

From the Winner of the  
2016 Stella Prize for  
*The Natural Way of Things*

CHARLOTTE  
WOOD

**The  
Weekend**



**Praise for**  
*The Natural Way of Things*

**Winner, 2016 Stella Prize**  
**Co-winner, 2016 Prime Minister's Award**  
**Winner, Fiction Book of the Year, 2016 Indie Awards**  
**Winner, 2016 Indie Book of the Year Award**  
**Shortlisted, 2016 Miles Franklin Literary Award**  
**Shortlisted, 2016 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards**  
**Shortlisted, 2016 Barbara Jefferis Award**  
**Shortlisted, 2016 Queensland Literary Award for Fiction**  
**Shortlisted, 2016 Voss Literary Prize**

‘It feels at times like a nightmare; but one in which women make serious pacts, take serious pleasures, and reimagine what it might mean to live in the world. I feel as if I’ve been witness to the most terrible injustice, but also the most astonishing beauty.’

—FIONA MCFARLANE, author of *The Night Guest*

‘Exposing the threads of misogyny, cowardice and abuses of power embedded in contemporary society, this is a confronting, sometimes deeply painful novel to read. With an unflinching eye and audacious imagination, Wood carries us from a nightmare of helplessness and despair to a fantasy of revenge and reckoning.’

—*The Guardian*

‘It’s rare to pick up a novel and from the opening pages be not only gripped by the story on the page but also by the keenness of the intelligence and audacity of the imagination at work . . . one hell of a novel by one of our most original and provocative writers.’

—STEPHEN ROMEI, *The Weekend Australian*

‘An extraordinary novel: inspired, powerful, at once coherent and dream-like . . . recalls all the reading you’ve ever done on the subjects of capture, isolation, incarceration, totalitarianism, misogyny, and the abuse of power. It’s thought-provoking in all directions.’

—KERRY GOLDSWORTHY, *The Sydney Morning Herald/The Age*

‘Riveting . . . the kind of book you inhale in a sitting. It leaves you woozy and disoriented, surprised to find yourself in mundane surroundings rather than sweltering in the desert heat.’

—*The Saturday Paper*

‘As a man, to read it is as unsettling as receiving one piece of bad news after another. It is confronting. Yet anyone who reads it, man or woman, is going to be left with a sense that a long-hidden truth has been revealed to them. A brave, brilliant book. I would defy anyone to read it and not come out a changed person.’

—MALCOLM KNOX, author of *The Wonder Lover*

‘Charlotte Wood’s book is a howl of despair and fury; but it is also that most rare and powerful of creations, a dystopian fiction that is perfectly judged, the writing controlled, the narrative engrossing and the language both searing and sensual. You can’t shake off this novel, it gets under your skin, fills your lungs, breaks your heart. As allegory, as a novel, as vision and as art, it is stunning.’

—CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS, author of *Barracuda*

‘A virtuoso performance, plotted deftly through a minefield of potential traps, weighted with allegory yet swift and sure in its narrative advance. As an idea for a novel, it’s rich, and to achieve that idea the writer has been courageous. Her control of this story is masterful.’

—*The Sydney Review of Books*

‘At once brutal and beautiful . . . Surreal yet intensely vivid . . . disturbing and enthralling . . . An absorbing plot, lyrical prose, and discomfiting imagery makes Wood’s novel decidedly gripping.’

—*Kirkus Reviews*

‘Few other novels have captured the stain of misogyny quite like this. Wood’s is a tale of survival in a world where captivity takes many forms; where power is a negotiation not just between prisoner and persecutor but of how far some women are willing to go in order to be free. Terrifying, remarkable and utterly unforgettable.’

—CLEMENTINE FORD, author of *Fight Like a Girl*

‘A prescient feminist horror novel you need to read.’

—*Jezebel*

‘Beautiful and savage—think Atwood in the outback.’

—PAULA HAWKINS, author of *The Girl on the Train*

‘One of those unforgettable reading experiences.’

