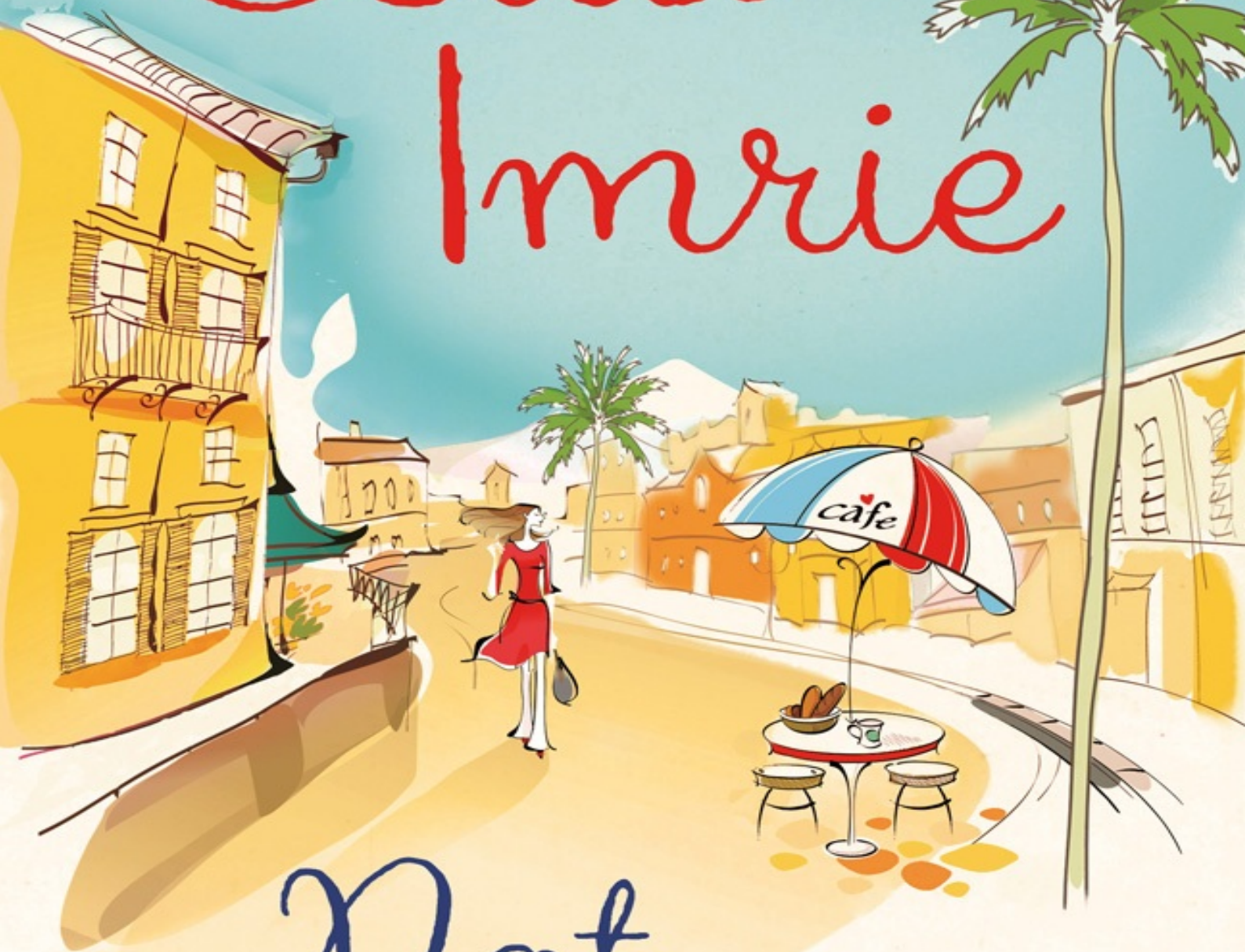


Celia Imrie



Not Quite Nice

a novel

"A very witty novel by a very witty woman. Hugely entertaining."

—JULIAN FELLOWES,
CREATOR OF *DOWNTON ABBEY*

Not Quite Nice

Celia Imrie

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

To my pals who brought me here to Nice, and to the city whose beauty saved and inspired me.

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Part One – Escape

The small town of Bellevue-Sur-Mer sparkled like a diamond on the French Mediterranean coast. Sprawling down from the foothills of the Alpes Maritimes to the beach, the town consisted of state-of-the-art cream-coloured villas and old ochre houses with yellow, pink and lime-green shutters, hunched up and gazing out to sea. Dark alleys and bright pathways zigzagged vertiginously between pastel painted walls, and the one main road took a series of terrifying hairpin bends in its descent from the corniches to the bustling cul-de-sac which bordered the harbour, with its railway station, souvenir shops, brasseries, hotels and a small but popular casino.

