

Prologue

6 June 1944

Afterwards, it is hard to recall the departure with any sense of continuity. Edward can only conjure a kaleidoscope of crystal clear but disconnected images. The swarming army of armoured ants, all heading for embarkation points along the south coast. The small boy in short trousers who grins from ear to ear and holds up his hand in a Churchillian V-sign, before being dragged away by his harried mother. The precipitous plummet in morale, when they hear that the operation has been put off for 24 hours because of the weather. The postponement is a kick in the guts. The news sends Fairbairn into a fearful temper, and he smokes cigarette after cigarette with barely a pause for breath.

The crossing, on the other hand, is all too vivid. At first, everyone is simply awed into silence by the sight of the channel, alive, positively infested with vessels of every description. Supply ships, destroyers, torpedo boats, assault craft, flotillas, stretching as far as the eye can see. Thousands and thousands of craft of all classes, all intent on the same purpose. Somewhere in the distance, he hears the plaintive sound of a bagpiper, accompanying a Scottish regiment. 'The Road to the Isles' floats eerily across the water. Four years after the humiliation at Dunkirk, the British are sailing back to France, the torchbearers of liberation. It is an honour to be part of this great enterprise. An exodus of mighty Israelites crossing the Red Sea for the Promised Land. A surge of sap rises in Edward's heart: he thinks of King Henry V on the eve of Agincourt. 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . .' If ever there's a time to 'stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood', this is it. He has to stop himself crying out loud, 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

But then the Rhino craft, loaded to the gunnels with jeeps, lorries, ambulances and men, begins to pitch and roll in the choppy

sea. Pulled by a freighter, the barge is a long, wide platform built of steel pontoons, and as un-streamlined as it is possible to be. The weather may have improved sufficiently for the operation to go ahead, but they are still tossed about like flotsam and jetsam on the tide. They are drenched in spray; his open Prayer Book is soaked. The surface of the craft becomes slick with sea water and vomit. He launches into an impromptu rendition of the old Navy hymn:

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave.
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep . . .

Men in life jackets and steel helmets crowd around him and join in, tentatively at first, and then with more confidence. By the time they reach the chorus, they are almost bellowing it out:

Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

The craft lurches on the swell. The acrid smell of sick and diesel catches at the back of his throat. And yet Edward is utterly, unnaturally calm. It is the hour for which he was born. He thinks of his father, and, inevitably, Kipling's poem comes into his head.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too . . .

He is a small boy, sitting on his father's lap. 'Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,' reads Papa. Then all at once, it is as if the Earth and everything in it has exploded. Overhead, they hear their bombers pounding the coastline. Alongside, there is gunfire from battleships, destroyers and cruisers. Then, a sudden uncanny silence, an orchestrated pause to allow the troops to land. In the few seconds' respite, it is as if all his senses are on overdrive. He

notes that the sun is coming up. That on the headland, the gorse is a blaze of yellow. He can just make out a church tower in the middle distance. Had he seen this on the map? He wonders if Monsieur le Curé is at his morning prayers, yet even as he forms the thought, he remembers that it is barely dawn. A seagull flies across the front of the boat, oblivious of the mighty armada below.

And then – a hailstorm of enemy machinegun-fire rains down upon them. All hell breaks loose as the Germans unleash the full force of their artillery, rockets and mortars on the approaching vessels. A shell clips the very edge of the landing craft and the barge lurches into a sandbar and sticks fast. They have come to rest some distance from the shore and the chances of a dry landing are evaporating. Looking down to assess the depth of the water, Edward sees bodies – one, three, five, ten – bobbing up and down in the water. ‘Oh hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.’ One khaki figure, carried on a current, strikes the metal side with some force and, as the body bounces away into the whorling water, Edward notices that it is a headless torso. *If you can keep your head, keep your head, keep your head*, he thinks. *Poor bastard! Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Water to water. In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

