

Saving Grace

JANE GREEN

MACMILLAN

One

There are only so many hours Grace can stay away from home. Her husband's car is still in the driveway when she pulls in, her heart sinking at the sight. As if she should be surprised. Where did she think he'd be going at six o'clock in the evening? It was the triumph of hope over experience, she thought to herself.

Luck is not on her side today. It wasn't on her side this morning when she woke up to hear a door slamming downstairs and her husband bellowing her name, and it isn't on her side now.

Although perhaps it is, she thinks, gingerly pulling up alongside his car and steeling herself for whatever might meet her inside. Perhaps his mood will have changed. Perhaps he will be the loving, attentive husband the rest of the world sees, as long as they don't get too close.

After almost twenty-five years of marriage the only thing that Grace is ever able to predict is the unpredictability of her husband's moods. He can throw his keys at the wall in a rage, then reappear twenty minutes later with a sunny smile, as if nothing had happened, as if Grace hadn't spent the prior twenty minutes quaking with nerves.

He can throw his keys at the wall, followed by a vase, followed by rageful venting that *this*, whatever *this* might be, is all Grace's fault. That Grace has somehow screwed up.

This morning, Grace heard the door slamming downstairs before she had even opened her eyes. She was woken up by the noise, sat bolt upright, heart pounding, realizing that Ted was in one of his moods. Terror flooded her body for a second. Sometimes, when this happens at night, she locks herself in the bathroom and runs a bubble bath, flooding out his anger with the water from the tap. She has learned that if she removes herself, he will frequently take his rage elsewhere, distance allowing it to simmer before disappearing. But if Grace is there, if he sees her, she becomes an unwilling victim of a predator who will not leave her alone until he is sure she is completely destroyed.

He doesn't mean it, she thinks, when he is back to being kind, loving, appreciative. He has terrible mood swings, which is part of what makes him a creative genius. I should be grateful, she says to herself. If Ted weren't allowed to be this kind of person, he wouldn't be able to write the books he does, wouldn't be the success he is.

I mustn't take it personally, she tells herself all the time, even as she feels her ears ringing with stress.

Her ears were ringing this morning, in bed, as she heard him downstairs. They always ring when she is frightened. She read somewhere that this is a symptom of anxiety, and one she has had as far back as she can remember. She has a theory that it helps drown out the noise of whoever is raging at her – her mother, her husband – but isn't sure that's why it happens.

This morning, moving quickly, she pulled on yesterday's jeans, a clean T-shirt and vest, and slipped down the back stairs, carrying her clogs in her hand so as not to make a sound before softly walking out the back door.

Ted heard her car start, as she knew he would, and she wound her window down as he came tearing out of the house.

‘Sorry!’ she called as she reversed, pretending she hadn’t noticed his face contorted with rage. ‘Early start. I’m hugely late. See you later!’ She waved a cheery hand out the window and zipped up the driveway, her body flooding with relief.

Her mobile phone buzzed. She turned her head, the ringing in her ears starting back up, an automatic response to her husband’s name flashing on her screen. She wouldn’t answer, never answered when he was in this kind of mood, but nor would she divert, for then he would know she was diverting him, which would infuriate him still further.

She pressed the top button to turn off the volume, waited until the call went to voicemail, then turned the entire phone off, knowing she wouldn’t turn it on again until Ted was back to normal.

Please let things be back to normal now, she thinks, hoisting the shopping bags into the house and onto the kitchen table. She has been out all day. First to work, then filling the rest of her afternoon with errands to keep her out of the eye of the storm.

The house is quiet. Ted must still be in the barn, which is a good thing, as it means he is writing. Work helps him to focus his mind elsewhere, and hopefully, *please God*, enable him to gather his equilibrium.

Grace puts the tomatoes in a bowl on the counter, the milk in the fridge, sliding the kettle onto the range to make tea. She once loved this house so much, this rambling antique on the banks of the Hudson River. That very first time they saw it, she knew she had found a place to call home.

