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Harold and the Letter



THE LETTER THAT would change everything arrived on a Tuesday. It was an ordinary morning in mid-April that smelled of clean washing and grass cuttings. Harold Fry sat at the breakfast table, freshly shaved, in a clean shirt and tie, with a slice of toast that he wasn't eating. He gazed beyond the kitchen window at the clipped lawn, which was spiked in the middle by Maureen's telescopic washing line, and trapped on all three sides by the neighbours' close-board fencing.

'Harold!' called Maureen above the vacuum cleaner. 'Post!'

He thought he might like to go out, but the only thing to do was mow the lawn and he had done that yesterday. The vacuum tumbled into silence, and his wife appeared, looking cross, with a letter. She sat opposite Harold.

Maureen was a slight woman with a cap of silver hair and a brisk walk. When they first met, nothing had pleased him more than to make her laugh. To watch her neat frame

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collapse into unruly happiness. 'It's for you,' she said. He didn't know what she meant until she slid an envelope across the table, and stopped it just short of Harold's elbow. They both looked at the letter as if they had never seen one before. It was pink. 'The postmark says Berwick-upon-Tweed.'

He didn't know anyone in Berwick. He didn't know many people anywhere. 'Maybe it's a mistake.'

'I think not. They don't get something like a postmark wrong.' She took toast from the rack. She liked it cold and crisp.

Harold studied the mysterious envelope. Its pink was not the colour of the bathroom suite, or the matching towels and fluffed cover for the toilet seat. That was a vivid shade that made Harold feel he shouldn't be there. But this was delicate. A Turkish Delight pink. His name and address were scribbled in biro, the clumsy letters collapsing into one another as if a child had dashed them off in a hurry: *Mr H. Fry, 13 Fossebridge Road, Kingsbridge, South Hams*. He didn't recognize the handwriting.

'Well?' said Maureen, passing a knife. He held it to the corner of the envelope and tugged it through the fold. 'Careful,' she warned.

He could feel her eyes on him as he eased out the letter, and prodded back his reading glasses. The page was typed, and addressed from a place he didn't know: *St Bernadine's Hospice. Dear Harold, This may come to you as some surprise*. His eyes ran to the bottom of the page.

'Well?' said Maureen again.

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‘Good lord. It’s from Queenie Hennessy.’

Maureen speared a nugget of butter with her knife and flattened it the length of her toast. ‘Queenie who?’

‘She worked at the brewery. Years ago. Don’t you remember?’

Maureen shrugged. ‘I don’t see why I should. I don’t know why I’d remember someone from years ago. Could you pass the jam?’

‘She was in Finance. She was very good.’

‘That’s the marmalade, Harold. Jam is red. If you look at things before you pick them up, you’ll find it helps.’

Harold passed her what she needed and returned to his letter. Beautifully set out, of course; nothing like the muddled writing on the envelope. Then he smiled, remembering this was how it always was with Queenie; everything she did so precise you couldn’t fault it. ‘She remembers you. She sends her regards.’

Maureen’s mouth pinched into a bead. ‘A chap on the radio was saying the French want our bread. They can’t get it sliced in France. They come over here and they buy it all up. The chap said there might be a shortage by summer.’ She paused. ‘Harold? Is something the matter?’

He said nothing. He drew himself up tall with his lips parted, his face bleached. His voice, when at last it came, was small and far away. ‘It’s – cancer. Queenie is writing to say goodbye.’ He fumbled for more words but there weren’t any. Tugging a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, Harold blew his nose. ‘I . . . um. Gosh.’ Tears crammed his eyes.

Moments passed; maybe minutes. Maureen gave a

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swallow that smacked the silence. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

He nodded. He ought to look up, but he couldn't.

'It's a nice morning,' she began again. 'Why don't you fetch out the patio chairs?' But he sat, not moving, not speaking, until she lifted the dirty plates. Moments later the vacuum cleaner took up from the hall.

