.'

'I'm not imagining this, Matt.'

'No, of course not, imagining, I'm not saying that, but...'

'You are saying that, little brother. That's exactly what you're saying. Ah well. Could you get me that pot of cream from the fridge?'

Of course, I did think she was imagining it. And I thought Creepy Craig had something to do with it. Ghoulish Geoffrey. The Paedophiliac Prof. I blamed him all right.

The chocolate cake made an appearance at supper, following my mother's frightfully healthy mushroom quiche. And Rachel seemed on good form again. Everyone was making plans for The Concert; my mother had booked the church hall as usual, and details were being worked on. Could they do the Brahms, or should they stick to the Handel? What would be right for Rachel's solo? Would Josh's friend who played the flute be able to make it that close to Christmas? They consoled me by throwing me a few details about the programmes. What about blue paper? Did I have any pretty pictures on my computer I could print out? Angels or bells, that kind of thing. Should they print more this year?

'Da- da,' said Rachel as she put the chocolate cake on the table. This one was a real monster, a huge mountain of chocolate and fudge icing and cream filling and chocolate curls. She proceeded to slice it into huge pieces for us. 'Whoa!' we all shouted and 'When!' She cut just a small bit for herself. 'Well? What's the verdict?' she said as we downed huge calorie-laden mouthfuls. We all said goily that it was yummy, great, delicious.

Rachel poked around on her plate with a fork. The little slice disintegrated into a pile of crumbs. I noticed that none of it seemed to have made its way into her mouth.

'A concert?' said Maya's mum. 'I'm impressed. Imagine us doing a concert, eh, girl?' And she gave a huge laugh. We were sitting at their kitchen table eating take-away pizza, and watching Eastenders. 'I can't miss my fix,' said Maya's Mum. 'Hey, is he going to make a pass at her? Dirty devil; he's only been married six months.'

Eastenders took over the conversation for the next twenty minutes. Next there was a programme about reincarnation. Maya and her mother talked merrily throughout it. Maya's mother believes in reincarnation and strange things like that. She always looks for her horoscope. When she met me, almost the second thing she said was 'Ah, Aquarius; thoughtful and reflective.' 'Mum' said Maya in disgust. Maya thinks it's all rubbish, but they joke about it. Still when the programme was over, we got into a discussion about other lives. Not the sort of discussion we'd have at home, but it was good fun. We were: Maya and me very much against, Maya's mum very much for. 'Some people have old souls,' she said. 'You can just tell.'

'Some people are full of shit,' said Maya. 'You can just tell too.'

'You need to listen to the voices you can't hear,' said Maya's mum. 'Then you'd understand.'

'Mum, that's total rubbish,' said Maya.

'About ghosts,' I said to Maya's mum, casually, 'Are some people more likely to see them than others?'

'Oh not you as well, Matt' said Maya. 'I give up.'

'Of course they are. What have I been telling you?'

'And can you see,' I said carefully 'a ghost that... that looks like yourself? Your own ghost?'

'Of course. That's called a fetch.'

'Oh, Mum!'

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'Don't you believe me? It's true. People see their own ghost; their own fetch. But it's not good news.'

'No?' I said, in alarm.

'No, not at all. You see your fetch, well, it's a sign - you're going to die.'

'Why must you wear that shirt all the time?' said my mother to Rachel. 'What about that nice dress you had last year?'

'Oh I can't wear that!' said Rachel in horror. 'I've got so *enormous* since then. I'd look like an elephant.'

'You don't look enormous to me,' said my mother. 'Are you off? What about supper?'

'Oh. I'll grab a bite after the show,' said Rachel. 'Don't worry. See you later.'

There was another odd conversation a few days later. One of our serious Corrigan dinner table discussions. This time we were talking about marriage. A couple my parents had known for years had just separated. As far as we could see, it was a good thing; Julia spent most of her time saying what a sanctimonious bore Stephen was, Stephen talked about Julia like a hen-pecked husband in a sitcom.

'I'm sure they'll be better off without each other,' said Clara. 'They were obviously having a miserable time.'

