

Prologue

I was eleven years old the first time I saw him but I still knew straight away. It was something about the darkness of his eyes and the way his face scrunched up when he smiled. I didn't tell him, of course. That wasn't how it worked, I understood that even then. I had to wait for him to realise. Two years it took. Though it felt more like an eternity to me. Still, it was worth the wait. I knew it then and I know it now. Nineteen years, ten months and twenty-one days later.

PART ONE

One

MEL

Saturday, 27 March 2010

According to Wikipedia, it was Aesop who came up with that line about familiarity breeding contempt. Which kind of vindicates my belief that Greek philosophers are, on the whole, rather overrated. I have known Adam for two-thirds of my life now. Admittedly, that's only a dot backwards on the great history timeline of things towards Aesop's era in 600 BC. But the fact remains that for me it is a struggle to remember life BA (as I tend to think of the years before I met Adam). There is a blurry childhood involving a one-eyed teddy bear, under-the-knee socks and grazed knees, blackberry-picking along the canal bank, a less than perfect ponytail and sticking my tongue out at my older brother Martin, who was always the apple of Mum's eye. And then there is the day I started high school and met Adam. That is when life as I know it really began.

We have barely gone a few weeks without seeing each other since that point. Yet far from make me look at him with a mixture of irritation and loathing, that familiarity has bred something deeper, stronger and altogether more wonderful than I ever thought possible. Don't get me wrong, Adam is not perfect. He's a man, for goodness sake. And this is a marriage not a fairy tale. There are, inevitably, a few things about him that cause me to roll

my eyes and make the odd sigh or tut every now and again; he snores (though only when lying on his left side), appears to have a pathological fear of baths (I should point out in his defence that he does shower), refuses to go anywhere near a tapas restaurant (something to do with not being able to get one big plate of what you want to eat and having to go home and make cheese on toast afterwards because you're still hungry) and is prone to going off on a bit of a rant if anyone expresses even the merest hint of admiration for either Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair (perhaps the most excusable of his foibles).

But that is as bad as it gets. A handful of silly little things that bug me. Nothing even approaching the foothills of contempt. Instead, I have all the lovely things that familiarity brings: knowing that he understands when to back off and give me space and when to throw his arms around me and give me a hug; the fact that we can be comfortably silent together because sometimes we just know and we don't need to say; the reassurance that if I have a headache he knows the exact spot on my shoulder where the knot causing it is and how to massage it away. And the fact that I know, as he sits opposite me at a rather swanky restaurant in Sowerby Bridge, top button of his shirt undone, brushing back the bit of dark brown hair which has always got in his eyes for as long as I have known him, exactly how he will respond to what I am about to say.

'Just in case you were thinking of planning anything, I don't really want a big fuss. You know, about the anniversary thing. I think we should keep it low key.'

On 6 May we will have been married ten years and, as we got married exactly ten years after Adam asked me out, it will also mark twenty years of us being together. That makes me feel happy and incredibly fortunate. It does not, however, make me want to throw a party.

A hint of a smile creeps on to Adam's face, confirming that this whole conversation we are about to have is already fully scripted. We both know our lines and each other's lines. But we are going to run through it all anyway so we can test how well we have learnt them.

'Oh, why's that, then?' he says. I was right. Word perfect, in fact. He knows exactly why, of course, but he is not going to let me get away without offering some kind of explanation.

I take a sip of my Rioja (I prefer white, but it is his birthday today so it is my turn to compromise. We are experienced enough parents to know you do not drink a bottle of wine each when your four-year-old daughter will be jumping on your bed at 6 a.m. the next morning.)

'Well, it's not like ten years is a big anniversary, is it?' I say.

'So you mean the tin can I've got you will be fine?'

I grin and pull a face at him. I know he hasn't got me a tin can. He is good at presents. Always has been. Partly because he knows me so well and partly because he likes getting surprises so he has to work really hard to think of something I won't have thought of.

'Maybe for our silver wedding we can have a big do but there's no need this year, is there? I know it's a bit different for us because of the twenty-year thing but people don't really celebrate the anniversary of when they started going out together, do they? At least not in public. And anyway, twenty years together makes us seem really old and my family will forget that we're not and will buy us commemorative plates and stuff like that and you can't really give them to Oxfam, not if they've got a personal inscription, which they will. Mum would expect to see theirs hung up somewhere and she'll be offended if you put it in the toilet, you know she doesn't get your sense of humour. Besides which, I have bad memories of having to go to my aunt and

uncle's silver wedding anniversary party under duress and being forced to do the birdie dance while my friends were enjoying *Ghostbusters* at the cinema, so really, I guess what I'm trying to say is, if you were thinking of planning some big do, I just don't want to go there.'

