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Jojo Moyes

One PLUS One

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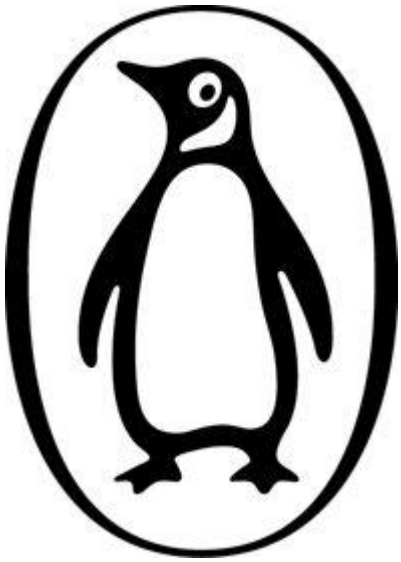

Jojo Moyes

THE ONE PLUS ONE

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To Charles, as ever.

1.

Jess

The irony did not escape Jessica Thomas that she lost the best job she'd ever had because of a diamond. Not because she stole it but because she didn't.

Jess and Nathalie had cleaned Mr and Mrs Ritter's holiday home for almost three years, since the Beachfront holiday park was part paradise, part building site. Back when the developers promised local families access to the swimming pool, and assured everyone that a large upmarket development would bring benefits to their little seaside town, instead of sucking out what remained of its life. The Ritters were standard occupants. They came down from London most weekends with their children. Mrs Ritter generally stayed on throughout the holidays while her husband stayed in the city. They spent most of their time on the manicured stretch of the beach, and visited the town only to fill up their people-carrier with diesel or to top up their groceries at the retail park. Jess and Nathalie cleaned their spacious, Farrow-&-Ball-painted four-bedroom home twice a week when they were there, and once when they weren't.

It was April and, judging by the empty juice cartons and wet towels, the Ritters were in residence. Nathalie was cleaning the en-suite bathroom and Jess was changing the beds, humming along to the radio that they carried between jobs. As she whipped off the duvet cover she heard a sound like the crack of a high-velocity air rifle. Living where she did, she knew this sound well. She could have bet money that there were no air rifles at Beachfront.

Her gaze was caught by something glittering on the floor. She stooped by the window and picked up a diamond earring between her thumb and forefinger. She held it up to the light, then walked next door to where Nathalie was on her knees, scrubbing the bath, lines of dark sweat outlining her bra strap. It had been a long morning.

'Look.'

Nathalie climbed to her feet, squinting. ‘What is it?’

‘Diamond. It fell out of the bed linen.’

‘That can’t be real. Look at the size of it.’

They gazed at the earring, as Jess rotated it between finger and thumb. ‘Lisa Ritter isn’t going to have fake diamonds. Not with their money. Can’t diamonds cut glass?’ She ran it speculatively down the edge of the window.

‘Great idea, Jess. You just keep going until her window falls out.’ Nathalie stood up, rinsed her cloth under the tap. ‘More importantly, where’s the other one?’

They shook out the bed linen, peered under the bed, sifted through the deep pile of the beige carpet on their hands and knees, like police at a murder scene. Finally Jess checked her watch. They looked at each other and sighed.

One earring. Your basic nightmare.

Things they had found while cleaning people’s houses:

– False teeth
– An escaped guinea pig
– A long-lost wedding ring (they were given a box of chocolates for this)
– A signed photograph of Cliff Richard (no chocolates; owner denied all knowledge)
– Money. Not just small change, but a whole turquoise wallet stuffed full of fifties. It had fallen behind a chest of drawers. When Jess handed it over to the client – a Mrs Linder, who had rented number four Beachfront for three months over the summer – she had looked at it in mild surprise. ‘I was wondering where that had gone,’ she said, and pocketed it without a backward look, as you would a mislaid hair slide or a remote control.

Guinea pigs aside, it was not as great as you might think, turning up valuables. One earring or a pile of loose notes, and clients would give you that vague, sideways look, the flicker in their eyes that meant they were wondering if you had pocketed the rest. Mr Ritter would definitely assume they had taken the other earring. He was the kind of man who made them feel guilty just for being in his house. That was on the days he deigned to acknowledge they were there.

‘So what do we do?’

Nathalie was bundling up the duvet cover, ready for the laundry. ‘Leave it on the side. We’ll just write a note saying we couldn’t find the other.’ They usually left a note or two out during their rounds, saying what they’d done. Or a polite reminder that they were owed money. ‘It’s the truth.’

‘Should we say we shook out all the bedding?’

‘Whatever. I just don’t want her thinking we took it.’

Jess finished writing, and placed the earring carefully on the piece of paper. ‘Mrs Ritter might already have the other one. She might be glad we found it.’

Nathalie made the face that said Jess would look on the bright side of a nuclear apocalypse. ‘Personally, I think I would have known if there was a diamond the size of an eyeball in my bed.’ She dumped the dirty laundry outside the bedroom door. ‘Right. You vacuum the hall, and I’ll change the kids’ beds. If we get a wiggle on, we can be at the Gordons’ by half eleven.’

Nathalie Benson and Jessica Thomas had cleaned together every weekday for four years, the somewhat uninspired moniker Benson & Thomas Cleaning Services on the side of their little white van. Nathalie had stencilled ‘A Bit Dirty? Can we Help?’ underneath for two whole months until Jess pointed out that half the calls they were getting were nothing to do with cleaning.