—LIANE MORIARTY, author of *Big Little Lies*

‘Margaret Atwood meets *Wake in Fright*.’

—*The Guardian*

‘A haunting parable of contemporary misogyny . . . *The Handmaid’s Tale* for our age.’

—*The Economist*

‘Exactly what we should be reading right now.’

—*Full Stop*

‘The fury of contemporary feminism may have found its masterpiece of horror.’

—*The Guardian UK*

‘A *Handmaid’s Tale* for end times.’

—*The Believer*

‘You won’t read another novel like it this year. Or ever.’

—TEGAN BENNETT DAYLIGHT, author of *Six Bedrooms*

‘A stunning exploration of ambiguities—of power, of morality, of judgement.’

—ASHLEY HAY, author of *The Railwayman’s Wife*

‘A fully imagined dystopian parable, vivid, insightful, the voices of young women echoing through the gum trees . . .’

—JOAN LONDON, author of *The Golden Age*

**CHARLOTTE  
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The characters and events in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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## CHAPTER ONE

It was not the first time it had happened, this waking early in the pale light with a quiet but urgent desire to go to church.

Cognitive decline, doubtless. Frontal lobe damage, religion, fear of death, they were all the same thing. Jude had no illusions.

This longing—was it a longing? It was mysterious, an insistence inside her, a sort of ache that came and went, familiar and yet still powerful and surprising when it arrived. Like the arthritis that flared at the base of her thumb. The point was this feeling had nothing to do with Christmas, or with anything in her waking life. It came somehow from the world of sleep, from her dreaming self.

At first when it came it would trouble her, but now Jude gave herself over to it. She lay in her white bed on the morning before Christmas Eve and imagined the cool, dark space of a



cathedral, where she might be alone, welcomed by some unseen, velvety force. She imagined herself kneeling, resting her head on the ancient wood of the pew in front of her, and closing her eyes. It was peaceful, in that quiet space of her imagination.

Frontal lobe shrinkage, doubtless. At this age it was inevitable.

She pictured the soft grey sphere of her brain and remembered lambs' brains on a plate. She used to enjoy eating brains, it was one of the dishes she ordered often with Daniel. But the last time she did—three tender, tiny things lined up along a rectangular plate—she was revolted. Each one was so small you could fit it in a dessert spoon, and in this fashionable Turkish restaurant they were unadorned, undisguised by crumbs or garnish: just three bald, poached splodges on a bed of green. She ate them, of course she did, it was part of her code: you did not refuse what was offered. Chosen, indeed, here. But at first bite the thing yielded in her mouth, too rich, like just-soft butter; tepid and pale grey, the colour and taste of moths or death. In that moment she was shocked into a vision of the three lambs, each one its own conscious self, with its own senses, its intimate pleasures and pains. After a mouthful she could not go on, and Daniel ate the rest. She had wanted to say, 'I don't want to die.'

Of course she did not say that. Instead, she asked Daniel about the novel he was reading. William Maxwell, or William Trevor, she often confused the two. He was a good reader,

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Daniel. A true reader. Daniel laughed at men who did not read fiction, which was nearly all the men he knew. They were afraid of something in themselves, he said. Afraid of being shown up, of not understanding—or more likely the opposite: they would be led *to* understanding themselves and it scared the shit out of them. Daniel snorted. They said they didn't have time for it, which was the biggest joke of all.

Jude pulled the sheet up to her chin. The day felt sticky already; the sheet was cool over her clammy body.

What would happen if she did not wake, one of these mornings? If she died one night in her bed? Nobody would know. Days would pass. Eventually Daniel would call and get no answer. Then what? They had never discussed this: what to do if she died in her bed.

Last Christmas Sylvie was here, and this one she wasn't—and now they were going to clear out the Bittoes house. *Take anything you want*, Gail had said to them from Dublin, in an email. *Have a holiday*. How you could think cleaning your dead friend's house a holiday . . . but it was Christmas and Gail felt guilty for flitting off back to Ireland and leaving it to them. So. Take anything you want.