Adam is smiling some more.

'Oh, piss off, you,' I say.

'What? I haven't said anything.'

'No but you've sat there grinning at me while I've said all that stuff which you knew already.'

'I didn't know I was going to have to wait until our silver wedding to get a party. Jeez, you know how to keep a guy keen, don't you?'

'Don't count on the party then,' I say, picking up one of the tortilla chips which I can vaguely recall appearing at some point during my little spiel. 'I'm not promising we'll have one then, only that I'll consider it. Although obviously not in a depressing church hall somewhere with the Virgin Mary looking down on us or some dingy community centre which smells of wee and still has sand from the toddler group on the floor. And wherever it is, please, please, do not hire some naff DJ who says things like "now, one for the laydeez out there", we'll just use the compilation tapes we did for our wedding.'

'Right,' says Adam, still smiling. 'I'll be sure to remember all of that. Although I should point out that as the iPod has been invented since our wedding, compilation tapes are now obsolete.'

'See, you're already making me feel old. Imagine what we'll feel like by our silver anniversary when Maya finds out that our wedding photos are on negatives, not a hard drive.'

'So you're already worrying about what she'll think when she's nineteen?'

‘Not worrying, just saying.’

‘Are you actually going to eat that at any point?’ asks Adam, nodding towards the tortilla chip which is still poised between my thumb and forefinger.

‘Possibly, but only when I’m sure that you’re clear about what I’ve said.’

‘Fear not, I have been left in no doubt about what you’ve said, although I’m also well aware that it has nothing to do with the real reason you don’t want a party.’

I watch Adam expertly use two tortilla chips to shovel a pile of guacamole on to a third before devouring the whole ensemble and selecting two new tortilla chip shovels. He even manages to look sexy as he does it; if I did it I’d probably manage to spill the whole thing down my top. I don’t know what age other people grow out of spilling everything but for some reason I haven’t got there yet.

‘So come on then, please enlighten me,’ I say, deciding I might as well ask for the theory as he is clearly going to tell me anyway.

‘It’s obvious, isn’t it? You think that if we pull so much as one celebratory party popper, he, or she, I know you’re unsure about the gender of whoever it is that decides these things, will decide that we’ve had far too long an innings and will send down a plague on our house and seven years’ bad luck to all who live in it.’

I finally eat the tortilla chip in my hand in order to give me time to think of a suitably robust denial. I eat three more while I think a little longer.

‘You make me sound like some kind of crackpot,’ I say, having failed to think of anything which Adam won’t see through.

‘You are. A loveable one, though,’ says Adam, reaching over to squeeze my hand.

‘I simply don’t think we should tempt fate by making a big

song and dance about it, that's all. You know what happens to those Oscar winners who use their speech to publicly pledge their undying love to their husbands. The next week they have to release a statement that it's all over because he's run off with some party hostess.'

'I guess you've got a point, the waitress tonight is kind of cute.'

I smile at him and shake my head. He can get away with it because I don't have an ounce of insecurity about our relationship. Not because I think I'm such a great catch that he'd never leave me but simply because we are Mel and Adam. If we were available in the supermarket you would not be able to buy us singly, only in a pack of two. We are probably at the top of all our friends' 'Least Likely To Split Up' list (I'm presuming everyone else has one of those too, even if they don't actually write it down). So it's not that I fear Adam running off with anyone. It's that somewhere along the line I figure I am owed a huge great dollop of something bad. Adam says it himself, I have lived a charmed life; the first boy I fell in love with fell in love with me and we have stayed in love ever since, I have never even had my heart broken. How many people can say that? We have a gorgeous, happy, healthy daughter who, apart from being obsessed with dinosaurs, seems reasonably well-adjusted, we live in our dream home, a converted schoolhouse in Cragg Vale, a couple of miles from here, with views across possibly the most beautiful valley in West Yorkshire, I have a great job lecturing in child development at Bradford University, my parents are still together and although I wouldn't go as far as to say they are blissfully happy, they seem content enough to stick it out. All four of my grandparents are still alive, living in sheltered housing, in reasonably good health and in full possession of their marbles, none of my close family or friends have ever died, had cancer or been stricken with an incurable disease. Indeed, Adam

jokes that the worst thing that ever happened to me was when my pet hamster died. It's not true, of course, but then he doesn't know about the worst thing. Only one other person does. And as Adam doesn't know I can see why he would think that. Why most people would think that. Because what is undeniably true is that my life appears to be borderline perfect. But because of what I did I obviously don't deserve that. Hence my conclusion that it is only a matter of time before someone will shout on a loudhailer, 'Come in, Mel Taylor, your time is up,' and something the equivalent of being shat on by the world's biggest seagull will occur.

