The Wreck

When I was thirteen years old my mother told me, with only the slightest hint of impatience in her voice, that I was 'determined to burn every bridge offered to me'. I sat still, head down, and picked at a chip in the laminate table top. I fidgeted my foot in and out of my shoe, and didn't answer. I could feel her eyes, their usual weary impassivity, fixed on my turned head. My mother sighed, got up from her seat, and placed a hand on my shoulder as she passed, then reached into her apron to retrieve a handkerchief. She loudly blew her nose into it and left the room. I listened as her slippers made slapping sounds against the stairs and when I heard her bedroom door shut, I slipped out from behind the table to the garden, where I sat alone and sulked.

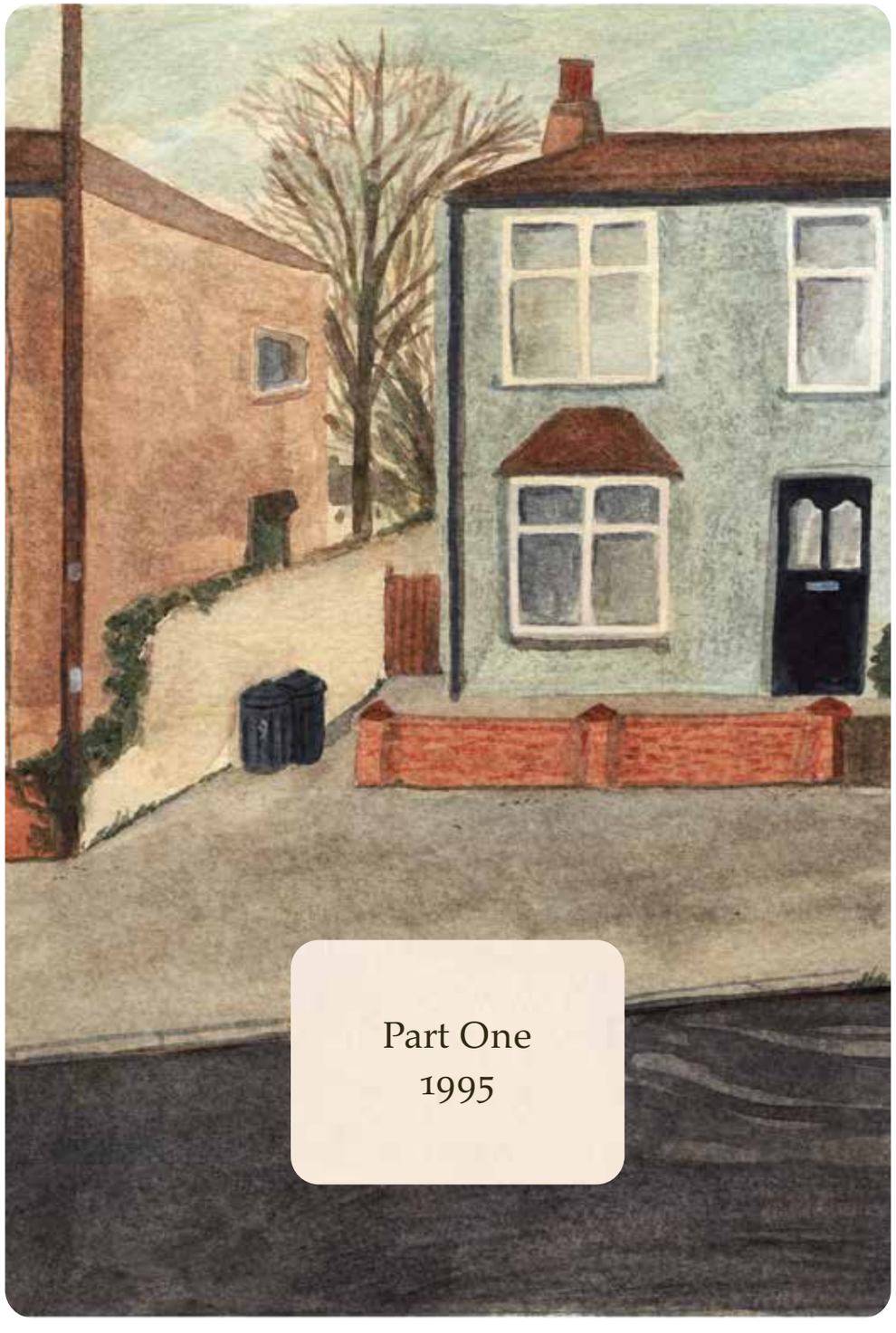
I remember the scene but I don't remember what I'd done to merit this dressing down. I know it had something to do with refusing to go to a classmate's birthday party, or a school event, or something of that kind. At a distance, or through the eyes of a stranger, it might appear that my mother's reaction to the ordinary obstinance of a thirteen-year-old girl was overblown, even a little harsh. After all, what child hasn't felt self-conscious about attending a party? Too shy, too tired, too ugly, or small, or tall or plain or strange? There was a catalogue of potential reasons for my wanting to stay at home.