There was nothing Jude wanted. She couldn't speak for the others.

Sylvie had been in the ground for eleven months.

The memorial had been in the restaurant (unrecognisable now from the old days—everything but the name had gone), and there was beautiful food and good champagne; good speeches. Wendy spoke brilliantly, honestly, poetically. Gail lurched with a silent, terrible sobbing, with Sylvie’s poor sad brother Colin beside her, unable to touch Gail for comfort. He was eighty-one, he’d been a greenkeeper at the golf club in their home town, stayed long after the rest of the family left. Never managed to get over his sister being gay.

In the end Sylvie went where nobody expected: an old-fashioned burial in Mona Vale, next to her parents. To this part Jude and Wendy and Adele went with Colin, and Gail, and Andy and Elektra from the old days. There they all stood in the hot cemetery with a sympathetic priest (a priest! for Sylvie!) and Jude had picked up a handful of dirt and thrown it down. Strange that in all these years it was the first time she’d ever done that, or even seen it done outside a film. She felt silly squatting in the dirt, scrabbling in the dry gravel with her polished nails, but when she stretched and flung and let the earth rain down on Sylvie’s coffin, a breath of awful sorrow swept through her, up and out of her body into the deafening, glittering white noise of the cicadas.

Sylvie was dead and felt no pain. They had said goodbye. Nothing was left to regret, but she was still in there, in that

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box, under the weight of all that earth, her cold little body rotted away.

Gail said she looked peaceful at the end. But that wasn't peace; it was absence of muscle tone, of life. Being dead made you look younger, it was a fact. Jude had seen six or seven dead faces now, and they all, in the moment after life left, smoothed out and looked like their much younger selves. Even like babies, once or twice.

How long did it take a corpse to rot? Sylvie would screech at a question like that. You're so *ghoulish*, Jude.

The ceiling fan in her bedroom rotated slowly, ticking, above her. Her life was as clean and bare as a bone, bare as that white blade, its path through the unresisting air absolutely known, unwavering. This should be a comfort. It was a comfort. The rooms of her apartment were uncluttered by the past. Nobody would have to plough through dusty boxes and cupboards full of rubbish for Jude.

She lay in her bed and thought of cathedrals. And she thought of animals: rats beneath the floorboards; cockroaches bristling behind the crossed ankles and bleeding feet of plaster Jesuses. She thought of dark, malevolent little birds, of the muffled small sounds of creatures dying in the spaces between bricks and plaster, between ceilings and roof beams. She thought of their shit drying out and turning hard, and what happened to

their skin and fur and organs, rotting unconsecrated in roof cavities.

She would not go to church, obviously, for she was neither a fool nor a coward.

She would go instead to the butcher and the grocer and then the hardware store for the few remaining cleaning things, and she would drive without hurrying up the freeway to the coast, and this afternoon the others would arrive.

It was not a holiday, the three women had warned each other, but the warning was really for Adele, who would disappear at the first sign of work. Adele would be useless but they couldn't leave her out.

It was only three days. Two, really, given that most of today would be taken up with the shopping and driving and arriving. And on Boxing Day the other two would leave and Daniel would come. She watched the fan blade's smooth glide. She would be like this: unhurried, gliding calmly through the hours until Adele and Wendy left. She would not let the usual things get to her; they were all too old for that.

It occurred to her that one of them could be next to go. Funny how she'd not thought of that until this moment. She threw off the sheet in a clean white billow.

After her shower, though, while she was making the bed, already some little flecks of annoyance with Wendy began creeping in. It was like dipping a hand into a pocket and

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searching the seams with your fingers; there would always be some tiny irritant crumbs if she wanted to find them. Why, for example, had Wendy refused a lift, insisting instead on driving up in that terrible shitbox of hers? Jude snapped the sheet, fending off the affront that would come if she let it, about Wendy's secretive refusal to explain. Jude's hospitality, not just in the long-gone restaurant days but in general terms, was well known. People said it about her, had always done so. She guarded her generosity even more as they all grew older and she saw other women become irrationally fearful about money, and turn miserly. Pinching coins out of their purses in cafes, bargaining in charity shops. Holding out their hands for twenty cents' change. It was appalling. It was beneath them.