'I just think we should leave well alone and have a quiet celebration for the two of us rather than publicly rub our happiness in other people's faces.'

'For someone with a psychology degree,' says Adam, 'you really are completely round the bend.'

My enchiladas arrive. And Adam's jambalaya. We don't do that couple thing of sampling each other's food in restaurants. Mainly because it is skin-crawlingly gross but also because we hardly ever fancy what the other one is having.

'Well, if that's what you want,' continues Adam with a shrug as he picks up his fork. 'As long as you don't complain when we spend our anniversary at home watching some crappy programme about a B-list celebrity who wants to fly his kite in the most inaccessible places in the world and have TV licence payers foot the bill for it.'

'You sound like my mother. Anyway, I shan't complain. I'll simply turn it off and put some music on to dance to.'

'Not your flamenco stuff again.' I go to a class once a week with my friend Louise. It is an opportunity to don a swirly long skirt and stomp around in clompy shoes like you are a little kid

dressing up in your mother's clothes and consequently it is very good for the soul.

'No, I was thinking of something a bit slower.'

'Hey,' says Adam, 'something for the laydeez.'

'Enough,' I say, laughing as I shake my head. 'You really are old enough now to know better.'

It is gone eleven by the time we get home. We shut the car doors as quietly as possible. Instinctively, I pull my coat across me, though it is unusually mild for March, especially a Yorkshire March, and hurry up the steps to the big wooden front door like a teenager trying to dash back to beat a curfew.

'At what age roughly do you think you'll stop worrying about what your mother will say?' whispers Adam.

'Probably around about the same time you stop taking the piss out of me.'

'It's hardly like we're still at school and rolling in at two in the morning, is it?'

'No, but I said we'd be back by eleven and you know full well that if you give her even the slightest reason to go off on one, she will do. Besides, she looked like she had a bee in her bonnet when they arrived and in case it's anything to do with us I don't want to make it any worse.'

I jiggle the key in the lock and open the door. I love the entrance to our house: a huge dependable door behind which is a wood-panelled hallway with a flight of stone steps rising steeply in one corner (utterly impractical for a toddler and the cause of more 'shit, I've left the stairgate open' moments than I care to remember). I knew it was right for us the second I first stepped inside. I should have said to the estate agent at the end of the tour, 'Actually, you had me at "this is the hallway".'

All is quiet inside. We go through to the lounge where my father is sitting in the armchair doing that one eye open, one eye closed thing he is so good at, and my mother, who is dressed in a jumper with a cardigan over her shoulders and a scarf twirled around her neck in a not very subtle way of suggesting that our house is too cold, is leafing through a copy of *People's Friend* (she brings them with her when babysitting, they are not our choice of coffee-table material). She looks up at me with a 'so what time do you call this?' expression. I am about to launch into a long-winded denial when I remember that I am thirty-three years old.

'Hi, sorry we're late,' I say. 'They took forever with the desserts. How's Maya been?'

'Took ages to go off as usual but we've not heard owt from her since,' says Dad, opening the other eye and smiling. He should be used for sofa adverts, his face screams 'comfy' at you. He also has an Alistair Darling thing going on; his hair and most of his beard are white but his eyebrows remain resolutely dark. When they finally succumb and go white he will make the most amazing Father Christmas. I have already told the local toyshop that I know a Santa-in-waiting.

'So what made-up story did she get you to do?' I ask.

'Something about a T-rex getting his foot stuck on a train track and having to be rescued by a giant purple butterfly.'

I nod. While to outsiders it would sound like a bad LSD trip, it all makes perfect sense to me; Maya's favourite things are dinosaurs, butterflies and the colour purple, and my father, who is retired but runs a model railway museum in Halifax, always manages to get some sort of train reference into his made-up stories.