My mother, whose name was Mary, crops up very rarely in the story of my life. She was there for forty-eight years of it, but our relationship was polite and uneventful enough that if I were to list the key events of my adulthood, she might not appear at all. Coincidentally this was true for all four of us at the Wreck, to varying degrees. Three of us were only children – and then there was Bill, who was electively estranged from his family. We were all living with different levels of familial ambivalence. It was a coincidence, but I don't doubt that this fact had some sway over where we ended up and how we tried to live.

It was unusual for my mother to share her judgements. When she did, though, I knew that she'd carefully formed her opinion through months, or years, of silent observation. She was a still, quiet woman. We had the same pale skin. 'That's your mother's Irish blood,' my father insisted when, as a child, I sadly compared my pallid arm to the ruddy warmth of his Cornish farmer's tan, which reached an inch above his elbow in line with his short-sleeve shirt. My mother wore her hair in a stiff, set curl, as she had since 1938, in a style very similar to my grandmother's. She had three versions of the same dress, in different colours, worn on rotation at the weekends. She exchanged these for a floral wrap-around apron over a drab shirtdress on weekdays. I hated the way my mother looked. I feared it was how I would look – or, worse, how I might already look.

Despite the unremarkable facts of my mother's life, she inspired a degree of reverence within our small family. She had a talent for observation and after a day visiting relatives would offer up a neat summary of them that was so clear, so true, that I couldn't help but feel impressed – and slightly wary of her. 'That man won't be happy until everyone else around him is brought as low as he believes himself to be,' she said of my uncle. 'Angela puts on that prim and proper voice to disguise the fact that everything she says is viciously cruel,' was her sharp assessment of my cousin, who was only eleven at the time. My mother wasn't a big talker but, when she did speak, it went straight to the heart of things, and so she had a reputation for being clever, though she had very little education beyond the age of fourteen. When she made an assessment of someone it quickly became a commonly held opinion, if not a fact. I know that this was a point of silent pride for my mother, and she couldn't prevent the slight curl of a smile from intruding at the corner of her mouth whenever someone asked 'What do you think, Mary, you're good with these things?' I saw her pride and I recognised it.

When my mother said that I was 'determined to burn every bridge offered to me' it came from thirteen years of watching me, her only child. It might have fallen from her in a worn tone as so many other scoldings had done before, but I picked this one to hold on to forever because it felt, more than anything else she said about me, completely, miserably true.



Part One
1995

'Post.' Bill came into the living room and tossed a pile of envelopes on the coffee table. It was early evening, autumn, light rapidly dimming, and the room had fallen into drowsy shadow. I was immersed in my work, a constellation of teacups in the process of leaving marks on the table, the cat wedged awkwardly behind my knee.