Sprawling, peaceful, filled with nooks, crannies, and charm, the house has low ceilings and French doors that open onto lawns that lead gracefully down to the water.

She loved this house, before Ted’s moods had the ability to discombobulate her in the way they now do. Back in the early days, Grace would laugh at him, would wander off, letting his insults roll off her back, happy to play with their daughter and wait for things to pass.

But the years have taken their toll, his rages lasting longer, gradually grinding her into the woman she is now – the same Grace she has always been, with a ringing in her ears, a quickening of her heart, an overwhelming urge to run far, far away.

She used to fight back. She doesn't anymore. She withdraws into a well of pain and resentment, removing herself as she did today, or hiding in her bathroom, the one room that feels safe.

Now, so often, the rest of the house she loved feels like a prison.

She jumps as she sees the barn door open, Ted emerging, his glasses in his hand as he runs his fingers through his hair. She squints through the window, reading his face, his mood, bracing herself not for fight or flight, for neither is an option right now, but for the third option: freeze.

Ted sees her through the window, his expression changing, as Grace holds her breath, to a smile. Relief floods her body as he waves a jaunty hand, slowly making his way up the path. She is close to tears as she raises a tentative hand back at him.

Thank God! she thinks. *Thank you, God!* She goes to the fridge to pour him a glass of wine, the ringing fading in her ears, wondering how on earth life ever got so hard.

Two

In the beginning, when she first met Ted, it felt as if she had fallen into the kind of life that only happened to other people, and usually only in movies. It was a life she determined to enjoy while it lasted, convinced it wouldn't last long, for Ted could have had his pick. There were always women more exciting, more glamorous, more beautiful than she.

Ted Chapman. One of the rising stars of the literary scene, the thinking man's Grisham; a writer of clever political thrillers that straddled both the literary and the commercial. When Grace met him, he had only published three books, three books that had been huge, and the publishers were doing everything they could to keep him happy, knowing they hadn't paid him enough, aware that every other publisher was circling now that he had come to the end of his book deal, concerned they could no longer afford to pay him what he would doubtlessly demand of his next contract.

He was speaking at the annual sales conference, joining the publishing team's table for dinner. Grace, only twenty-two and an assistant cookbook editor, was stunned she had been asked to join the

table, more so when she discovered she was seated to the right of Ted Chapman.

Assistant cookbook editor was not nearly as glamorous a job as it sounded, and it was unusual for a lowly assistant to go to the sales conference, but her boss had demanded, and when her boss made demands, she had no choice. Perhaps he understood these were the perks that made the job worthwhile: going to publishing dinners, meeting famous chefs – Jacques Pépin and Julia Child. She met them. And they talked to her as if she were an equal! The perks made it all worthwhile.

Ted Chapman was not often seen in the office, and when he was, he seemed frightening. Dark and brooding, he had the kind of aura that made you want to stare, made you want to please him.

Grace had arrived early to the dinner, had allayed her fears during the cocktail hour with two glasses of cheap white wine, and by the time they took their seats in the banquet hall next door, her fear of Ted Chapman was tinged with intrigue. She sat, shaking, at the table, wondering why she had been given such an onerous and terrifying seat.

‘Gracie will charm him.’ Grace looked up to see Bill Knight, the publisher, toasting her across the table with a wink. ‘Right, Gracie?’

Of course, thought Grace. ‘How could he even think of leaving when we have such talented and delightful people working for us.’

Grace forced a smile, feeling sick. She was here as bait. And there was no way to leave. She would have to do her job, charm Ted Chapman, and then perhaps, *certainly*, look for another job.

Ted was the only empty chair at the table. He was too nervous before public speaking to sit at a table with other people, explained his editor. He needed quiet, but would join them afterwards.

