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REACH

I've come to London this summer to visit my friend Izzy, meet her husband, Simon, and her fifteen-month-old son, Jacob. I'm not staying with them because they are packing, readying to move house, and the baby's schedule dominates everything—and the baby-ness of everything would make me go crazy. I know I would last only a few minutes of mild smiling before snapping, "It's fine, I can finish telling my story later," or "It's okay, I can eat dinner at five." So I'm staying in a small and extremely expensive hotel in Soho with sloping hallways that take me from one building to another and from one century to another through the hotel's ongoing expansion.

I turned fifty earlier this year and Izzy is three years younger, although these days that kind of age difference is negligible. What has opened up a gap between us is that she has had a child in her mid-to-late forties with seemingly no personal angst or social judgment or physical calamity. This speaks to the differences between her world and mine and between Izzy and me in general. But she is still concerned about what kind of artist she is and will become and so we have things to talk about that don't bore me or make me think I haven't done things I should have even if I didn't want to.

Izzy and I met at the University of Warwick near Coventry. I was on a junior-year-abroad program, and she was a first year. She had grown up in Brussels and in London. Her father did something with NATO or European courts and her mother was creative in some way that made her stay in bed all day. We had sleepy mothers in common. We were also both Jewish. She saw me as this mythic character come to life, a sophisticated New York intellectual. I imagined her a Euro-Brit bohemian who had something to do with Bloomsbury and delicate slippers made from dark brocade fabrics. I wanted her accent, her clothes, her style, her passport stamps. She wanted to go to book parties in uptown brownstones and artist parties in downtown lofts. (I had attended these events as a teenager, although I mostly sat in the edges of those large rooms and wondered about paint dribbles on artists' sneakers.) Izzy referred to females as women then, even at the age of eighteen. I still refer to grown women as girls. She was Izzy then. Now she is Isabel. I was and

remain Jenny, but she has always called me Jennifer even after I told her no one calls me that. Since our year together at Warwick, she took a law degree, worked for banks, gave up making money, enrolled in art college, had gallery shows, married Simon, and gave birth to Jacob. Since then, I took a literature degree, worked temp jobs and waitressed, gave up not making money, got a job in advertising, made money, put two novels and twenty-seven short stories in a drawer with their rejection slips, dated but did not cohabitate or marry, and did not give birth to a child.

I like taking the Tube in London. Its stations and trains live at the intersection of *ye olde* and sleek modern. This new-oldness makes the city feel very different than New York where things are either new or old but never both. The Northern Line from Tottenham Court Road will get me to the Golders Green Tube stop and Izzy's soon-to-be ex-home. As I walk the three blocks from my hotel to the Tube station, the we're-hosting-the-Olympics! mood fills London's sidewalks as vendors preside over their displays of 2012 key chains and sprinters suspended within snow globes.

I take my time figuring out which ticket to buy at the machines. I don't want to look like a tourist who doesn't know what she's doing, but the interface is unfamiliar. I operate via intuitive bluff and buy my ticket. I look around at the other passengers and think to myself, these are British people I'm with. And then I slip instinctively into my New York subway rider zone-out mode and lose myself until I realize the next stop is mine.

My iPhone navigation gets me from the Tube stop to Izzy's house. I stand out front, shoving the phone into my shoulder bag, staring up at the townhouse, wondering what my life would be like if I lived here. And then Izzy is opening the front door and shrieking and rushing down the walk and pulling her good American friend close into her arms.

I knew Warwick wouldn't be like the movie versions of Oxford or Cambridge, but I still thought I knew what to expect when I arrived in the early autumn of 1982. Through various childhood trips to England—traipsing after my art dealer mom in London's museums and galleries and several August house rentals in various shires—and extensive viewing of British television covering several centuries of drama, I felt somehow prepared for every British person and circumstance I would meet. Maybe it was just having traveled early and having so many European visitors come to the apartment in New York, but

I greeted difference with aplomb and interest, rolled with it and dove in. But when I acted as if I were just another British student, I felt hollow and alien. I was the American on the first-floor corridor of Draycott House, and that meant I was just a visiting tourist no matter how much I had prepared to be a native.

I also had apparently started an argument simply by arriving in England. For some reason, I was required to defend my entire country, the current government, and the menu at McDonald's. I said I was a New Yorker and not an American, but no one seemed to know what that meant except Izzy. My fellow students demanded that I explain why I owned two Mercedes, had a pool in my backyard and front yard, and voted for Ronald Reagan. I explained that none of this was true and asked if they had voted for Margaret Thatcher. Silence. Then more attacks on the evil empire I represented, even though I obviously didn't.