Everywhere you looked, the colours were almost startling in their intensity: vivid purples, pinks and reds of bougainvillea and oleander bushes crowded under the green boughs of umbrella pines, orange trees and palms, and all set against the turquoise and ultramarine background which was the sea and sky.

Understandably, Bellevue-Sur-Mer had, like most places on the Côte d'Azur, seen more than its fair share of artistic and literary visitors: you couldn't walk five hundred yards without passing a building which had been associated with Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, H.G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, Jules Verne, Maupassant, Stendhal, Nietzsche, Chekhov or F. Scott Fitzgerald. In art galleries all over the world you could see vivid paintings of its streets and sea views, executed by the likes of Renoir, Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Cocteau, Chagall and Dufy. Nowadays rock icons and Hollywood movie stars lurked behind the virgin walls of impressive villas perched in the rocks above the Old Town, while many of the more garish seafront mansions along the bay belonged to magnates of world industry and Russian oligarchs.

As in most of the beauty spots on the earth, there were, dotted among the native inhabitants, a gaggle of Brits, people who, for one reason or another, kept a second home here or, in many cases particularly of the older generation, had chosen to move, lock, stock and barrel to this magnificent village to retire in the sun. All of them, more or less, knew one another, if only by sight. They had their own local English newspaper, and even a radio station which broadcast English-speaking programmes from nearby Monaco.

This morning Theresa Simmons would be joining them. She walked briskly along the seafront, gripping the keys to her new apartment. She stopped a while by the harbour wall to take in the beautiful view – the glass-like sea, shining silver in the late January midday light, the little fishing boats tethered to the quay, bobbing and clanking, the sky dappled at the edges with pink haze, but at its zenith as blue as a kingfisher.

She knew she'd done the right thing. How lucky that she had taken the plunge and chosen to come here. The flight and train ride might have taken less than three hours but Theresa's journey here had taken six long months.

The whole business of her transplant from Highgate to Bellevue-Sur-Mer started one night in July on a night of babysitting her three granddaughters. She always babysat, twice a week. But this one night came after a horrible day, during which, quite against her will, she was forced into retirement.

Until that day, Theresa had hoped to go on working as long as she could and planned to carry on in the house in which she had been living for the last thirty-five years. Although she was coming up to her sixtieth birthday, Theresa was not expecting her boss Mr Jacobs to give her the heave-ho but, when she put on her coat ready to leave for her daughter's Wimbledon home, he had taken her aside and apologised, saying that in a few months he would be 'letting her go'. Theresa protested that she

enjoyed working and didn't want to give up, but Mr Jacobs confessed that it was a cost-cutting effort. Like everyone else, Jacobs and Partners was going under financially and unless he did this to a couple of people now, in a few months they'd *all* be out of work, including him. He was very sorry, whether she liked it or not, Theresa had to go.

With a heavy heart she made her way to Wimbledon, for the usual dose of childcare. She rode at the back of the crowded bus, the warmth from the engine turning the back of her seat into a heat pad, leaving her sweltering in the already sweaty crush of the London rush hour.

She resisted the feeling that she was on a tumbrel, heading for the guillotine. Theresa knew that wasn't really right. She was only going for an evening's babysitting. That was all.

Two hours later she looked at her watch, horrified to see she still had three long hours ahead of her before she could go home. She was under siege on her daughter's taupe leather sofa, while the little bastards, her grandchildren, Chloe, Lola and Cressida, crawled around, ducking behind the sofa, whispering obscenities and insults: 'Granny smells! Granny pongs! Granny stinks! Granny wears make-up like a clown! Granny's fat! Granny's a mad cow! Granny's a witch! Granny's a bitch!'

She knew you were supposed to love your children. You were also supposed to love your grandchildren. In fact you were supposed to offer them all 'unconditional' love, a fashionable term which was merely a trite way of saying it didn't matter how badly your family behaved towards you, you had to love them anyway.

But Theresa had come to the end of her tether. Yes, it was easy to love the *thought* of them all, to love some idealised notion of what they ought to be: beaming daughter and giggling grandchildren running to darling granny, doling out love and hugs all round, while granny proffered foul-tasting bits of butterscotch, which were supposed to make them all have fond memories of granny, even long in the future, when granny was under the sod and they themselves were grandparents.