He hears Johnson in noisy argument with the CO; it is clear that they are significantly adrift of their target. Then they are unloading, disgorging men and equipment along the seashore. The doors open and a mob of soldiers topple into the sea and are soaked. Edward keeps his balance, but only just; he is wet, and his uniform stiffens horribly into cardboard as he staggers through the waves. Utter chaos ensues as they run, then crawl up the shore, heavy with equipment. The beach is already jammed with men and vehicles. Mines explode; there is a sharp smell of gunpowder, fluorescent flashes of fire. Bullets buzz around his head like angry bees, the noise ringing in his ears to the exclusion of all else. He sees Fairbairn stumble, Stevens fall. Yet there is nothing to do, nothing to do but go forward, forward, forward, dragging himself in the direction of the *rendez-vous*.

Nell, April 2016

Nell was struggling to keep her cool. When she met Mike Emory for the first time last month, she suspected he was a bore, but today he seemed to be speaking pure gobbledegook.

‘The fact of the matter is, Nell, that we need a paradigm shift here. If you don’t take your IT provision to the next level and pronto, Ofsted will be down on you like a ton of bricks. The question is, is your current system fit for purpose going forward?’ He looked round the room for support. ‘Before we get granular, can I suggest a bit of blue-sky thinking here? Why don’t we run a few ideas up the flagpole?’

The nods of agreement from her colleagues made Nell wonder fleetingly if she was missing something. Perhaps she wasn’t taking the school’s IT needs seriously enough. Certainly Fiona, her deputy, seemed very impressed by Mike. Now he was suggesting that his company would offer a game-changing tailor-made solution designed to deliver optimal performance.

‘We’re all about giving one hundred and ten per cent, Nell,’ he said. ‘We see ourselves as change agents. Results driven. As I always say, if it’s not working for you, it’s not working for us. Value-added is our middle name, Nell.’

If he used her name gratuitously once more, she’d scream. Which would be embarrassing in front of two colleagues and Kevin Letts, the school governor who’d been co-opted onto the IT sub-committee on the grounds that he worked at Curry’s. She was gripping the pencil in her hand so tightly that her fingertips had turned white, and she was in danger of starting to chew the end. Something she never did, and an absolute no-no in her classroom.

She cleared her throat and stood up, smoothing her skirt. ‘I do apologise, Mike. I really need to be somewhere else. You’ll have to excuse me. I’ll leave you in Fiona’s capable hands. I’d be happy to look at your proposal when there’s a bit more detail to discuss. But you should know that our budgets are very tight indeed. We’re having to make difficult decisions about our spending.’

Mike leapt up to shake her hand. ‘Of course, Nell, of course. Busy woman! We can touch base again when we’ve got our ducks in a row. I’ll action that and ping you an email.’

Nell made her way to her office via the staff room where she made a cup of tea. What a crashing waste of time. Where did people learn to speak like that? Was there some sort of training in business-speak-cliché or did you just absorb it by osmosis if you hung about in the wrong crowd? Perhaps there should be a degree course in Jargon, along with Golf Studies and all the other ridiculous non subjects you could study these days.

‘Somewhere else’ was only a slight bending of the truth. She still had a heap of paperwork to go through before the end of the day. Or perhaps that should be *close of play*? Diane, the school secretary, had left a neat pile on her desk, covered with luminous post-it notes, colour-coded according to an esoteric system of priority Nell was yet to understand. And no doubt emails galore would have been *pinging* into her inbox since she last checked at lunchtime. She wondered idly if there was a market for some kind of cliché bingo game. She pictured colourful cards, jaunty graphics and boxes to tick when anyone *pushed an envelope* or *thought outside the box*.

Kevin was quiet, she thought. He looked like a startled rabbit. It was hard to get parent governors at St Sebastian’s, and it had taken months of encouragement to persuade him to put himself forward. Mind you, when Mike was in full flow, there wasn’t much space for anyone else to contribute. *Blame the chair*, she thought. *Note to self: I should have managed him better. That’s what I’m here for.*

Actually, that’s *not* what she was here for. She was here because she had wanted to be a teacher for almost as long as she could remember. She was heart-and-soul committed to the children in her care: she, if anyone, knew what a difference a good teacher could make. IT might be important – essential these days, obviously – but it was only a tool to deliver the things that really mattered. Like learning and discipline and life chances, along with a healthy dose of fun and kindness.