Literature seminars were easier than talks in the pub over pints of warm lager because the books bound us to common ground. I had funny stories to share about feminist party-line readings of *Mrs. Dalloway* in women's studies classes in the States, and in those moments I didn't feel out of place. Running off to London and Paris on weekends, drinking in the campus bars until the prawn man arrived with closing-time snacks—*vinegar and black pepper, please*—and generally having a good time kept me from handing in even a single paper in my 20th Century British Literature seminar. My college back in the States willingly placed a B in my transcript for that seminar based solely on the professor's prediction that "if Jennifer had actually submitted her essays, she would have received a B."

"Remember that end-of-term dinner we had on the corridor?" Izzy asks, as she leads me into her home. "I was thinking about it. Something I was cooking reminded me."

"You were all so mean to me. I thanked everyone for being nice and in return they were mean." We seem to have picked up our last Skype conversation in mid-flow, but I still feel dull dragging this up out of the past. She leads me into her kitchen, and a dumbness descends on me further. The room occupies the same simultaneous multiple eras of the underground stations—a brick wall and stainless steel appliances; a bottle of HP sauce and three small garden pots of fresh herbs. I find myself lost trying to find a place in the time line of this kitchen.

Izzy flips the switch on the electric kettle and pulls down two flowery mugs from a cabinet. "Digestives?" she asks, shaking a roll of biscuits wrapped in red plastic at me.

"They're horrible," I say, but I eat them whenever I'm in England. "There's a store down the block from me—I stare at them when I'm paying for other things." I take a bite of the flat, almost tasteless barely-cookie and add, "Same as always."

"Delicious," Izzy says, and they kind of are, at that moment.

"And they weren't mean," Izzy continues. "You were older, remember. You were being polite, thanking them—us—for making you feel at home. Taking a special occasion to mark a milestone and be gracious. They were wankers."

"God, I love that word. Americans don't use that word. Wanker wanker wanker wanker."

The kettle bubbles and the switch flips off by itself.

"I went home after that year saying *oi* and *cunt* every other word. I thought I was so cool, such a British council flat thug. My mother was appalled, which I guess was the point. I must have sounded disgusting."

"You were just trying too hard. How *is* your mother?"

"Oh, you know. The ever-constant least she can do," I say, watching my friend's eyebrows, waiting for the quick rise of recognition, but she turns her face away before I'm sure she approves.

I sit in front of my steaming cup and look into the submerged and swirling tea bag as our conversation pauses.

Izzy easily moves beyond the silence; in fact, she may not hear it as silence at all. "We always talk about that year," she says brightly. "We need to let it be." She blows into her own steaming cup.

"Where's the baby?" I have momentarily forgotten his name. "And the husband?" His too.

"They went for a walk so we could have some proper grown-up time before I descend into goo-goo-gaa-gaa stupid mom non-artist brain for the rest of the day."

"Can I see what you're working on?" She had posted images on Facebook and held up a sketch for an installation when we were Skyping, but it was hard to get a good sense at that distance.

"Later? It's all very in-progress at the moment. Feeling a bit fragile, a bit artisty this week."

I exhale at the long-gone memory of feeling iffy about something I had created, remembering how hard it was to share a story when I never thought it was finished, which was almost all the time about everything I wrote. What if you share it and someone says something and it goes badly and the whole piece changes, falls apart in your hands at just the moment you thought you had repaired it? When do you let it go? I swallow a big gulp of tea.

I was completely ruined by British pop music the year I spent at Warwick. What I first heard as cloying tunes became deep anchor points for intense nostalgia almost immediately. Spandau Ballet's "True," anything by Ultravox, the rolling pop of A Flock of Seagulls, Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" over and over, and the forever soul-bruising "I Melt With You" from Modern English. We gathered around the only TV on the corridor in Draycott and watched The Police perform "Every Breath You Take" on *Top of the Pops*—all of us hushed and frozen in hypnotic admiration. At the end of the academic year, I lugged home twelve-inch EP singles of all my sentimental faves in my suitcases.

"Did you go yet to that book shop you like in Bloomsbury?" Izzy asks.

"Tomorrow, I think. I want a copy of the new book by that Irish writer I like who doesn't publish in the States."

"Can't you just have Amazon UK ship it to you?"

"It's not the same." I wonder for an instant if this was a bad time to arrange my visit. The baby is small and they are packing and moving and the surrounding city is difficult to navigate—I should have thought more about this trip. It feels at this moment as if I have flown three thousand miles to buy a book and eat cookies I don't like with a friend who has better things to do. I remind myself I have taken this trip to mark a milestone, but sitting in Izzy's kitchen, I wonder what I'm hoping to find, staring into my mug of tea.

"Where do you buy clothes?" is all I can think to ask.

"There're a few shops. We can go, if you like."

"Walking down Oxford Street is like walking down Broadway. It's all the same brands."

