

## One

It was a sort of madness. I realised that at the time. How could a woman like me be capable of such a thing? But I'd been horribly betrayed, and was reeling from the shock. I was in freefall, all the branches cut off, nothing to catch me as I fell. And I was insanely lonely.

That's no excuse either, but maybe you've never been there. Howling loneliness, month after month. I was alone when the lawyer's letter arrived. No Greg beside me to look at those words wiping out our life together. *What's this all about? Leave it to me. It must have come to the wrong address.*

I was alone when the car broke down on the North Circular Road at one in the morning. When a gutter got blocked and water ran down the walls. When a plumber ripped me off, and my laptop crashed.

I was alone when a rosy-cheeked vet arrived – just married, she told me – to put down the dog. I played Joni Mitchell, that song about her lover sniffing his fingers as he watches the waitress's legs, Sidney's head lowered and rested, a dead weight, in my lap.

So that was it. I was sixty-nine, and alone for the first time in my life. My friend Azra said: 'Good sodding riddance. Greg was a tosser, I can say that now. You're not too old to find another man. Go to the park. There's plenty of them there, walking their dogs.'

Deborah Moggach

‘I haven’t got a dog any more.’

‘You’ve still got his lead, haven’t you? Walk about calling “Sidney, Sidney.” Somebody’s bound to come and help.’

I laughed – a startling sound; I hadn’t laughed for weeks. Azra could do that to me. Glorious Azra, sprawled on my sofa in a fug of cigarette smoke. God, I loved her.

Greg didn’t fight me for the house. He’d moved onto a higher plane; he made me well aware of that. Our family home had mausoleumed into a repository of junk.

‘Who needs all this *stuff*?’ he’d said. ‘People bust their guts doing jobs they don’t like to buy stuff they don’t need, just to help corporate criminals ruin the planet.’

He said he was shedding his possessions and going on a silent retreat in Rutland.

‘*Rutland?*’

He was already removing himself to an unknown county. We’d never said the word ‘Rutland’ in our lives. So many unknowns he was going to discover without me. His tone was sorrowful but weirdly exultant.

‘I need solitude, to start my spiritual journey.’ He’d said this without a glimmer of humour. I knew then that I’d lost him. ‘I don’t want anything, you can have it all.’

That wasn’t quite true. He’d kept the cottage in Dorset. That’s where he was going to live. We’d talked about retiring there but decided we’d die of boredom.

Not now. Greg had moved beyond boredom. Gazing at the immensity of the ocean would restore him to himself, a prelapsarian Greg, unmuddied by compromise and familiarity, by a mortgage and a thickening waist, by family rows, by the chronic hopes and disappointments of simply weathering the years. By me.

The Black Dress

‘It’s not you,’ he’d said. ‘It’s nothing you’ve done. It’s just that since my cancer scare I’ve realised that life is so very short, one must live each day fully, concentrate on what’s important—’

‘So *I’m* not important?’

‘Be honest, Pru. You’ve felt it too, I can tell. We only have the one life—’

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘And you must admit that our marriage has run out of steam. It’s become stale and predictable. We’ve lost that joy in each other’s company. To be brutally honest we haven’t been happy for years. Isn’t it time we had the courage to part as friends—’

‘*Friends?*’

‘And rediscover the aspects of ourselves that have lain dormant all these years, nurture them and let them flourish – you as well as me. Don’t we owe it to ourselves—’

‘Who is she?’

‘What?’

‘Who’re you fucking? There must be someone waiting in the wings or you wouldn’t be spouting this drivel.’

But he swore there wasn’t and promptly burst into tears.

Since starting therapy Greg had been more in touch with his feelings. He’d gone to treat his depression and it seemed to have worked. My bookish, gloomy husband had morphed into a cult member, bland and glazed, with a visible lifting of the spirits and a whole new vocabulary of self-awareness. No, self-absorption. Quite honestly, I preferred the old Greg, whose leaden footsteps on the stairs sounded like a man going to his own execution.

So there was no woman waiting in the wings, just his

so-called ‘facilitator’, who seemed to have facilitated the end of our marriage.

The madness came later. At first I was simply shell-shocked. Everything unravelled so fast, because how can you fight someone who gently, and oh-so-patronisingly, makes it clear that he no longer loves you? Who says it’s not your fault, it’s his? Who’s attempting to relive his youth, or have a late-life crisis, or whatever the heck it was, leaving you to face the future alone?

There was, simply, nothing to say. Of course we’d had our problems but we’d always managed to talk. Now the rubber band had snapped and we’d sprung apart, two ageing strangers. Had it all been a delusion, those decades together? I listened to the cupboards opening and closing, his footsteps on the floorboards above, the rumble of his suitcase wheels. And then with a sorrowful hug he was gone, sprung free, without a single shouting match.