'So, what did you have for dessert?' asks Mum, as if oblivious to the fact that the conversation has moved on from there.

‘I had bitter chocolate torte,’ says Adam, ‘and Mel went for the blueberry cheesecake.’ Mum raises her eyebrows and nods slowly, managing to suggest that she is either disappointed in our choices or the dessert menu itself.

‘Well, I’m glad I brought me magazines,’ she says. ‘Nowt worth watching on TV as usual. Certainly nowt to take me mind off bad news.’

Dad looks up with a start from his armchair and gives Mum a look.

‘Well, I’ve got to tell them sometime, haven’t I?’ she says.

‘Tell us what?’ I ask, my stomach tightening.

‘I didn’t want to mention it earlier because I didn’t want to spoil your evening.’

‘Just tell us, please,’ I say.

‘Bill’s left Sylvia for some woman at work. A cleaner, not even one of secretaries.’

The knot in my stomach releases. Sylvia is Mum’s friend from the surgery. The two of them do for GPs’ receptionists what Sweeny Todd did for barbers. I see her occasionally at Mum’s house and bump into her every now and then at the Co-op. She is a terrible gossip and impossible to get away from once she’s started. I feel sorry for her, of course, as I would feel sorry for any woman who is left by their husband. But the very idea that imparting this news earlier would have spoiled Adam’s birthday demonstrates how much Mum has lost the plot. I glance up at Adam who is clearly trying to resist the temptation to comment on the notion that Bill’s actions would somehow have been more honourable had he run off with a woman of greater social standing.

‘Oh dear. That’s a shame,’ I say. ‘Must have been a terrible shock for her. It’s not long since their silver wedding, is it?’ Sylvia and

Bill were late starters, both living at home in the same road until their aged parents died and they realised it was lonely being on their own.

‘Three months,’ snorts Mum. ‘Then he tips twenty-five years of marriage down drain just like that. I can’t understand how anyone could do that to Sylvia, can you?’

‘No, dear,’ says Dad, obviously deciding it is politic to agree with her although I suspect he can understand exactly why Bill did it. And that somewhere he has a sheet of paper on which is a tally of the years he and Mum have been married. A tally which is heading towards fifty. Mum sighs and starts gathering her copies of *People’s Friend* together.

‘You know worst thing about it?’ she says. ‘All that effort Sylvia put into that lovely trifle she made for silver wedding party. Such a waste.’

‘I suppose,’ says Adam as we lie in bed together later, his arm around me as I nestle into the comfortable place my body seems to have worn away in his over the years, ‘I now need to add “trifle” to your list of silver wedding party no-nos.’

I let the laugh I suppressed at the time finally escape. Adam is laughing so much his chest is shaking.

‘The thing is,’ I say, ‘we haven’t heard Bill’s side in this. Maybe he doesn’t like trifle. Maybe he told Sylvia so the day they met and she never took any notice, kept on making it, determined to force her trifle-making talents on him. And then to spite him by making one for their silver wedding party, well, you can see how that could have been the final straw.’

Adam grins down at me, his hand stroking my arm. ‘I bet his new woman doesn’t do trifle,’ he says. ‘I bet she whizzes up Angel Delight for him. Chocolate, butterscotch, any flavour he wants.’

Come to think of it, I haven't had Angel Delight since I was a kid. How come you never make it for me?'

I look up at him, smiling. 'Tell you what. I'll get some in especially for our anniversary.'

'Oh, Mel,' he says, starting to kiss my shoulders. 'You sure know how to turn a man on. Go on, talk Angel Delight flavours to me . . .'

'You either shut up now,' I say, digging him in the ribs, 'or I turn out the light.'

'OK,' he says. 'I'll just lie here quietly and fantasise about you being covered in it.'

I try to kiss him to stop him talking but I can't do it for laughing.

'Right,' I say, rolling over on top of him. 'If you won't shut up I'll have to make you.' Adam raises his eyebrows. A few minutes later he is suitably distracted and finally rendered speechless. That's the other great thing about familiarity. The control panel is the same as it's always been. So you don't have to waste time getting to grips with the instruction manual.

I lie there in the darkness much later, my body still pressed against Adam as he sleeps. Feeling his chest rise and fall, listening to his breath, unable to move even an inch away from him, lest I might somehow break the spell.

'Happy Birthday,' I whisper, giving him a final kiss goodnight. And trying not to worry about what else, apart from trifle, could destroy a marriage so easily.