

June 12<sup>th</sup>

Dear All of you,

Despite my controlling streak, there aren't too many rules, so far as the funeral goes. Do it as soon as you can, won't you? Good to get it over with. Lisa knows about the music, if you can bear to go with what I've chosen. We've talked about the committal - you know I only want you lot there, and you know which coffin, and which fabulous outfit. I'd like this poem - which, by the way, I love. Thank god for insomnia and the internet - I'd never have found it otherwise, and you'd be stuck reading something yucky. It should be read by whoever thinks they can do it without crying, because that is my biggest rule. No crying, please. If you can manage it. Oh, and no black. Wear the brightest thing you can find in your wardrobe. Both are clichés, I know, but better the colourful one than the sombre. And try and make the sun shine (although I recognize that this last one might be outside of your control). I'm not saying anything mushy in this letter - strictly business - but I daresay there will be other letters. I have other things to say, she says ominously - if I last long enough to write them ... (don't you just love terminal illness humour?).

I'm sorry you all have to do this; I really am.

So, never ever-ending love, as always ...

Mum

Do not stand at my grave and weep

I am not there, I do not sleep

I am a thousand winds that blow

I am the diamond light on snow

I am the sunlight on the ripened grain

I am the gently falling autumn rain

When you wake in the morning hush

I am the swift uplighting rush

Of quiet birds in circling flight

I am the soft starlight at night

Do not stand at my grave and cry

I am not there, I did not die.

(Isn't that perfect for a funeral in a field?!)

## **Lisa**

Lisa lay back gingerly in her deep aromatherapy bubble bath and looked at the 8" x 10" picture she had taken from the top of the piano downstairs and brought up there with her. She'd propped it behind the taps so that she could see it clearly from where she lay in the steamy water, and now she was trying not to splash it. It was a black and white shot of her mother, Barbara, taken on her sister Jennifer's wedding day, eight years earlier. Mum looked desperately glamorous, with her salon-fresh hair and artfully artless outfit. No mother-of-the-bride peach suit with matching hat for her. Lisa remembered the hat – three feet wide, floppy brimmed espresso coloured straw. No one sitting in the four pews behind her saw a thing of the ceremony. You couldn't see why, and she no longer remembered, but Mum was laughing her big, loud laugh. Her head was thrown back, the ungainly hat long abandoned, the auburn waves of her hair blown messily across her face by the summer breeze. Her large, expressive mouth was open and wide, so that you could see a filling on the top row of her teeth, and her hazel eyes had almost disappeared into the crinkles of her face. It was an especially great picture of her mother, although Barbara had always been photogenic. Lisa could almost hear it when she looked at the picture, deep and throaty, and so, so alive. It was Mum's raucous laugh she would miss the most – that, and the smell of Fracas.

She thought about the last big belly laugh they had shared. It was the day Lisa had helped her mother plan her own funeral. She couldn't bear to do it with Mark, she had said. He would keep crying, and she so badly didn't want to cry. She was almost obsessed by not crying, towards the end. Hannah

was too young, obviously. Amanda wasn't around. Off doing whatever Amanda was doing right now. And Jennifer ... well, Jenny Wren wasn't exactly the person that sprang to mind for the task, she said, making a stupid grimacing face and rolling her eyes. No, she wasn't – Lisa could see that. Part of her was horrified, and part flattered, of course.

She hadn't expected it to be hilarious, but now that she thought about it, she didn't know why not. The two of them had done a great deal of laughing together, through all of Lisa's life. Mum had been quite well that week. She was thin, and a bit of a funny colour – a sort of translucent pale lavender – but she was still mobile, and almost energetic. She'd had all these brochures and computer printouts spread across the dining-room table. Coffins, hearses, wreaths ... She always said life was a retail opportunity, but now, obviously, so was death. The last great party you got to go to, they said, if you planned it right. It was macabre and weird for about the first twenty minutes, and then they both just got silly, because that made it easier. Mum had even got prices for those horse-drawn affairs – but they decided that people weren't really ready for a purple crushed velvet, Kray-style East End send-off. She'd planned the clothes, though. She wanted to wear her Millennium Eve party dress, although it was a bit big for her right now. Which was a minor cause for celebration, and almost the justification for an open-coffin ceremony, since she'd eaten cabbage soup for a week and had one of those ridiculous lymphatic wrap things in order to squeeze into it on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1999, and it hadn't been near her since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000, when the wrap wore off and all the cellulite flooded back. Lisa remembered the dress – it was emerald green, lithe and silky, and her mum had looked amazing in it. The kind of good that almost makes adult daughters a little bit