‘You’re such a wimp, letting him get away with it,’ said Azra. ‘You should’ve put up a fight.’

‘You can’t *fight* somebody back into love with you.’

‘Or gone for counselling, or something.’

The truth was, I’d thought Greg and I had been getting on fine in the past few months. His depression had lifted. We still held hands in the cinema. Now we’d both retired we were talking about walking the Coastal Path; we’d discussed selling up and buying a communal house where we could live with equally ancient baby boomers, playing Led Zeppelin and drinking too much. We’d given up flying so we spent whole evenings on the internet working out how to get to Italy by train. *Anything but a cruise,*

## The Black Dress

was one of our running jokes. *What a ghastly thought . . . a fifth circle of Hell . . . why on earth would anyone do it?*

Though, actually, now I remembered, it was *me* who led these discussions. Maybe Greg's mind was already elsewhere, plotting his release, wondering what to shed and what to take. Working out when to tell me. Rehearsing what to say to our middle-aged and far-flung children, who may or may not have seen it coming.

Or maybe it was an impulse decision, prompted by a single moment, an utterly irrelevant moment, like the sight of me slotting a tablet into the dishwasher. *I no longer want to be married to this woman.* Once he realised this, he was swept along helplessly and there was no turning back.

Who knew? It was too late to ask. I was alone in my stagnant house with no other person to stir the air. The slightest noise made me jump. Those first weeks I felt too exposed to go outside, yet indoors the hours stretched endlessly. Friends asked me to supper but that still left the rest of the day to kill. It was November, and darkness fell at four. When I could rouse myself I'd go round switching on the lights but then I thought: why bother, just for me?

I missed him. I missed him *so much*, despite my bitterness and humiliation. I missed him groaning with me when Trump came on the TV. The companionship we shared, in an ever-more dismaying world. The chatting and banalities. I missed the talking, more than anything, even his annoying habit of asking me a question when I had a mouth full of toothpaste. I had so much to say, the words silting up as the days passed. All those thoughts rolling round my head, all those unsaid words – what could I do with them all? Needless to say, I couldn't sleep. I missed his arms around me at

night, keeping me safe. His naked body, the smell of his skin. How could he bear to be alone?

For now he was settled in Dorset, living his new life. What did he do all day? Didn't he miss our arguments? The squabbling seagulls were no substitute. I wanted to know about his niece's latest love rat, and his friend Bing's scan results. But these conversations were no longer appropriate. He'd made that clear.

I'd been dumped out of the blue, and overnight become one of those women I'd secretly pitied and kept meaning to invite to supper. Single women with their single cinema ticket and single hotel room and single Serves One Vegan Bake. And a cat, always a cat. That was me, now.

Our house was in Muswell Hill, which made it even worse. Muswell Hill was entirely populated by smug couples leading enviable lives. At dusk I'd walk the streets gazing into my neighbours' windows, each a lamplit tableau of middle-class contentment. Ten-year-olds playing the violin. Candlelit dinner parties. Teenagers romping with labradoodles. The women sang in choirs and did Pilates, and the men played football with the other husbands and they sent their children to private schools even though they read the *Guardian*. They had date nights and said they were each other's best friend – how nauseating was that? Some of them were on their second marriage and even smugger. Some weren't married at all because they didn't believe in a piece of paper, and they were the smuggest of the lot. And every Saturday they all went to the farmers' market where everybody smiled at everybody all the time.

'Ugh! They make me vomit,' said Azra, who lived

## The Black Dress

above a Turkish takeaway. It was only a bus ride from Muswell Hill but it was another world. ‘Anyway, I bet the husbands are banging their PAs.’

Azra lived alone but there was nothing pitiful about *her*. Quite the opposite. She was a fierce, feral creature. Long legs and masses of hair, which she streaked pink and blue, or sometimes dyed jet black. She didn’t give a toss about her age. Both men and women had fallen under her spell and been spat out when she’d finished with them. I’d known her for ever and her adventures had thrummed through my marriage like a distant tom-tom in the jungle. How timid my own life seemed, compared to hers! She was my best friend and I loved her with all my heart – even more so now that I was on my own.

For Azra was my inspiration, my role model for this new me. ‘Who needs men cluttering up the place?’ she said. ‘Go, girl. Eat what you like, do what you like. Reclaim your territory. Stay in bed all day if you want to. Go out all night if you want to. Fart in bed, pamper yourself, *don’t* pamper yourself, who gives a shit? Come on holiday with me, get drunk, have a laugh. Get rid of his stuff and make the house *your* house. It’s fun, and you haven’t had much of that with boring old Greg, have you, sweetheart?’

