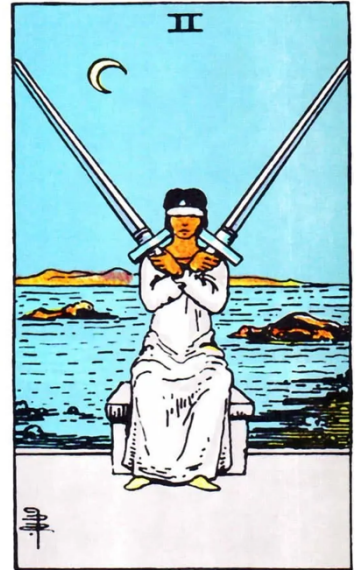
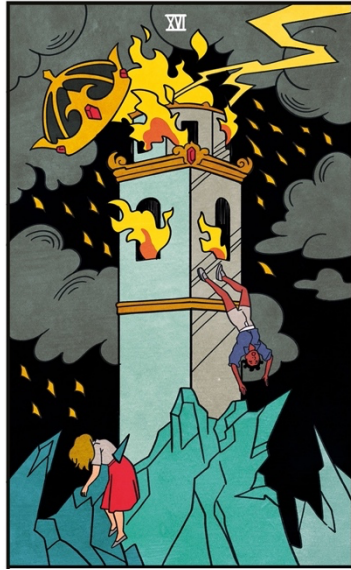


All the Things I've Grown

by Martha Harris

Content Warning: contains mental health struggles, family turmoil, death, miscarriage





FIVE OF CUPS

When representing the past, this card may suggest a great loss, betrayal or disappointment that could be holding you back from moving forward or attaining a goal. When we experience loss, we enter into a process of grieving that will last until we are ready to meet the world again. Then we can discover new opportunities and experiences. Good often comes from the bad. Perhaps now is the time to embrace the good, and shift your perspective from past to future, from what we have lost to what life is offering you. Let go of despair and open your heart. Traditionally, this card may indicate an inheritance, legacy or gift from someone who we have lost.

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It wasn't the first time I'd been left alone. Surrounded by Saturday morning grease and half eaten poached eggs. Squeaky crockery and conversations turned up to ten. I picked at my nails under the table, my hand yoyoing back and forth to check my phone.

He was late again.

I stared into the pot of cheap cutlery that sat untouched in the middle of the table. It was the type of cutlery you could bend with your hands. How many mouths had those forks seen inside, I wondered? I could just about make out my dull reflection in the convex side of a spoon. All hair, with a slither of face coming through between the blonde. Very still. Waiting not so patiently, anymore.

It was coming up to my thirty-fourth minute sat in the café and I was getting tired of the gaudy polka dot tablecloths and overly attentive waiters who seemed determined to either bring me food or take my table away. My brother was always late, but rarely more than twenty minutes.

I called him again. Voicemail. No one uses voicemail these days but fuck it. I could express my anger after the tone, where it would probably never get heard.

‘Jared, it’s Olive. Where ARE you?’ I hissed, covering my mouth with a casual hand so as not to distract the happy toast crunchers. ‘I’ve been waiting for fucking ages and I’m just going to have to leave soon, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do. I know you’re probably hungover or whatever, but if you didn’t want to spend your birthday morning with me, you could’ve let me know before I came all the way here from fucking London.’

Sharp April air felt like a blessing as the door dinged behind me and I stepped out into the shadowy side of the street. Sun was beating bright and harsh onto the opposite pavement, and I crossed to feel it. Regretting bringing my coat, I started in the direction of Jared’s house. If he couldn’t come to me, I’d have to go to him.

I made my way through town, bag hanging heavy with birthday booze for my brother. Brighton was always busy on Saturdays, and on a hot spring day the city was guaranteed to buzz. A strange mix sauntered at all angles: small children dragging on tired parents’ arms and grey faces walking grey pavements on their return home from the night before. Premature shorts exposed pale skin that soaked up the first of the year’s rays, and people walked eagerly in the direction of the beach. A homeless woman sat in their path throwing a brand-new squeaky toy for her staffie, her weathered face full of love. Pre-teens walked past her with tiny shopping bags from H&M and Claire’s Accessories, giving her their spare change when she asked because they didn’t know how to say no. A distinct blend of fried breakfast and Lush cosmetics was clammy on the air. I’d missed this place. It felt like part of me. Embedded in my genes and my deepest sense of self. But the warmth of it came with an unavoidable sting of memories. Jared and I had spent our whole childhoods here, and probably the best and worst times of our lives.

Dad sold the family home a couple of years ago now. It felt huge to me as a child, but it was actually quite a small place for a family of four. Our neighbourhood was built of row after row of close-knit terraced houses, all different colours.

Mum knew everyone nearby, and we’d always be going for playdates with neighbours and friends. Dad was usually working, often spending days at a time in London earning money so mum could make her children her job. He would always be back on Fridays though, and take little Jared and I, quivering with excitement, down to the fish and chip shop. We got to know the owner, and he would present us with a shiny yellow chip to eat while we waited. One for me, one for Jared. They’d always be too hot, and we’d sit in

the corner blowing on them until dad came over with our dinner. If we were lucky, we might drive down the coast to Rottingdean or Ovingdean and join the milky white cliffs in facing the ocean. In the summer we took our bikes or scooters, and Dad would race us down the paths on foot. Mum came occasionally, but she liked her Friday nights off. She'd usually go out to see a friend, or sometimes we'd find her curled up on the sofa with a glass of wine. But on the nights she was home, she'd jump up to greet us at the door, arms open wide like wings.

In winter I would lie in bed with my palms together composing long, elaborate prayers to God, Buddha, the angels and the unicorns asking for snow. The few times it actually happened were better than any Christmas or birthday. Queen's Park would be teeming with shrill children on slow toboggans, soggy stressed parents herding them around like livestock. There would always be tears on the way home: red cheeks, blue fingers and heavy wet feet trudging down the hill through melting snow.