And in a catchment area like St Seb’s, which served one of the most deprived areas of Oxford, of the country even, school could

inject the one bit of stability and calm during the day. Some order into the chaos of a childhood lived in deprivation and poverty. It might be a bit of a hobby horse – OK, an obsession – but she was convinced children thrived on routine and structure and knowing what was what. The satisfaction, the emotional rewards of teaching were enormous. On a good day she felt she had the keys to a magic kingdom in her hands. On a bad one, she feared she would drown under the weight of the insatiable demands of government targets and the intractable problems of the children in her charge.

She was here now, in this particular office, because the head, Rob Thomas, went off on long-term sick leave due to stress half way through last term, the day after Ofsted placed St Seb's in Special Measures. As deputy head, she'd been asked to step up and was now acting head. Anyone outside the system might see that as a golden opportunity for the understudy to shine. Anyone inside the system knew that 'poisoned chalice' was a better description. The reality was that her workload had doubled – at least – overnight. She'd managed to offload some of her responsibilities as deputy to Fiona, but she was still in the classroom half time. Of course, she loved the teaching – it was her lifeblood – but she was sinking under the pressures of acting headship. It was now obvious that the pre-inspection School Evaluation Form had been horribly out of kilter with the reality, and a bit of digging had thrown up serious questions about the way the welcome injection of Pupil Premium funding had been spent. And she was the one left clearing up the mess.

She'd hoped that Rob would be back for the summer term, but she heard this morning that he'd been signed off for another month. Nell was going to be the one facing constant HMI visits to check on progress. There was every indication that they were going to be fast-tracked into becoming an Academy, a move to which at least half the staff and who knows how many parents were adamantly opposed. Surely they were going to have to call in reinforcements now? Pull in a supply teacher to help plug the gap?

Nell sighed as she waited for her laptop to wake up. Why was it so *slow*? Underinvestment in IT, no doubt. ('A poor worker blames her tools,' tutted her mother with a shake of her head.) But how did

you decide between spending tens of thousands of pounds on IT or repairing that leaky roof in the Year 6 Portacabins, which were only ever supposed to be temporary anyway, or taking on extra learning support staff? Particularly when Rachel Wilkes reported increasing numbers of children arriving in Reception barely able to respond to their own name, let alone knowing any of their phonemes. Half of them still needed help getting dressed, which meant PE lessons were a bit of a joke, and a good number couldn't sit still for more than about three minutes at a time. *I'll give you paradigm shift*, she thought.

Oh God, she was tired, and it wasn't even the first day of term. Today had been an INSET day. The children arrived back tomorrow. Usually, her heart would be singing at the thought of all those bright faces. Now she just felt weary. She hadn't been sleeping; she must have an early night. At least the term started on a Thursday, so they would be eased in with a two-day week. Settling the children back to work after the holidays, even a short one like the Easter break, was always an effort. Some of the more vulnerable kids really struggled with routine after the anarchy of home. It would help if she had had a real break over Easter, rather than spending most of it on the School Improvement Plan. Ah well. Best laid plans. At last, the laptop fired into action. Nell opened her Inbox and set to work.

By Friday night she was feeling both better and worse. The first day of term had started well; she arrived at school at 7 a.m. feeling much more positive after a good night's sleep. She met Fiona on the doorstep.

'Sorry to bail out on you last night,' she said, with a wry smile. 'Blessed paperwork.'

'Blessed Mike, more like,' said Fiona. 'To be fair, he calmed down a bit after you'd gone. I think he was trying to impress you.'

'Well, he called that one wrong! But look, we'll talk again when you're further on. And thanks . . . I do appreciate it.'