But now, folding hospital corners—her bulging disc threatened to twang, but she manoeuvred carefully and eased around it—she considered the possibility that hidden within the compliments about her largesse might be needles of sarcasm. Once her sister-in-law murmured, 'It's not that generous if you have to keep mentioning it,' and Jude had burned with silent rage. Burned and burned.

If she told Daniel about any of this, if she complained about Wendy and the car, he'd shake his head and tell her she had too much time on her hands.

She yanked another corner of the sheet.

If Sylvie was here Jude could ring her and find out what the matter was with Wendy, and they could be exasperated together and then agree that it didn't matter, and Jude would be able to compose herself for when Wendy parked her filthy, battered car in the driveway at Bittoes, and she would be calm and welcoming, and free of grievance. Now she would have to do it by herself.

This was something nobody talked about: how death could make you petty. And how you had to find a new arrangement among your friends, shuffling around the gap of the lost one, all of you suddenly mystified by how to be with one another.

With other circles of friends, a death meant you were permitted to quietly go your separate ways. After the first shocks, the early ones in your forties and fifties—the accidents and suicides and freak diseases, the ones that orphaned children, shook the ground beneath cities—when you reached your seventies and the disintegration began in earnest, there was the understanding, never spoken, that the latest—the news of another stroke, a surprise death, a tumour or Alzheimer's diagnosis—would not be the last. A certain amount of withdrawal was acceptable. Within reason, you did what you must, to protect yourself. From what? Jude stood, looking down at the flat, white space of the bed. From all that . . . emotion. She turned and left the room.

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It was true that time had gradually taken on a different cast. It didn't seem to go forwards or backwards now, but up and down. The past was striated through you, through your body, leaching into the present and the future. The striations were evident, these streaky layers of memory, of experience—but you were one being, you contained all of it. If you looked behind or ahead of you, all was emptiness.

When she'd told Daniel—crying bitterly, smoking—what Sylvie said in the hospital about Wendy and Adele, he gazed at her with soft reproach and said, 'But Judo, of course you will, because you *do* love them. Because they're your dearest friends.'

Daniel was quite sentimental really. It could be oddly appealing in a man. Why was that, when in a woman it was so detestable?

She sat at the dining table to drink her coffee. It was seven thirty-four. If she got to the grocer by eight-fifteen she might find a parking space quickly, and then she could be in and out of the butcher and then the hardware place, home and packed and on the road by nine-thirty. Ten, latest. She reached for the notepad with the list, swished it towards herself.

People went on about death bringing friends together, but it wasn't true. The graveyard, the stony dirt—that's what it was like now. The topsoil had blown away and left only bedrock. It was embarrassing, somehow, to pretend they could return to the softness that had once cushioned their dealings with one



another. Despite the three women knowing each another better than their own siblings, Sylvie's death had opened up strange caverns of distance between them.

She wrote: *scourers*.

And it had opened up great oceans of anger in Jude, which shocked her. Now, when other people died she found the mention of it offensive. It was Sylvie who had died, who was to be mourned. Other people's neighbours and sisters were of no relevance; why did people keep telling her about them? Even Daniel! Holding her hand in his one evening, telling her his cousin Andrew had gone, a heart attack on a boat. Jude had waited for him to come to the point, before realising it was sympathy he wanted. From her. It was all she could do not to spit on the floor. She had to put a hand to her mouth, the force of her need to spit was so great. She wanted to shout, So what, Andrew died, of course he did, what did Daniel expect? Everybody *died*. But not Sylvie.