Harold felt winded. If he moved so much as a limb, even a muscle, he was afraid it would trigger an abundance of feeling he was doing his best to contain. Why had he let twenty years pass without trying to find Queenie Hennessy? A picture came of the small, dark-haired woman with whom he had worked all that time ago, and it seemed inconceivable that she was – what? Sixty? And dying of cancer in Berwick. Of all the places, he thought; he'd never travelled so far north. He glanced out at the garden and saw a ribbon of plastic caught in the laurel bush, flapping up and down but never pulling free. He tucked Queenie's letter into his pocket, patted it twice for safekeeping, and rose to his feet.

Upstairs Maureen shut the door of David's room quietly and stood a moment, breathing him in. She pulled open his blue curtains that she closed every night, and checked there was no dust where the hem of the net drapes met the windowsill. She polished the silver frame of his Cambridge portrait, and the black and white baby photograph beside it. She kept the room clean because she was waiting for David to come back, and she never knew when that would

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be. A part of her was always waiting. Men had no idea what it was like to be a mother. The ache of loving a child, even when he had moved on. She thought of Harold downstairs, with his pink letter, and wished she could talk to their son. Maureen left the room as softly as she had entered it, and went to strip the beds.

Harold Fry took several sheets of Basildon Bond from the dresser drawer and one of Maureen's rollerball pens. What did you say to a dying woman with cancer? He wanted her to know how sorry he felt, but it was wrong to put *In Sympathy* because that was what the cards in the shops said after, as it were, the event; and anyway it sounded formal, as if he didn't really care. He tried, *Dear Miss Hennessy, I sincerely hope your condition improves*, but when he put down the pen to inspect his message, it seemed both stiff and unlikely. He crumpled the paper into a ball and tried again. He had never been good at expressing himself. What he felt was so big it was difficult to find the words, and even if he could, it was hardly appropriate to write them to someone he had not contacted in twenty years. Had the shoe been on the other foot, Queenie would have known what to do.

'Harold?' Maureen's voice took him by surprise. He thought she was upstairs, polishing something, or speaking to David. She had her Marigolds on.

'I'm writing Queenie a note.'

'A note?' She often repeated what he said.

'Yes. Would you like to sign?'

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‘I think not. It would hardly be appropriate to sign a note to someone I don’t know.’

It was time to stop worrying about expressing anything beautifully. He would simply have to set down the words in his head: *Dear Queenie, Thank you for your letter. I am very sorry. Yours Best wishes – Harold (Fry)*. It was limp, but there it was. Sliding the letter into an envelope, he sealed it quickly, and copied the address of St Bernadine’s Hospice on to the front. ‘I’ll nip to the post box.’

It was past eleven o’clock. He lifted his waterproof jacket from the peg where Maureen liked him to hang it. At the door, the smell of warmth and salt air rushed at his nose, but his wife was at his side before his left foot was over the threshold.

‘Will you be long?’

‘I’m only going to the end of the road.’

She kept on looking up at him, with her moss-green eyes and her fragile chin, and he wished he knew what to say but he didn’t; at least not in a way that would make any difference. He longed to touch her like in the old days, to lower his head on her shoulder and rest there. ‘Cheerio, Maureen.’ He shut the front door between them, taking care not to let it slam.

Built on a hill above Kingsbridge, the houses of Fossebridge Road enjoyed what estate agents called an elevated position, with far-reaching views over the town and countryside. Their front gardens, however, sloped at a precarious angle towards the pavement below, and plants

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wrapped themselves round bamboo stakes as if hanging on for dear life. Harold strode down the steep concrete path a little faster than he might have wished and noticed five new dandelions. Maybe this afternoon he would get out the Roundup. It would be something.

Spotting Harold, the next-door neighbour waved and steered his way towards the adjoining fence. Rex was a short man with tidy feet at the bottom, a small head at the top and a very round body in the middle, causing Harold to fear sometimes that if he fell there would be no stopping him. He would roll down the hill like a barrel. Rex had been widowed six months ago, at about the time of Harold's retirement. Since Elizabeth's death, he liked to talk about how hard life was. He liked to talk about it at great length. 'The least you can do is listen,' Maureen said, although Harold wasn't sure if she meant 'you' in the general sense or the particular.

'Off for a walk?' said Rex.

Harold attempted a jocular tone that would act, he hoped, as an intimation that now was not the time to stop. 'Need anything posting, old chap?'