'Oh?' said my father. 'You think it's all right just to up and go as soon as things start getting difficult?' My father is a Catholic, which he has imposed with varying success on the rest of us, and on Rachel and myself not at all. But it means that on some subjects his mind is made up before he starts.

'An unhappy marriage is a nightmare,' said my mother. 'I wouldn't wish it on anybody.'

My father launched into a lecture. 'No marriage is a dream, you know that. Marriage has to be worked at. If you make a commitment you have to stick at it. It might be hard, but nothing's easy.'

Rachel looked up, her eyes ablaze. As usual, she had been stirring her fork listlessly around a plate of casserole, moving things from one side of the plate to another, hiding things under little piles of other things. 'Oh?' she said 'well, just suppose this person, this really sensitive and intelligent person is stuck, *stuck*, into a marriage with some dull housewife who thinks Beethoven's the name of a Disney film, who can't talk about anything except make-up, and who doesn't give a shit for all the things he cares about, is he supposed to stick it out for ever and ever, just because he made a dumb mistake when he was twenty? Not even if he meets someone who's just right for him? Is that fair? Do you think that's fair?'

Well everybody had this or that to say about it. Except me. I thought it was best to keep my mouth shut. But I did notice that getting angry was an excuse for Rachel to push her plate away, and say 'I've had enough. I can't eat any more.'

I wanted to tell my mother, but I didn't want to break Rachel's confidence. I tried saying, 'Rachel's looking really thin. Do you think she's all right?'

My mother of course was on that particular ball at once. 'What anorexia? Oh no dear, I don't think so. She put away three Mars Bars yesterday before supper. I agree it's not the

healthiest of lifestyles, but she's a sensible girl. She'll sort things out.'

But I hoped she'd say to me 'And what about this chap she's seeing? Do you know anything about him?' If she had, I'd have told her.

But she didn't ask. 'We respect our children's right to privacy,' she said once.

You never actually caught Rachel not eating; I think she was getting clever at making us think she was eating as much as the rest of us, but every day she seemed to find a different tactic for not cleaning her plate. One day the phone might go when we were eating; she'd rush to answer it, chat away to whoever it was for a while and then rush back to the table and sweep her plate away to the kitchen. Or she might use the occasion, as she'd done the other day, to provoke an argument at the table, and obviously you can't eat when you've just been shouting, can you?

But then, just as I began to think that I'd lost my Rachel and got a neurotic stranger in her place, she'd talk to me, just like she always did.

Often it was late at night, after she'd come back from a night out with Guess Who, and I'd been with Maya. 'You think I'm going crazy, don't you?' she said to me once.

'Well, yes, a bit,' I said.

'I promise you I'm not. I promise you I'm so uncrazy it hurts. But, you know how it is.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Not really.'

'Then I'm not going to tell you,' she said, mysteriously, and was off.

For a bit, I almost forgot the Fetch business. I almost forgot what Maya's mum had said. I thought about Geoffrey sometimes with venom. But for a while Rachel seemed happy and relaxed again.

Then, one day in about the middle of November, I'd been detailed by my mother to sweep up the leaves from the front garden, and in rather desultory way, I was piling them up and swirling them about, rather like Rachel and her plates of food.

She came in through the gate and clanged it behind her. Her nose and cheeks were bright from the cold and her breath came in a cloud. She was wearing her rose-pink beret and pink woollen gloves. Her hair was the colour of the leaves I was sweeping up. She looked crisp and pretty and old-fashioned, a Victorian miss. But under the windblown pink, her face was drawn.

I thought, as I often did, how odd it was that we were twins and yet so different. Supposing we'd been identical, and there'd been two Rachels, or two Matts instead?

It was an odd thing to be thinking, just at that minute, because what Rachel hissed in my ear was: 'I've seen her again! She's still here!'

I didn't say, are you sure, or might you be mistaken, this time, because it didn't seem the right thing to say. So I just said 'Where was she...it?'