She looked at the list again. Adele had been at her about the pavlova. She knew it wasn't a holiday, but it's *Christmas*, Jude, it's a *tradition*. Adele had always been soppy about things like this. But actors were sentimental, in Jude's experience; she supposed they had to be. They had to be able to believe in all sorts of things.

But the humidity would make a meringue collapse; it was going to be so wretchedly hot. They were all too fat anyway,

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especially Wendy. Christmas be damned, they could have fruit and yoghurt. She put a line through *eggs*.

She had not spat on the floor, and she had not pulled her hand away from Daniel's, and she said she was sorry even though all she felt for his dead cousin was shame, that he might try to associate himself with what had happened to Sylvie.

She stopped, looked at her list. Don't be so hard on people, Jude. She added *eggs* again.

Jude hated other candles being lit next to the one she secretly thought of as Sylvie's, in the cathedral she had stolen into once or twice. Sometimes she blew the other candles out.

None of this could be said. She lied in all the expected ways.

Wendy ran her hand down the length of Finn's sweaty, narrow back. 'It's alright, boyo, it's alright.'

In her dented red Honda by the side of the freeway under the hot blue sky she crooned softly to the dog who had clambered into the front and was trying to claw his way onto her lap. She hardly had room even to lean sideways, but managed to release the lever: her seat slid all the way back with a chunking sound, and Finn landed heavily across her body. It was so hot, here in the airless car.

She sat with her head pressed back against the seat, listening to the rhythmic on-off click of the hazard lights and the dog's

anxious whining, and looked out of the window. She could see only the looming rush of car-ghosts into and then past her wing mirror, and the greys and greens of scrub and road. For a moment she spiralled up and away from herself and Finn and the car into a high, aerial view of the bush and the road. She saw her car, a tiny red blob huddled beneath the great stone cliff on the freeway between the city and the coast. And then she plummeted down again and felt the panic of the landing, here in her present circumstances.

Finn whined and licked his lips and did not settle, but instead tried to turn his large shaggy body around in the small space, treading again over Wendy's thighs, shifting his weight, his claws catching in the thin fabric of her trousers. He couldn't pace his circles in the car; he would get more and more agitated. She'd hoped he would sleep all the way, but now the car had broken down and he was frightened, and Bittoes was still an hour away, and it was so muggy she could hardly breathe.

There was nothing to do but wait. She had found the roadside assistance number and called, and although her membership had lapsed she could just pay the extra, *thank God thank God* for mobile phones, thank God for credit cards. Sometimes the modern world was filled with miraculous goodness. Her phone battery had been full. Or half full. She extracted this merciful fact from the guilty chaos inside herself. She wasn't so hopeless as to have a flat phone battery as well.

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But the adrenaline of moments ago was still spreading through her body, the echo of it hot and cold and chemical like gin or anaesthetic along her veins and through the core of her bones. She'd forgotten how it felt until the moment it happened. The soaking dread of a vehicle stuttering beneath you, suddenly dropping all power as you ascended a hill at a hundred and fifteen kilometres an hour with a line of cars barrelling along behind you. She'd forgotten the drench of disbelief as the car faltered, forgotten the sound of your own voice calling out *no no please please come on, little car, just hang on*, as you pumped and pumped the accelerator, lurching to the side of the road and the cars behind you were forced to brake suddenly, then roar past in perilous, swerving overtaking, horns blaring, drivers screaming abuse, and all the time Wendy calling out, 'It's alright, Finny, it's alright,' to the ancient dog curled on his smelly tartan bed on the back seat.

But he had already lifted his grubby head and begun whining, staring anxiously about while Wendy's heart hammered in her chest, pulling over into the breakdown lane, drawing as close as she could to the great stone wall of the dark cliff face.

And now they just had to wait. There was nothing to panic about now. Except to please, please not have Finn piss in the car.

It was so *sticky*. And despite the clear skies, storms were forecast in the coming days. Wendy pushed this to the bottom of her mind, into that marsh of things not to be thought about.