Once the children arrived, Nell was relieved to feel the familiar lift to her spirits. The sun was shining and the kids were smiling. The job was demanding, but manageable. And by the end of

the day, staff and children were back in the swing of things. She watched them file into the hall for assembly, consulted her notes and made sure she could pick out the three new children, who she wanted to welcome. She took pride in knowing every one of the 315 pupils by name. She allowed herself a brief moment of satisfaction that this was *her* school, for the moment at least. By hook or by crook she would do well by these children, whatever it took.

Nell's optimism lasted until approximately 3.20 the next afternoon when a familiar figure barged her way past Diane and into Nell's office. Kelly Meacher was vast, shapeless and filled the room. She brought with her the smell of cigarette smoke, cheap perfume and body odour. Her hair – poorly dyed with two inches of roots showing – was pulled off her face in a tight pony tail. Her fleshy arm wobbled as she shook her fist at Nell.

'Ms Meacher, what seems to be the problem? Would you like to sit down?' Nell kept her voice as calm as she could. It was always an effort not to treat angry parents like naughty children.

'No, I fucking wouldn't!'

'Please. How can I help?' *How indeed?* thought Nell. Kelly Meacher had four children at St Sebastian's, the youngest of whom joined Reception yesterday. There was at least one more child at home, and it looked as if she might be pregnant again, but you could never be quite sure until she turned up in the playground with a pram. Somehow, though as far as Nell knew she lived on benefits, Kelly had a new pram for each baby.

'You bloody teachers! You disrespect my kids, just because I live up the Binks Estate!'

'I'm sorry?' said Nell. 'Is this something to do with Kar-ian? Mrs Wilkes seems to think she's settling in well.'

'There you go! *Carrie-Anne!* That's not how you say 'er name, is it?'

'Isn't it? I'm sorry, I didn't—'

'I know you bloody didn't! And nor did that cow Mizz Wilkes, neither. It's *Kardashian*, innit? What do you think the fucking dash in the middle's for?'

Nell struggled to keep a straight face. The older Meacher children were called Kraig, Kyle and Krystal. *Kardashian* was a

new one on her, although the celebrity surname was familiar. ‘Oh! I thought it was a hyphen,’ she said. Kelly threw her a murderous look. Did she think Nell was being sarcastic? Nell stood up, to signal the end of the conversation. ‘I appreciate you putting us straight on that, Ms Meacher,’ she said briskly. ‘I’ll make sure Mrs Wilkes knows. And in the meantime, please accept my apologies for the misunderstanding.’

Kelly glowered at her. She looked as if she was about to say something more, but perhaps thinking better of it, she turned and left the room. A faint whiff of sweat and righteous anger lingered and Nell opened the window before collapsing into her chair with relief. She’d give herself a moment to recover before going in search of Rachel.

By the time Nell arrived home that night, the episode with Kelly Meacher was beginning to feel slightly less entertaining. It didn’t help that she’d fought to find a parking space and had to carry a big box of files half way down the road to her flat. When she unlocked the door into the shared hall, it was late and she was hungry and fed up. It was no picnic, being a teacher, let alone acting head of a school in Special Measures, and she could really do without aggressive parents. Her first head when she was an NQT always said that there was no such thing as difficult kids, only difficult Mums and Dads. He had a point.

She climbed the stairs and opened her own door. ‘Honey, I’m home!’ she called out before she could stop herself. *Must stop doing that*, she thought. What had started out as a silly joke between herself and Mark had become a defence mechanism. Although she told herself it was sensible – better, surely, that no one guessed she was on her own, and therefore vulnerable, though who knew whether anyone in the flats was fooled – she suspected the daily lie was not exactly helping her to move on. And since last week’s shock she’d decided that moving on could not be delayed another moment.

She opened the fridge and reached for the cold bottle of Pinot Grigio that was her Friday treat. Even at her most miserable, she refused to drink on a school night, but Friday gave her the green

light. She poured herself a large glass, enjoying the welcome sight of the cold pale green wine in her favourite wineglass. Music on, while she found something for supper. Adele, perhaps. Always balm for the broken hearted. And comfort food: fresh pasta, maybe, with parmesan and an avocado and rocket salad. Ice cream for pudding. She'd done her usual big pre-term shop which meant the freezer was full of possibilities.