resentful. There'd been an underwear issue – she'd talked Mum into the first and last thong of her life, convincing her it was the only acceptable option under the dress bar going commando. Mum had rung, on New Year's Day, to say it was so uncomfortable she'd taken it off after about an hour and seen the New Year in knickerless – with a Magistrate and a headmaster at the table, if you please. More laughing.

'Isn't that a bit of a waste of a perfectly lovely Ben de Lisi? I was hoping I might have that,' she had joked. Actually joked. Jennifer would have been fulminating. 'Too bad,' said her mum, winking. 'There'll be a bit of money. Use it to buy one of your own.'

What really did them in was the music. Mum said she couldn't bear to have something miserable – no 'Abide with Me' ('no one can ever make the high notes – you can always hear the tear in their voice'); no 'Nearer My God to Thee' (too *Titanic*.) 'Lord of the Dance' was nixed because it reminded her of Michael Flatley, and who the hell wanted to think of that daft prancer as they were shuffling off their mortal coil? And 'He's Got the Whole World' was far too tambourine-y. She'd got a fondness for 'Jerusalem', which was more wedding than funeral, but who cared? And definitely, definitely 'Be Thou My Vision', although preferably the Van Morrison version, piped in, even if it sounded tinny in the high-ceilinged church. She had also surfed the net for a website recommending popular non-religious music choices, however, and it was this list that finally had them shedding tears of mirth. Frank Sinatra's 'My Way': 'As if dying at 60 would ever be *my* way!' Gloria Gaynor's 'Never Can Say Goodbye': 'Well, I suppose it's more appropriate than "I Will Survive"', she spat out through the chortles, 'but who the hell *are* these people, and why have I never been invited to one of their funerals?'). Imagining the coffin

being carried out to the saccharine strains of Doris Day's 'Que Sera Sera' made their ribs hurt, and the idea of quietly listening to Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again', sounded like the funniest thing ever to the pair of them. When they'd regained their breath, and dried their wet faces, they'd settled on Louis Armstrong's 'Wonderful World'. But the moment her mum nodded decisively and wrote it down on the A4 pad in her round, girlish handwriting, Lisa heard it playing in her head, imagined the scene and had to turn her face away so her mum didn't identify the fresh tears she refused to see.

Now that day – the day they had meticulously planned, but that, somehow, found her so very unprepared, was here. Van Morrison and Louis Armstrong were lined up in the portable CD player and the organist had his sheet music open at 'Jerusalem'. Just that now it wasn't funny any more. Lisa sank down into the hot water so that it splashed around her nostrils and squeezed her eyes shut. If only, if only, if only Andy was here.

## **Jennifer**

Stephen said he was parking the car, but he'd done that. The driveway was full: Mark's car, and Mum's Polo. Lisa's VW beetle – she'd said, when they'd spoken the previous morning, that she was going to stay the night. So he'd driven a little down the street and expertly parallel parked. She could see him, for God's sake. He'd switched off the ignition and wound the window down a little. Now he'd picked up his BlackBerry and was staring at it intently. Today was terribly inconvenient for him. She'd gotten that message. He had these clients, passing through London on some trip from somewhere. They'd only

had today to see him; they were important. He'd made sure she understood that. Not more important than her, obviously, since he was here, and not there but it was close. And he hadn't been gracious about it. She hadn't needed to know, after all, anything about any clients, or meetings, or power lunches. She was burying her mother today. It shouldn't have mattered. He was her husband. Everything about his demeanour, all the way here, had been irritated. The reception got fuzzy on the radio. He'd switched it off viciously. The line for a coffee at the service station was too long. He'd sighed dramatically, and bought a Coke. And now it was too hot. He'd hung the jacket of his black suit on the hook on the back passenger door, but he'd unbuttoned the neck of his shirt and loosened the black knitted tie. She stood at the end of the driveway for a few minutes, realizing she was too embarrassed to go into the house without him. They should be together. He should *want* to be with her, shouldn't he, today of all days?