Finn whined again now. She would need to get him out of the car for the toilet if the roadside assistance did not turn up soon. But the girl on the phone had said it would be at least an hour and a half. When Wendy exclaimed at this the girl said—patiently, as if Wendy were retarded—‘It’s coming up to Christmas, you see. Everyone’s on the road.’

The car shuddered again as another B-double truck whumped past. It had been thirty degrees when they left home, probably hotter now. It was intolerably stuffy without the air conditioning. The humidity pressed in through the cracks in the car’s bodywork, coating Wendy and Finn. Sweaty, oppressive.

He would need to wee, but how could she possibly get him out? The driver’s side was impossible, the holiday traffic roaring past: she had a fleeting vision of their two frail bodies obliterated by a truck. Bits of arm and hindquarter raining down. But on the passenger side was the sheer rock wall, too close for her to squeeze out of the door, and she could not let him out alone.

She put the radio on. A melodic drift of guitar, The Pretenders singing about Christmas time. She rocked softly, and Finn was slumped in her lap now, heavy, unbearably hot, but quiet. So she sat.

Once, she had known how to open a car bonnet and whack the alternator with a tyre iron to get it going again. Once, she had driven all the way from Lithgow to Dubbo doing this, in

the dark, getting out, opening the bonnet and whacking the part every forty-five kilometres. She'd felt absolutely no fear. That was the days before mobile phones. Women were braver then.

Technology and female fear, that was interesting. That could go in with the stuff she had already done on dependence. Or in an earlier chapter. Somewhere. If she could get out of the car now she would like to see what the tyre iron felt like in her hand again. The weight of such a thing, she hadn't felt that in years. People used them for violence: there could be something in that, too.

'Come on, Finny, move over.'

She lifted his great forepaws and shoved at him, trying to move him to the passenger side, at least. Her leg was going to sleep under his weight, and she needed more air. But he wriggled backwards, further into her lap, and braced his arthritic front paws even harder against her knees, his claws digging and scratching. His whining began again, higher and more frightened.

When was the time she had to whack the alternator? She counted back—using her books, the ages of her children, Lance's jobs—to discover she must have been thirty-two, thirty-three. It was the Subaru, with the kids' bikes in the back. But Claire was fifty-four now. So it was a very long time ago. Did cars even have alternators anymore? Wendy could not get out, so she would never know.

Finn's fetid breath rose up. When he was a puppy she could hold him along one arm, wearing him, a woolly white gauntlet. Now he was enormous, a hot immovable weight in her lap. It was hopeless. She turned her face from the smell of him and wound down the window a little. She patted him comfortingly with firm, rhythmic thuds of her hand.

Mobile phones gave you a sense of permanent rescuability. A false sense, obviously. She would write that into the chapter. She could not ring Claire, because Claire had been at her for years to get a new car. And what would she do about it, anyway? Wendy was confused by many things about Claire, but her ice-cold perfect manners were the most shocking. Where did a person learn that smooth, corporate-management way of speaking to her own mother? Whenever Wendy spoke to Claire on the phone it was like ringing a complaints hotline; the assertiveness training did all the work. Unfortunately I'm unable to offer. What I propose is. If Wendy had to write down an emergency contact on a form she put Claire, but sitting here now she thought how mistaken this was, because Claire might not actually come if her mother were, say, found in bloody, fleshy shreds on a road. She would make some calls and go back to work. She would send flowers to the funeral. Whatever happened to daughter's guilt? The world had changed. Or what about simple familial duty . . .

But this was bad, this was her own mother's way of thinking. Self-indulgent and mean. Wendy detested conservatism. Everybody hated old people now; it was acceptable, encouraged even, because of your paid-off mortgage and your free education and your ruination of the planet. And Wendy agreed. She loathed nostalgia, the past bored her. More than anything, she despised self-pity. And they *had* been lucky, and wasteful. They had failed to protect the future. But, on the other hand, she and Lance had had nothing when they were young. Nothing! The Claires of the world seemed to forget that, with all their trips to Europe, their coffee machines and air conditioners and three bathrooms in every house. And anyway, lots of people, lots of *women*—Wendy felt a satisfying feminist righteousness rising—didn't have paid-off mortgages, had no super. Look at Adele, living on air.