Izzy gives me an eyebrow, as if I should know better. "You have all those lovely shops downtown in New York. That woman who makes jewelry in Nolita—where I bought my pregnancy earrings."

Izzy makes this reference as if we share decades of immediately recognizable intimacies. Our past actually only occupies two clusters of

time—the Warwick year and then the last three and a half years triggered by our refriending via Facebook before which we hadn't seen or talked to each other in over twenty years. Our reunion took place in London the third week in January 2009. It was easy to be an American in London then. The British were so happy for us: we were inaugurating our first black president. Everywhere I went, every time I opened my mouth, broad smiles broke out accompanied by "cheers." It was also easy to reconnect with an old friend, to close a gap.

A year and a half after that London inauguration visit, Izzy accompanied Simon to a conference in New York, and we had dinner on Elizabeth Street while he met with clients in Midtown. She showed off earrings she had bought that day, pulling them from their cotton bed in a small pink box and holding them up to the dim light of the restaurant. She said she thought she had gotten pregnant that morning. I laughed, not taking her seriously but sorting through my foggy memories to see if she had been weirdly witchy like that in the past. Not having met Simon made Izzy's declaration all the more unreal to me. "I got pregnant in New York," Izzy giggled with conspiratorial glee, as if where she had conceived somehow made it better.

Izzy reroutes the conversation back to shopping for nonglobal brands and mentions a few names I've never heard of, promising we will refurbish my mass-produced, too-American wardrobe.

"Do you have to dress for your work?"

"They generally don't like me to show up naked." Humor doesn't always translate between us, especially in e-mail or on Skype, but here it's a success as we cackle about naked office workers for a few seconds.

"No, I don't have to dress corporate. In fact, the more artsy the better. I can seem innovative without actually doing any work."

"Can you preserve your energy for your art? Are you in writer brain when you leave the office in the evening?"

It is only with Izzy that I still consider myself a writer who has a day job and is still trying to write at night and on the weekends.

"Sometimes," I answer, but even that is a partial truth.

"You could move here and we could see each other more often. You would write here. London's better for that kind of life than New York."

It's not as if I haven't thought of this, plotted asking the corporate bosses for a transfer to the London office, strategized solutions and stashed money away, wondered what that life would be like.

"You were going to stay after that year. You could stay now." It's difficult to tell if she's being conversational or urgent.

All at once I feel I have news to share with her. Maybe it's why I've made the trip. "Iz—" It's a syllable of introduction, but it comes out as a question. She sees this is painful for me—or at least I hope she sees it—and softens her posture as she sits opposite me at the kitchen table.

"I went back," I say, suddenly realizing I'm about to tell her something very simple and my caught-throat dramatics will be too much. I push out what now feel like weird words. "I went back to college." I see her packed moving boxes all around me. "I finished two weeks ago. I've got my undergraduate degree." I see the bulging zippers of the suitcases stacked along the wall. "Thirty-three years after I began."

She starts smiling—grinning intensely—from my first words and then her excitement spreads through her face and body. She pulls me to her, and I deflate and soften. Her embrace bruises and then revives me.

"It must have been incredible," she shouts too closely into my ear. Then she pushes me away at arm's length and inspects me for evidence of my adult studenthood. "All those books and films and the talk. You must have written endlessly. And the smart, strange people saying such wonderful things, making you think."

"Well, that's just New York," I say, slightly embarrassed at forcing this reaction.

"But all that reading, all that time for writing. It's like meditation, you know. Reading is all about the breath. When I went back to art college, it was like that." I'm relieved she is talking about herself. "I wish I still had more time for—This is amazing, Jennifer. I'm so proud of you. Should we celebrate?"

Before I can answer, there's a ruckus in the hallway, and Izzy is moving to greet her husband and child.

Students at Warwick were told not to go at night into the city center of Coventry—it was dangerous in a way that was not specified—although Izzy and I went into Coventry one afternoon to see the bombed-out cathedral remains. The Nazis bombed Coventry during the war, and firestorms destroyed most of the city center and the medieval cathedral. The church was rebuilt next to the original site, leaving the remaining outer walls and spire to stand as a memorial. There's a stage play about the Allies breaking the Nazis' communications code and Churchill learning that Coventry was to be

bombed. Churchill decides against evacuating the city because it would reveal that the code had been broken. The play's scenario is apparently an imagined set of events. Eight hundred people died in Coventry in November 1940 from the bombing. When Izzy and I stood within those roofless ruined church walls, I couldn't help but feel the sadness of the distance between choices made and not made, between life and stories, between people and time.

Simon shakes my hand awkwardly as he unstraps the baby from his body. Men wear infants here just like they do at home in New York.