Oh God, thought Grace, her heart sinking. How pretentious. The excitement of meeting him was beginning to pall, the whole evening starting to feel like a huge mistake. How ironic, she thought, that this morning she’d flown around her apartment, trying on dresses, tipping

her makeup into her bag so she could get ready for this event, exhilarated at meeting someone whose work she adored. Now she would have given anything to get out of there.

Grace had no appetite, unusual for her. She was a cookbook editor because she loved food. Coming to New York, she was amazed at how few girls her age knew how to cook. She had learned to cook at university, going home to her roommate Catherine's house where Catherine's mother, Lydia, was so thrilled to have an eager student, she sat her at the kitchen table for hours and taught her everything she knew.

She loved creating, loved cooking and loved writing. What better place to put all those skills together than working for a publisher in the cookbooks division, and where more glamorous than New York?

She hosted impromptu dinner parties all the time. Two folding card tables – one she had, one she had found on a street corner one afternoon – served as the dining table, with long wooden benches that had been made out of planks of oak by a handy ex-boyfriend.

Grace would throw cloth over the tables, fill jam jars with flowers and line them down the centre. The food was inexpensive, and back then, in those early days in New York, frequently had an English bent.

Her co-workers delightedly cooed over toad in the hole and treacle tart, as Grace dreamed of one day writing a cookbook of her own.

At the event dinner, the waiters started to hand out the plated food. Wilted salad followed by a dry chicken breast in a mushroom sauce. Grace took a few bites before pushing the food aside, bored with the empty seat to her left, the man on her right – another author – too busy talking to other people at the table to pay any attention to her.

A tinkling of spoon on glass, and the CEO of their company stood up to introduce their keynote speaker. To a whirl of applause, Ted Chapman appeared through a side door, tall, much taller than Grace had imagined, as he strode up to the podium, notes in hand, shaking the CEO's hand and murmuring 'thanks', before turning to face the

audience, clearing his throat, and pausing to take a sip of water.

He looked at his notes, then shook his head and grinned. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I'm much better off without the damned notes.' And then he spoke.

Grace didn't hear the beginning. She was so stunned by his smile, by the transformation of his face, she couldn't concentrate on anything other than how she could have possibly missed, in all those photographs, all those book jackets, how attractive he was.

When she tuned back in to his speech, her disorientation grew. She had heard that he was difficult, moody, high-maintenance. The editorial assistants at work had developed a Pavlovian response of fear to the phone ringing, scared it would be a furious Ted Chapman, in a rage because he'd just flown to Cincinnati for an event and – shocker! – there wasn't a single book of his in the airport bookstore. Or he might have been complaining about the marketing department, or that he'd just been sent the large-print version, and what the hell were they thinking, putting this godawful cover on it?

This man standing up on the podium, telling witty, dry stories, punctuated with sardonic eye rolls that made everyone laugh, had every person in the room in the palm of his hand. This was not the man she had heard about, this couldn't possibly be the same man of the terrible reputation.

Had she imagined it, or had he somehow transformed?

By the time he finished his speech and came to sit next to her, she was no longer nervous, but intrigued. Who was this humble, humorous, brilliant man, and if it was true that he could be difficult, impatient, short-tempered, which one was the real Ted Chapman? Which was the personality he tapped into in order to write?

She never had a chance to ask him, not that night, for Ted, smitten as soon as he laid eyes on Grace, did not stop peppering her with questions. He sat down at the table, allowed the perfunctory introductions to be made, and turned to shake hands with Grace, pausing for a second to take in her prettiness.

‘Well, this is a lovely surprise,’ he said. ‘You’re not the usual publishing type.’

‘There’s a type?’ Grace said, deciding to be flattered.

‘You’re English too? Goodness. This gets better and better. What brings you to these shores, Grace?’

The questions continued all night. Where did she grow up? What were the things she needed in life to be happy? What were the things she missed the most about England? What books had most influenced her life and how?

Grace had never been asked questions with such intensity, had never been fixed with such a forceful gaze, had never had so much fun, nor felt so . . . special. There was a chemistry between them that was obvious to everyone sitting at the table, and yet, at the end of the night, Ted merely bowed his head as he kissed her hand, and told her what a delight she had been.