'Nobody writes to me. Since Elizabeth passed away, I only get circulars.'

Rex gazed into the middle distance and Harold recognized at once the direction the conversation was heading. He threw a look upwards; puffs of cloud sat on a tissue-paper sky. 'Jolly nice day.'

'Jolly nice,' said Rex. There was a pause and Rex poured a sigh into it. 'Elizabeth liked the sun.' Another pause.

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‘Good day for mowing, Rex.’

‘Very good, Harold. Do you compost your grass cuttings? Or do you mulch?’

‘I find mulching leaves a mess that sticks to my feet. Maureen doesn’t like it when I tread things into the house.’ Harold glanced at his yachting shoes and wondered why people wore them when they had no intention of sailing. ‘Well. Must get on. Catch the midday collection.’ Wagging his envelope, Harold turned towards the pavement.

For the first time in his life, it was a disappointment to find that the post box cropped up sooner than expected. Harold tried to cross the road to avoid it, but there it was, waiting for him on the corner of Fossebridge Road. He lifted his letter for Queenie to the slot, and stopped. He looked back at the short distance his feet had travelled.

The detached houses were stuccoed and washed in shades of yellow, salmon and blue. Some still had their pointed fifties roofs with decorative beams in the shape of a half-sun; others had slate-clad loft extensions; one had been completely rebuilt in the style of a Swiss chalet. Harold and Maureen had moved here forty-five years ago, just after they were married. It took all his savings to pay the deposit; there had been nothing left for curtains or furniture. They had kept themselves apart from others, and over time neighbours had come and gone, while only Harold and Maureen remained. There had once been vegetable beds, and an ornamental pond. She made chutneys every summer, and David kept goldfish. Behind the

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house there had been a potting shed that smelled of fertilizer, with high hooks for hanging tools, and coils of twine and rope. But these things too were long since gone. Even their son's school, which had stood a stone's throw from his bedroom window, had been bulldozed now and replaced with fifty affordable homes in bright primary colours and street lighting in the style of Georgian gas lamps.

Harold thought of the words he had written to Queenie, and their inadequacy shamed him. He pictured himself returning home, and Maureen calling David, and life being exactly the same except for Queenie dying in Berwick, and he was overcome. The letter rested on the dark mouth of the post box. He couldn't let it go.

'After all,' he said out loud, though nobody was looking, 'it's a nice day.' He hadn't anything else to do. He might as well walk to the next one. He turned the corner of Fossebridge Road before he could change his mind.

It was not like Harold to make a snap decision. He saw that. Since his retirement, days went by and nothing changed; only his waist thickened, and he lost more hair. He slept poorly at night, and sometimes he did not sleep at all. Yet, arriving more promptly than he expected at a pillar box, he paused again. He had started something and he didn't know what it was, but now that he was doing it, he wasn't ready to finish. Beads of perspiration sprouted over his forehead; his blood throbbed with anticipation. If he took his letter to the post office on Fore Street, it would be guaranteed next-day delivery.

The sun pressed warm on the back of his head and

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shoulders as he strolled down the avenues of new housing. Harold glanced in at people's windows, and sometimes they were empty, and sometimes people were staring right back at him and he felt obliged to rush on. Sometimes, though, there was an object that he didn't expect; a porcelain figure, or a vase, and even a tuba. The tender pieces of themselves that people staked as boundaries against the outside world. He tried to visualize what a passer-by would learn about himself and Maureen from the windows of 13 Fossebridge Road, before he realized it would be not very much, on account of the net curtains. He headed for the quayside, with the muscles twitching in his thighs.

The tide was out and dinghies lolled in a moonscape of black mud, needing paint. Harold hobbled to an empty bench, inched Queenie's letter from his pocket and unfolded it.

She remembered. After all these years. And yet he had lived out his ordinary life as if what she had done meant nothing. He hadn't tried to stop her. He hadn't followed. He hadn't even said goodbye. The sky and pavement blurred into one as fresh tears swelled his eyes. Then through them came the watery outline of a young mother and child. They seemed to be holding ice-cream cones, and bore them like torches. She lifted the boy and set him down on the other end of the bench.