'I was cutting through the park. I came through the rose garden, the bit that leads up to the old house, you know. And there was a girl with a beret, like mine. She had her back to me. Then she sort of swung round, and looked. And laughed.'

'So what happened then?'

'I just stood there. I was gobsmacked. Then a group of kids ran past, and then I saw

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her turn round and sort of rush away. She seemed to go up towards the terrace, by the shop. I went after her, but when I got to the shop I couldn't see her. She wasn't in the cafe. I don't know where she was. And Matt...

'Yes?'

'Matt, she hates me. She wants me dead.'

Then I remembered what Maya's mother had said. I gasped as though someone had punched me in the chest. I said, faintly, 'Rach, don't be a moron. How can she? How could it happen?'

Rachel sighed. 'You still think I'm making all this up, don't you. I don't know how to convince you. I'm not mad. I'm not hallucinating. I see her. She's there. '

'Well, perhaps I'll be with you when you see her next.'

'Oh no,' said Rachel bitterly, 'she's far too smart for that. She wouldn't let anyone else see her. Only me. It's me she's after.'

For the month before Christmas, everything in the Corrigan household was concert, concert, concert. This year, it was going to be better than ever. A couple of well-known singers had volunteered their services - Josh, who was now at the Royal College of Music, had got some friends to play some of the instruments the Corrigans couldn't manage, and a television company had approached us with the idea of putting on a programme about our brilliant family. It meant that in addition to ourselves, we now had to share some of our days with Pete and Dave, the two cameramen, and snaking heaps of camera equipment. We would make so much money for the children's charity we supported, said my mother, it would really be worth it.

So with everything so frantic, it wasn't surprising perhaps, that no-one except myself noticed quite how dreadful one of our number was starting to look. She always wore these baggy shirts now, but if she turned quickly, you could see the hollows of her neck bones, and her jutting elbows. Her face was pale, and her skin was dry, and even her autumn-leaf coloured hair was starting to look dingy and frizzy. It was almost as though she were turning into a living ghost before our eyes. I wanted to talk to her about myself, rather than always talking about her problems. I'd like to have told her about Maya, but I didn't think the time was right.

Still, she was always there for rehearsals, she did all her practising. Rachel never let anyone down. In addition, she was taking over much of the family cooking, producing huge bowls of pasta, or quiches and salads, which everyone, including now, Pete and Dave, wolfed down ravenously. She watched us all silently, with nervous eyes, and quick mouse-like movements. Once I said to my mother, 'Look, I'm getting really worried about Rachel.' Perhaps if she hadn't had so much to think about, she might have listened, but all she said was: 'Rachel? No, Rachel's got her head screwed on all right. As a matter of fact, it's you I'm a bit concerned, about, Matt. You seem so negative about everything at the moment. Now look, give me a hand with getting these invitations sorted, will you?'

Those November days were cold and misty. People walked past, huddled in scarves and shawls. There seemed to be no colour in the streets, grey skies, grey pavements, grey trees, grey people. Only the Christmas decorations in the shops glittered ferociously, neon

pink and Disney green and electric blue, lights and tinsel and swathes of silver. But you might easily imagine ghosts slipping in and out of the mists. I found myself looking for strange - or too familiar - faces myself as I hurried through the drab, laden crowds.

I came into the kitchen one day to find Rachel hectically rolling out pastry for mince pies.

'Give it a rest,' I said.

She tossed her head at me. 'Oh?' she said, 'and what are Pete and Dave and everyone going to say if there's nothing to eat tonight?' That evening they were going to show us a video of some of the stuff they'd already filmed. We'd had to rent a colour TV and a video for the occasion, which is why we hadn't managed to see any of it before.

Of course it didn't matter what Dave and Pete thought, I knew that and she knew that, but we'd left logic behind.

I said, 'I just wish you'd stop. Look at you. You look so ill.'

She did stop for a moment, and ran a floury hand angrily through her hair. 'Well, of course,' she snapped. 'I am ill, aren't I? That's what *she* wants.'

'For God's sake, Rachel!'