The next day, at her desk, a bouquet of russet and flaming orange roses arrived with a note. ‘These made me think of my delightful companion last night. Drinks tonight? I will pick you up at work at 5. TC.’

There was no question of Grace saying no, or making other plans. She had, in fact, made other plans, but only a movie with a girlfriend, which she swiftly postponed, berating herself for not having made more of an effort with her outfit at work today, wishing she were in something more glamorous.

At lunchtime she ran to Bloomingdale’s and got a free makeover at the beauty counter, excitement and anticipation giving her a radiant glow.

Drinks at the Carlyle led to dinner, led to Ted insisting he bring her to a party the next night, led to Grace moving in with him three weeks later. His apartment was so much bigger, he said; she could save money living with him, he said; why would they ever want to be apart when being together made both of them so happy? he said.

Those days were a whirlwind of romance, passion, excitement. Grace swiftly became a fixture in his life, adoring the glamour and thrill of mixing with the great and the good, for Ted was in high demand, and Grace the perfect partner.

When Ted signed a second three-book contract with the same publisher, Grace was promoted to cookbook editor, their way of saying thank you to the woman who now went everywhere with Ted Chapman, who was surely instrumental in ensuring he stayed true to his roots.

It is presumed by many that Grace learned to cook at her mother's knee, but her mother could barely boil an egg. Grace was entirely self-taught until the age of eighteen. She had to learn to cook in order for her family to eat, her mother far too unreliable in her mood swings to ever be relied upon to serve them dinner, not, at least, with any consistency.

Grace learned to cook at the scrubbed kitchen table of her university roommate's mother, Lydia. Her rudimentary skills were honed and crafted as Lydia gave her cookbooks that she read like novels and which taught her everything she knew.

Back when she first moved to New York it all seemed so sophisticated. Grace brought Delia Smith's cookbooks with her to New York, and wowed her colleagues by staying loyal to her English roots: buttery kedgerie and cottage pie topped with mashed potato, sliced leeks, and melted gruyere.

Years later, when Clemmie entered middle school, Grace decided to indulge her passion further by doing a cooking course. Not just any cooking course, she wanted to do the Cordon Bleu, but there wasn't anything in her area, which left the Culinary Institute of America, the Institute of Culinary Education, or the French Culinary Institute.

She chose the French Culinary Institute, seduced by the promise of learning to cook the true French way, as espoused by the great chefs, Escoffier, et al.

The first day she turned up, she stood in line waiting to be handed

her uniform and knife set, aware she was so much older than the other students, but thrilled to be back in the human race again.

Motherhood had isolated her. She loved Clemmie, loved being her mother, but she missed being out in the world; missed being defined by something other than wife, mother.

It was a year-long course. A year during which Grace wasn't special, wasn't valued because of who she was married to, wasn't anyone other than another student in the class.

She loved it. She loved standing at the train station with the other commuters, her bag full of knives over one shoulder, her bag holding her chef's uniform over the other.

She loved getting into Grand Central at rush hour and moving through the station with swarms of commuters, climbing onto the subway and taking the number 6 train to Soho.

She wore flip-flops and cargo trousers, T-shirts and no makeup, and felt twenty again, a lightness in her step, a glow on her face, a light in her eyes. She felt alive again, part of the world in a way she hadn't done since marrying Ted and settling into married life to an older man.

Her classmates ranged mostly from Clemmie's age to late twenties, with a few fortysomethings like her, looking for a new career for the second act of their lives, although this wasn't going to be a career for her, she just wanted to learn how to do the one thing she had always loved.

Grace was not used to doing things wrong, or to criticism. She thought she was an accomplished cook until she got to cooking school, when Chef Z would shout at her on a daily basis because her sauce was too thin, or too cold; her beef too well done, her pastry too thick.

'Sorry, Chef,' she would say, ashamed, humbled, as she slunk back to her station, vowing to do it better next time.