'Lovely day,' said Harold, not wanting to sound like an old man who was crying. She didn't look up, or agree. Bending over her child's fist, she licked a smooth path to stop the ice cream from running. The boy watched his

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mother, so still and close it was as if his face was part of hers.

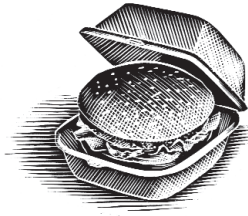
Harold wondered if he had ever sat by the quay eating ice cream with David. He was sure he must have done, although searching in his mind for the memory, he found it wasn't readily available. He must get on. He must post his letter.

Office workers were laughing with lunchtime pints outside the Old Creek Inn, but Harold barely noticed. As he began the steep climb up Fore Street, he thought about the mother who was so absorbed in her son she saw no one else. It occurred to him it was Maureen who spoke to David and told him their news. It was Maureen who had always written Harold's name ('Dad') in the letters and cards. It was even Maureen who had found the nursing home for his father. And it begged the question – as he pushed the button at the pelican crossing – that if she was, in effect, Harold, 'Then who am I?'

He strode past the post office without even stopping.

2

Harold and the Garage Girl and a Question of Faith



HAROLD WAS NEAR the top of Fore Street. He had passed the closed-down Woolworths, the bad butcher ('He beats his wife,' Maureen said), the good butcher ('His wife left him'), the clock tower, the Shambles, as well as the offices of the *South Hams Gazette*, and now he was at the last of the shops. The muscles in his calves pulled with every step. Behind him, the estuary shone like a sheet of tin against the sun; boats were already tiny flecks of white. He paused at the travel agent, because he wanted to take a rest without anyone noticing, and pretended to read about bargain holidays in the window. Bali, Naples, Istanbul, Dubai. His mother used to talk so dreamily about escaping to countries where there were tropical trees, and women with flowers in their hair, that as a boy he had instinctively distrusted the world he did not know. It had not been very different once he was married to Maureen, and they had David. Every year they spent two weeks in the same holiday

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camp in Eastbourne. Taking several deep breaths to steady his chest, Harold continued north.

The shops turned into homes, some built in pinky-grey Devon stone, some painted, others fronted with slate tiles, followed by cul-de-sacs of new housing. Magnolias were coming into flower; frilled white stars against branches so bare they looked stripped. It was already one o'clock; he had missed the midday collection. He would buy a snack to tide him over and then he would find the next post box. After waiting for a gap in the traffic, Harold crossed towards a petrol station, where the houses stopped and the fields took over.

A young girl at the till yawned. She wore a red tabard over a T-shirt and trousers, with a badge that said HAPPY TO HELP. Her hair hung in oily strips either side of her head so that her ears poked through, and her skin was pockmarked and pale, as if she had been kept inside for a long time. She didn't know what he was talking about when he asked for light refreshments. She opened her mouth and it remained hanging ajar, so that he feared a change in the wind would leave her like that. 'A snack?' he said. 'Something to keep me going?'

Her eyes flickered. 'Oh, you mean a burger.' She trudged to the fridge and showed him how to heat a BBQ Cheese Beast with fries in the microwave.

'Good lord,' said Harold, as they watched it revolve in its box behind the window. 'I had no idea you could get a full meal from a garage.'

The girl fetched the burger from the microwave and

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offered sachets of ketchup and brown sauce. 'Are you paying for fuel?' she asked, slowly wiping her hands. They were small as a child's.

'No, no, I'm just passing. Walking actually.'

'Oh,' she said.

'I'm posting a letter to someone I knew once. I'm afraid she has cancer.' To his horror, he found that he paused before saying the word and lowered his voice. He also found he had made a small nugget shape with his fingers.

The girl nodded. 'My aunt had cancer,' she said. 'I mean, it's everywhere.' She cast her eyes up and down the shop shelves, suggesting it was even to be found tucked behind the AA road maps and Turtle Wax polish. 'You have to keep positive, though.'

Harold stopped eating his burger and mopped his mouth with a paper serviette. 'Positive?'