Jared lived at the top of the hill in Kemptown now. In a crummy flat above the newsagents with two mates who never opened the curtains or collected the junk mail. I rang the buzzer four times before anyone answered.

Louis, I think his name was, came to the door looking greasy and weak.

'Hi?' he said, obviously irritated by my presence. I waited for him to open his eyes properly. 'Oh, you're Jared's sister? Erm... Olive?' he murmured into his hair.

'Yeah, is he here?' I snapped back through a tight smile.

'Nah, nah... not seen him since the pub yesterday. It was gearing up to be quite a big night, we were all getting wasted, then he just disappeared. He does that sometimes though; think he just likes being alone.'

'Are you sure he's not here?'

'Nah, I would know. He never came home.'

'Alright. Well. Tell him he's a knob and to call me when he gets back... Maybe don't tell him I'm angry though.' I took a deep breath and tried to give Louis a genuine smile. I needed him on my side. 'Thanks so much for your help. I really appreciate it.'

I wanted to scream.

How could he do this? He knows I'm in my last two months of uni. He knows how much work I have on. And should get it – he's a student too. Not that he'd been making much effort with that recently. I checked my phone for the hundredth time.

My rage balled into a lump in my throat. I tried to breathe it away, but it felt like it was choking me slowly.

I found myself back near the south lanes – the posh bit where middle-class mums take their mums out for lunch that's never good enough. I had a feeling I wouldn't be hearing from my brother anytime soon, but I didn't feel ready to leave yet. Soaking my face in sun, I stood against a wall on the main drag, allowing my eyes to close while I listened in to the Saturday soundscape. Distant sea churned and coffee grinders shouted endless espressos. The warmth on my face was calming. Freckles peeked across my nose and cheeks, waking from a winter of hibernation.

I noticed her as soon as I opened my eyes. An old woman sat in the middle of the pedestrianized street at a small table layered in colourful Indian fabrics. Her badly dyed blonde-grey ringlets billowed like smoke in the wind. I walked towards her.

A minute later, I was shifting awkwardly on a three-legged camping stall as she overturned the cards I had chosen. Past, present and future. Three cards. She looked at me again with dark sunset blue eyes. Almost black. She smelled like Parma Violets. Immense breasts erupted over her frilly neckline and her brows furrowed into one as she inspected my cards. I listened to her purring things like *fascinating, interesting... I see...* I didn't really see.

Tarot reading wasn't a totally foreign concept to me - mum used to do it occasionally when I was growing up. I definitely would have called myself a sceptic though. People see what they want to see. Anything can apply to anyone if they look hard enough. But it seemed like a fun thing to do to pass the time. Maybe I'd get a story out of it for my housemates.

The old woman inhaled sharply, crow's feet narrowing around her pink glittered eyes as she spoke. Her voice was squeaky but soft like chalk. Her fake gold jewellery clanged like samba as she gestured and rambled her way through the reading, never drifting from my gaze. She reminded me of a baby, staring plainly with no inhibitions or self-awareness. I wasn't sure what to make of her, but I nodded my head and repeated a cycle of *mmm, yes, right.*

She rambled on, 'the construction of self is everything, my dear. Nothing influences our experience in this world like our own conception of ourselves. Who you think you are defines you. What you think you can and can't do – you're probably right. And only you have the power to change that...'

As I was leaving, she grabbed my hand. Her skin looked loose and lame against mine, pink and plump in comparison.

'You know he's always with you, sweetheart. Your brother. He wants you to know.'

I laughed, 'well. I'm not so sure about that. He didn't turn up to meet me for breakfast today.'

She paused for a moment. Her black eye make-up had sweated into the lines of her wrinkles. 'No dear, not that brother.'

'I... I don't have another brother. He's the only one. It's just us,' I stuttered.

'Did your mother lose a child before she had you dear? Your brother is no longer present in our world. But he stays with you in spirit. He wants you to know.'

I stared blankly into her face which looked more dead by the second. I dropped a twenty to the table and heard the camping stool falling into the pavement behind me.

'Ask your mother about it,' she called after me.

Tears poked at my eyes as I bumped shoulders with the oncoming flow of bodies.

I wormed my way through the lanes and back towards the old house. I hadn't been there since my first year of uni. Childhood faces once known bobbed around in crowds which spewed through narrow streets. I looked down and pretended not to see them. It was almost like nothing had changed and I was desperate for the past. I ached for it. How many times had I walked these streets as a girl, my tiny hand held tight in a parent's palm? It was unbearable to know that I could never do it in the same way again. Brighton taunted me: it looked the same, but everything had changed.

As children, the main event of the weekend was often a trip to Sainsbury's. When Jared got too big for the seat in the trolley, it was my responsibility to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't grab random things off the shelves. Mum would pick up some sticky chicken from the deli counter and let us eat it in the shop. We'd get sent on little missions to get pasta or apples, racing around the store to see who could find it first, leaving a trail of sticky fingerprints wherever we went.

I started secondary school first, then Jared a couple of years later. I began to get more interested in friends than family, and mum and Jared would go to Sainsbury's alone. As I got older, the only place I wanted to be was with my best friend El: we were obsessed with each other and got to know a big group of friends. From the ages of twelve to eighteen we practically lived at each other's houses, spending our weekends shoplifting eyeliners in Churchill Square and smoking spliffs in the park. I don't think mum and dad really knew what I got up to, or they didn't mind too much. I liked to think I was daring but they knew just as well as I did - I was too sensible to get into trouble.

I almost didn't recognize our house when I approached it. The new owners had painted the outside lavender over the sunny yellow it used to be. I could see the inside was different too. Lifeless monochrome and horrible modern furniture. The table where Jared and I ate our eggs in the morning had been replaced with a corner sofa and flat screen television. Still no word from Jared and I had an overwhelming desire to punch something. I wouldn't be here if he'd just met me for breakfast. But I didn't know what else to do. Maybe this was good for me.