She rolled up her sleeve, and I could see the thin wasted flesh of her arm. Her bones seemed huge. 'It's what she wants!' she repeated. 'Do you think *she* looks like this? Do you think *she* wants to be anorexic?'

I didn't know what to say. I said 'Are you still seeing Geoffrey Craig?'

She stared at me in horror. Then she burst into tears, threw the flap of pastry on to the floor and ran out of the room.

But by the time we gathered together in the living room to look at the video, she was pale but composed. We all sat round in the living room, and Dave inserted the cassette into the video. We watched snippets of our lives, eerily caught forever - my mother coming into the house carrying a huge Christmas tree, my father tuning up his violin. Daisy laughed into the lens and then played an arpeggio on the piano, joyfully showing off. Clara and Josh assembled music stands seriously. Then another shot, later that evening. Clara and Josh played a violin duet, accompanied by Daisy. We saw Rachel coming round the door, smiling softly, carrying a tray of cakes. She wore a glowing scarf of pink and purple over her black shirt. She put the tray down and then vanished.

Next to me, I heard the real Rachel gasp. 'When did you say this was filmed?' she said.

'Last Thursday,' said Dave. 'Look, the date's at the bottom of the screen.'

Rachel swallowed hard, and then she took a deep breath. In a couple of minutes, she rose and silently ran from the room. I rose to follow her, but my mother hissed, 'Don't be a spoilsport, Matt. Stay and watch like the rest of us.'

Fortunately the video was soon over. I did leave the room then, and went upstairs.

There was silence from Rachel's room, though I wondered from the way she'd run out that she might be crying. I knocked and she called to me to come in. She was sitting on the bed, dry eyed. In her thin hands she held a pink and purple scarf, fingering it nervously.

'What is it?' I said.

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She looked up at me, her eyes rimmed by huge shadows. Surely even our mother would notice how ill she looked.

'I'm not a child,' she said.

'Course not.'

'But he thinks...I...I mean, I know there's his career, he can't risk that. And his children. I know it's not easy. But, listen, Matt, I don't care about that. I'd wait for him. Two years, that's all. He can get a divorce, and I'd have left school. Then it would be all right. I'd wait two years. But...'

'Is that why you ran out on us?' I said.

'No, that wasn't why,' she said. 'The date on the film. Did you notice it, Matt?'

'Of course. Dave pointed it out.'

'Matt, I wasn't there. That day last Thursday. I wasn't there. I was out. I shouldn't have been in the video.'

I opened my mouth to say rubbish. But then I closed it again. Last Thursday, Maya and I decided to go to a new Mexican restaurant that had opened off Church Street. I thought it would be nice if Rachel came too. I asked her, though I still didn't mention Maya's name; I wanted to save that for the right time. 'See if Ben would like to come with you,' I added, mentioning her last non-geriatric boyfriend, who I knew was still quite keen on her. But she'd shook her head. 'I can't,' she said 'I promised Geoff I'd stay late at school and help him put together the set for the Junior play.'

I remember thinking that putting the set together for the Junior play must have taken quite some time. It was eleven o'clock when I came back after seeing Maya home. I came out of the bathroom some time later to hear Rachel's key in the lock, and to see her tip-toeing up the stairs. She put a finger on her lips to shush me.

Yes, I knew she shouldn't have been in the video either.

But a week before the concert, my mother was at last starting to notice. 'You really don't look well,' she said. 'I think maybe you should go for a check up.'

I thought Rachel would deny being ill. But she shrugged and said 'All right. If you like.'

'We'd probably better leave it till after Christmas,' said my mother. 'I doubt if we'd get an appointment now. And anyway, things are too hectic.'

'After Christmas,' said Rachel.

The evenings were misty now. My parents talked about the good old days of London pea-soupers when you couldn't see a hand in front of your face. Rachel shivered as they talked. She shivered all the time now, like a frightened rabbit. Her hands were cold as ice. 'After Christmas,' she reassured my mother, 'I'll go for that check-up.'

But to me, she said, 'Matt, I can't help being ill. It's what she wants. She isn't ill.'