'You have to believe. That's what I think. It's not about medicine and all that stuff. You have to believe a person can get better. There is so much in the human mind we don't understand. But, you see, if you have faith, you can do anything.'

Harold gazed at the girl in awe. He didn't know how it had happened, but she seemed to be standing in a pool of light, as if the sun had moved, and her hair and skin shone with luminous clarity. Maybe he was staring too hard, because she gave a shrug and chewed her lower lip. 'Am I talking crap?'

'Gosh, no. Not at all. It's very interesting. I'm afraid

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religion is not something I ever quite got the hang of.'

'I don't mean, like, religious. I mean, trusting what you don't know and going for it. Believing you can make a difference.' She twined a strand of hair round her finger.

Harold felt he had never come across such simple certainty, and in such a young person; she made it sound obvious. 'And she got better, did she? Your aunt? Because you believed she could?'

The strand of hair was twiddled so tightly round her finger he was now afraid it was stuck. 'She said it gave her hope when everything else had gone—'

'Does anyone work here?' shouted a man in a pinstripe suit from the counter. He rapped his car keys on the hard surface, beating out wasted time.

The girl threaded her way back to the till, where the pinstripe made a show of checking his watch. He held his wrist high in the air and pointed to the dial. 'I'm supposed to be in Exeter in thirty minutes.'

'Fuel?' said the girl, resuming her place, in front of cigarettes and lottery tickets. Harold tried to catch her eye but she wouldn't. She had returned to being dull and empty again, as if their conversation about her aunt had never happened.

Harold left his money for the burger on the counter and made his way to the door. Faith? Wasn't that the word she had used? Not one he usually heard, but it was strange. Even though he wasn't sure what she meant by faith, or what there was left that he believed in, the word rang in his head with an insistence that bewildered him. At sixty-five

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he had begun to anticipate difficulties. A stiffening of the joints; a dull ringing in his ears; eyes that watered with the slightest change in the wind; a dart of chest pain that presaged something more ominous. But what was this sudden surge of feeling that made his body shake with its sheer energy? He turned in the direction of the A381, and promised again that at the next post box he would stop.

He was leaving Kingsbridge. The road narrowed into a single lane, until the pavement disappeared altogether. Above him, the branches joined like the roof of a tunnel, tangled with pointed new buds and clouds of blossom. More than once he had to crush himself into a hawthorn to avoid a passing car. There were single drivers, and he supposed they must be office workers because their faces appeared fixed as if the joy had been squeezed away, and then there were women driving children, and they looked tired too. Even the older couples like himself and Maureen had a rigidity about them. An impulse to wave came over Harold. He didn't, though. He was wheezing with the effort of walking and he didn't want to cause alarm.

The sea lay behind; before him stretched rolling hills and the blue outline of Dartmoor. And beyond that? The Blackdown Hills, the Mendips, the Malverns, the Pennines, the Yorkshire Dales, the Cheviots, and Berwick-upon-Tweed.

But here, directly across the road, stood a post box, and a little way beyond it a telephone booth. Harold's journey was over.

He dragged his feet. He had seen so many he'd lost

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count, as well as two Royal Mail vans and a courier on a motorbike. Harold thought of all the things in life he'd let go. The small smiles. The offers of a beer. The people he had passed over and over again, in the brewery car park, or on the street, without lifting his head. The neighbours whose forwarding addresses he had never kept. Worse; the son who didn't speak to him and the wife he had betrayed. He remembered his father in the nursing home, and his mother's suitcase by the door. And now here was a woman who twenty years ago had proved herself a friend. Was this how it went? That just at the moment when he wanted to do something, it was too late? That all the pieces of a life must eventually be surrendered, as if in truth they amounted to nothing? The knowledge of his helplessness pressed down on him so heavily he felt weak. It wasn't enough to send a letter. There must be a way to make a difference. Reaching for his mobile, Harold realized it was at home. He staggered into the road, his face thick with grief.

A van shrieked to a halt and then skirted past. 'You stupid fucker!' yelled the driver.

He barely heard. He barely saw the post box either. Queenie's letter was in his hands before the door of the telephone kiosk had closed behind him.