Stephen hated funerals. He'd confessed to her, once, long ago, that coffins terrified him. He couldn't stop thinking about the body inside. Wondering how it looked, how it smelt, how it would feel to the touch. He remembered losing it completely, when he was about eight years old, at his grandfather's funeral – having to be taken out of the crematorium, screaming.

He was right about the weather, at least. It was too sunny for this. It was what Mum would have wanted, but to Jennifer it seemed wrong. It was like the day those two planes flew into the World Trade Center. As they made their final descent into hell the sky behind them was too impossibly, perfectly blue. It wasn't the right backdrop. She wanted a slate-grey sky and drizzle; she wanted to shiver with the chill. Not this beautiful day, not today.

The door opened, and Mark stood on the doorstep. ‘Jen?’ Jennifer shuffled from one foot to the other, feeling like she’d been caught out. She waved and gestured towards Stephen. ‘We’ll be there in a minute. Stephen’s just...’ but Mark was coming towards her. He wasn’t dressed – not for the funeral. He had on a pair of linen shorts, and a scruffy pink T-shirt, and he was barefoot. He didn’t speak when he got to her, just opened his arms and drew her into a tight embrace. Jennifer felt herself stiffen momentarily, then relax and lean into the man who had been her stepfather for the last sixteen years. God knows she needed the hug.

When he drew back, he put his hands on either cheek, and looked intently into her face. He smelt of soap and coffee. ‘How are you doing?’

‘I’m okay. You?’

‘I’m trying.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘She got the weather she ordered, hey?’ Jennifer nodded, and smiled weakly.

Mark looked behind her, at Stephen. ‘He coming in?’

‘He’s just got to check a few things... There’s a lot going on, you know, at work, and...’

Mark took her hand and the squeeze he gave it said ‘Don’t explain him, don’t defend him.’ Out loud, he just said, ‘Don’t worry. No hurry. Amanda’s not here yet. Show doesn’t start for a couple of hours. Come on in – I’ve got some coffee going, and muffins and croissants...’ Jennifer gave the back of Stephen’s head one more sad, reproachful glance, and went into the house with Mark.

**Hannah**

Hannah stared at her face in the mirror and wondered whether it was okay to wear mascara. She couldn't wear it to school, but she could at the weekends and on holidays. To Church? There'd never been a rule that she'd known of. Maybe if she wore it she wouldn't cry, because she'd know that then it would run. Maybe wearing it would help her not do it.

'No one was with her when she died.' That was a line from *Charlotte's Web*. It had been one of her favourite books when she was young. And that was one of her best bits, the line when Charlotte the spider had finished her web-making, egg-laying mission, and gently slipped away into oblivion. 'No one was with her when she died.' It was so deliciously sad. You could revel in it, in the small dry ache it caused in the back of your throat and the little sting in your ribs. When she was younger, Hannah liked to feel sad, so long as it was 'artificial' sad; that was what she called it when the sadness was about something that wasn't real. Like when Leonardo DiCaprio slips beneath the icy waves at the end of *Titanic*, with Kate Winslet hoarsely whispering her promise never to forget him. Or when Charlotte died. Well, this was different. This sad was real; the ache wasn't fun. Trying not to cry was a huge effort, one she made all the time, all day, until she got into bed at night, and didn't have to try not to any more. Especially today. They'd all promised that they wouldn't. They'd promised Mum, although Hannah didn't think it was fair of her to ask for that. Still, none of it was fair, was it? She tried not to think about Charlotte anymore. Unhelpful bloody spider! There'd been loads of people around when Mum died, anyway. She'd died in a crowd scene. All of them there, around that horrible high hospital bed they'd brought in, so incongruous in the pretty room. Her sisters, Jen and Lisa ... Dad. And the

vicar, and the doctor – both more by accident than by design, she thought. It made her think of a Philip Larkin poem she'd learnt at school – something about the priest and the doctor running across the fields in their long coats trying to figure out all the answers to all the questions. The doctor came every other day, checking up on Mum. The vicar came because Mum had asked for him, which was slightly odd, since Hannah only really ever remembered seeing him before this year on Christmas morning, once every three hundred and sixty-five days, belting out 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', the tip of his nose perpetually bright red and dripping with a winter cold. She told Dad she was hedging her bets. Not in front of the vicar, of course. And even more people downstairs, Mum's friends, in and out on a rota, making tea that no one wanted to drink and sandwiches that no one wanted to eat and taking phone calls no one else wanted to answer.