The envelopes were all bills bar one, which was cream-coloured, our address type-written onto a sticker and stuck, perfectly centred, on the front. It was too luxurious for a circular, and the postmark was West London. I peered at the outside of the envelope. 'Just open it, Sherlock. Stop investigating,' said Bill, as he stood in the doorway eating a tiny yogurt with a teaspoon. I pulled a face at him and wiggled a fingernail down the sealed flap.

Dear Charlotte,

I hope you don't mind, I got your address from Annie Ellis. I tried to find your new phone number but perhaps you're married? Or X-directory? It's that isn't it? Always a bit too cool.

Anyhow, Adrian and I are coming back to Bristol for a few months. A stop gap whilst we move house. Would love to see you! Give me a call! Please.

Love Francesca (and Adrian).

I read it over twice, and then a third time just to be sure. It was a plain, unremarkable communication, but the jolt I'd felt at seeing the familiar not-quite-neat handwriting made my heart race. I had met Francesca MacClery at university, and for slightly more than a decade she was my closest and perhaps my only important friend. It was five or six years since we'd spoken, and about eight since we'd seen each other. Our friendship had fallen victim to our thirties, when time suddenly felt tighter and pressures so much heavier. We'd grown apart. Fewer phone calls, coffee once a week, then once a month until Fran moved away to London. We hadn't fallen out but I assumed we had both realised that the forces of our lives were pulling us in different directions: hers more notably upwards, mine very much laterally.


What's that?


A letter.


No shit!


Ur hur.
No shit.


It's actually from Francesca.
Oh, Francesca-Francesca?
Yep. Fran.


Huh. It's been a while for you two, eh?


Yeah. They're coming back here for a bit.


Her and what's his name?
Adrian.


Adrian the photographer?
THE photographer.


Will you see her? I thought you were kind of done?


We were, I thought. I mean...


I guess we didn't really fall out. Just drifted apart.


She wants to give it another go though? That's nice.


Hmm. Yeah.


Weird.

Bill and I first met after work one evening in 1985, soon after I'd turned thirty. I had got caught in a downpour and rushed into a pub near the harbour to wait it out. A friend, perhaps even Fran herself, once told me that a woman sitting alone in a pub is an irresistible prospect to a man, and I was not averse to the idea of getting picked up.

That evening two men approached me, separately, and asked what I was reading. The first was at least thirty years older than me and carried a plastic supermarket bag in one hand and an almost empty pint in the other. I smiled politely and turned back to my book, pretending not to hear the question. He wandered off only to be replaced by a much younger man in a T-shirt, who swayed violently back and forth as he looked not at but through me, and mumbled something that reached me only as pungent fumes. As I turned away I heard him say 'Snobby fucking cow' under his boozy breath. I picked up my belongings and moved to a table on the other side of the room. 'Excuse me,' said a man's voice behind me, and I swung around and told him to 'quite frankly leave me the fuck alone, frankly'. I can only imagine how I must have looked to Bill in that first moment– rain-drenched and wild-eyed – but I remember him, his face, always extraordinary in its openness, looking back at me. What a peculiar sensation it is to recall the first time you see a face that becomes, even for a short while, your entire world.


I actually don't know. No one cares what I'm reading.


Well. Please tell me. What are you reading?


I'm going to say I'm reading something smart cos you seem like...


...a pretty smart lady.
So, I'm reading Proust. In French.


And what are you actually reading?


Mostly the A–Z. I keep getting lost.


A to zee?
A to ZED. Sorry. I've exposed myself now, haven't I?


Where're you from?


Calgary. Canada.


And why are you here?


Well. I moved here. For one reason or another. And, then, I heard that if you sit in a rubbish pub long enough...


...a beautiful bad-tempered woman will shout at you.


Oh, nice. Very nice.


Charlotte.
Bill.