But reality was nothing like the TV ads.

She thought about Mr Jacobs, and how he had smiled at her so pityingly as he reminded her that she was nearing retirement age anyhow. It would be less hard on her, he had said, than it would be on the youngsters.

She pointed out to him that, at her age, the prospects of her getting another job were nil.

'So spoil yourself, Theresa, my dear,' he said, 'spend more time with your family, enjoy a dignified retirement.'

'Granny smells! Granny's got a fat arse! Granny's a mad cow! Granny's a witch! Granny's stinkypoo!'

A dignified retirement indeed.

This night was not a one-off. It was like this every time. In fact, though Theresa first started babysitting a few years ago, the three children had recognised the opportunity for larks right from the start. Theresa had tried to win them round. She'd attempted bribery, with sweets and comics, brought round DVDs for them to watch, and board games for them to play (in some wildly imaginary world *that* would have been – an evening of Monopoly!), but within seconds the three girls had got bored with her baubles and resumed their ritual chanting, with Theresa as their totem pole.

Nowadays, for the duration of her twice-weekly stint, Theresa tried to ignore it. Nothing she did made any difference. She had learned to close her ears, but not well enough. It was impossible to use the TV to drown out the little bastards, they could always get even louder. It was also impossible to ignore them. She'd long ago given up on trying to read books. Even newspapers were useless, as all three of them had caught the idea of banging the back, cracking the paper, making her jump while they recoiled in spasms of laughter.

Today Theresa sat in the armchair with a cookery book. It was a new idea. Recipes could certainly be taken in small doses, there was no story to follow, very few complex sentences, and a few phrases on the page conjured a delightful world where she could imagine being at home in the calm of her own kitchen, stirring and chopping, pricking pastry and painting it with milk or egg yolk, buttering baking trays and popping things into the oven. In her mind she could even get as far as taking the complete dishes of her imagination out of the oven, placing them on the table and sitting down to eat.

‘Granny’s an old bitch! Granny stinks! Granny wears make-up like a clown! Granny’s fat! Granny a mad cow! Granny’s a witch!’

Blah blah blah! She thought. Soon this purgatory would come to an end, she’d be released from her duties and she would go home, uncork a bottle and cook up a storm. A lovely cheese omelette Gruyère of course – with champignons à la Provençale and a salad of sweet peppers. (No prizes for guessing she was deep into Elizabeth David’s *Mediterranean Cookery* and thereby not only thinking of lovely food but lovely places too, with a sparkling azure sea and indigo skies.)

Theresa had worked in that office, a small solicitors’ in Islington, for years. She’d been there ever since her husband Peter had buggered off with Annunziata the nanny, a nubile Italian girl with cow-like eyes and huge knockers.

And now what were her prospects? Years of babysitting, no income – even her state pension wouldn’t come through for another five years – and nothing else to do. The thought of this blank wall ahead of her, lasting for the rest of her life, couldn’t be more appalling. Theresa was a get-up-and-go kind of person.

She dreaded days when she might wake up and have no reason to get out of bed. The income thing was a problem too. Just because no money was coming in didn’t mean none would be going out. She had the last throes of the mortgage to get rid of, and there were all the usual bills. She had spent most of her savings buying things for the family – a car, school uniforms, expensive presents like computers, trainers and music gadgets, iPods and iPads – which her daughter Imogen told her she *needed*.

If money was going to be a problem the answer was simple: she’d sell the house. Sell the house, pay off the mortgage, buy something smaller and cheaper and leave herself a decent lump sum. She didn’t need a huge place. A one-bed flat would be fine. Maybe she would give private tuition, a little reading and writing, helping kids swat up for exams, teach cookery even. She had always enjoyed cooking.

‘Granny’s reading a boring book, a boring book, a boring book . . .’ This to the tune of ‘Nuts in May’. ‘Granny’s reading a boring book and . . .’

Before they could finish, Theresa slammed the book shut and stood up. Momentarily she saw the girls flinch, expecting her to lash out at them. Instead she walked to the ‘kitchen area’ – as they called it these days. No one had a kitchen any more, just a huge carpet-free space which merged into one echoing kitchen-dining-living room which took up the whole ground floor of the Victorian house.

‘Granny’s going to teach you to cook some sweets,’ said Theresa, tying on a flowery pastel-coloured apron which dangled from a hook but which had clearly never before been used. ‘And when Granny finished, if you don’t want to join her, she’s going to sit down on her own and eat them and make her arse even fatter. OK, girls?’

She shook her bangles further up her arm, and raised her chubby hands like a surgeon about to operate.