He found the address and telephone number, but his fingers shook so hard he could barely tap the buttons to enter his pin code. He waited for the ringing tone, and the air hung still and heavy. A trickle of sweat slid between his shoulder blades.

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After ten rings there was at last a clunk, and a heavily accented voice: ‘St Bernadine’s Hospice. Good afternoon.’

‘I’d like to speak to a patient, please. Her name is Queenie Hennessy.’

There was a pause.

He added, ‘It’s very urgent. I need to know that she’s all right.’

The woman made a sound as if she was breathing out a long sigh. Harold’s spine chilled. Queenie was dead; he was too late. He clamped his knuckle to his mouth.

The voice said, ‘I’m afraid Miss Hennessy is asleep. Can I take a message?’

Small clouds sent shadows scurrying across the land. The light was smoky over the distant hills, not with the dusk but with the map of space that lay ahead. He pictured Queenie dozing at one end of England and himself in a phone box at the other, with things in between that he didn’t know and could only imagine: roads, fields, rivers, woods, moors, peaks and valleys, and so many people. He would meet and pass them all. There was no deliberation, no reasoning. The decision came in the same moment as the idea. He was laughing at the simplicity of it.

‘Tell her Harold Fry is on his way. All she has to do is wait. Because I am going to save her, you see. I will keep walking and she must keep living. Will you say that?’

The voice said she would. Was there anything else? Did he know visiting hours, for instance? Parking restrictions?

He insisted, ‘I’m not in a car. I want her to live.’

‘I’m sorry. Did you say something about your car?’

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‘I’m coming by foot. From South Devon all the way up to Berwick-upon-Tweed.’

The voice gave an exasperated sigh. ‘It’s a terrible line. What are you doing?’

‘I’m walking,’ he shouted.

‘I see,’ said the voice slowly, as if the woman had picked up a pen and was jotting this down. ‘Walking. I’ll tell her. Should I say anything else?’

‘I’m setting off right now. As long as I walk, she must live. Please tell her this time I won’t let her down.’

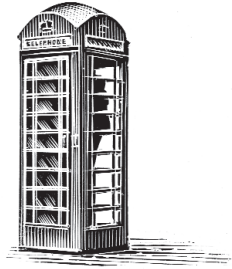
When Harold hung up and stepped out of the phone box, his heart was pounding so fast it felt too big for his chest. With trembling fingers, he unpeeled the flap of his own envelope and pulled out the reply. Cramming it against the glass of the kiosk, he scribbled a PS: *Wait for me. H.* He posted the letter, without noticing its loss.

Harold stared at the ribbon of road that lay ahead, and the glowering wall that was Dartmoor, and then the yachting shoes that were on his feet. He asked himself what in heaven’s name he’d just done.

Overhead a seagull cracked its wings and laughed.

3

Maureen and the Telephone Call



THE USEFUL THING about a sunny day was that it showed up the dust, and dried the laundry in almost less time than the tumble drier. Maureen had squirted, bleached, polished and annihilated every living organism on the worktops. She had washed and aired the sheets, pressed them, and remade the beds for both herself and Harold. It had been a relief to have him out of the way; in the six months of his retirement he had barely moved from the house. But now that she had nothing left to achieve, she was suddenly anxious and this in turn made her impatient. She rang Harold's mobile, only to hear a marimba tone coming from upstairs. She listened to his faltering message: 'You have reached the mobile phone of Harold Fry. I am very sorry but – he isn't here.' From the long pause he took in the middle, you'd think he was actually off looking for himself.

It was past five. He never did the unexpected. Even the usual noises, the ticking of the hall clock, the hum of

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the fridge, were louder than they should be. Where was he?

Maureen tried to distract herself with the *Telegraph* crossword, only to discover he had filled in all the easy answers. A terrible thought rushed into her head. She pictured him lying in the road, with his mouth open. It happened. People had heart attacks and no one found them for days. Or maybe her secret fears were confirmed. Maybe he would end up with Alzheimer's like his father? The man was dead before sixty. Maureen ran to fetch the car keys and her driving shoes.