Nearly all their jobs were in Beachfront now. Hardly anybody in the town had the money – or the inclination – to hire a cleaner, except for the GPs, the solicitor and the odd client like Mrs Humphrey, whose arthritis stopped her doing it herself. She was one of those old women who believed cleanliness was next to godliness, her life’s worth previously measured in starched curtains and a freshly scrubbed front step. Sometimes they suspected she’d saved up a whole forty-eight hours of conversation just for the hour that they were there. Wednesdays they did Mrs Humphrey after their Beachfront jobs, the Ritters and the Gordons, and, if they were lucky, whichever of the holiday cottages the other cleaning firms had failed to turn up for.

Jess was lugging the vacuum cleaner along the hall when the front door opened. Mrs Ritter called up the stairs, ‘Is that you, girls?’

She was the kind of woman to whom all women, even those collecting their pensions, were ‘girls’. ‘I had the best girls’ night out on Saturday,’ she would say, her eyes rolling with mischief. Or, ‘So off I went, to the little girls’ room …’ but they liked her. She was always cheerful, and wore her money lightly. And she never treated them like cleaners.

Nathalie and Jess exchanged looks. It had been a long morning, they’d done two ovens already (what kind of people roasted pork on holiday?), and Mrs Humphrey’s tea tended to be the colour and consistency of stair varnish.

Ten minutes later they were sitting round the kitchen table, while Lisa Ritter pushed a plate of biscuits towards them. ‘Go on, have one. If you

eat them, I can't be tempted.' She squeezed a non-existent roll of fat over her waistband. Nathalie and Jess could never agree if she'd had work. She was the kind of woman who floated somewhere in the carefully maintained hinterlands between forty and sixty-something. Her tinted chestnut hair was set in soft waves, she played tennis three times a week, did Pilates with a private instructor, and Nathalie knew someone at the local salon, who said that she was waxed to within an inch of her life every four weeks.

'How's your Martin?'

'Still alive. To the best of my knowledge,' Natalie said.

'Oh, yes.' She nodded, remembering. 'You did tell me. Finding himself, was it?'

'That's the one.'

'You'd have thought he might have found himself by now. There was enough of him.' Mrs Ritter paused, and gave Jess a conspiratorial smile. 'Your little girl still got her head stuck in a maths book?'

'Always.'

'Oh, they're good children, yours. Some of these mothers round here, I swear they don't know what their lot are doing from dawn till dusk. That Jason Fisher and his friends were throwing eggs at Dennis Grover's windows the other day. Eggs!' It was hard to tell from her voice whether she was more shocked at the act of aggression or the waste of good food.

She was in the middle of a story about her manicurist and a small, incontinent dog, breaking off repeatedly as she was overcome with laughter, when Nathalie held up her phone. 'Mrs Humphrey's tried to call,' she said, pushing back her chair. 'We'd better get off.' She slid off the stool and made her way out to the hallway to fetch the cleaning crate.

'Well, the place looks lovely. Thank you both so much.' Mrs Ritter reached up a hand and patted her hair into place, briefly lost in thought. 'Oh, before you go, Jess, you wouldn't give me a hand with something, would you?'

Most of the clients knew Jess was good at practical things. There was barely a day where somebody didn't want help with some grouting, or picture-hanging, jobs they swore would only take five minutes. Jess didn't mind. 'If it's a big job though I may need to come back,' she said. *And charge*, she added silently.

'Oh, no,' Lisa Ritter said, walking towards the back door. 'I just need someone to help me with my suitcase. I cricked my back on the plane, and I need someone to get it up the steps for me.'

'Plane?'

‘I went to see my sister in Mallorca. Well, now the children are at uni, I’ve got all this time to myself, haven’t I? I thought it would be nice to have a few days’ mini-break. I left Simon to it, bless him.’

‘So when did you get back?’

She looked at Jess blankly. ‘You saw me! Just now!’

It took a couple of seconds to hit. And it was a good job that she was already headed outside into the sun because Jess felt the colour actually drain from her face.

That was the problem with cleaning. It was a good job on the one hand – if you didn’t mind other people’s stains and pulling lumps of hair out of other people’s plugholes (she didn’t, funnily enough). Jess didn’t even mind that most of those who rented holiday homes seemed to feel obliged to live like pigs for a week, leaving mess they wouldn’t sit in at home because they knew there was a cleaner coming. You could work for yourself, organise your own hours, pick and choose your clients when times were good.

The downside, weirdly, was not the crappy clients (and there always was at least one crappy client), or the dirt, or that scrubbing someone else’s toilet somehow left you feeling like you were one step lower on a ladder than you had planned to be. It wasn’t even the constant threat from other companies, the leaflets through your clients’ doors and the promises of cheaper by the hour. It was that you ended up finding out much more about other people’s lives than you really wanted to.

Jess could have told you about Mrs Eldridge’s secret shopping habit: the designer-shoe receipts she stuffed into the bathroom bin, and the bags of unworn clothes in her wardrobe, the tags still firmly attached. She could tell you that Lena Thompson had been trying for a baby for four years, and used two pregnancy tests a month (rumour had it she left her tights on). She could tell you that Mr Mitchell in the big house behind the church earned a six-figure salary (he left his payslips on the hall table; Nathalie swore he did it deliberately) and that his daughter smoked secretly in the bathroom and lined up all her cigarette butts in neat rows on the window ledge.