I felt something for Bill instantly, an intense yet totally benevolent propulsive feeling pushing me towards him. It couldn't be helped, I thought later – you had to love this man. I liked his face and the shape his tall body made concertinaed onto a small pub stool. I liked the tone of his voice, which was warm and clear and, of course, Canadian. Later, Fran would call it a perfect TV voice. That was as much as it took. Perhaps not love at first sight, but certainly longing. I didn't need to know what he did for a living or what traps the ghosts of his childhood had planted in his personality; I don't think I knew his full name for the first month of seeing him.
I wonder if there's a chemical equation for it, for how the atoms that made me settled when placed next to the atoms that made him.
Of course, I found him attractive immediately. Of course, because Bill is almost preposterously attractive, tall and lean and blonde, radiating health and good will. In fact his general robust pleasantness would have appalled me had it not compelled me so thoroughly. Bill was, from the minute he set foot in my life, an absolute necessity.

We'd been living together for almost seven years in the ground-floor flat of a house in Fishponds, a mostly residential area of Bristol that enjoyed little of the stately beauty of Clifton or Redland. Rows and rows of post-war semi-detached houses, pebble-dashed with patches of bored grass outside each front door. When we moved in the flat was plain and unfussy, almost drab, but Bill found a book of Terence Conran interiors, which he studied for weeks, paying a 50p fine when he eventually returned it to the library. He built us a wall of bookshelves and re-clad the kitchen in flat planes of clean, solid pine.
We had a small garden where Bill nurtured a vegetable patch. 'My jolly green giant,' I called him. Inside we kept plants on the windowsills and hung posters from exhibitions I'd been to in London in lieu of owning art. Every day I rearranged the terracotta-coloured blanket over our second-hand sofa to cover up the early eighties stripes underneath, a task that had to be repeated after anyone sat down for more than a second. We wanted a modern, unfussy home where our simple, well-designed belongings would sing out against plain white walls and natural surfaces. It was important to us that we turn our backs on the chintz, china and net curtains of our parents' generation and make a clear statement about the future we wanted. For a year or two we were completely in love with our life in that flat, I especially. On sunny days at 11 a.m. sunlight broke around the corner of the garden wall and hit the tiny box room where I did my writing. I'd sit in the triangle of light, the sun heating one side of me, lulling my eyes closed, and feel as close to content as I'd ever been.

Three years in, though, our building, designed to house one household, strained under the weight of containing two. Upstairs a young family with a new baby and a nervous dog had packed their busy, growing life into five rooms, while downstairs Bill and I danced around one another, trying to run our respective work lives from the same rooms we cooked, ate and slept in. Mould grew on the bathroom ceiling and behind the wardrobe in our bedroom. We scrubbed and bleached, replastered and painted, but a year later the damp would resurface. I took it personally. I suspected the damp of being judgement of us, manifest as black spores. You should have got somewhere bigger. You should be doing better, it said.

I worked as an arts critic, mostly for a West Country newspaper but also for a couple of beautifully produced but barely read journals. I wrote about theatre and film but was willing to cast an eye over anything that an editor would throw my way. Bill said that my job was 'taking things seriously'. What does Charlie do? She takes things seriously, he'd say, and I'd roll my eyes and explain that I wrote about art and if I seemed serious it was only because Bill was such a deeply unserious man. Bill's was, irksomely, a good summation though. My job was to take beautiful, frivolous, indulgent things seriously, and I loved it. I suppose I also loved that my opinions had weight – as a woman this fact remained, even into the nineties, a novelty. I too could declare this writer or that director a visionary or a hack and people took note. Not a lot of people, sure, but enough.

As for Bill, he'd left his job with a large carpentry firm to set up his own business, driving around Bristol in his van doing domestic carpentry in all kinds of homes. Sometimes I thought about how a client's eyes might widen with delight as they saw Bill walking up the driveway. I imagined men and women flustered and stumbling through their instructions as he drank instant coffee in their half-built kitchens, and I felt jealous of the frisson of nerves and excitement someone might feel at experiencing this nice, handsome man for the very first time. The difference between us was writ so large it felt lazy: he was a body and I was a mind. Narratively it was a little too clear-cut to allow for subtlety: the writer and the carpenter. But it worked.