And then it occurred to her that he was probably with Rex. They were probably talking about lawn cutting, and the weather. Ridiculous man. She replaced her shoes by the front door, and the car keys on their hook.

Maureen crept into the room that had become known over the years as the 'best' one. She could never enter it without feeling she needed a cardigan. Once they had kept a mahogany dining table, and four upholstered chairs; they had eaten in here every evening with a glass of wine. But that was twenty years ago. These days the table was gone, and the bookshelves stored albums of photographs that no one opened.

'Where are you?' she said. The net curtains hung between herself and the outside world, robbing it of colour and texture, and she was glad of that. The sun was already beginning to sink. Soon the street lamps would be on.

When the phone rang, Maureen shot into the hallway and plucked up the receiver. 'Harold?'

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A thick pause. 'It's Rex, Maureen. From next door.'

She looked about her helplessly. In her rush to answer the phone, she had stubbed her foot on something angular that Harold must have left on the floor. 'Are you all right, Rex? Have you run out of milk again?'

'Is Harold home?'

'Harold?' Maureen felt her voice shoot upwards. If he wasn't with Rex, where was he? 'Yes. Of course he is here.' The tone she had adopted was not at all her usual one. She sounded both regal and squashed. Just like her mother.

'Only I was worried something had happened. I didn't see him come back from his walk. He was going to post a letter.'

Devastating images were already firing through her mind of ambulances and policemen, and herself holding Harold's inert hand, and she didn't know if she was being completely foolish, but it was as if her head was rehearsing the worst possible outcome in order to pre-empt the full shock of it. She repeated that Harold was at home, and then before he could ask anything else she hung up. She immediately felt terrible. Rex was seventy-four and lonely. All he wanted was to help. She was about to call back, when he beat her to it and the phone began ringing in her hand. Maureen reassembled her composed voice and said, 'Good evening, Rex.'

'It's me.'

Her composed voice rocketed sky high. 'Harold? Where are you?'

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‘I’m on the B3196. Just outside the pub at Loddiswell.’ He actually sounded pleased.

Between the front door and Loddiswell there were almost five miles. So he hadn’t had a heart attack and fallen into the road. He hadn’t forgotten who he was. She felt more indignant than relieved. Then a new terrible thought dawned on her. ‘You haven’t been drinking?’

‘I’ve had a lemonade but I feel brilliant. Better than I’ve felt in years. I met a nice chap who sells satellite dishes.’ He paused as if he was about to deliver portentous news. ‘I’ve made a promise to walk, Maureen. All the way to Berwick.’

She thought she must have misheard. ‘Walk? To Berwick-upon-Tweed? You?’

He appeared to find this very funny. ‘Yes! Yes!’ he spluttered.

Maureen swallowed. She felt her legs and her voice failing her. She said, ‘Let me get this clear. You’re walking to see Queenie Hennessy?’

‘I am going to walk and she’s going to live. I’m going to save her.’

Her knees buckled. She threw her hand out to the wall to steady herself. ‘I think not. You can’t save people from cancer, Harold. Not unless you are a surgeon. And you can’t even slice bread without making a mess. This is ridiculous.’

Again Harold laughed, as if this person they were talking about was a stranger and not himself. ‘I was talking to a girl at the garage and she gave me the idea. She saved

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her aunt from cancer because she believed she could. She showed me how to heat a burger as well. It even had gherkins.'

He came across as so sure. It completely threw her. Maureen felt a spark of heat. 'Harold, you are sixty-five. You only ever walk to get to the car. And in case you haven't noticed, you left your mobile phone.' He tried to reply, but she sailed straight through him. 'And where do you think you are going to sleep?'

'I don't know.' The laughter had stopped and his voice sounded stripped away. 'But it isn't enough to post a letter. Please. I need to do this, Maureen.'

The way he appealed to her, and added her name at the end, childlike, as if the choice was hers, when clearly he had already decided, was too much. The spark of heat ignited to a bolt. She said, 'Well, you head off to Berwick, Harold. If that's what you want. I'd like to see you get past Dartmoor—' The line was staccato'd with pips. She tightened her grip on the handset, as if it was a piece of him she was clinging to. 'Harold? Are you still in the pub?'