If she was that way inclined, she could have pointed out the women who went out looking immaculate, hair faultless, nails polished, lightly spritzed with expensive scent, who thought nothing of leaving soiled knickers in full view on the floor, or the teenage boys whose stiff towels she didn’t want to pick up without a pair of tongs. There were the couples who spent every night in separate beds, the wives insisting

brightly when they asked her to change the spare-room sheets that they'd had an 'awful lot of guests lately', the lavatories that required a gas mask and a HAZCHEM warning.

And then every now and then you got a nice client like Lisa Ritter and popped over to vacuum her floors and came home with a whole load of knowledge you could really have done without.

Jess watched Nathalie walking outside, the cleaning crate under her arm, and saw with a terrible clarity what was going to happen next. She saw the bed upstairs, immaculately made with clean linen, the polished surfaces of Mrs Ritter's dressing-table, the cushions neatly plumped on the little sofa in the bay window. She saw that diamond, sitting where she had left it with her scrawled note on the dresser, a tiny glittering hand grenade.

'Actually,' Jess said, hauling the suitcase past Nathalie, 'can I have a quick word, Nat?' She tried to catch her eye, but Nathalie was busy gazing at Mrs Ritter's shoes.

'I love your pumps,' she said breathlessly.

'Do you, Nathalie? I got them while I was away. They were an absolute bargain.'

'Mrs Ritter's been to Spain, Nat,' Jess said pointedly, stopping beside her. 'A *mini-break*.'

Nathalie glanced up and smiled. Nothing.

'She got back *this morning*.'

'Lovely,' said Nathalie, beaming.

Jess felt panic rising inside her, like an unstoppable tide. 'I tell you what, I'll carry this upstairs for you,' she said, pushing past Mrs Ritter.

'You don't have to do that!'

'It's no bother.' She wondered if Lisa Ritter had registered the strange set to her face. She could make it upstairs, she thought. She could run into the bedroom, fetch the earring, stuff it into her pocket and shove Nathalie into the car before she could say anything, and Mrs Ritter would never know. They would decide what to do about it later.

But even as she hurled herself through the back door some part of her already knew what would happen.

'So did Jess tell you?'

She was halfway up the stairs. Nathalie's voice carried, as clear as a bell, through the open window.

'We found one of your earrings. We thought you might have the other one put by.'

‘Earrings?’ said Mrs Ritter.

‘Diamond. I think it’s a platinum setting. Fell out of the bed linen. You’re lucky we didn’t vacuum it up.’

There was a short silence.

Jess closed her eyes, stood very still on the stairs and waited as the inevitable words floated up to her.

‘How was I supposed to know Mrs Ritter doesn’t have pierced ears?’

They sat in the cleaning van, slumped in their seats. Nathalie was smoking. She had given up six weeks ago. For the fourth time.

‘I don’t look at people’s ears. Do you look at people’s ears?’

‘I think you must have been mistaken,’ Lisa Ritter had said, her voice quivering slightly with the effort, as she held it in her hand. ‘It’s probably my daughter’s, from when she came home last time. She’s got a pair just like it.’

‘Of course,’ Jess said. ‘It probably got kicked in here. Or carried in on someone’s shoe. We knew it would be something like that.’ And she knew right then, when Mrs Ritter turned away from her, that that would be it. Nobody thanked you for bringing bad news to their door.

Nobody wanted a cleaner knowing their bad business.

‘Eighty pounds a week, guaranteed. And holiday pay.’ Nathalie let out a sudden scream. ‘Bloody hell. I actually want to find the tart who owns that bloody earring and thump her for losing us our best job.’

‘Maybe she didn’t know he was married.’

‘Oh, she knew.’ Before she’d met Dean, Nathalie had spent two years with a man who turned out to have not one but two families on the other side of Southampton. ‘No single man keeps colour-coordinated scatter cushions on his bed.’

‘Neil Brewster does,’ Jess said.

‘Neil Brewster’s music collection is sixty-seven per cent Judy Garland, thirty-three per cent Pet Shop Boys.’

At the end of the road a padded toddler toppled gently onto the ground like a felled tree and, after a brief silence, let out a thin wail. Its mother, her two armloads of shopping bags perfectly balanced, stood and stared in mute dismay.

‘Look, you heard what she said the other week – she’d get rid of her hairdresser before she’d get rid of us.’

‘Before she got rid of “the cleaners”. That’s different. She won’t care whether it’s us or Speedicleanz or Maids With Mops.’ Nathalie shook her head. ‘Nope. To her, from now on, we’ll always be the cleaners who

know the truth about her husband. It matters to women like her. They're all about appearances, aren't they?'

The mother put down her bags and stooped to pick up the toddler. A few houses away, Terry Blackstone emerged from under the bonnet of his Ford Focus, a car that had not run in eighteen months, and peered out to see what was making all the noise.

Jess put her bare feet up on the dashboard and let her face fall into her hands. 'Bugger it. How are we going to make up the money, Nat? That was our best job.'

'The house was immaculate. It was basically a twice a week polishing job.' Nathalie stared out of the window.

'And she always paid on time.'

'And she used to give us stuff.'