Her contempt for Greg surprised me. Azra wasn’t normally the soul of tact but in this case she’d kept her feelings hidden, out of consideration for me. Now it all gushed out.

‘He’d become such a pompous old git. Didn’t it annoy you, the way he cleared his throat before giving his opinion on anything? And how he let everybody know he’d been a professor at the LSE? He always got it in somehow. And

how he'd met Mick Jagger – he got *that* in, too. He was such a starfucker.'

'Was he?'

'God, Pru, didn't you notice? But much, much worse was the way he undermined you.'

'Did he?'

She rolled her eyes. 'All the time. Little squelches. Squelch, squelch, squelch. Contradicting you in front of other people, putting you down, that sort of thing. Being a control freak. No wonder you felt so inadequate.' She gripped my arm. 'But you're not, you're *so* not! You taught for twenty years in the toughest comprehensive in Hackney – catch *Greg* doing that – and you're funny and clever and gorgeous, and you've brought up two fabulous children—'

'He really wasn't that bad.' Ridiculously, I felt a throb of loyalty. 'I think, deep down, he felt inadequate. That's why he was so moody and difficult. It's all the fault of being sent away to boarding school, feeling abandoned. He was so damaged by that. I could've killed his parents. He was depressed for years – you know that – but he was trying to sort himself out. Better late than never. I think it was the cancer that shook him up. He was trying, honestly. He was going to a therapist.'

Azra shrugged. 'I don't know why you're standing up for him when he's been such a shit. I was only trying to help.'

I grabbed her bony shoulders and gave her a hug. It was awkward, on her kitchen stool. She pushed back her hair and took another gulp of wine. Her bangles tinkled as they slid down her arm.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

‘No, *I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have let rip. It’s just such a relief, to say what I feel.’

People don’t, do they, when you’re married? They can analyse your lovers to bits when it doesn’t really matter, but the moment you get married the curtain is lowered and nothing critical is said until the marriage is over, the curtain is lifted, and they’re stumbling over each other to tell you how ghastly your spouse was.

Azra was particularly tense that day, and fell silent after we’d spoken. She obviously felt that even by her standards she’d blurted out too much.

Of course I was buoyed by her criticisms of Greg. But I was also hurt that she hadn’t, even in the most guarded way, hinted at some of this before and offered her support. After all, she’d known the two of us for years.

And, quite honestly, he wasn’t *that* bad. If he were, she must have thought me an idiot. Azra was a passionate woman and inclined to lash out in all directions, sometimes missing the mark. Maybe her hostility stemmed from Greg’s ambivalent attitude towards *her*.

I’d long suspected that he found Azra threatening. He’d kept quiet because she was my friend, but sometimes it would slip out. *Bit of a ballbreaker, isn’t she? And the way she wangs on about the patriarchy and racial profiling, all that stuff, nobody can get a word in edgeways. Bloody bad manners.* I had to agree about the manners, but Azra felt things deeply and didn’t give a toss if that upset people. I’d been the target of this myself, often enough.

Besides, she’d had a tough upbringing. She’d been born in Sunderland to a single mother, and known real deprivation. In her teens, however, she’d escaped, hitch-hiked

south and reinvented herself as Azra, simply because she liked the name. I so admired her courage; in fact, I was a little in awe of her. She was a free spirit, utterly classless, and beholden to nobody. In the circumstances, good manners seemed irrelevant.

I think, too, that Greg was threatened by her bisexuality. I've noticed this, with men. They suspect that their dicks aren't enough to satisfy a woman and that anybody bi must really prefer another female. So where did that leave *them*? Pretty disposable, that's where.

But Azra was beyond all that. *When I fall in love, that's the last thing that concerns me. They're just a person – who gives a fuck?*

I gave a fuck. However, I pretended to agree. In truth I found her airy pronouncement a bit pretentious, but she was my soulmate, something Greg had never been, not really. My soulmate and lifesaver.

He'd been gone four months by then. Outside, the sun was sinking. Azra and I had finished the bottle of wine and were taking turns to swab bread around a tub of guacamole. It was eerily warm for January and Azra's window was open. The smell of kebabs drifted up from Karim's takeaway. On the nearby rooftop, amongst the satellite dishes and extractor fans, sat a crow. It tilted its head and eyed me speculatively, sizing up my thoughts, before bouncing sideways and flying off.

Azra rubbed her thumb along my forearm. 'I shouldn't have said all that. What happens if you two make it up? I'll feel such a twat.'

But he was gone. It had taken a long time for it to sink in, that he was gone for good.