Like mice, the three sisters stood where they were, quivering slightly, eyeing Theresa keenly as she pulled open drawers and plonked pans on to the vast gas range.

‘Come on, you lot, if you want to share the feast, you have to help make it.’

The girls edged a half-step forward, unsure.

‘Granny’s got a great big . . .’ piped up Cressida, the baby at six years old.

She was neatly silenced by a jab in the ribs from her oldest sister, Chloe, nine. Theresa dropped a slab of butter into a pan, ladled in some sugar, syrup and cocoa, and slowly stirred while the warm aroma wrapped around the three siblings. Silent now, they crept imperceptibly nearer to her till they hovered a few inches from her elbow.

Theresa peered up at the row of cereals lined up on top of the fridge. ‘Rice pops, cornflakes, biscuits or muesli?’ she asked. She didn’t mention the bran and other worthy-looking packets beside them.

‘It smells of chocolate,’ said Cressida quietly.

‘It’ll taste of chocolate too,’ said Theresa, wiping some of the brown liquid from the edge of the wooden spoon and tasting it. ‘Mmm. If we used biscuits we’d call it Tiffin. But Mummy doesn’t allow biscuits, does she?’ Theresa licked her little ‘cook’s’ finger. ‘Delicious. Here!’

She held the spoon out. Tentatively each child wiped away a small blob of the chocolate fudge and tasted it.

‘Let’s go mad, shall we?’ said Theresa, tipping cereal into the mix. ‘We’ll have a bit of all three.’

‘Please, Granny, can we have some more?’ asked Lola, the middle one, holding out a finger.

‘Wait a min, my little darlings, who wants to butter the dish?’ Theresa pulled out a tin tray.

In unison they put up their arms, as though they were in a classroom, trying to get teacher attention.

‘Wipe this all round the tray,’ Theresa handed Lola a piece of greaseproof paper dabbed with butter.

‘Then in a few minutes you’ll have something even nicer.’

The three girls started fighting over the paper, tearing it so that they could join in with the job.

‘OK, OK,’ said Theresa, as she ladled out the warm mixture into the roughly buttered tray. She handed Chloe the spatula. ‘Smooth it over, then we’ll all take a slice.’

Theresa marked out the dish into neat squares and cut deep, handing each child a flaky chocolate flavoured slab.

The children ate.

Silence reigned.

Theresa turned back and wiped the tops of the counters, stacking the dirty pans into the dishwasher.

‘How’s school going then?’ Theresa asked. ‘Have you decided what you’re all going to be when you grow up?’

The children opened up, gabbling with delight about teachers and ballet and art class. As they sat round the kitchen table, digging into the home-made confectionery, Theresa realised that she had finally found a way to connect with them. After all these years she had found a way to get through.

After about fifteen minutes of congenial chat, the children’s focus changed with a united tilt of their heads. They jumped up from their seats and stood erect, listening. Theresa thought they looked like meerkats.

From the street, Theresa heard the slam of a car door, and feet clipping up the path.

In unison the girls’ heads turned. They took a few steps towards the front door.

‘Granny smells,’ said Cressida, sotto voce.

A key went into the lock.

Knowing what would come next, Theresa braced herself, and moved briskly back to the sofa, slipping her book into her open handbag, before standing, arms folded, ready for the onslaught.

The key turned and as one, the three girls flung themselves to the floor, beating it with their fists, screaming, real tears oozing from popping eyeballs.

‘Mama,’ sobbed Cressida.

‘We missed you so much,’ wailed Lola.

‘Why do you leave us with *her*?’ Chloe cried, then quickly sucked the last drop of fudge from her finger.

Imogen dropped her bags in the hall and came into the living room. She shook her head and tutted.

‘I do wish, Mother, that you would learn how to control them while I’m out. It’s not much to ask

Imogen bent low to hug her sobbing children and spoke in a strange cooing voice, as though addressing three little poodles. ‘Did you miss me, my darlings? I know, I know. You poor babies. It’s all right. I’m back now. Mummy’s back with you.’

Theresa wondered why Imogen felt she had to collude with them in this way, why she treated them like helpless babies when they were in fact quite feisty children.

Suddenly, in a change to the usual pattern, Imogen took her arms away from her children. She stood up, held out her face and sniffed the air. ‘What’s that smell?’

‘I showed them how to cook chocolate crunchies.’ Theresa held out a piece for her daughter.