I walked to the bench where I'd go after a fiery teenage blow up with mum. These arguments were defined by the ruthless struggle for popularity that ensued in my first years of secondary school. A never-ending contest to see who could have the shortest skirt or the biggest thigh gap. El and I would spend hours reading beauty magazines after school, discussing which diets to go on or the fake tans and eyeliners we wanted for our birthdays. Mum couldn't stand it, of course. But she had to give up the battle for fear of losing me.

Once A Levels began, I didn't have much time to think about all that anymore. Jared and I had a new-found appreciation for family, and mum did everything she could to support us through our exams. She would wake up early to make sure we had a substantial breakfast every morning. She revoked all our chores and helped us revise during exam season. Dad was working more and more and usually stayed in London for most of the week. We would often do something with dad at the weekends to give mum some time to herself.

Jared got his GCSE results, then I got my A Level results a week later. We both did well, all credit to mum. She waited two weeks to tell us about the cancer and five months later she was gone.

It felt like we all just sat around looking at things for the first couple of months. Life turned into knocks on the door, homemade sympathy soups and long sighs. Then nothing. People move on quickly. Me and Jared just wanted things to go back to how they were, and on the nights when dad was away, we would stay up together laughing, crying, talking about mum. Dad had other ideas though. He was still spending most of the week away, and that summer we found out why.

Suzie was younger, prettier and not even half as nice as mum. I wondered how long she'd really been on the scene. She had a habit of talking over dad and would get sulky if he didn't pay her enough attention. Jared and I tried our best to like her. Dad told us again and again how happy he was now. We wanted to be happy for him too, but we were still too sad about mum. Suzie would come and stay every couple of months, and I always got extra shifts at the pub when she was around. She'd always say things like 'I know I'm not your mum, but I'm always here if you need a girly chat' or roll her eyes and say 'men, what are they like eh?'. She'd come armed with lovely expensive gifts and make a big show out of giving them to us before stealing dad for the weekend and pretending we didn't exist.

As my train pulled into London, the sun was dissolving into an orangey glow that cast long, bottomless shadows out past the buildings. We chugged through skyscrapers that protruded from the city at all angles, slotting together like a greyscale game of Tetris.

Red wine and a 'wahey!' greeted me as I walked through the door. Saturday night and everyone had started early it seemed. It was our second year living in Mile End. It had been quite the love affair. El and I met Bibi and Nathan in first year. It didn't take long for us to move into our own place which had become a centre for small parties, Uber Eats scamming and an excessive number of plants which hung off ceilings and draped off window ledges. We'd managed to do a pretty good job of decorating the place into a lawless display of colours and textures. From 99p Ikea cushions to vintage Persian rugs – we had the spread.

El was the matriarch of the house. She was all neatly brushed hair and leftovers in Tupperware. One of those people who always seemed like she had her shit together and time left over to help everyone else get their shit together too. She somehow managed to work part-time at our local organic, whole food, no sugar, everything's-double-the-price shop. Which we all secretly loved for the discount. She spoke fluent astrology, and strongly

identified with her Capricorn traits. In other words, she liked to blame her controlling nature on the stars.

I'd met Bibi the day I moved into halls. I liked that she called me 'babes' in every other sentence. El's dad had dropped me and my four boxes at the entrance where I sat trying to work out what the hell was going on. Bibi came around the corner, her grey-blue eyes like Brighton sea water on a sunny day. She was a very particular kind of front-cover pretty, and it didn't take me long to work out that she knew it. Effortless but perfectly considered. She was from up north, and I pretended I knew where Leeds was, not disclosing the fact that I'd never been past Cambridge. She was a calorie-counting, relationship-hating, lover-of-flowers which she bought for herself at the supermarket every week.

Nathan, or Nath as we called mostly called him, had met El on their course. He was the most loyal friend and the last person I would want to meet on Tinder. The king of one-night stands, and Bibi, El and I would play a little game on a Saturday morning, searching for unfamiliar shoes to work out their gender, job, star sign. But the same person never came twice – he was a serial ghoster. The most surprising thing about Nathan was that he was a maths genius. You'd never think it – he was stylish, sociable, political – a real catch. There was nothing stereotypically 'nerdy' about him. Most people would have expected him to work in a speciality coffee shop or a small gallery in Hackney. He was full of surprises.

I didn't want to tell them about Jared yet.

The radio cackled out 90s anthems as we sat around in the kitchen gossiping about our neighbours. I smirked into my wine as El discussed her new boyfriend: a self-proclaimed 'alternative man' whose main interests were expressive dance, drum circles, fungi and not paying rent.

After a bottle of wine, I sat in the garden smoking cigarettes with Bibi and Nath while El washed up.

'How's things with your brother, Olive?' Nathan probed in a half breath as he exhaled.

'Ha well,' I sighed. I'd only just managed to put that to one side. Silence hung onto the grey cloud between us. 'Yeah, he didn't turn up. He can be such a dick sometimes, honestly.'

I recalled the events of the day, that I was still waiting for an apology. I received the expected reaction that was meant to make me feel like they understood. El came out to join in the chorus of *'fucks sake, what a wanker, poor you Olive, that's so shit'*.

A sweaty, prickling discomfort crept up my spine as I nodded along emptily. Bitching with my friends usually made me feel better. But images of Jared, dead or in trouble began to float in my mind. What if there really was something wrong and we were just sat around complaining?

I contemplated telling my dad, who had recently decided to step out of our lives and make a new one with Suzie on a Greek island. They were doing up their new house and all he could talk about was the shade of pink going in the guest bedroom and what a nightmare the builders were. That was the last thing I needed right now.

I held my breath and looked up to the stars. But of course, it was just a blanket of muddy light pollution. Like a freshly hoovered carpet. The absence of stars was probably the only thing I hated about this place.

I made my way up to bed after that, a bit sick and a bit sad. Mouth like ash and Colgate, I sunk into my bony mattress wishing I could cry.

Low clouds let me sleep that morning. Alabaster and grey like an ugly kitchen counter. I jumped to my phone when I woke but all I found was a text from dad.