And yet, he was her favourite teacher. He may have shouted at her, but there was always a twinkle in his eye, and every time he said something, in his thick French accent, she couldn't help thinking of a TV show from her childhood, and it made her laugh.

It also taught her. She kept a notebook with her, scribbling down all the tips offered, everything they said that wasn't in the manual: the tricks of the trade that would truly transform the food she made, the skills and the science of cooking. She went from being a very good cook to one who could be described as serious. *A serious cook.*

Now she cooks as a professional. Over the years she has had her own catering company, gaining an excellent reputation for cooking easy food that can be thrown together quickly, that nevertheless looks and tastes as if she had been cooking carefully and diligently for hours.

More recently, she had become the chef at Harmont House, a home founded ten years ago in Nyack, for families escaping abuse and addiction, helping them get back on their feet.

Ten years ago, Grace's friend Sybil came to her and asked her if she would be interested in joining the board. Only, Grace said, if she could actually do something there. Clemmie was still in middle school, Grace counting the hours until she got home, desperate for something to relieve the boredom of having nothing to do.

She became the chef. Not just cooking for the residents of the home, but teaching them how to cook, just as, all those years ago, she herself was taught. Harmont House was now her passion, and her job, and the one place she truly considered her sanctuary.

Grace teaches them the way Lydia once taught her, and throws in the lessons she learned at culinary school: how to organize a kitchen; how to shop for food; what makes the basis of a great sauce.

Five days a week Grace, feet slipped into clogs, an apron wrapped around her, hair scraped back into a bun, cooks first in her own kitchen, then shows up at Harmont House with the ingredients for one last dish for her lesson.

She introduced the English classics Lydia had taught her to cook and that she had learned to love: toad in the hole, bubble and squeak. The cooking humbles her, but more than the cooking, more than the

service she is providing, it is the relationships she has with the women, the friendships she has made, that bind her. She has the ability to make a difference in these women's lives and they, equally importantly, are open to her help.

Her passion, her job and a way to heal the wounds of the past.

Ted will tell people he loves Harmont House, has to tell people he is supportive of the work Grace does, but in private he is jealous of the amount of time it takes up in Grace's life. He has learned to keep this to himself, but it comes out in bitter sideways swipes.

Still. This does not change Grace's commitment. She loves cooking for these women just as much as she loves cooking for friends. Her dinner parties, particularly since her success as a chef, are legendary, desserts more so. Anyone coming to the house to write a profile about Ted knows in advance that part of the profile will include long and loving descriptions of the delicious food that Grace provides.

Whatever her passions, whatever her work, still she has time for Ted. She must make time for Ted, ensure he is the number one priority in her life. Whatever is going on in Grace's life, and it is by no means as easy as it sounds, from the outside, her life looks perfect.

'You look as if you have never had a hard day in your life,' someone once said at a dinner party. Grace smiled, for she had learned to hide her secrets and shame well. She had learned to never discuss what she came from, the hell of growing up as she did, having the mother she had.

The more perfect the illusion, the more her secrets will recede. Or so she thinks.

If she just keeps running and running, keeps being the perfect wife, mother, cook, the past will surely just disappear.

BUTTERY KEDGEREE

(Serves 4)

Adapted from Delia Smith

INGREDIENTS

340g smoked salmon trout fillets

110g butter

1 onion, chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon fish sauce

200g uncooked rice

3 hard-boiled eggs, chopped

3 heaped tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped

1 tablespoon lemon juice

Salt and pepper

Melt half the butter in a frying pan. Soften onion in it for 5 minutes.

Stir curry powder into the onion, stir in rice, and add 500ml water and fish sauce.

Stir well, bring to boil, cover, and turn down to a gentle simmer for 15 minutes, or until rice is cooked.

Remove salmon trout flesh from skin. Flake. Add to cooked rice with eggs, parsley, lemon juice and remaining butter.

