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The Boarder

Steve could probably tell from the set of her shoulders at the screen.

“No reply from the boarding school?”

Kate shook her head, hoping he wouldn't ask her again why she didn't just phone, when the answer was so obvious. Because words like “possible”, “visit” and “convenient time” would make way for the child who needed to see, to know – or else she'd cry.

“It'll have changed,” she heard Steve say as he made for the kettle. “It's not as if they'll have ... you know, a plaque in the dorm where his bed used to be.” Kate looked up from the laptop at the kitchen table to the back of her husband's head, his hair straggling damp from the shower. Was that impatience talking? Irritation? Her friend Jayne had suggested the other day that Steve might even be jealous: “Because your grief occupies you.” “Costumes, you mean?” she'd answered, and the smile had trailed more tears.

She accepted Steve's offer of more coffee and clicked off the email. She had no fresh words to explain what he couldn't process – this longing to track down the missing chapters in the narrative and find her father again, the boy who'd gone missing. Before the patient in Intensive Care, the wild, full-steam grandpa and the daddy who wrote poetry in a deckchair once the lawn was cut, his fingernails tipped with green.

“If it wasn't such a long drive,” Steve broke in, “I'd say let's just go. Turn up. Refuse to leave.”

Kate smiled. He could do that: the twist from critic to champion. Maybe he read her hurt better than she knew. Maybe the belief she'd lived with all her life, that her dad understood her best, most instinctively and unconditionally, wasn't fair on anyone else.

“Enough,” she said, attempting a shrug. “It was a mad idea. Kind of grabbing in the dark.”

A different kind of smile meant Steve remembered grabbing of a different kind, in the early hours, when she'd not only allowed it at last