Put 300 in your acc. Hope you're having a good weekend. Dx

Useless. I assumed he also hadn't heard from Jared or seen that as a cause for concern. Dad had drifted from regular contact with both of us since we started uni. He was just less and less bothered. That seemingly had a knock-on effect on mine and Jared's relationship. We used to be so close when mum died. We looked after each other – I don't know what I would have done without him. But after a couple of months, it seemed like our relationship just began slipping further and further into irritation and snippy remarks and boring conversation. It was weird to realise that the family you once held so close and dear, a unit that felt indestructible, had fallen from beneath your feet.

A hangover lingered so I didn't arrive downstairs until after midday. Bibi, El and Nath had become one with the sofa, a tangle of hairy limbs and laptops. I headed into the garden, ignoring their intermittent groans and screeches of hysterical hangover laughter.

I went to spend some time with my seedlings. They were still so small, but I loved watching them grow. Courgettes, cherry tomatoes, green beans, peas, sweet peas. My favourite were the sunflowers. They were so tiny but held such potential as they sent out their roots and leaves, vulnerable yet confident in their search for what they needed to survive. Young, strong, steadfast but a few days neglect and they could be gone. Resilient and vulnerable at the same time.

Raw moist soil was getting ready to grow all sorts that season. Pollen floated on the breeze like invisible confetti that made me sneeze. The cherry trees blushed blossom again. Powdery pinks and snowy whites lined the streets, speaking to the summer ahead.

I toyed with my phone, dropped it on the patio, swore at another crack in the screen. My anger bled into frustration. Jared was still on voicemail. I knew I should be doing uni work. It was six weeks until I'd be finished, and I was losing the will day by day. Stomach made of knots, I fidgeted my ring up and down my finger.

Dad sounded so surprised to hear from me. I wasn't sure what to say to him. I heard all about the dreamy new sunbathing beach they'd found - so secluded they'd only ever seen one other person there.

He didn't ask me about Jared. I told him regardless, tricking myself into thinking he might be helpful. It was like he was there, and he could hear me speaking but couldn't listen to a word I was saying. He hadn't heard from Jared either – he must be off having a good time, he told me. It was his birthday after all! He was sure Jared would be very sad to have missed the birthday breakfast.

Suzie chimed in out of nowhere telling me not to worry. Of course, she'd been listening in. He couldn't do or say anything without her there. I was genuinely unsure whether it was possible for them to be in separate rooms.

They went back to talking about their dinner plans as if it was the most interesting thing I'd hear all day. I wished I could sound more hostile.

'Wow sounds amazing. Enjoy!' I said.

Three days later and I still hadn't heard from Jared. Neither had his friends. I'd been messaging Louis every day and even he seemed worried now. I wasn't sleeping properly. My housemates made me cups of tea while I wavered between tears and blind rage. They could see I was struggling but they didn't really understand. Bibi brought me a bunch of salmon-

coloured roses and put them next to my bed. Days became long showers and trying to finish a plate of food. I gave up on uni work and planted more seeds in the garden instead.

El seemed worried too – she would come and tell me about her boy dramas and what had happened at work the other day and we'd giggle then she'd go quiet and say in a small voice, 'nothing from Jared then?'

She'd known him since he obsessed over Lego and slept in mum and dad's bed. I tried to pretend it was alright and sometimes I managed. I smiled when people tried to comfort me and laughed when something was funny and stayed quiet when I started feeling panicky.

'He's probably off with some girl and lost his phone,' Bibi said when I floated the idea of calling the police, 'I can see why you're worried babes, but honestly, he's a grown man. He can handle himself.'

Dad thought getting the police involved was a bad idea too. Not that I wanted to. In fact, I was desperate not to make it any more real than it needed to be. The last thing I wanted was to talk to some pompous and wildly unhelpful police officer. But I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't sit through another day of blank stares and forced smiles.

The next morning, I crept up to my room, pulled my duvet up around me and called the police. Jared called me two hours later.



THE TOWER

This card is suggestive of a period of immense change and growth, either internally or externally. This may indicate a major upheaval, because destruction precedes creation, and fury precedes grace. Old structures, personalities or beliefs may be overthrown to make space for new, radical change. A sudden release of tension may be a manifestation of this but remember that every time aspects of our life or ourselves fall apart, obstacles are being removed so we can then reform, stronger than before. Liberation and awakening emerge from the destruction.

...

He sits across the table from me and I'm screaming. There's damp on my palms and bitterness on my breath. Dad watches me and his body begins to shake from the inside out. Deep belly laughs. I scream louder and I'm punching him again and again and again and he's bleeding a wine-red river down his face. It mixes with his sweat and cologne like a sour cocktail. I'm shouting, *how could you do this to me? I'm your daughter. How could you do this? Where have you been? You bastard! You bastard!* His laughter rattles through his bones and consumes him. And then I see it. Tucked away in an empty corner of the room in a pool of sticky blood and mucus. I can just about make out its tiny hands gripping its cheeks as if protecting itself from something so horrifying. I'm drawn to him, I want to hold him, care for him. But his body is thin and skeletal like a bat. He's dying but I can't save him.

...

It was still dark outside when I opened my eyes. My phone screen glared, illuminating the space around me. I never switched it off at night anymore. I pawed my way around the duvet to find it, the moon smiling down through my window like a friend. I instantly knew who it was. Fourteen missed calls. Christ.

I called back straight away but knew he wouldn't answer. He'd made up his mind that it wasn't safe to answer incoming calls, he would only make them himself, so I hung up after a few rings. His name instantly reappeared on my screen.

'Jared... what's going on? Are you alright?' I groaned, surprised by how raspy my voice was.

'Olive! So, listen... I've been thinking right? And, and I think I've worked something out.'

'It's five in the morning, Jared.'

'I know, I know. Sorry, sorry, sorry. This is important though.' His voice was shaky and small. He obviously hadn't slept. I deep breathed and stayed quiet.