Cover pan and replace on gentle heat for 5 minutes before serving.

Three

There is nothing Grace loves more than being alone in her kitchen, surrounded by food, inspirational recipes scattered on the counter in front of her as she tries out new dishes. When she is working on a book, she will use assistants, but it is during these moments, when it is just Grace, alone in her kitchen experimenting, that make her happiest of all.

The process is almost meditative. The vegetables are gathered, washed, placed carefully in a stainless-steel prep bowl to the left of her chopping board, an empty bowl at the top for the scraps to go on the compost heap, a tray with small empty bowls to the right, waiting for Grace to chop the onions, the celery, the carrots, her bay leaf, peppercorns, parsley stalks and thyme already tied up in cheesecloth for the aromatics to bring her braised short ribs with marmalade glaze to the next level.

The oven is preheated, all the knives, peelers, paring knives she will need by her board. Her apron is on, a cloth tucked into the tie around her waist, another in a bowl of soapy water ready to clean down her board.

Cooking was always something she loved, but pre-cooking school it inevitably meant chaos. The sink would gradually pile up with dirty bowls and spoons, as Grace raced around the kitchen grabbing things out of the fridge, chopping and sautéing as she went, stopping to pull the canned tomatoes from the pantry or the chicken from the fridge.

Cooking school taught her how to organize. It taught her how to prepare her *mise-en-place*. It taught her that if she prepares everything first, the very act of preparation becomes a joy, the cooking is made easier and more enjoyable.

Now, as she lines up her knives, starts to peel the carrots, her mobile phone rings. With a sigh she wipes her hands on the cloth and picks up the phone, squinting to see the name on the screen before deciding to pick up. Ellen.

‘Is everything okay?’

‘It’s fine,’ says the voice on the end of the phone. ‘I just wanted to let you know the driver will pick you up tonight at five thirty, and Ted’s tuxedo is being returned from the dry cleaner’s this afternoon.’ Ted’s recently ex-assistant is as efficient and organized as ever, even though she no longer works here.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ says Grace. ‘I’m handling all of it. Really, Ellen. You need to concentrate on looking after your mother, not on organizing us.’

‘Until we find someone to take my place, you know I’m going to keep doing it. If I left it up to you, you’d be hitchhiking.’

Grace laughs, for it is true. Organization has never been one of her strong points – hence her need for cooking school – and she had meant to organize a driver for tonight, but, as Ellen well knows, it had slipped her mind, and had it not been for their former assistant, Ted would probably have ended up having to drive himself, which would have upset him, because when he is a keynote speaker, he uses that valuable time in the back of his chauffeur-driven car to fully memorize the words.

‘How are you, though?’ asks Grace. ‘Really?’

‘I’m fine,’ Ellen reassures, although Grace knows this cannot be true. Ellen’s mother is now struggling with Alzheimer’s. Ellen is moving to Florida to take care of her. The strain is enormous, even though Ellen is loathe to let it show.

Ellen has been part of their lives for fifteen years. She is the kind of assistant you dream about, the kind of assistant people usually only dream about: efficient, kind, thoughtful, discreet and loyal beyond anything Grace had ever known.

Ellen can handle Ted. However bad his mood, Ellen has a way of calming him down, of making him feel that everything would be fine, and it is the loss of this, more than anything else, that has been so difficult since she stopped working for them.

She worked in the small office at one end of the barn, Ted in his large, book-filled library at the other end. All he had to do was bellow her name – no time, no patience for emails, or texts – and Ellen would appear, framed in the doorway, notebook and pen always in hand, ready to do whatever Ted wanted: research a lobbyist; fix the damned screen in the library; get rid of the yapping dogs outside before I kill them.

She headed off his moods before he had a chance to take them out on anyone else; on Grace. She masked how temperamental he had become. She had a way of calming him down, of giving him a semblance of peace.

Their author friends in New York all had assistants, but none of them were like Ellen. Everyone wanted to find an Ellen, but instead found themselves drawn to young, glamorous women, fresh out of grad school, who were starstruck and eager, unable to believe they would now be working for someone famous.