Jess kept seeing that diamond earring. Why hadn't they just ignored it? It would have been better if one of them had stolen it. 'Okay, so she's going to cancel us. Let's change the subject, Nat. I can't afford to cry before my pub shift.'

'So, did Marty ring this week?'

'I didn't mean change the subject to *that*.'

'Well, did he?'

Jess sighed. 'Yup.'

'Did he say why he didn't ring the week before?' Nathalie shoved Jess's feet off the dashboard.

'Nope.' Jess could feel her staring. 'And no, he didn't send any money.'

'Oh, come *on.* You've got to get the Child Support Agency onto him. You can't carry on like this. He should send money for his own kids.'

It was an old argument. 'He's … he's still not right,' Jess said. 'I can't put more pressure on him. He hasn't got a job yet.'

'Well, you're going to need that money now. Until we get another job like Lisa Ritter's. How's Nicky?'

'Oh, I went round to Jason Fisher's house to talk to his mum.'

'You're joking. She scares the pants off me. Did she say she'd get him to leave Nicky alone?'

'Something like that.'

Nathalie kept her eyes on Jess and dropped her chin two inches.

'She told me if I set foot on her doorstep once more she'd batter me halfway to next Wednesday. Me and my … what was it? … me and my "freakazoid kids".' Jess pulled down the passenger mirror and checked

her hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. ‘Oh, and then she told me her Jason wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

‘Typical.’

‘It’s fine. I had Norman with me. And, bless him, he took an enormous dump next to their Toyota and somehow I forgot I had a plastic bag in my pocket.’

Jess put her feet back up.

Nathalie pushed them down again and mopped the dashboard with a wet wipe. ‘Seriously, though, Jess. How long has Marty been gone? Two years? You’ve got to get back on the horse. You’re young. You can’t wait around for him to sort himself out,’ she said, with a grimace.

‘Get back on the horse. Nice.’

‘Liam Stubbs fancies you. You could totally ride that.’

‘Any certified pair of X chromosomes could ride Liam Stubbs.’ Jess closed the window. ‘I’m better off reading a book. Besides, I think the kids have had enough upheaval in their lives without playing Meet Your New Uncle. Right.’ She looked up, wrinkled her nose at the sky. ‘I’ve got to get the tea on and then I’ve got to get ready for the pub. I’ll do a quick ring-round before I go, see if any of the clients want any extras doing. And, you never know, she might not cancel us.’

Nathalie lowered her window, and blew out a long trail of smoke. ‘Sure, Dorothy. And our next job is going to be cleaning the Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.’

Number fourteen Seacove Avenue was filled with the sound of distant explosions. Tanzie had calculated recently that, since he’d turned sixteen, Nicky had spent 88 per cent of his spare time in his bedroom. Jess could hardly blame him.

She dropped her cleaning crate in the hall, hung up her jacket, made her way upstairs, feeling the familiar faint dismay at the threadbare state of the carpet, and pushed at his door. He was wearing a set of headphones and shooting somebody; the smell of weed was strong enough to make her reel.

‘Nicky,’ she said, and someone exploded in a hail of bullets. ‘Nicky.’ She walked over to him and pulled his headphones off, so that he turned, his expression briefly bemused, like someone hauled from sleep. ‘Hard at work, then?’

‘Revision break.’

She picked up an ashtray and held it towards him. ‘I thought I told you.’

‘It’s from last night. Couldn’t sleep.’

‘Not in the house, Nicky.’ There was no point telling him not at all. They all did it around here. She told herself she was lucky he had only started at fifteen.

‘Is Tanzie back yet?’ She stooped to pick up stray socks and mugs from the floor.

‘No. Oh. The school rang after lunch.’

‘What?’

He typed something into the computer then turned to face her. ‘I don’t know. Something about school.’

It was then that she saw it. She lifted a lock of that dyed black hair, and there it was: a fresh mark on his cheekbone. He ducked away. ‘Are you okay?’

He shrugged, looked away from her.

‘Did they come after you again?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Why didn’t you call me?’

‘No credit.’ He leant back and fired a virtual grenade. The screen exploded into a ball of flame. ‘The number’s on the table. If it’s about me, I was there on Friday. They must have just not seen me.’ He replaced his earphones and went back to the screen.

Nicky had come to live with Jess full time eight years previously. He was Marty’s son by Della, a woman he’d gone out with briefly in his teens. He had arrived silent and wary, his limbs thin and elongated, his appetite raging. His mother had fallen in with a new crowd, finally disappearing to somewhere in the Midlands with a man called Big Al, who wouldn’t look anyone in the eye and clutched an ever-present can of Tennents Extra like a hand grenade in his oversized fist. Nicky had been found sleeping in the locker rooms at school, and when the social workers called again, Jess had said he could come to them. ‘Just what you need,’ Nathalie had said. ‘Another mouth to feed.’

‘He’s my stepson.’

‘You’ve met him twice in four years. And you’re not even twenty.’

‘Well, that’s how families are, these days. It’s not all two point four.’

Afterwards, she sometimes wondered whether that had been the final straw; the thing that had caused Marty to abdicate responsibility for his family altogether. But Nicky was a good kid, under all the raven hair and eyeliner. He was sweet to Tanzie, and on his good days he talked and laughed and allowed Jess the occasional awkward hug, and she was glad

of him, even if it sometimes felt as if she had basically acquired one more person to feel anxious about.