'So, you remember, um... that old neighbour we had on Lincoln Street? The old lady. Yeah, yeah. She used to dye her hair pink and stuff. Weird person,' he spoke quickly, occasionally tailing off like he was losing his train of thought.

'Yeah, I remember. She was lovely. Mary from number-'

'Mary!' he practically shouts, "that's her name, yeah. Yeah. Mary.'

'Yeah, what about her?' My patience was starting to falter. The longer this went on, the less likely it was I'd be able to go back to sleep.

'So, I've been thinking about that woman. Mary, yeah... So, she used to bring us round soups and shit, didn't she? When mum was sick? Yeah. And I was thinking that... because mum got so much more ill after, uh, Mary started bringing the soups and dinners round. I always thought she was a weirdo, I really did. I said it to you as well, didn't I? I always thought Mary was up to no good.'

He rambled on, explaining his theory as to how our lovely old neighbour Mary had somehow poisoned our mother into dying of cancer. He'd seen Mary in town and she'd apparently ignored him (she's half deaf and at least in her eighties) which got him thinking.

'Look, Jared... these are some interesting ideas. Maybe we can discuss it another time? You must be exhausted. Please get some sleep, it's really important. Have you spoken to dad?'

‘Nah, he never really answers. If he does, him and Suzie are always too busy painting and shit,’ he muttered.

‘Yeah, I know. Call him again. Get some sleep,’ I mustered the words I felt the least, ‘love you.’

I dozed for a couple of hours after that. The night was so suffocating that I’d slept with the window wide open, and my duvet kicked down to my ankles, allowing the breeze to hop across my skin as I slept. The heat felt tropical this summer, and my skin was bright and clear from the sun.

The calls from Jared had become pretty commonplace since his brief stint as a missing person. He’d called me six weeks earlier from a two-star hotel in Hastings where he’d ended up on a drug binge with two blokes he met at the pub. When I found him, his hands were cold and pale like stones and his voice was scratchy. He smelled like metal and stale sweat. As soon as I got there I wanted to run far away. It felt serious and sad, like the harsh reality of life kicking in. I looked after him for a day, but I had so much work to do, I couldn’t stay.

My last pieces of uni work were due today. All I had to do was write a bibliography then my degree would be finished. I had no idea how I’d managed Jared’s dramas and a seemingly impossible workload, but I had. I was just desperate to enjoy my summer of freedom. For the first time since I was a little girl, I found myself praying to God, Buddha, the angels and anything else I could think of – I just wanted Jared to get better so I could get on with my life.

Feet soft, I crept down the stairs and into the kitchen. I made a coffee and padded out into early morning beams of sleepy light that made their way across the garden. They touched leaves and coaxed out glorious orange flowers which reached their petals wide to salute the sun. My feet felt their way through the soil, comfortable like an old lover. Sweet peas ascended bamboo, their honey scent confident on the air. They always reminded me of my mum. She grew them every year on grand structures in our garden which would slowly turn pinky-purple as the summer went on.

I missed her. She would’ve known what to do about Jared. I’d become an expert at ignoring the problem and burying my head elsewhere.

I was still receiving texts from a couple of his friends. They were worried. But with every text I got detailing his latest behaviour, the less I wanted to deal with it. My conscious mind knew he couldn't help it, he wasn't well. But I couldn't help the malicious creeping thoughts that snipped away at my goodness. I pretended they weren't there and convinced myself that Jared would get better soon.

Two days later I sat in the garden. BO and sun cream smelled like summer on my skin. My hands were dusted in soil and it clumped together under my nails. My morning coffee was beige. Bibi, El and Nath sat around the table talking about Jeremy Corbyn and the gender pay gap. Geraniums in hanging baskets bloomed into post-box red florets that popped under the blue sky. A slow reggae pulse floated around us. London had smelled like barbecues for weeks now, and today was no different. I'd finally finished for the summer, and for the first time we were all free.

Jared had gone off the radar again and I hadn't heard from him since his last night-time call. I promised myself that I would try and get him some help, maybe ask dad to pay for therapy. Guilt was snaking into my consciousness, and I couldn't help feeling like I was neglecting my brother. What did he even think of me? I had no idea. I didn't know what his brain was even capable of thinking these days. But if our relationship had any chance of improving, I needed to do something.

For now, I was submitting myself to sun, garden and friends. We were off to a monumental end of year party that night, at our friend Polly's house in Dalston. The theme was holidays, and our house was going as an Ibiza hen party. I'd been to the shop the day before to purchase copious amounts of Lambrini, L-plates and fake penis paraphernalia.

We started drinking around four, the heat on the patio making it feel like a Mediterranean holiday. Pollution hung on the air, reminding me it wasn't. Louis, Jared's housemate buzzed on my phone.

'Hi Olive,' he spoke fast like running water, 'got a bit of a problem, you might need to come down for Jared. He's in hospital. We don't know what's going on, but he got really bad these past couple of days and now he's in the hospital.'

El and I were on the train forty minutes later on our way to a psychiatric unit somewhere in Brighton that I'd never heard of. I was glad to have company, and we could stay at El's

mum's house for the night. I tried to get through to dad. He hadn't been in touch for over a week. He hadn't even called to say congratulations for finishing my degree. I didn't realise I was tapping my foot on the floor of the train until El rested her hand on my knee.

'Stop,' she said. I could see she was out of her depth too. Her eyes looked deep-set and conflicted. Her face was tight. I had no idea what to do with myself. Emotions hadn't even kicked in yet. I had that feeling you get when the doctor tells you off for not getting something checked out earlier. That feeling times ten. My stomach was definitely ahead of the rest of me, rolling like a bowling ball in my gut.

Dad rang back as we were getting off the train.

'Shit! Why didn't you tell me this was going on Olive?'

'Dad... are you joking? I've been telling you for weeks!'

'You said Jared was struggling, darling, behaving weirdly... but I didn't know he was going psychotic. We could've got him more help if you'd told me. All it would've taken was a phone call and this could've been avoided. Oh, I feel awful being all the way over in Greece and not being able to help you kids out.'