Out here, in Sneden’s Landing – it may have been renamed Palisades, but Grace and Ted have been here too long, and it will always be Sneden’s to them – the pool was smaller.

The glamorous literary chicks didn’t want to cross the bridge and

work in a quiet hamlet in Rockland County, and truth be told, Grace wasn't sure she would have particularly wanted them anyway.

The other authors they knew went through a revolving door of young, pretty assistants. However good they were, it was only a matter of time before they left to work for someone bigger, or because they were getting married, or had decided to move to Paris. All of them had landed in New York City, and that was where they were going to stay unless somewhere even more exciting presented itself.

When Grace and Ted first saw the house in Sneden's Landing, twenty-two years ago, with Clemmie toddling around, they fell instantly in love. For eighteen months, Clemmie had been the only thing Grace could think about. From the moment the squawling newborn was placed in her arms, Grace came undone. She fell head over heels, didn't care about anything other than being with her daughter. Even now, years later, they are bonded together, as much like best friends as mother and daughter.

Back then, when Grace was interested in nothing other than Clemmie, stumbling upon the house at Sneden's Landing was like something out of a dream, giving Grace a focus outside of her daughter, a focus that grounded her and made her feel safe.

All Grace had ever wanted was seclusion, and water. They wanted to be close enough to get into the city for meetings with publishers, for events they were expected to attend, but far enough that they had, at least, the *feeling* of country, even if it wasn't the deepest, darkest depths of Vermont, as she would have liked.

They came up for lunch with Katie and Richard Walbert, a couple they had developed a couple crush on. The friendship burned brightly and with great intensity for a year, before sputtering and dying. This was at the height of their mutual affection for one another, and the fact that Katie and Richard had a weekend house in Piermont but wanted to live in Sneden's Landing was enough for Ted and Grace to want to be there too.

As the four of them toured the small hamlet, Grace fantasized about waking up every morning with these stunning views of the Hudson, the vibrancy of neighbouring Nyack, the quiet and privacy of Sneden's Landing.

Katie vaguely knew the people who owned a house in Sneden's, knew they had been talking about putting it up for sale. In a haze of excitement the four of them all showed up on the doorstep – which you could do in those days – and asked whether it might be possible to have a look around.

Grace didn't need to look around. Even as they rounded the curve of the driveway she caught sight of the old rambling farmhouse, lawns leading down to the water's edge. There was a dilapidated barn, an old cow shed, various other outbuildings that had been left to rot; all she saw was magic. The interior of the house was terrible. Grace and Ted didn't even have to look at each other to know this was it.

By the end of the day a deal had been made, sealed with a handshake. A month later they moved in, terrified that Clemmie, racing around in excitement, would topple into the water.

Six years later, when Ted was no longer seen as a hugely talented newcomer but had become a fixture at the pinnacle of the literary world, Grace was in Nyack, getting the food shopping, when she stopped by a noticeboard, seeing a sign for a Mrs Fixit looking for work. 'Experienced house manager,' it said. 'Great with animals, kids. Will clean, organize, drive, cook. Ask and it shall be done.'

Grace scribbled down the name and number, liking the way the ad had been written, the cartoon that accompanied it, of a woman juggling children, animals, shopping bags, tools, all with a big smile on her face.

That afternoon Ellen walked in, sturdy, solid, smiling. She had an air of calm that allowed Grace, unwilling to admit she was utterly overwhelmed by all she had taken on, to finally exhale.

Ellen was the same age as Grace, and her husband Glenn ran the local garage and took care of their cars, turning out to be an excellent

handyman on the side. Ellen took care of everything else, and over the years, as Ted's star had continued to rise, it had become more and more about taking care of Ted.

Ellen updated his Facebook, Twitter, the calendar on his blog. You may think Ted Chapman was the one responding to your generous tweet, thanking you for your kind words, but in fact it was Ellen. Always.