She stepped out into the garden with the phone and took a deep breath, her stomach a knot of anxiety. 'Um … hello? It's Jessica Thomas here. I had a message to call.'

A pause.

'If it's about Nicky, I did check his study-periods rota. He said he was allowed to do revision at home and I thought that this was how they –'

'Mrs Thomas, I was calling you about Tanzie.'

A clench of panic. She glanced down at the number, registering. 'Tanzie? Is … is everything all right?'

'Sorry. I should have said. It's Mr Tsvangarai here, Tanzie's maths teacher.'

'Oh.' She pictured him: a tall man in a grey suit. Face like a funeral director's.

'I wanted to talk to you because a few weeks ago I had a very interesting discussion with a former colleague of mine who works for St Anne's.'

'St Anne's?' Jess frowned. 'The private school?'

'Yes. They have a scholarship programme for children who are exceptionally gifted in maths. And, as you know, we had already earmarked Tanzie as Gifted and Talented.'

'Because she's good at maths.'

'Better than good. Well, we gave her the paper to sit last week. I don't know if she mentioned it? I sent a letter home but I wasn't sure you saw it.'

Jess squinted at the sky. Seagulls wheeled and swooped against the grey. A few gardens down Terry Blackstone had started singing along to a radio. He had been known to do the full Rod Stewart if he thought nobody was looking.

'We got the results back this morning. And she has done well. Extremely well. Mrs Thomas, if you're agreeable they would like to interview her for a subsidized place.'

She found herself parroting him. 'A subsidized place?'

'For certain children of exceptional ability St Anne's will forgo a significant proportion of the school fees. It means that Tanzie would get a top-class education. She has an extraordinary numerical ability, Mrs Thomas. I do think this could be a great opportunity for her.'

'St Anne's? But … she'd need to get a bus across town. She'd need all the uniform and kit. She – she wouldn't know anyone.'

‘She’d make friends. But these are just details, Mrs Thomas. Let’s wait and see what the school comes up with. Tanzie is an extraordinarily talented girl.’ He paused. When she didn’t say anything, he lowered his voice: ‘I have been teaching maths for almost twenty-two years, Mrs Thomas. And I have never met a child who grasped mathematical concepts like she does. I believe she is actually exceeding the point where I have anything to teach her. Algorithms, probability, prime numbers –’

‘Okay. This is where you lose me, Mr Tsvangarai. I’ll just go with gifted and talented.’

He chuckled. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

She put down the phone and sat heavily on the white plastic garden chair that had been there when they’d moved in and had now grown a fine sheen of emerald moss. She stared at nothing, in through the window at the curtains that Marty always thought were too bright, at the red plastic tricycle that she had never got round to getting rid of, at next door’s cigarette butts sprinkled like confetti on her path, at the rotten boards in the fence that the dog insisted on sticking his head through. Despite what Nathalie referred to as her frankly misguided optimism, Jess found her eyes had filled unexpectedly with tears.

There were lots of awful things about the father of your children leaving: the money issues, the suppressed anger on behalf of your children, the way most of your coupled-up friends now treated you as if you were some kind of potential husband-stealer. But worse than that, worse than the endless, relentless, bloody exhausting financial and energy-sapping struggle, was that being a parent on your own when you were totally out of your depth was actually the loneliest place on earth.

2.

Tanzie

Twenty-six cars sat in the car park at St Anne's. Two rows of thirteen big shiny four-wheel-drives faced each other on each side of a gravel path, sliding in and out of the spaces at an average angle of 41 degrees, before the next in line moved in.

Tanzie watched them as she and Mum crossed the road from the bus stop, the drivers talking illegally into phones or mouthing at bug-eyed blond babies in the rear seats. Mum lifted her chin and fiddled with her keys in her free hand, as if they were actually her car keys and she and Tanzie just happened to have parked somewhere nearby. She kept glancing behind her. Tanzie guessed she was worried she was going to bump into one of her cleaning clients and they were going to ask what she was doing there.

She had never been inside St Anne's, although she'd been past it on the bus at least ten times because the NHS dentist was on this road. From the outside, there was just an endless hedge, trimmed to exactly 90 degrees (she wondered if the gardener used a protractor) and those big trees where the branches hung low and friendly, sweeping out across the playing fields as if they were there to shelter the children below.

The children at St Anne's did not swing bags at each other's heads, or bundle up in huddles by the corner of the playground, backing someone against the wall to tax their lunch money. There were no weary-sounding teachers trying to herd the teenagers into classrooms. The girls had not rolled their skirts six times over at the waistband or backcombed their hair. Not a single person was smoking. A lot of them wore glasses. Her mother gave her hand a little squeeze. Tanzie wanted her to stop looking so nervous. 'It's nice, isn't it, Mum?'

She nodded. 'Yes.' It came out as a squeak.

'Mr Tsvangarai told me that every single one of their sixth-formers who did maths got A or A starred. That's good, isn't it?'

'Amazing.'

Tanzie pulled a bit at Mum's hand so that they could get to the head's office faster. 'Do you think Norman will miss me when I'm doing the long days?'

'The long days.'

'St Anne's doesn't finish till six. And there's maths club on Tuesdays and Thursdays so I'd definitely want to do that.'

'Tanze,' she said, and stopped.