There were a hundred things I wanted to say, shout, scream at him. Suzie came on the line babbling like she didn't give a shit. She was all 'your poor brother' and 'how lovely of El to come with you'. Dad did sound genuinely choked up about it. But he still didn't offer anything apart from money for taxis and stuff. He could've just got a flight over here. He'd be here by tomorrow. I couldn't ask, though. Even if I did, I knew he wouldn't have come.

El and I didn't speak a word in the taxi. My heart fluttered in my chest and my head was heavy. The psychiatric ward was strange – it smelled like briny antiseptic and old canteen food and I didn't think I could ever feel comfortable in a place like this.

We walked through the corridors and there was a man cleaning up sick on the floor and people stared at us oddly. Jared sat in a room with three other patients who were all older than him. One read magazines, one was asleep, and another talked to himself like a chat show host. Jared fidgeted and trembled in his bed. His eyes were what scared me most; pupils jumping around the room, sunken into his face, framed by deep purple rings that hung below. I held his hand while it shook.

The doctor spoke to us like we were kids which is how I felt so maybe that was ok. Jared kept whispering in my ear while the doctor spoke.

'Sorry, Olive, sorry about all this.'

I hushed him softly, squeezing his hand a bit tighter. He'd ended up hiding in Mary's shed, spying on her after convincing himself that she'd plotted to kill our mother. Mary, being the sweetheart that she is, had clocked that he was unwell and ensured that he got here safely. The doctor explained that he'd gone into psychosis and they'd started him on medication. He'd get better but it would take some time.

Jared didn't want us to leave the hospital. He was like a little boy again. But they gave him some pills and he was asleep within ten minutes. I told him I'd come back the next day. It was gone eleven by the time we got back to El's mum Janet's house. She put some shepherd's pie in the microwave for us. We sat around the huge wooden table in El's kitchen and let Janet fuss over us. I struggled to get the potato down even though it was like baby food. Janet had always looked out for me, especially since mum died. She was always so sweet, but I never felt like I could fully relax around her – she was too prim and proper. The kind of parent who was always a school governor and went on all the school trips and arrived early at pick up time to chat to the other mums.

I slept in El's bed where we'd spent so many nights over the years talking about boys and eating midnight feasts. The familiar sound of seagulls woke me up and I let myself out for a walk. I wandered to the beach, brain whirring but unable to really think. A heavy fog was just beginning to lift from the morning ocean and sunbeams broke through like heaven. I sat by the Angel of Peace statue which marked the boundary between Brighton and Hove. El and I always used to come here and smoke spliffs in the middle of the night after her parents went to bed. Morning dog walkers threw balls and homeless people began emerging from sagging tents that they'd pitched along the promenade. I ambled along the seafront towards town, hair fighting the wind. My heart sank thinking of Jared in that place. But I couldn't help feeling relieved too – at least there were adults that could take some responsibility for him. Maybe I didn't have to pretend I was one of them anymore.

Moon and sun rested on opposite sides of the sky, chasing one another as they always had. No matter how much my friends tried to talk to me about what was going on, or told me they cared, I always stopped myself speaking about it too much. I didn't want to be annoying. And I wasn't ever sure they really got it – when I talked about my family issues I was usually met with unhelpful advice and missed points. Talking ended up being so

exhausting that it wasn't worth doing. Everyone had their own issues too – surely, they'd rather not be burdened with mine too.

I found myself back on the street where I'd been weeks before with the tarot reader. A lot had changed since then. I spotted her struggling to set up her stall for another day. I kept my distance, sitting on a bench to watch her through the passing bodies as she battled with tablecloths. I couldn't work out if I loved or hated her. But her words still rang in my head.

I texted dad.

Did mum lose a baby before she had me?

I didn't expect a reply, but my phone flashed back almost straight away.

Can tell you about it when I next see you. Have been thinking about you and Jared... maybe you two should come out to visit. X

I left the bench straight away and wove through the streets back to El's house. The old woman was right, I was sure of it now. Somehow, she knew. I felt like only my brain existed, barely feeling my breath or my feet hitting the floor. Mind racing, I questioned why I had sought out this information when I probably needed it the least.

What would life have been like with a big brother? Maybe he would have stood up to dad and Suzie or helped Jared and me. Maybe none of this would have happened.

What would he have looked like? Would we have had the same muddy blonde hair that was a little too thick to manage? Would he have loved flowers as much as me and Jared and mum? Would we have been close?

I didn't believe in ghosts, but maybe the old woman was right – maybe he was with me in spirit somehow. The feeling of missing something I never had was familiar. But would I have appreciated those lost things if I'd actually had them?

Jared suddenly felt like the most precious thing to me. Guilt burned and tumbled in my gut as I thought about what he'd been through. I hadn't been there for him, and I knew that, but it wasn't too late. Sometimes he felt like a burden, like he was dragging me down. But the reality was that I needed him as much as he needed me.



TWO OF SWORDS

Two views, feelings or people are in opposition. You will seek harmony or reconciliation between the two, which you may find temporarily, but this will not be easy while repressed feelings and unresolved issues are gathering. Eventually, the clouds will break, and the tension will be resolved. This card may also indicate an upcoming dilemma or avoidance of a problem. But diplomacy and negotiation are needed, and you will be required to act with integrity to sense when to confront, calm or compromise.

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London, 6am and it's raining. August was often like this: wet and clammy. Jared and I clunked our bags down the stairs, trying to be quiet so we didn't wake the others. I checked the garden one more time, praying that El and Nath would remember to water it. The Uber grumbled outside, already waiting outside to take us to the airport. The last thing I wanted was to see my dad. But I was doing it for Jared.