"Isabel doesn't shut up about you, so it's lovely to finally meet you," Simon says. I hear him say "lovely" the way Izzy always has, and I wonder if it was something they found they had in common or if he caught it from her.

"Jennifer is all mine so don't try being friends with her," Izzy says as she reaches for Jacob who flings his arms up, fists partially clenched, at his approaching mother.

Simon disappears upstairs, and Izzy takes Jacob into the sitting room. Suddenly I'm alone in the front hallway. I can hear Izzy talking to the baby in tones I barely register, and from above I feel the double thud of what must be Simon's shoes coming off.

"Red or white?" Izzy calls from the sitting room.

"It's just a bachelor's degree," I say as I join her. "We don't have to celebrate."

She's got Jacob on one hip and is inspecting the contents of a small wood-paneled wine cellar in the corner of the room. "You finished something after not finishing it for a long time. This is worth celebrating. Red or white?"

She deposits Jacob into my arms without asking permission while she attends to the wine. The baby pulls at my shirt and utters words that are unintelligible to people other than his mother.

"One of the perks when an artist marries a banker is that there's almost always a lot of wine in the house stored at exactly the right temperature." She pulls the cork out of a Côtes du Rhône fit for daytime drinking.

Izzy has Jacob back on her hip now, and we have our stemmed glasses angled toward each other, ready to touch. The shining red wine settles gently under our fingers.

"Congratulations, my great friend. To words and ideas."

"To words and ideas," I repeat as we click glasses and swallow some of the wine.

"I suppose your sleepy mother didn't have much to say about your

achievement, did she?" Izzy almost whispers this.

I experience a slight panicked pain at this revealing question until I remember she has one of these mothers as well.

"No, she did not get out of bed for even this." I feel brave, released, and relieved saying this to my friend, who knows so well that sinking sensation of watching her own mother resettle herself among her bedcovers as she turns away.

"Shall we get drunk and speak ill of the should-be-dead?" Izzy spins this precisely, with just the right amount of bite and depth. I'm afraid I won't find the balance the way she does, so I only nod and raise my glass again toward her before swinging it back to my lips.

When Izzy and I met that time in London after over two decades of no contact, we ate lunch at an Asian fusion restaurant near the British museum. We found we were wearing almost the exact same clothes—a chic green military-like parka, a large black sweater, jeans and black boots—and had dabbled in the same searches, including yoga, vegetarianism, foreign travel, red wine, married men, and the music of Joni Mitchell. I talked of 9/11 and how quiet New York was afterward. She talked of 7/7 and how London had been silenced in the same way. We talked and talked, rarely had to explain, although she remembered more about my year at Warwick than I did. She wanted to know what music I was listening to now, and we shared earbuds on our phones while we waited for our food. We both had The Duke Spirit's new album in our mobile collections.

"I'm working in parchment and wax. They're coming along well," Izzy says as she attends to a demanding Jacob in her lap. We're in the sitting room on a green velvet couch that grips at the denim of my jeans and makes it difficult to change positions. We are both quite drunk now, letting ourselves slip away into slumped postures and loose language.

"How do you work with it?" I wish we could just go up to the studio on the top floor of the house and see what she's talking about, but she seems to prefer describing it. And I'm not sure either of us could climb the stairs at this point, without tripping or dropping a baby.

"I sketch in charcoal on thick paper—people, buildings, a scene. Then I put parchment paper over that—you can just see the sketch through the parchment and then I melt clear wax over some or all of the images. They

come out sort of blurred and enhanced all at once—altered, deepened."

I try to imagine what this looks like, this wading through layers to get at a new version of things.

"I want to see them," I say. I suspect they will have a swift and fleeting impact, but I hope better thoughts will form.

This afternoon of communal knowing between us has exhausted me and enlivened me all at once. I came to London to establish a before and after, and to share news with my friend because she's the only one who knows what it could mean for me. Then I feel a blossom of new energy in my brain. What Izzy has described of her work has gotten caught on something in my mind—perhaps from the past or from a wish for the future or maybe molded on this very day—and I suddenly feel as if I need to be alone, scribbling in a notebook.

I look up from the intricate patterns of the carpet to tell Izzy that I have to go and do something else now. Before I can say anything, she leans forward, searching for something on the coffee table. The bottle of Côtes du Rhône stands empty near her, and I worry not that she'll knock it over but that there isn't another one at the right temperature in the wine cellar. She disturbs objects in her search and a charcoal pencil rolls gently across the table before I snatch it up. Izzy finds what she's looking for—a soft notebook of lined paper—and thrusts it into my free hand.

"Mind that pencil. It smudges. More wine?"

The baby leans toward me from her lap, his fists partially clenched, as seems to be his way, reaching out to me from Isabel's arms, covering the distance between there and here.