I had hoped we might be moderately bohemian: lively dinner parties and European travel. If we had to be suburban homeowners then the least we could do was buck convention and live life with a degree of abandon. Instead we felt our days becoming neater and more orderly, no matter how hard we tried to resist. We didn't want to be people who fell into habits, but the running of our tiny household required a routine: one of us doing the food shopping on the way home, the cooking at six-thirty to eat by seven-thirty in order to have fully digested by the time we went to bed at eleven, exhausted and filmy with the grit of the day's stresses. Sex only at the weekends. The pub once or twice a month with our friends, me taking occasional solo trips to London for work and returning exhausted on an always late-running train. We were unambiguously adult and, whether we liked it or not, our lives began to match up to the polite expectations society held for us.

It is hard to see how I didn't recognise that Bill and I lived so very close to inordinate happiness. If we could only loosen a screw here, tighten one up over there, the structure of our lives would be complete. Yet I was too busy imagining how we might find a better one altogether. I was always hoping for a surprise intervention.

Anyone could see that Francesca and Adrian were what it looked like when everything went right for you. They were a magazine couple. They had been in magazines; I'd seen them. The worst part of me, the part I knew to press far down into myself, wanted to roll my eyes at their stories and to scoff at their good fortune. And yet, I had always liked Francesca so very much. Now that I saw her, I wanted her back in my life, making it sunnier. So I resolved to try harder and to be better. If it weren't Francesca, a person I felt thoroughly fond of, then it would just be someone else. Someone had to be out there, doing well, reaping the rewards, and it may as well be her.


You do know about art!


Bill likes to play salt of the earth, good honest farm boy, but he's nearly as posh as you, Fran. In Canada, anyway.


We don't really have 'posh' in Canada.


Lucky you.


Anyway, love your work.
Thanks.
That's kind.

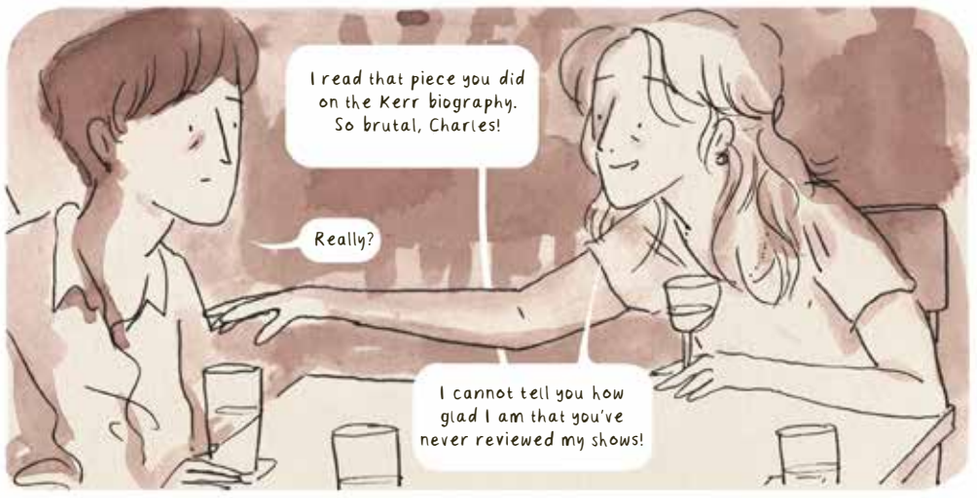

Who'd have thought Adrian would end up the artist, eh?


Well, quite.


Charles, you're still writing, I hope? Beyond the reviews.
Which I read religiously, of course.


She is! Always turning out amazing work. Charlie is my favourite writer.


I literally feed and clothe this man, could you imagine if he said anything else?


I read that piece you did on the Kerr biography. So brutal, Charles!
Really?
I cannot tell you how glad I am that you've never reviewed my shows!


It wasn't that harsh, was it?


No! You were bang on! Agreed with every word of it!


You always cut to the core! It's a skill. Just please don't ever cut to MY core. I couldn't face it!
Nor mine. I certainly wouldn't hold up to close scrutiny.