She wrote his newsletters, responded to his fan mail, coordinated meetings with his agents, and was on first-name terms with the assistants of the biggest and most powerful agents and actors in Hollywood, not phased should Harrison Ford or Bradley Cooper phone the house.

She was able to decipher his scribbles, type up his notes, spend hours online, or on the phone, researching anything he needed, last minute, for his latest book.

She accompanied him to literary events – unless of course the invitation was for husband and wife, in which case Grace would attend – and television shows, ensuring he was comfortable in the greenroom, the cars arrived on time, he had everything he needed.

Ellen organized his book tours, arranged his travel, ensured the hotels he stayed in had the correct suite, and that he had a basket of fresh fruit, and a bottle of pinot noir, and Perrier, on arrival.

But more than that, more than any of that, Ellen was a friend. Ted talked to her, had been known to hang out in Glenn's garage, delighting in the local gossip Glenn shared with him, in the glimpse into another world he was afforded just by knowing Ellen and Glenn.

As the years have rolled by they have come to know each other intimately. Ellen understands him as well as she understands her husband; is far better, in fact, at anticipating Ted's needs than those Glenn has.

Grace adores Ellen. She always referred to her as Ted's other wife, the *good* wife, the one that knew where everything was. Whenever Ted was away, Grace delighted in stealing Ellen away from her

office in the barn and planting her at the kitchen table with a cup of tea.

Ellen leaving was unthinkable. There was no question that Ellen had to leave, that her family took precedence, but none of them could bear the thought of it. Grace kept thinking the problem might go away. Perhaps her mother wouldn't be as bad as Ellen thought. Perhaps she would be very much worse. Perhaps the end wasn't far away and Ellen could come home, back to work as normal. Surely Grace could pick up the slack for a few months.

Grace has been trying to pick up the slack for weeks and it has been disastrous. Her memory, never wonderful, has in the last couple of years appeared to have gone to pot.

She decided to write everything down. It seemed like a brilliant idea, except everything was written on little yellow Post-its that would end up crumpled in a pocket or at the bottom of a handbag, never to be seen again.

Grace thinks about something Ellen said yesterday on the phone. 'I put an ad on Craigslist. For my replacement. Apparently this is where you're supposed to advertise these days. Don't worry. I used the anonymous email address and of course I didn't say who it was for.'

'Craigslist?' Grace scowls. 'I'm not sure how safe that is.'

'Darren found his wife on Craigslist,' says Ellen.

Grace laughs. 'Not exactly. She answered an ad to be a roommate. That isn't quite the same thing.'

'Point being, Sarah's lovely. And he found her on Craigslist. I spoke to one of my friends who works for a domestic staffing agency and she says these days lots of the domestic agencies find their staff there too, there or the *New York Times*. It isn't like before when you paid all that money to an agency knowing they'd do all the background checks so you'd know what you'd be getting. They're advertising in the same places, and it's up to us to do all the due diligence. Anyway, I haven't had any responses yet, so I'm putting an ad in the *Times* next week. If

I get anything that sounds interesting, I'll forward it to you. How does that sound?'

'Worrisome,' says Grace.

'Only because you and I are so old we don't understand all this technology. Trust me. It's what everyone's doing. I did advertise on the noticeboard at the library, but I haven't heard anything, and I've passed the word around. Didn't John Foster say his old assistant was looking for something?'

'Yes. We met her.'

'And?'

'She was twelve.'

'Oh dear.'

'I know I sound completely ageist, but I don't want a young college graduate with stars in her eyes. I want someone like you. Mature. Efficient. Someone who has common sense and initiative.'

'Young people can have that too,' Ellen says.

'This one didn't. She was an hour and a half late because she got lost and had no service to check the GPS on her iPhone.'

'She couldn't have stopped and asked?'

'Exactly!' Grace says. 'Maybe Craigslist is the way to go . . . if you're sure.'

'I'm sure.'