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ALSO BY CLARE FURNISS

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How Not to Disappear

CLARE FURNISS



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‘Just for today,’ Dad said. ‘Forget everything else. Just let today be perfect.’

So we did. We forgot that at fifteen I was really too old for a birthday picnic that had become a family tradition when I was three. We forgot that the weather forecast had said light to moderate showers and a strong breeze were likely in the southeast by mid-afternoon. We forgot that society may or may not have been collapsing around us. Dad cast a spell, we allowed ourselves to fall under it. And my birthday was perfect.

He invited the same old family friends every year and, when I was a kid, half my classmates. Now the only schoolfriends to make the invite list were Mischa and Danny, my oldest friends. Most years the picnic wasn’t perfect, not quite. There’d be arguments. Or a kid went missing, or was sick, or injured themselves. Or the weather was wrong, because despite humanity’s best efforts to set the planet on fire, somehow London on a holiday weekend in May is often rainy, or the wind turns out to be colder than you expected, and everyone

has to try to pretend they're not wishing they'd worn at least one sweater.

This day was magical. The sun shone in defiance of the forecast, and we stretched ourselves out like cats, lazy and happy in its warmth. We ate iced gems and cocktail sausages on sticks and a squashed chocolate cake I'd watched being carefully covered in Smarties by Billie in our kitchen that morning, acting like I didn't notice she was eating half of them.

Mischa sneaked paper cups of wine for us while Dad and his friends were too busy dozing or having boring conversations to notice, and Danny played football and rounders with Billie and the other little kids, organizing them into teams, cheering them on, resolving their arguments, until their shadows grew long. I felt a pang of happiness watching him and I knew Mischa did too. She'd never have admitted it but she'd worried like I had that he was drifting away from us, that everything was changing. It was a relief to see the old Danny, like he always had been. It was right. Everything was right.

Claudia almost broke the spell. She arrived at the picnic very late, and there was a forced brightness about her, a kind of distracted sadness when she thought no one was looking. She laughed and said she was just tired but it was obviously more than that. Dad put his arm round her, looked concerned.

She waved a dismissive hand. 'Something at work,' she said. 'Boring. Now let's enjoy this bloody picnic. Have you lot left me any booze?' There was plenty left for Claudia despite Mischa having placed herself strategically next to whichever bottle had just been opened.

Billie spotted her and waved.

‘Mum! You missed my goal!’

She turned away to chase after the ball, but Claudia kept watching her with an expression that didn’t belong at my perfect, sunlit birthday. I felt a pinprick of irritation. Why did she always have to worry? What happened to you when you were a grown-up that made you serious all the time, just under the surface, even when you were supposed to be having fun? Nothing could really be wrong on this enchanted, golden day.

Eventually people started to drift off, slow and reluctant. I feel now like we sensed what was coming and that was why no one wanted to leave. But probably it was just the sun and the wine. Dad and Claudia packed up and persuaded Billie and her friends it was time to go home, their howls of protest quietened by encouragement from Danny and promises of popcorn and a movie from Dad. Billie didn’t want to leave me and hung on to my hand till I promised I’d see her at home later and tell her a story.

It was early evening, no curfew patrols out yet. Mischa and Danny and I wandered down to the boating lake and sat and talked till the sky turned orange and pink in front of us, deepening blue above. We argued about whether the first star was really a plane but made a wish on it anyway. *Star light, star bright*. I wished that . . . I don’t know. What was it that I wished for, back then? When I was a little kid it was that Mum would come back or even that she had never left in the first place. By fifteen I knew there was no point wishing for the impossible. But I can’t imagine now – that day, my birthday,

with my friends there with me, my home round the corner, my family waiting for me, what could I possibly have wished for?

‘I’ve got to go,’ Danny said suddenly, awkward. ‘My dad needs me to . . .’

Something. I don’t remember what. He always was a bad liar. He goes red under his freckles and looks at the floor, has done ever since he was a little kid in trouble with a teacher.

But our spell was too strong for even that to break it. We wouldn’t let it.

‘Just you and me then, babe,’ Mischa said as we watched him disappear. ‘Like it should be, right?’

She pulled a bottle half-full of warm wine out of her bag like she was pulling a rabbit out of a hat, and I got the giggles and laughed so hard it made my belly hurt and I had to lie down, so Mischa lay down too and we propped ourselves up on our elbows and drank the wine. We invented backstories for all the people who walked past and wondered what it would be like to be them and laughed some more because everything was funny and because we were so happy not to be any one else but us.

And then we walked home through the dusty London summer streets, arm in arm, sun-dazed, wine-dizzy, singing loudly and out of tune as the first drops of the light to moderate showers fell. We turned our faces up to the sky and the thick summer smell of rain on warm pavements rose around us and Mischa held her arms out and grabbed my hand as thunder rumbled.

As we spun and whooped and splashed our way home, I

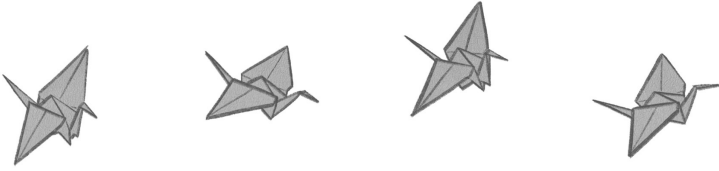
told myself I would *never* forget, not even when I'm ninety years old, what it feels like to be fifteen and right on the edge of everything exciting and real, and have the best friend in the world, and to walk together in a summer rainstorm through the streets we grew up in.

That's how I remember it.

Mischa told me once that when you're remembering something you're actually just remembering the last time you remembered it. So it's like a whispered message passed along a line. Who knows how close the end result is to how it started out? You get things wrong and cut things out and add things without even realizing, and over time the tiny changes get bigger. So all memories are stories really. *Based on real events*, like they say about movies.

But whatever. That's how I remember it.

My fifteenth birthday was the last perfect day.



STORY

Shortening of Latin *historia* meaning ‘history, inquiry, account, narrative, story’. An account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment. A description, either true or imagined, of a connected series of events. A particular person’s representation of the facts of a matter. A lie.