It was eleven months and a day since he left. The date was indelibly marked in her brain because Mark chose her fortieth birthday to inform her that, on reflection, he didn't see a future with her, and, actually, he didn't want children, thank you very much, couldn't really see himself as a father. No matter that they'd talked about marriage and family on and off over the past four and a half years. No matter that hitting forty was a milestone for many people, and a bit of a watershed if you happened to be a woman and childless. No matter that he broke the news over dinner at Luigi's, presumably because he was counting on her being far too controlled to make a scene in public. He knew, he *knew* that she wanted children. She'd never made a secret of it. Fuck's sake, why did he think she worked with kids all day long? And now she'd lost the chance.

She really had been getting over it. From the outset – well, not quite the outset; there was the delicious, unexpected moment when she found herself pouring a glass of red wine all over his new shirt in the bistro – she had refused to give in to self-pity. She told herself that he was a loser, and didn't deserve her. She would throw herself into work, push herself harder than ever. Not allow herself to dwell on what might have been. And it was almost working. She could contemplate her forty-first birthday with something approaching equanimity. She'd be busy at school that day, anyway; she'd take a cake in to share at break-time but there'd be no need to make a particular song and dance about it.

But in the holidays. . . she drained the pasta, stirred in some fresh pesto, and took another swig of wine. In the holidays she'd only been doing what she always did. She took the bus into the city and went to the Ashmolean because that was one of her beginning-of-the-holidays treats. Her friend Fran had cried off at the last minute

– a childcare crisis, but she does have two under-fives – which was a great shame because Nell was looking forward to a good catch-up, but she didn't see why that should stop her seeing the Andy Warhol exhibition. And she'd been enjoying herself: there were more than a hundred works on display, and as well as the more iconic, familiar material, a lot of the items on show were less well known and revealed a whole new side to the artist's character.

Then all of a sudden she saw them. Mark – and a petite woman with long blonde hair. His new girlfriend, presumably. Fran's partner Pete still played Sunday league football with Mark, so she'd heard he was seeing someone. The two had their backs to her, which gave Nell a moment to watch unobserved. Mark's arm was lightly draped over the woman's shoulder. He leant in to tell her something. *Bloody cheek*, she thought. *To bring her here! When Mark isn't even interested in art and only ever came because it was my thing!* At that moment, the woman laughed and turned slightly towards him, so Nell could see her face. *Pretty*, she thought. *And young. Much younger than me.* And then she saw, unmistakably, a bump. The woman reached out for Mark's hand and guided it to her pregnant belly. Perhaps the baby had kicked and they were sharing the moment.

Nell turned her back and walked out of the exhibition, down the stairs and out into Beaumont Street where it had started to rain and she retched into a gutter. She wiped her face on the back of her hand and set off on foot, blindly at first, and then up the High Street, down the Cowley Road and all the way home. She arrived home an hour or so later, wet through and shivering, had a hot bath and went straight to bed, where she stayed for the best part of 24 hours. Later she checked Facebook – till now she'd been so good about keeping her distance, she'd signed up to Facebook's 'take a break' settings and everything – and discovered that the woman was called Ellie. And that she and Mark had announced their engagement on Valentine's Day.

Ten days later, she was still shaken. *Bastard Mark, whose new girlfriend – or should I say fiancée – even almost has my name. Bastard, bastard Mark, who couldn't really see himself as a father*, she thought as she finished her second glass. *And more fool me for putting up with him as long as I did.*

She switched on her laptop and logged into Facebook. She knew what she needed to know now, so she would finally unfriend bloody Mark and block all updates. That way she didn't have to have anything more to do with him. Ever. It was Friday night and she'd forget about Kelly Meacher and Ofsted and the spreadsheets she was supposed to be working on. She'd see what Fran was up to this weekend. See if anyone else was planning to do the Park Run tomorrow; she really ought to as she skipped the gym tonight. She might check the cinema listings. She'd have to work some of Saturday and all day Sunday, probably, but she would take some time out too. She'd got better things to do with her life than waste time thinking about what might have been.