

It was a small decision, nothing really, to have a second cup of tea after all – just half a cup – that morning, a week later, before I left for an early appointment at Mae’s school. But it meant that I was still at the kitchen table when Steve came back from emptying our mailbox. And I was still there when he opened the pale blue envelope addressed to him in polite, cursive handwriting.

Had I been gone, I wouldn’t have seen how he shrank back into the worktop. How he placed his left hand on it to support himself. How he seemed to be reading and rereading what looked to me like a very short letter, a single embossed page. How the page creased at its centre as he gripped it in his hand.

And the paperclip. I wouldn’t have seen it fall to the floor when he pulled at something attached, at something smaller behind the page. A photo.

Listen for the Weather

And the photo. I wouldn't have been there to see him, to see his face, to watch his eyes widen looking at that photo for the first of what would be many, many times.

'What is it?' My voice is even, despite the panic barely held back, waiting, waiting to rise through me.

'It's a photo of a child. A child. It's—' He looks stricken, holding the photo awkwardly, away from his face, from his body, as though it's a bomb he doesn't want to touch but is afraid of dropping. It quivers in his hand.

'It's what?'

'It says she's . . . eh, it says that . . . Oh, God. It says she's my child. I don't—' He stops.

Something punches through me.

She. My child.

'Show me.'

'I – I don't – I mean, it could be anybody. It's just a—'

'Steve. Show me. Please.'

'The letter's from that woman, you know, the woman from a few years ago. That time – back when we weren't getting on so well.' He turns the photo around.

It's a child. A girl. About three years old, maybe a bit more. A little girl, posing for the camera, holding out one side of a princess dress. He gives it to me and it quivers in my hand too. With thick, raven hair and dark eyes.

Al. She looks like Al. And Al looks like his father. The best of his father.

And some part of me knows immediately that it's true. Without hearing anything else, I believe it. My husband has a daughter. A second daughter.

And I can see that this comes as news to him too.

The room splits and tilts, everything in it seeming to swim away from the centre. I open the window above me for air, even though every glass door and wall in the kitchen is already pulled back, fully open, the room more outside than in.

‘Beth, oh, God, Beth . . .’ Steve reaches for me, and I lean into him. We stand there, staring at the photo, silence pounding through the room.

I turn it over. Her name – Olivia – is written on the back. ‘Olivia,’ he says.

A beautiful name. Ruined for me now. She is alone in the picture, but someone else’s hand is visible. A hand holding one of hers. An adult’s. But the adult has been cut from the photo with scissors.

Calculations and dates and years and ages. April 2013. I try to add, to count on. Born early in 2014. The months match. I know she is his. Somewhere deep down and instinctual, I know.

My husband has a second daughter.

A second chance for him.

A tornado builds around us, around the kitchen, readying itself to grab everything into its swirl and build, build, build, before firing it all to the ground and blowing out every glass window and door. Blowing out our very walls.

I want to get under the table to avoid it. To save myself and my clenched heart.

I hand the photo back to Steve, who casts about the

Listen for the Weather

room for somewhere to put it. He sticks it on our fridge door. That's what we always do with new photos. Stick them on the fridge. We both stare at it in silence. He has used two magnets, even though one would have sufficed. A magnet at the top and another at the bottom. To cover more of it, I think, rather than to ensure it doesn't slide down.

It can't stay there, even with her face and legs hidden now as they are.

It's beside Mae's cardiac check-up appointment card and the phone number of a new speech therapist. They both have one magnet each.

It can't stay there. Hanging, weighing down a branch of our family's tree.

Al and Mae will see it. And Steve's father, Bill. And everyone else who comes through the door.

It can't stay there, dragging every eye towards it, sucking the air from the room. This photo of a little girl who is nearly four.

He passes me the letter. It is just one page and the writing is clear and neat, but the words jumble and jump off it. Snatches of sentences hitting home, slapping at me.

Dear Steve,

I hope you remember me . . . baby in January 2014 . . . New Zealand at the end of October . . . for six weeks . . . Olivia . . . back to London in December . . . meet you.

Jane

She was a January baby. Like Mae. But younger. Younger by four years. Another baby girl. But this one would have been perfect. She would have looked perfect. And they are coming here later this month to New Zealand. This woman and her child.

Here.

We have been found.

I don't say anything. Shock doesn't make a sound. Shock unleashes invisible waves that blow through a room and hollow out a person, a family. Shock presses against a person's temples and pushes, pushes, the pressure making them scrunch up their eyes to withstand it. Shock grabs at your throat so you can't breathe, and every breath becomes conscious, an effort. Shock makes your heart race. *DANGER, DANGER! Get out!*

I get out.

I sit on the wooden bench at the end of our street.

A perfect little girl. No therapies. No interventions. No surgeries on her broken heart. *Croí briste*.

I regret not taking the photo with me. I want to scrutinise it, to take in every tiny grain of this child, stare her away, stare her out of existence. My husband's child. I want to look at the photo until the shock of it wears off and she's been neutralised.

And, yet, I never ever want to see it again.

Her hair, her eyes, her skin. All her father's.

I wonder what else she has of his. What things she has been given, without our knowledge. His mannerisms, his

Listen for the Weather

head for numbers, his weaknesses? Acid sits in the back of my throat. Then again, maybe she has nothing of his. She has never been around him. Is it nature or nurture? She only has nature. But that seems a lot.

I feel a familiar desire, an old sense of wanting to go back to yesterday, to before I knew. The same feeling I had once before, when another little girl came into my life. After Mae was born and her disability declared, I wanted time to turn back then too. Back to before my world and everything in it slanted, lost its balance.

The photo. In its absence, I fixate on it.

Why send that photo? One that needed cutting. A photo that will be studied and remembered always, one that carries a life-changing message. A fucking bomb of a message from the other side of the world.

The photo was posed and its margins framed to include what had been decided upon. But, later, something was excluded. Someone. This photo, narrow and uneven down one side, more than a sliver of it having been cut away. Just a hint of someone left behind – a hand. Is it her mother's? A hand my husband knows.

Did Jane cut herself out of the photo at the last minute, after second and maybe third thoughts? Did she regret that decision after she posted it?

Or maybe the image wasn't posed at all. Maybe she just sent whatever photo she had lying around at the time – cut out a washing line or something ugly that sat to one side of it. No need to send her laundry to the other side of the world.

Now I regret not taking it with me because I want to rip it to shreds. I'm not sure if it'd be an act of healing or violence. Most likely a bit of both.

Of course, it's the letter I should have taken with me. I should have taken it, given myself time to organise the words into lines and the space to read between them.

Dear Steve

The intimacy of those two words, handwritten to my husband. Reminding him. Reminding me.

Strangers call him Steven. Not Steve.

I am trembling.

January 2014. Olivia would have been born while we were on holiday here, Steve and I, Al and Mae. My family. It would have been six months after the surgery that had repaired our daughter's stretched and heavy heart, when we came to see how life in New Zealand might be. During that trip we'd decided to give it a try, to move here.

January 2014. Jane would have been in London, thinking about my husband. She would have seen his colouring in her new baby. And she would have thought about him most days since. Olivia keeping Steve alive in her mother's mind. On the other side of the world.

And now Jane is coming. Here. With her daughter.

His daughter.

They are coming.

We have been found.

* * *