

black skirt, which I have not worn in years, I scramble into the back seat and give them a tight smile, keeping my terrors behind my teeth. My brother and his wife feel like members of a different species to me.

Funerals are uncomfortable occasions, no matter what your connection to the deceased. In unfamiliar surroundings, in unfamiliar clothes, you bid farewell to someone who can no longer see or hear you, and are not sure whether to sit or stand, almost more stressed by the rituals than by the loss itself. There is always something to knock you out of the moment, something out of place: the brisk compassion of a celebrant who never even met your loved one; a child's cry erupting suddenly into silent contemplation; a bum note sung during the parting hymn. And when this happens you stand alone in your own head, your connection to the departed suddenly stretched so thin it is like a span of spider silk trembling

in the air, and you don't know who you are. And then, just as abruptly, grief at the transience of life almost bowls you over and you find your hands are trembling so much that the words on the hymn sheet have become unreadable. And then you catch yourself wondering if you are honestly grieving for your mother, or whether a selfish grain or two of self-pity may not have crept in and salted the occasion with terror about your own mortality.

At the end of the service I look around. Apart from James and Evie, I recognize only a couple of Mum's friends from the Ramblers' Association – one chap accompanied by a grey-haired woman in a dark red hat with a net veil that has probably not been out of its box since a wedding decades ago – and a family of four: Rosa, a blonde Lithuanian woman who used to come in to help Mum with the housework, her husband and their two children. Rosa and I hug

briefly afterwards outside the crematorium in the bright daylight.

‘I’m so sorry about your mother. The news came as a terrible surprise.’ She considers me. ‘You look so pale! How are you, Becky?’ she asks, and I give the usual reply. She peers over my shoulder. ‘And where’s your handsome man?’

That’s a good question. I experience a physical yearning for Eddie that rushes through me like fire. I mumble something about unfortunate timing and quickly change the subject, brightening my tone. ‘How about you and Lukas, are you well? You look well! And your girls have grown so much!’

‘Anna is just finishing Key Stage 2. It’s a good time for us to move.’

‘You’re moving? Where are you going?’

She looks surprised, as if the answer is obvious. ‘Back to Lithuania. To be honest, we don’t really feel welcome here any more.’

Besides, Lukas says there are good jobs to be had with the energy company, so it makes sense for us to go.’ She puts her hand on my arm. ‘You know, I would have come in and helped Jenny more if I’d known she was ill. Not for money, you understand,’ she adds quickly. ‘But she didn’t tell me she was sick.’

‘She didn’t tell any of us,’ I say. Her death feels unreal. Why hadn’t I paid more attention during our twice-weekly calls? I must have missed so many little clues. Had there been some small hesitation when I asked how she was? The answer was always, ‘Fine, dear. But more importantly, how are you?’ and I hadn’t recognized this as deflection. Mum had been putting others before herself all her life. I didn’t even know she was in hospital when we last spoke: my mother used the same mobile phone no matter where she was.

‘Why didn’t she tell us she was so ill?’ I had asked my brother when he called to break the

terrible news.

An uncomfortable pause. ‘She told me,’ he said. ‘But only recently. She said there was nothing that could be done, and you already had enough on your plate. She knew I wouldn’t fuss and would just get on with doing what she wanted.’

The word ‘fuss’ cut deep. I had always unloaded my problems on Mum, because if you can’t tell your mother your deepest fears and your daily disasters, then who can you tell? Every time something awful happened I would think, *Well, at least it’ll give me something to talk about with Mum*, and would gather amusing or gruesome details with which to embroider the telling.

The realization was a sort of second bereavement, a mourning for the relationship we shared, as well as for the mother I lost. It is confirmation of how weak Mum must have