Thank the Lord God Adele had got herself set up with Liz, was what Wendy thought about that.

So it was true Wendy had nothing to complain about. Except here she was, with an elderly demented dog, broken down on the side of the road in thirty-three degrees.

On the phone to the roadside service she'd hesitated, but added in a quiet, hopeful, dignified way, 'I'm seventy-five.' Then hated herself for it when the girl didn't skip a beat, just repeated her singsong assurance, first-available-take-care-have-a-merry-Christmas.



It really was hot now.

She could phone Jude, who might not be ahead of her on the road, and who could glide into place beside them in her sleek, dark Audi. But there was something of the undertaker about Jude. She radiated a kind of grim satisfaction when things went wrong for other people. Plus, she'd been snippy about Wendy saying no to a lift. Jude's car was serviced every six months whether she had driven it or not. And despite being garaged it was washed—professionally—once a fortnight. Once a *fortnight!* In this time of catastrophic climate change! Jude's insurance and registration papers would be in a special folder, and she would know where it was, and she had probably never used roadside assistance in her life because ever since she got involved with Daniel all her cars were brand-new, so no, she could not be asked for help.

Wendy rubbed Finn's head and said, 'We couldn't ask her, could we, Finny? Not old Jude.'

No wonder Jude had never been a mother. It would offend her sense of order.

Sylvie would have helped. She would shout down the phone in exasperation—*fucking* hell, that bloody car, I told you—and then she would help. It would be a problem shared, with Sylvie; it would not occur to her that here might be a chance to teach, or reproach. Or humiliate. Wendy missed her more and more.

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Also, Wendy had not yet told Jude she was bringing Finn.

She groped down beside the seat for a plastic water bottle—warm, but three quarters full—and her movement against him as she did so made him squirm and let out an odd moan. How could Wendy still be so afraid of Jude and her silent rebukes? She tried shoving at Finn again but he would not be moved.

It was exhausting, being friends. Had they ever been able to tell each other the truth?

Then Finn started the trembling.

‘Shhhhhh, oh, Finny Fin Fin,’ Wendy crooned, nuzzling into his bony, hairy back. There was so little flesh on him now.

With difficulty she undid the bottle and took a swig of the warm, plasticky water. It was foul, tainted, but it was important to stay hydrated. Delicately she poured a little of the water into the cap, and held it to Finn’s mouth. His great soft tongue came out and knocked the cap from her hand to the floor. His tremor worsened. She poured the rest of the water in slops into her hand, and Finn gently lapped and licked at it, and he began to calm down, and the trembling subsided.

Another road train went past; the car swayed violently.

Wendy jumped at the phone suddenly chirping, vibrating under her thigh. Finn lurched up again, hurting her legs. He looked at Wendy and whined louder. She struggled to extract the phone, pushing his head away. It was Adele.

When Wendy said hello, a finger pressed into her other ear to block the highway noise, Adele didn't greet her, just demanded, 'Where are you?'

'Oh, on the road,' Wendy said as cheerfully as possible. 'Just pulled over to answer.'

'What's that noise?' Adele said.

Wendy tucked the phone into her neck and clamped Finn's snout together, still stroking him, begging him with her eyes to be quiet.

'Nothing,' she shouted, grateful as another huge truck roared past. 'I'm not supposed to park here,' she said.

Adele was waiting for the train. She sounded odd.

'*Waiting* for it? You said you'd be first to get there, hours ago!' said Wendy. It didn't matter, but Jude would be angry. 'What's wrong?'

Adele ignored the question. Just quickly, did Wendy think she could spot her a bit of cash? Only till next week.

Wendy gripped Finn's nose. 'How much?'

She felt a little wall of suspicion flip up inside herself. Adele spoke lightly, as if this was an ordinary thing to ask her. She was an actress, after all. You never knew when she was telling the truth. Why wasn't she asking Liz?