After a couple of weeks in hospital he'd moved in with me temporarily while Bibi spent a couple of months travelling. It had been the most time we'd spent together since we were kids. At first it was weird. Jared was so deeply familiar, but it was like spending time with a stranger. He was on so much medication and spent most of the time in Bibi's room, only coming out for food and barely speaking a word to any of us. The days were hot, and I encouraged him to come out into the garden with me. Wood pigeons pecked elderberries out of the trees and bees crawled inside the sunflower hearts, feasting on pollen which spilled out onto the leaves below. He started chatting to Nath and they became friends. Then he started making delicate little flower arrangements every morning

from sweet peas and ox eye daisies and nigellas. Confident greens and chalky pinks in old jam jars. He started cooking for us too, and before long we felt like a happy family.

Dad had been supplying us with a steady stream of money but that was about it. Jared and I fought over our proposed trip to Greece. Frankly, I didn't think dad deserved to see us. Why should we make the effort to go all the way to him when he couldn't be bothered to come here? Jared thought that it might make things better to go and reconnect with dad, see the house, see Suzie. After finding that it was the main tension in mine and Jared's ever-improving relationship, I agreed to a long weekend there. My brother seemed like a different person on the other side of his breakdown. At first more vulnerable, childlike. He needed me to look after him and I did. But once he began gaining strength again, I could see that he recognised how much I'd given to him these past months. We became more playful with each other, and also started talking about our family. I was far more critical of dad, maybe because I'd dealt more directly with his absence. Jared tried to see it from dad's point of view. They'd always had a strange relationship, and Jared was always trying to impress him. Seemingly at the expense of his own feelings.

An unwelcoming wall of heat met us at the plane doors in Kos. Dad met us off the ferry in Kalymnos. He'd always worn the same cologne and it used to smell so comforting and familiar. Now it smelled acidic and tart like he'd passed his expiry date. He hugged us both awkwardly and started barking about our journey and what Suzie was making for lunch and the beds he'd made up for us. I couldn't understand what mum saw in him. We sat damply in the back of the car and I wound down the window to taste the breeze and new scents. Pine and woodsmoke were strong as we snaked along winding coastal roads. The island was made up of rocky mountain slopes, sun-drowned and bare aside from dry shrubbery that sprouted fragrant herbs. The sky met the sea flawlessly and was almost too blue. Jared squirmed as dad asked him what he was doing about uni and getting his life back on track. I stayed staring at the sea. The heat was usually my friend but here it felt severe and over-bearing like a friend made too fast.

Suzie served four different types of posh local olives for lunch and wouldn't stop banging on about cultivation cycles and irrigation systems and how she knew all the olive farmers who grew them. I cringed while they toured us around the house. It was bigger than I'd imagined. All stone and white. Waves lapped softly at the bottom of the hill. The house

was full of things that belonged in the ocean and Suzie's thongs hung neatly on the washing line, pathetic in the breeze.

I was desperate to be in the water. As the sun spilled into a halcyon glaze, the streets turned orange and I walked alone to the beach. I took my time, filling my lungs with clean, clear air and stopping to inspect flamboyant red flowers and succulents that lived outdoors year-round. Figs hung in sweet syrupy drops. Waves pushed and pulled delicately at the sand and the salty water felt ceremonial as the stars blazed and the big moon settled above.

The next morning, I asked dad about the baby. My brother. I could tell he didn't want to talk about it. His wrinkly bronzed skin collapsed into folds, and he shook his head while he washed up the coffee pot. He told me it was a terrible shame and we left it at that.

The days that ensued were defined by Suzie's jarring laughter, sandy feet and long moany anecdotes to the group chat back home. Jared had been making a big effort with dad and Suzie, but I could tell this place wasn't doing him any good. By day three, the fervent heat and the repressed familial tensions felt unbearable.

Dad and I walked into town; one long street of touristy restaurants and overpriced gift shops. We were silent and it was the hottest time of day. There weren't many people around. I assumed dad wanted some quality father-daughter time, but he hadn't said a word in thirty minutes. Healing sunburn itched on my shoulders and heat swirled from concrete pavements.

As soon as he started talking, I wished he would stop.

'I'm worried about your brother Olive, I really am,' he stroked his bald head as a display of his concern, 'he's not got a lot going for him at the moment, has he?'

I looked at him to see if he was joking, but he met my eyes and said, 'god knows what's going on with his degree, his friends are good for nothing and it just doesn't seem like he's making that much of an effort to invest in his future. I don't know what to do, Olive.'

I let his words sit for a minute, expecting to take it in my stride like everything else. But for some reason, I just couldn't do it. I stopped in my tracks and waited for him to notice me.

'Are you fucking joking dad?'

He stared at me in disbelief, and I didn't quite recognise what was coming out of my mouth, but I didn't care. 'How can you speak about him like that? Not sure you noticed but Jared's just had a breakdown! Of course he's not thinking about investing in his future, he's just trying to stay alive in the fucking present. Thanks for your 'concern',' I mimed quotation marks above my head, 'convenient timing. Because you're never around when we need you, you're detached and unemotional, can't stop going on about your new girlfriend and your new fucking fabulous life here. I'm just so done with it. Sorry.'

'Hey, hang on. That's not very fair,' he spluttered, 'how about we just take a breath for a minute? Calm things down...'

'You know what dad? I'm fine. I just need a bit of honesty about what's been going on here because I'm fucking exhausted by the whole thing.'

I threw my hands in the air and exhaled.

'So, what exactly do you want to talk about, Olive? I don't get it.'

'Oh, erm, well. Let me think,' I threw out sarcasm liberally, 'maybe the fact that you were having an affair with the most irritating woman in the world while your wife, my mother – yeah remember her? – was dying. Then moved on with her pretty much instantly and forgot all about me and Jared? And left me to pick up the pieces of Jared having a massive fucking mental breakdown, which was probably because of you in the first place by the way. You've basically fucked over your entire family and seem to be ignoring that.'

I breathed heavily as birds chattered in the greenery above. Dad looked punctured and angry; eyes wide while he decided how to react. He looked around, sighed and ran his hand across his scalp then put a firm hand to my shoulder and muttered 'come on.'

I shrugged him off, perhaps more forcefully than intended.

'No, we're sorting this out right now. I'm not going anywhere, fucks sake!'

Out of nowhere his voice clapped like thunder, 'come ON.'