She decided against the mascara, and picked up the hairbrush, running it through her long auburn hair. Mum's hair. Dad's hair was silvery above the ears, and still pretty dark on the top. That would have been okay too – the dark, not the silver. But she had Mum's hair. When she'd finished, she sat on the end of her bed, with her hands folded in her lap, squeezed tight together. And waited.

Jennifer didn't want coffee, but she took a mug for something to do with her hands, and wandered across the large living room. The house was immaculate. It was a great house for the summer. Mark had built it. Not with his own hands – he was an architect, and he'd designed it for him and Mum the year they married, just before Hannah was born. They'd bought a hideous

bungalow with peeling, custard-yellow paint, on a lovely three-acre plot, and immediately knocked it down, even as the neighbours watched, open-mouthed, muttering to each other about how the elderly couple who had sold it to them had bothered to remove every picture hook and filled every crack in the place. It had taken six months to build the new place, and they'd lived in a caravan on the site the summer it went up. Jennifer remembered her mother standing on the steps of the van, pregnant with Hannah, offering cups of tea made on a camping stove. She remembered how obscene it had looked to her then. Jennifer had been 22. She hadn't lived at home since she was 18, and she felt like she barely knew Mark. It was all wrong – her mother, 45 years old, with her vast, fertile baby-belly. Living in this temporary squalor with a man ten years younger than she was. Jennifer had been embarrassed for her then, or for herself.

Now she stood staring at the garden out of the tall glass doors that ran the entire length of the back of the house downstairs and wondered whether she'd just been jealous. She'd never lived here; she'd never really been a part of the family that happened here, the happy, laughing life they'd had before Mum got ill. Each corner showed her a different memory. Baby Hannah, with her smooth, round arms and legs kicking contentedly on a plaid blanket under that apple tree. Her mother, kneeling at her beloved herb garden, tending the fragrant plants. Mark flipping burgers on the barbeque; Mum, radiant with happiness and contentment. But she'd always been just a visitor.

Stephen loved the house. He'd spent hours, the first time he'd come, wandering around with Mark, looking at details Jennifer had never really

taken in. His questions, and examinations, had gone way beyond flattery, although Mark was always happy to show it off. Jennifer knew he wanted something like it for himself, one day. They couldn't afford it now, of course. Their flat was a good start – right area, high ceilings, great light. It was modern and fashionable, all dark wenge wood and stainless steel. But it was nothing like this, and it had nothing to do with money. It just didn't have the heart.

Mark came and stood by her, gazing into the garden. 'Needs a damn good water. Everything's dying.' He didn't seem to realize what he had said.

She smiled at him. 'You've been busy. Cut yourself some slack.'

'She'd be cross.'

'No she wouldn't.'

Mark smiled his half-smile at her, and she smiled back. 'Okay, maybe a bit cross.'

Then, 'Where's Hannah?'

'Upstairs. Lisa was having a bath. I think Hannah's in her room.'

'No Andy?'

'No. Haven't asked her about it. She came last night. We had a curry and too much red wine. But she hasn't mentioned him.'

Jennifer nodded. She wondered if she ought to offer to go and see Hannah. She didn't want to. 'How is Hannah doing?'

'She's quiet. She's been quiet for days. No crap music blaring out of her room. She hasn't been on the phone much to her mates, and no one's been round. I expect they'd like to come, some of them, but I don't think she's spoken to any of them. I'm not even sure she's told them, although they must

know by now. She hasn't even watched *Coronation Street*, which has me *really* worried.' He was trying to sound lighthearted, but he was failing.

'It's early days, Mark. She's lost her Mum. She's only 15.'

'I know. It's ... it's hard. I'm trying, but I don't have a lot of juice left in my tank, you know? I know she needs me. But I need ... I need Barbara. I need her to help me. And she's not here.'

Upstairs, someone knocked gently on Hannah's door.