'Mum. *Look*.' There was a girl walking along reading a book. Actually reading a book. Nicky said if you walked across the playground reading a book at McArthur's you got battered. You had to hide them, like cigarettes.

Her mother glanced at her. She looked really tired. She was always tired, these days. She put on one of those smiles that wasn't really a smile at all, and they went in.

'Hello, Mrs Thomas. Hello, Costanza. It's very good to meet you. Do sit down.'

The headmaster's study had a high ceiling, as white and perfectly decorated as a wedding cake. Little white plaster rosettes sat every twenty centimetres, and tiny rosebuds exactly halfway between them. The room was stuffed with old furniture and through a large bay window a man on a roller could be seen travelling up and down a cricket pitch. On a small table somebody had laid out a tray of coffee and hand-made biscuits. It took Tanzie a few minutes to realize they were for them. 'Can I have one?' she said, and the headmaster pushed them towards her.

'Of course.'

'Mouth closed,' Mum murmured.

They were so good. You could tell they were homemade. Mum used to make biscuits before Dad left and they were just like these. She sat down on the edge of the sofa and gazed at the two men opposite. The one with the moustache smiled like the nurse did before she gave you an injection. Mum had pulled her bag onto her lap and Tanzie could see her holding her hand over the corner where Norman had chewed it. Her leg was jiggling.

'This is Mr Cruikshank. He's the head of maths. And I'm Mr Daly. I've been head here for the past two years.'

She shook their hands and smiled back. Tanzie should have shaken their hands, but all she could hear were the words 'head of maths'. She looked up from her biscuit.

'Do you do chords?'

‘We do.’

‘And probability?’

‘That too.’

Mr Cruikshank leant forward. ‘We’ve been looking at your test results. And we think, Costanza, that you should sit your GCSE in maths next year and get it out of the way. Because I think you’d rather enjoy the A-level problems.’

She looked at him. ‘Have you got actual papers?’

‘I’ve got some next door. Would you like to see them?’

She couldn’t believe he was asking. She thought briefly of saying, ‘Well, DUH’, like Nicky did. But she just nodded.

Mr Daly handed Mum a coffee. ‘I won’t beat around the bush, Mrs Thomas. You are well aware that your daughter has an exceptional ability. We have only seen scores like hers once before and that was from a pupil who went on to be a fellow at Trinity.’

Tanzie nodded, although she was pretty sure she didn’t want to be a fellow. Everyone knew girls were better at maths.

He went on and on then. She tuned out a bit because she was trying to see how many biscuits she could eat so what she heard was ‘… for a very select group of pupils who have a demonstrably unusual ability we have created a new equal-access scholarship.’ Blah, blah, blah. ‘It would offer a child who might not otherwise get the advantages of a school like this the chance to fulfil their potential in …’ Blah, blah. ‘While we are very keen to see how far Costanza could go in the field of maths, we would also want to make sure that she was well rounded in other parts of her student life. We have a full sporting and musical curriculum.’ Blah, blah, blah … ‘Numerate children are often also able in languages …’ blah, blah ‘… and drama – that’s often very popular with girls of her age.’

‘I only really like maths,’ she told him. ‘And dogs.’

‘Well, we don’t have much in the way of dogs, but we’d certainly offer you lots of opportunities to stretch yourself mathematically. But I think you might be surprised by what else you enjoy. Do you play any instruments?’

She shook her head.

‘Any languages?’

The room went a bit quiet.

‘Other interests?’

‘We go swimming on Fridays,’ Mum said.

‘We haven’t been swimming since Dad left.’

Mum smiled, but it went a bit wonky. ‘We have, Tanzie.’

‘Once. May the thirteenth. But now you work on Fridays.’

Her smile went really strange then, like she couldn’t hold the corners of her mouth up properly.

Mr Cruikshank left the room, and reappeared a moment later with his papers. She stuffed the last of the biscuit into her mouth, then got up and went to sit next to him. He had a whole pile of them. Stuff she hadn’t even started yet!

She began going through them with him, showing him what she had done and what she hadn’t, and in the background she could hear Mum and the headmaster’s voices rumbling away. ‘We’re very conscious of the pitfalls, psychological and otherwise, that can occur if children are only encouraged to go in one direction … blah, blah, blah … If Costanza comes to us, while we would consider her mathematical ability an asset, her pastoral care would be …’

It sounded like it was going all right. Tanzie let her attention travel to what was on the page. It might have been renewal theory. ‘Yes,’ Mr Cruikshank was saying quietly, his finger on the page. ‘But the curious feature of renewal processes is that, if we wait some predetermined time and then observe how large the renewal interval containing it is, we should expect it to be typically larger than a renewal interval of average size.’

She knew about this! ‘So the monkeys would take longer to type *Macbeth*?’ she said.

‘That’s it.’ He smiled. ‘I wasn’t sure you’d have covered any renewal theory.’

‘I haven’t, really. But Mr Tsvangarai told me about it once and I looked it up on the Internet. I liked the whole monkey thing.’ She flicked through the papers. There was tons of it. The numbers sang to her. She could feel her brain sort of humming she wanted to read them so much. She knew she had to go to this school. ‘Mum,’ she said. She didn’t usually interrupt, but she was too excited and forgot her manners. ‘Do you think we could get some of these papers?’