Adele answered and Wendy yipped, 'Five *hundred!*'

Finn slid his nose from her grip and groaned. At the end of

the phone Adele was triumphant. 'Is that Finn! Oh my God, does Jude know you're bringing him?'

Wendy needed to end this conversation immediately. Yes, she could lend Adele the money, she told her, and now she had to go.

'See you up there,' Adele said gaily.

Wendy lay back in her seat and closed her eyes, for there was nothing to be done. She shoved the phone back beneath her legs and Finn began his treading again, over her thighs, trying to pace his circles. She wished she had never got in the car. Why hadn't she just stayed home?

'Come on, Finny boy, come on,' she wheedled, and soon he sat again, smelly, heavy in her lap. She kept stroking him, and as she did she began to count her breaths as the meditation app man had taught her, and she felt Finn relaxing.

Near the end Sylvie had told her she must remember to look after the others, she must not be neglectful. Wendy had been stung for a moment, not knowing what this meant, but Sylvie was on a lot of morphine then. She'd cried, with Sylvie's creamy hand in hers, and promised.

But what about Gail, going back to Ireland straight after? Almost straight after. The Paddington house cleared out, one go, wiped out like a sick bowl. Poor Gail, people said. Losing the love of your life. Wendy had to look away each time, had

to clean beneath a fingernail with great concentration, to not shout, But I did. I lost the love of *my* life.

First Lance, now Sylvie.

Lance died—*a long time ago*, she told herself sternly—and now Sylvie had died, and only Wendy knew that Sylvie was like a goddess. That's what Wendy secretly thought. It was ridiculous, unsayable, but for Wendy, near the end, Sylvie had been like a goddess in a golden robe, ascending, shedding herself, her body, shedding love, shedding fear, shedding illness and sadness. Poor Sylvie had to shed Gail, too, and that was the last, worst thing. She had to work very hard at leaving Gail, like pushing a huge stone from her path. Poor Gail—for watching Sylvie die, Wendy knew, was like watching Lance. Like watching someone being born: the primal instinct, the exhaustion of it, the panting, animal labour. Watching, wanting it to be over, unable to bear it going on.

Then, when it was finally over, the terrible new avalanche: he was actually gone.

Wendy wanted to say all this at the memorial, but it couldn't be said, obviously. So she talked about their letters from when they met at Oxford and how generous Sylvie was, a fellow Australian, how intelligent and dignified. And then she said plainly she would miss her (*miss* her, anodyne as a greeting card: pathetic, grotesque), and then she stepped away from the

## THE WEEKEND

microphone. It was decorous and it was not what she believed, it was not this force that stayed in her all the time now, the column of shimmered gold which was Sylvie, dead.

And Wendy had promised. So she had to come and clean out the beach house, and she had to give Adele the money, and Jude would just have to cope about the damned bloody dog.

She exhaled, long and slow, a restfulness beginning to drift over her, and at that moment she felt the horrible, inevitable flood of the dog's hot piss soaking her lap and her trousers. 'Oh, *Finn*.' She held her breath as her poor boy's piss trickled down to soak the cloth of the upholstery beneath her, and the hot misery of it mingled with the salt of her own tears on her skin and the sticky unbearable heat of this impossible day. She patted poor Finn, wound down the window a little more, and went back to counting her breaths.

She was woken by a hand pushing at her shoulder. She jerked, and Finn yelped in fear. She finally heaved the dog off herself, with a great wrenching that strained something in her shoulder and sent a shooting star of agony up into her skull, as the roadside assistance man yanked open her door.

*Mercy!* she wanted to cry, and bow down. Instead she shouted, 'Hello!' at the same time as the man said, 'Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead.'

CHARLOTTE WOOD

But Wendy was so relieved to see him that she sprang out of the vehicle into the hot slippery wind, forcing him to flatten himself against the car, and she did not care that he stared down at her sodden pants and thought that she had wet herself.