'No, a phone box outside. It's quite smelly. I think someone may have—' His voice cut off. He was gone.

Maureen groped her body into the hall chair. The silence was louder than if he had not phoned at all. It seemed to eat up everything else. There was no ticking from the hall clock, no humming from the fridge, no birdsong from the garden. The words Harold, Burger, Walk, rolled around her head, and in the midst of them came two more: Queenie

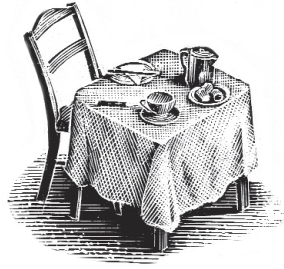
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Hennessy. After all these years. The memory of something long buried shivered deep inside her.

Maureen sat alone as the dark fell, while neon lights came on across the hills and bled pools of amber into the night.

4

Harold and the Hotel Guests



HAROLD FRY WAS a tall man who moved through life with a stoop, as if expecting a low beam, or a screwed-up paper missile, to appear out of nowhere. The day he was born his mother had looked at the bundle in her arms, and felt appalled. She was young, with a peony-bud mouth and a husband who had seemed a good idea before the war and a bad one after it. A child was the last thing she wanted or needed. The boy learned quickly that the best way to get along in life was to keep a low profile; to appear absent even when present. He played with neighbours' children, or at least he watched them from the edges. At school he avoided attention to the point of appearing stupid. Leaving home when he was sixteen, he had set out on his own, until one night he caught Maureen's eye across a dance hall and fell wildly in love. It was the brewery that had brought the newly wed couple to Kingsbridge.

Harold had done the same job as a sales rep for forty-five years. Keeping himself apart, he worked modestly and

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efficiently, without seeking either promotion or attention. Other chaps travelled and accepted jobs in senior management, but Harold had not wanted either. He made neither friends nor enemies. At his request, there was no farewell party for his retirement. And even though one of the girls in Admin had organized a quick whip-round, few of the sales team knew much about him. Someone said they'd heard once that Harold had a story, but didn't know what it was. He finished work on a Friday, and returned home with no more to show for his lifetime's employment than a fully illustrated *Motorist's Guide to Great Britain* and a voucher for Threshers. The book had been placed in the best room, along with all the other things that no one looked at. The voucher remained in its envelope. Harold was teetotal.

Gnawing hunger woke him with a start. The mattress had both firmed up and moved overnight, and an unfamiliar rod of light fell across the carpet. What had Maureen done with the bedroom, that its windows were on the wrong side? What had she done with the walls, that they were lightly sprigged with flowers? It was then that he remembered; he was in a hotel just north of Loddiswell. He was walking to Berwick because Queenie Hennessy must not die.

Harold would have been the first to admit that there were elements to his plan that were not finely tuned. He had no walking boots or compass, let alone a map or change of clothes. The least planned part of the journey,

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however, was the journey itself. He hadn't known he was going to walk until he started. Never mind the finely tuned elements; there was no plan. He knew the Devon roads well enough, and after that he would simply head north.

Harold plumped his two pillows, and eased himself to a sitting position. His left shoulder was sore but otherwise he felt refreshed. He had enjoyed his best sleep in many years; there had been none of the pictures that regularly came to him in the dark. The quilt covering his body matched the floral fabric of the curtains and there was a stripped antique-pine wardrobe, below which were parked his yachting shoes. In the far corner stood a sink, beneath a mirror. His shirt, tie and trousers were folded small as an apology on a faded blue-velvet chair.

A picture surfaced of his mother's dresses scattered through his childhood home. He didn't know where it had come from. He glanced at the window, trying to have a thought that would smudge the memory. He asked himself if Queenie knew he was walking. Maybe she was thinking about that even now.

After the phone call to the hospice, he had followed the rising and turning of the B3196. Clear in his direction, he had passed fields, houses, trees, the bridge over the River Avon, and endless traffic had passed him. None of these made any real impression, except as one thing less between himself and Berwick. He had taken regular breaks to calm his breathing. Several times he had to adjust his yachting shoes and mop his head. On reaching the Loddiswell Inn

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