Another day, she said 'She's doing her Christmas shopping now. I saw her today. Bags and bags and bags. She's got presents for everybody. I wonder what she'll give you, Matt.'

I told her not to be silly, but I didn't sound convincing, even to myself.

At last it was the morning of the concert. It was so cold and misty that my father worried about whether anyone would bother coming out that evening. We were all at school that day - we wouldn't break up until the end of the week. So my mother and a friend of hers would have to spend the day making the final preparations. We'd been working extra frantically now, everything duly filmed by Pete and Dave. Piles of neat printed programmes waited in boxes by the door (courtesy of Good Old Reliable,) the tea-urn had been hired and boxes of biscuits and crisps brought. Instruments had been tuned, black dresses and white shirts pressed and cleaned.

Meanwhile I walked to school through the mist and fog. In a funny kind of way I quite looked forward to the concert, it had been part of my life for so many Christmases. I was feeling a little nervous too. I'd plucked up my courage and asked Maya to be there. I wondered what she'd make of my family and their strange habit of wanting to organise the world. I'd still not told anyone about her, not even her name. But I thought that evening, among all the hassle, I could make a casual introduction. Then with any luck, she could just slip into being one of the family.

So after school, I said a temporary goodbye to Maya and arranged to pick her up at Holland Park Station at six-o'clock.

Back home, I encountered complete chaos, cars being loaded, musical instruments and music stands being carried down the hall, strange young men in dinner jackets laughing with girls I'd never seen before. It was always like this at the last moment, and it always went perfectly.

Only Rachel wasn't there. She should have come back straight from school, but she hadn't.

My mother said 'She'll be here soon. She won't let us down.'

Soon she said, 'She's cutting it a bit fine.'

At quarter to six, she said, 'Perhaps we should phone...no, I'm being silly. I'm sure she's on her way.'

I said 'I've got to go and meet my friend now. I expect I'll see Rachel on the way. They've had a lot of things on at school. I'm sure she'll be here on time.'

'She better had be,' my mother said.

I went out in the dark mist. Cars loomed out of nowhere hissing on the wet road as they came past and then vanishing into silence. Street lights glowed dimly and all the houses seemed stranded in the darkness. Trees were rows of black ghosts. People did not look up as they hurried past. Everyone wanted to be inside in the light.

Maya, bless her, was waiting for me. She looked great. She'd put on a dress for the occasion and some fancy silver earrings. 'I want your parents to think I'm respectable,' she said. I kissed her. 'They'll think you're gorgeous,' I said, 'which you are.'

But I had to tell her about Rachel. 'She hasn't turned up yet,' I said. 'Actually we're all a bit worried though no-one's letting on.'

'Perhaps you'll see her on the way home,' said Maya. 'What's she wearing?'

'She usually wears an old black coat for school,' I said. 'oh, and she has this sort of pink beret.'

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'Look, over the road.'

Maya must have had better eyesight than me. Yes, now I could see Rachel, who must have come out of a side road, but she was only faintly distinguishable in the mist. She appeared to be wandering about. If I hadn't known her I might have thought she was drunk.

I called to her, but she didn't seem to hear. The traffic light near me flashed up a green man.

'Wait here a second,' I said to Maya 'I'll just go and get her.'

I ran across the road. Rachel had already staggered away. I called after her but she did not hear, and I had to run to catch up. Finally when I was at her shoulder, she turned and nearly jumped out of her skin.

'Oh it's you,' she said faintly.

'Why, who did you think it was?'

The mist swirled all around her, and it seemed to have taken all the colour out of her. She was like a wraith, washed out and faded. Somehow she seemed to have become insubstantial as a photograph. I thought the mist might swallow her up altogether and I reached out and tried to take her hand. But though I could feel the firm warm texture of the soft woollen glove, it was as if there were nothing inside it.

'Rachel, what's the matter?'

She gulped, and gagged, as though she were going to be sick. 'It's nearly over, Matt. She's won. She's got her way.'

'What do you mean? She? Who?' But I thought I knew.