Mr Daly looked over. He didn’t seem to mind about the missing manners. ‘Mr Cruikshank, have we any spares?’

‘You can take these.’

He handed them over! Just like that! Tanzie began flicking through them. Outside a bell rang and she could hear children walking past the office window, their feet crunching on the gravel. She poked her head up to look at them. She wanted to see if any others were reading books.

‘So … what happens next?’

‘Well, we’d like to offer Costanza … Tanzie … a scholarship.’ He lifted a glossy folder from the table. ‘Here’s our prospectus, and the relevant documentation. The scholarship covers ninety per cent of the fees. It’s the most generous scholarship this school has ever offered. Usually fifty per cent is our maximum, given the extensive waiting list of pupils hoping to come here. The new scholarship is designed to recognize children with unusual levels of ability.’

‘Like me,’ Tanzie said.

‘Like you.’ He held out the plate towards her. Somehow they had replaced the biscuits on the plate with new ones. This really was the greatest school ever.

‘Ninety per cent,’ Mum said. She put her biscuit back on her saucer.

‘I do appreciate that there is still a considerable financial commitment involved. And there would also be uniform and travel costs, and any extras she might want, like music or school trips. But I would like to stress that this is an incredible opportunity.’ He leant forward. ‘We would love to have you here, Tanzie. Your maths teacher says you’re a joy to work with.’

‘I like school,’ she said, reaching for another biscuit. ‘I know lots of my friends think it’s boring. But I prefer school to home.’

They all laughed awkwardly.

‘Not because of you, Mum,’ she said, and helped herself to another. ‘But my mum does have to work a lot.’

Everyone went quiet.

‘We all do, these days,’ said Mr Cruikshank.

‘Well. It’s a lot for you to think about. And I’m sure you have other questions for us. But why don’t you finish your coffee, while we talk, and then I’ll get one of our pupils to show you around the rest of the school? Then you can discuss this between yourselves.’

That evening Mum went up to Nicky’s room and got him to hook the computer up to Skype. Every Sunday she would text Dad half an hour before, and he would set up the computer at Grandma’s so that Tanzie could speak to him. She would sit at Nicky’s desk and try not to be distracted by the little image of herself in the corner. It always made her look like she had a really weird-shaped head.

Except it wasn’t Sunday.

Tanzie was downstairs in the garden throwing a ball for Norman. She was determined that one day he would fetch it and bring it back. Tanzie

had read somewhere that repetition increases the probability of an animal learning how to do something by a factor of four. She wasn't sure Norman could count, though.

They had got Norman from the animal shelter when Dad first left and Mum stayed awake for eleven nights in a row worrying that they would be murdered in their beds once everyone realized he'd gone. Brilliant with kids, a fantastic guard dog, the rescue centre said. Mum kept saying, 'But he's so big.'

'Even more of a deterrent,' they said, with cheery smiles. 'And did we mention he's brilliant with kids?'

Two years on, Mum said Norman was basically an enormous eating and crapping machine. He plodded around the house shedding hair and leaving evil smells behind him. He drooled on cushions and howled in his sleep, his great paws paddling the air as if he was swimming. Mum said the rescue centre had been right: nobody would break into their house for fear Norman would gas them to death.

She had given up trying to ban him from Tanzie's bedroom. When Tanzie woke up in the morning he was always stretched across three-quarters of the bed, hairy legs across her mattress, leaving her shivering under a tiny corner of duvet. Mum used to mutter about hairs and hygiene but Tanzie didn't mind. She and Norman had a special bond. She knew that one day he would show it.

They'd got Nicky when she was two. Tanzie went to bed one night and when she woke he was in the spare room and Mum just said he would be staying and he was her brother. She didn't know if they had a special bond, even though they were actually 50 per cent related. Tanzie had once asked him what he thought their shared genetic material was, and he'd said, 'The weird loser gene.' She thought he might have been joking, but she didn't know enough about genetics to check.

She was rinsing her hands under the outside tap when she heard them talking. Nicky's window was open and their voices floated out into the garden.

'Did you pay that water bill?' Nicky said.

'No. I haven't had a chance to get to the post office.'

'It says it's a final reminder.'

'I know it's a final reminder.' Mum was snappy, like she always was when she talked about money. There was a pause. Norman picked up the ball and dropped it near her feet. It lay there, slimy and disgusting.

'Sorry, Nicky. I … just need to get this conversation out of the way. I'll sort it out tomorrow morning. I promise. You want to speak to your

dad?'

Tanzie knew what the answer would be. Nicky never wanted to talk to Dad any more.

'Hey.'

She moved right under the window and stood really still. She could hear Dad's voice.

'Everything all right?' Dad sounded tense. She wondered if he thought that something bad had happened. Perhaps if he thought Tanzie had leukaemia he might come back. She had watched a TV film once where the girl's parents divorced and then got back together because she got leukaemia. She didn't actually want leukaemia though because needles made her pass out and she had quite nice hair.

'Everything's fine,' Mum said. She didn't tell him about Nicky getting battered.

'What's going on?'

A pause.

'Has your mum decorated?' Mum asked.

'What?'

'New wallpaper.'

'Oh. That.'

Grandma's house had new wallpaper? Tanzie felt weird. Dad and Grandma were living in a house that she might not recognize any more. It had been 348 days since she last saw Dad. It was 433 days since she'd seen Grandma.