'C'mon in.'

It was Lisa, still damp from the bath, wrapped in a bath sheet.

'You got any make-up, Hannah? I forgot mine. Can you believe it? Can I come in?'

Hannah nodded, and pointed to her dressing table. 'Not much. Some – mascara and lip gloss and stuff. You can borrow whatever you want.'

'Cheers.' Lisa closed the door again behind her, and let the towel fall to the ground. She was wearing a strapless bra, and she had a thong on. They were beige, with lace, and they looked expensive, and nice. Hannah felt shy, and Lisa saw her glance away.

'Excuse the blatant semi-nudity but I'm so hot. That bath was boiling, and it must be 90 degrees out there already. I should have had a cold shower, really.' She was pretty red, and her legs were blotchy. 'I forget you're not really used to sisters running around naked. Me and Jen did it all the time when we were younger.'

That didn't sound like Jennifer. 'It's fine, really.'

Lisa caught her sister's glance. 'Okay ... not Jennifer. Just me. I ran around naked all the time when we were younger. Jen just tolerated it.'

Lisa sat down in front of the dressing table and started applying make-up, although Hannah didn't think she really needed it. She was dead pretty. Lisa's hair was much lighter than her own – strawberry blonde, with really light bits in it. And she had all these freckles, tiny ones, across her nose and cheeks. But her lashes and eyebrows were surprisingly dark (maybe she did something to them?), above eyes that were more green than hazel most of the time, and almond shaped. Hannah didn't think Lisa had had spots when she was young – if she had, there was no photographic evidence in the albums Mum kept. She was slim and tall, with great skin and hair that just looked nice, without you spending ages on it – the kind you could just put up in a ponytail, and the ponytail didn't make you look like you just hadn't had time to wash it – it looked pretty and natural, and Hannah felt a stab of envy and misery. She wasn't spotty, or fat, or ugly, or anything. She knew that much, at least. She just didn't feel comfortable in her own skin like Lisa seemed to. She wasn't easy like her sister was. She'd rather die than have anyone see her in her bra and knickers.

'What are you wearing?' she asked Lisa.

'Well ... Mum really did a number on me with her "brights and primaries only" thing. I'm more of a black and beige girl, myself; neutrals all the way. I found something in the summer sales. Don't you hate how they have those in July – it's like summer's over before it even starts, don't you think? It's bright yellow. A bit Jackie O, I thought. A sundress, thank God! I doubtless look like a giant banana in it. But it fits the bill. You?'

‘I’ve got this pink dress, from last summer. I wore it to a wedding –my friend Amy’s sister got married and she was allowed to invite one friend, and she took me. Mum got it for me, so I think she liked it. It’s a bit sparkly, is all ...’ Hannah’s voice tailed off.

Lisa looked at her in the mirror, through narrowed eyes. ‘She’d love that even more,’ she said, as gently as she could. She swivelled around on the stool.

‘Hannah?’

Hannah stood up. ‘Don’t be nice to me, Lisa. You’ll make me cry. Please, don’t, okay? Let’s just get it over with; I just want to get it over with. Doesn’t matter what we’re wearing, does it? It’s a stupid, stupid rule.’

Lisa nodded, and when she spoke again, she made her tone jokey. ‘Well, you and Jennifer have that opinion in common, at least. She was bitching about it the other night on the phone. Said that Stephen would refuse to wear anything but black; said she was thinking about it. I said she could compromise – black dress, red shoes, you know. God knows what she’ll be wearing when she turns up.’

‘What about Amanda?’

‘God knows if *she’ll* even turn up...’

They smiled hopefully at each other. That was how Amanda was – you wouldn’t exactly count on her in a crisis, although neither of them really doubted that she would be here today.

‘Is someone coming with you?’

‘No.’ Lisa looked at her quizzically. Hannah shrugged. ‘Didn’t ask anyone. I don’t really want anyone to come. How about you? Andy isn’t coming?’

'No, he's not.'

'How come?'

That was a good question ...

The sound of a car stopping outside the house saved Lisa from further questions. The engine idled, doors were opened and closed again. Hannah ran to the window.

'It's Amanda.' Until she heard the words, and felt the relief, Lisa hadn't realized how much she needed to hear that her sister had arrived.