'Goodbye Matt,' she said. 'I love you.'

She lurched, and I thought she was going to fall into my arms. I held them out to catch her. Then she was gone, slipping into the shadows, away down Holland Park Road. Her shape, pink and black, grew smaller, faded into black, then grey, then disappeared in the mist.

I started to follow her, and then stopped to semaphore to Maya, who had been watching this from across the road. Maya waved back. The green man came on again and she ran across the road to me.'

'What happened?'

'She's ill. I've got to find her.'

Together we made our way down the road, following the place where Rachel's dark shape had disappeared into the fog. We ran on and on and looked around. Ten, fifteen minutes went by. There was no sign of her, or of anyone who looked like her. No pink beret. After a while Maya said 'Look, it's none of my business, but perhaps you ought to go home. You may find she's there.'

In the distance I could hear the eerie sound of a police car siren. It came and went, the sound looping and circling on the air, as though the car was caught in the traffic. Eventually we could see it, breasting the slope from Notting Hill gate; the noise became louder, surrounding us. Another siren now joined the pandemonium, this time coming in from the Shepherd's Bush direction. The two police cars met and seemed to do a slow dance through the traffic, all the time the discordant swirls of sound winding in the air. As they turned the corner into Holland Park, an ambulance came up suddenly on the right and

cleared the gaps now visible in the traffic. A policeman all in black cut through on a great shiny motorbike; another motorbike came up behind him. It was like some great and terrible hunt in the misty darkness, the clamour of the sirens coming and going, the blue lights circling and bouncing off the glitter of the surrounding cars, the people turning to gawp.

I stood frozen to the ground. 'Something's happened. I know something's happened. I've got to find out.'

But Maya pulled me back as I started off after the cacophony. 'Look,' she said. 'You don't know where they're headed. Even if you found them, no-one'd let you anywhere near. Go home. If she's not there, then you can phone the police. But I bet you anything, she'll be home.'

Maya was right about one thing. There was nothing more to be done in Holland Park Road. Together we made our way through the misty darkness. I felt sick. The familiar landscape of streets where I had lived all my life had become a nightmare maze. I went over and over in my head what I was going to say to my parents. I thought of the chaos as everything was cancelled, the players in their evening dresses sent home, the church hall shut with a notice on the door, the piles of uneaten bourbon biscuits, Pete and Dave left with a useless load of footage.

And yet, as we approached the house it looked brighter than ever. Maya gasped. 'You've got a lovely house, Matt,' she said. Lights blazed from every single window, making it look like a glittering ship breasting the mists. The front door was open, and I could see people moving about.

Maya and I exchanged looks. 'Well, this is it,' I said, and we went in.

People I'd never seen before clustered in the living room. I looked for my mother but didn't see her there. Someone else I didn't know rushed down the steps past me carrying a pile of sheet music.

But at that moment, Maya grabbed my hand. 'Look,' she said.

There, thrown over the bannisters, were an old black coat, a pink beret and pink woollen gloves. 'See?' said Maya. 'I told you.'

The door to the kitchen opened, and the spicy smell of warm mince pies blew out.

Somebody opened the door, somebody stood there smiling.

'Why, Matt,' she said 'Where have you been? Mummy's been frantic. And this must be the famous Maya. I've heard so much about you.'

'You must be Rachel,' said Maya with a smile. 'I've heard all about you too. You had us worried there for a bit, yourself.'

'What, me?' she said. 'There was no need for that.'

She was soft-skinned, bright-eyed. Her sleeve fell back to show a perfectly rounded, yet slender arm. She was a girl with autumn-leaf coloured hair, in the bloom of health and vitality.

'Have a mince pie,' she said with a dazzling smile. And she picked up one herself and bit a huge chunk. 'Yes, I was a bit late too,' she said between mouthfuls. 'Last minute Christmas shopping. I've got everything I wanted though now. And just you wait until you

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see what I've got for you, big brother. I'm going to have a great Christmas.'  
And she smiled at me, a secret smile, as if to say, *go on. Tell. I dare you.*