'I need to talk to you about Tanzie's schooling.'

'Why – is she playing up?'

'Nothing like that, Marty. She's been offered a scholarship to St Anne's.'

'St Anne's?'

'They think her maths is off the scale.'

'St *Anne's*.' He said it like he couldn't believe it. 'I mean I knew she was bright, but …'

He sounded really pleased. She pressed her back against the wall and went up on tippy-toes to hear better. Perhaps he'd come back if she was going to St Anne's.

'Our little girl at the posh school, eh?' His voice had puffed up with pride. Tanzie could imagine him already working out what to tell his mates at the pub. Except he couldn't go to the pub. Because he always told Mum he had no money to enjoy himself. 'So what's the problem?'

'Well … it's a big scholarship. But it doesn't cover everything.'

‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning we’d still have to find five hundred pounds a term. And the uniform. And the registration fee of five hundred pounds.’

The silence went on for so long Tanzie wondered if the computer had crashed.

‘They said once we’ve been there a year we can apply for a hardship fee. Some bursary or something where, if you’re a deserving case, they can give you extra. But basically we need to find the best part of two grand to get her through the first year.’

And then Dad laughed. He actually laughed. ‘You’re having me on, right?’

‘No, I am not having you on.’

‘How am I meant to find two grand, Jess?’

‘I just thought I’d –’

‘I’ve not even got a proper job yet. There’s nothing going on round here. I’m … I’m only just getting back on my feet. I’m sorry, babe, but there’s no way.’

‘Can’t your mum help? She might have some savings. Can I talk to her?’

‘No. She’s … out. And I don’t want you tapping her for money. She’s got worries enough as it is.’

‘I’m not tapping her for money, Marty. I thought she might want to help her only grandchildren.’

‘They’re not her only grandchildren any more. Elena had a little boy.’

Tanzie stood very still.

‘I didn’t even know she was pregnant.’

‘Yeah, I meant to tell you.’

Tanzie had a baby cousin. And she hadn’t even known. Norman flopped down at her feet. He looked at her with his big brown eyes, then rolled over slowly with a groan, as if it was really, really hard work just lying on the floor. He kept looking at her, waiting for her to rub his tummy, but she was trying too hard to listen.

‘Well … what if we sell the Rolls?’

‘I can’t sell the Rolls. I’m going to start the weddings business up again.’

‘It’s been rusting in our garage for the best part of two years.’

‘I know. And I’ll come and get it. I just haven’t got anywhere to store it safely up here.’

The voices had that edge now. Their conversations often ended up like that. They would start off with Mum being all nice and then something

would happen so that they both got really clipped and tense with each other. She heard Mum take a deep breath. ‘Can you at least think about it, Marty? She really wants to go to this place. Really, really wants to go. When the maths teacher spoke to her, her whole face lit up like I haven’t seen since –’

‘Since I left.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘So it’s all my fault.’

‘No, it’s not all your fault, Marty. But I’m not going to sit here and pretend that you going has been a barrel of laughs for them. Tanzie doesn’t understand why you don’t visit her. She doesn’t understand why she hardly gets to see you any more.’

‘I can’t afford the fares, Jess. You know that. There’s no point you going on and on at me. I’ve been ill.’

‘I know you’ve been ill.’

‘She can come and see me anytime. I told you. Send them both at half-term.’

‘I can’t. They’re too young to travel all that way alone. And I can’t afford the fares for all of us.’

‘And I suppose that’s my fault too.’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake.’

Tanzie dug her nails into the soft parts of her hands. Norman kept looking at her, waiting.

‘I don’t want to argue with you, Marty,’ Mum said, and her voice was low and careful, like when a teacher is trying to explain something to you that you should already know. ‘I just want you to think about whether there is any way at all you could contribute to this. It would change Tanzie’s life. It would mean she never has to struggle in the way that … we struggle.’

‘You can’t say that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t you watch the news, Jess? All the graduates are out of work. It doesn’t matter what education you get. She’s still going to have to fight. She’s still going to struggle.’ He paused. ‘No. There’s no point us going further into hock just for this. Of course these schools are going to tell you it’s all special, and she’s special, and her life chances are going to be amazing if she goes, et cetera, et cetera. That’s what they do.’

Mum didn’t say anything.

‘No, if she’s bright like they say she is, she’ll make her own way. She’ll have to go to McArthur’s like everyone else.’

‘Like the little bastards who spend all their time working out how to bash Nicky’s face in. And the girls who wear four inches of makeup and won’t do PE in case they break a nail. She won’t fit in there, Marty. She just won’t.’

‘Now you sound like a snob.’

‘No, I sound like someone who accepts that her daughter is a little bit different. And might need a school that embraces it.’

‘Can’t do it, Jess. I’m sorry.’ He sounded distracted now, as if he’d heard something in the distance. ‘Look. I’ve got to go. Get her to Skype me Sunday.’

There was a long silence.

Tanzie counted to fourteen.

She heard the door open and Nicky’s voice: ‘That went well, then.’

She leant over and finally rubbed Norman’s tummy. She closed her eyes so she didn’t see the tear that plopped onto it.

‘Have we done any lottery tickets lately?’

‘No.’

That silence lasted nine seconds. Then Mum’s voice echoed into the still air:

‘Well, I think maybe we’d better start.’