I hadn't been yelled at like that since I was a child, and it ripped through me.

Eyes stinging ashamedly, I followed him just off the street to a white jetty that stretched far out into the blue ocean. Surrounding fishermen looked up at us as we stomped across the wooden slats. Dad was shaking, storming ahead to the end. Then he turned and spoke, soft and urgent.

'You know what Olive? You have no idea what's been going on for me these past few years. No idea. I don't know why you think you do.'

I stammered, 'oh great, so I finally open up to you about my feelings and now I'm supposed to feel sorry for you? Don't try and turn this around on me. You've been an absolute shit when we needed you most. Sorry if you've been dealing with your own stuff as well but it's really no excuse.'

My heart was beating fast, and I wondered how much of my sweat was erupting from the heat and how much from the stress. He fidgeted and looked around like he was thinking of a comeback. His shirt was the same colour as the ocean that fizzed behind him.

'I didn't know you felt like this,' he muttered.

'Yeah, probably because you never fucking ask,' I retorted, beginning to get into the anger, 'this is the whole problem, dad. You don't ask so we don't talk about it but that doesn't mean it's not happening.'

'So, do you want to talk about it, Olive? Because we can talk about it. But I don't think you're going to like what I have to say.'

I paused, uneasy lumps forming in my throat, 'yes, I want to talk about it.'

Small sprightly fish swirled in the water under the jetty, and I watched through the cracks as he spoke.

My mum wasn't who I thought she was. That's what he told me anyway. She didn't miscarry my brother, she aborted him. The pregnancy was the result of an affair, which she had regularly through the years. Dad would find out, mum would cry, break it off and say she wouldn't do it again. Then she'd find another man and do it all over again. But neither of them ever had the guts to leave until mum was forced to. He said he hated her by the end, but she knew about dad and Suzie, who'd been together a year before mum died. They had her blessing.

I wasn't sure if dad was trying to shock me into submission and make excuses or maybe this was a genuine outpouring of truth. I'd never hear mum's side of the story, and he knew that just as much as I did.

My head stung and the floor fell from beneath me. All I could do was cry through my confusion. Me and dad sat on the edge of the jetty, my body crumpled into his. My tears stained his shirt black-blue. I hated every inch of him, but he was all I had at that moment.

So, I held on tight.

...

The days were still like summer when we got back from Greece, but it didn't really feel like it anymore. Sunflowers hung their rotten heads and surrendered themselves back to the earth. Everything was dying.

Jared was starting back at uni and moved into a new house in Brighton with a less hectic group of people. We still spoke on the phone every day, but that was as much for my sanity as it was his. Dad was absent as ever. Some days I felt angry, but I was becoming more at peace with the fact that he wasn't able to be there for me and Jared in the way we wanted him to be, and probably never would be. It wasn't ok, but it was who he was and there was nothing I could do about it. I hadn't spoken to anyone about our conversation in Greece, including dad.

It was late September. Days were shorter and air was sharper. I went to the garden and collected the last of the flowers into a chaotic bouquet of fiery oranges and purples wrapped in brown paper and thin string. I took them with me on the train to Brighton.

I'd missed the slap of sea air on my face. Jared and I were meeting for breakfast, but I had somewhere else to be first. Proud balmy sun bounced around the streets periodically as I walked, clutching the jumble of flowers. I hadn't been back to mum's grave since just after she died – it made it all too real. I walked through the gravestones, noticing how many more were here since last time. Old bouquets lay brown and shrunken inside their plastic petrol station wrapping. Some half decayed, and a couple of fresh ones, which seemed like they didn't belong.

Mum's place was on the far side. Her gravestone wasn't as silvery and bright as it was last time. The grass grew up around the edges and was still dewy, but I sat on it anyway. I placed the flowers in front of the marble and sat completely still, eyes fixed on the stone. I thought about all the things I missed about her, everything we did together. Was it all true? Since dad's outpouring of truths, part of me had begun doubting every memory of my mum. Did I ever really know her?

The other part of me knew she was only human. No matter what she might have kept hidden from Jared and I, of course she was still capable of loving us completely. I would

never feel her love again. My whole body shrivelled and closed when I remembered that, like a slug in salt. But I didn't cry.

Had I finally found peace or was I just numb?

I walked briskly back into town, aware that I was running late for Jared. Leaning and looping through moving bodies that clung to the last of the warm days, I approached the old woman's usual spot and wondered if she would be there. And sure enough, she was. I wondered if she ever really left – she was as much a part of this street as the cracks in the pavement and the enduring smell of the sea.

As I approached, a young smiling woman rose from the uncomfortable three-legged stall where I sat all those months ago. The old woman looked up and saw me lurking.

'Oh, hello sweetheart!' she called out, 'I recognise you.'

'Hiya,' I said, suddenly feeling shy, 'you did a reading for me in the spring.'

'Yes of course, I remember!' she burst, 'I never forget a face. Look at you! I love it when people come back for visits. Here here, come here,' she beckoned with a wild arm.

She closed her eyes, shuffling through her tarot cards with quick, expert fingers. Stopping abruptly and letting out a little 'oop', she pulled one from the pack.

'I don't do this often, but here you go my sweet,' she held it out, 'this one's for you.'

I was late to meet Jared, and I spotted him stood outside the café checking his phone anxiously. Clutching the card in my hand like treasure, I sauntered up, waiting for him to notice me.

A goofy grin spread across his face when he saw me, like he'd never been happier.

'Oliiiiive!' he half-shouted; half-sung as he embraced me. Close and tight. Although his Greek tan was fading, he looked better than he had in ages. The darkness around his eyes had gone and he looked sweet and young again.

We got a table in the window. The yellow glow of the sun magnified through the glass and I moved to expose as much of my skin to it as I could. We drank iced lattes with more sugar than they needed and chatted about things that weren't important.

'I'm so glad you made it,' Jared said. Then he gestured to the card still grasped firmly in my hand. 'What have you got there?'

I smiled and gave it to him.