Ignoring the sweet, Imogen swept past the wailing children and hissed into Theresa’s ear. ‘I will *not* have my children eating this rubbish.’ She grabbed Theresa by the elbow and dragged her into the kitchen space. ‘They have allergies. You can’t shovel this muck down their throats. Sugar, butter, biscuits? If this is what you live on, it certainly explains why you’re so overweight yourself. Mummy.’

Theresa tried to defend herself but her daughter didn’t draw breath. ‘Never, ever, will you throw a stunt like this again. Do you understand?’

As she watched her daughter, advancing on her like a furious schoolteacher, Theresa wondered for a moment who was the parent and who the child.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, feeling stupid for apologising to her own daughter. ‘I had to do something to entertain them. They’re not the easiest children, Imogen.’

‘What did you say? I don’t know how you have the nerve . . .’ Imogen wiped the perfectly clean kitchen top with a damp cloth. ‘So, you’ll be wanting to get off now, Mummy. It’s a long way from Wimbledon to Highgate. Same time Wednesday?’

‘No.’ Theresa winced. Why did she feel so bad about claiming her own life? ‘I can’t do Wednesday. I’m afraid.’

‘Do you notice, Mother,’ Imogen flung the cloth into the sink, ‘how selfish you’re becoming?’

Theresa felt herself stammering her reply. ‘I’m meeting up with some friends.’

‘Friends?’ Imogen scoffed. ‘Can’t you meet them another night? You know Wednesday is my Pilates class.’

Theresa braced herself and said ‘I can’t really change it. It’s a one-off. Schoolfriends, you know.’

Imogen wore a cold smile. ‘Schoolfriends? You’re fifty-nine years old. Why? How?’

Theresa felt her heart thudding, just like when she herself had been brought before the headmistress for disobedience. She said quietly: ‘They found me on Facebook.’

‘Facebook?’ Imogen threw her head back and laughed. ‘Facebook! Listen to yourself, Mummy. You’re going on sixty, not sixteen.’ She went back to rinsing the already sparkling sink. ‘You don’t think I have time to play about on computers and the Internet, do you?’

‘I’m on the Internet all day at work, other things come through now and then,’ said Theresa, wondering how it had come to this, what had happened that she felt it necessary to explain herself to her daughter.

‘Oh really!’ Imogen turned off the tap and pushed up her sleeves. Theresa could see that she was

really spoiling for a fight. 'Perhaps I should phone Mr Josephs and tell him what you get up to on his time?'

'Jacobs,' Theresa corrected, under her breath. 'Please, Imogen, I'm not in the mood.' Theresa pulled away and went to the sofa to pick up her coat and bag. She noticed that the three girls were now sprawled out on the floor, happily playing with paper and crayons. How come it was never like this during her sessions with them?

'Anyway, Imogen,' she said, putting on her coat, 'for your information, Mr Jacobs has let me go.' 'He sacked you?' Imogen tutted. 'I'm not at all surprised.' She paused her kitchen cleaning, then perked up. 'You mean you don't have a job any more? You won't be going to work? Oh God, Mummy, how marvellous. If you're not working, you'll be able to come here more often and do days now as well.'

Theresa knew that she was cornered.

But why did she have to think of coming here as something bad? This was family, after all. The people who really had first claim on her time. She felt awful for resenting them. Was it she herself who was the problem? She steeled herself and resolved to work harder at being the perfect grandmother.

'Of course I'll do it,' she said. 'But you know, Imogen, I can't bear the thought of that endless tube journey up and down from Highgate all the time. Perhaps I'll sell up the house. It's way too big for me on my own anyhow. I could buy a flat somewhere round here.'

Imogen's smile froze on her prim, perfect face. 'Why? Why here?' She took a deep breath and looked Theresa in the eye. 'Look, Mummy, I hope you don't think that if you move to Wimbledon we're all going to look after you in your old age.'

The shock Theresa felt stunned her to silence. She had only suggested the move to save time, to make things easier, so that perhaps sometimes she could have the children to her home.

A small commotion took place as Michael, Imogen's husband, came in, and, with a cursory nod to Theresa, went straight upstairs.

'Better to keep a bit of distance, eh, Mummy?' Imogen laughed, steering her mother towards the front door. 'After all we don't want you spying on us.'

Spying?

Theresa had to turn away so that her daughter would not see the flush of embarrassment on her face, nor see the tears gathering in her eyes.

The front door clunked shut.

CHOCOLATE FUDGE TIFFIN

Ingredients

1 tablespoon golden syrup
1 tablespoon soft light brown sugar
1 tablespoon butter
1 tablespoon cocoa powder
A few drops vanilla essence
Pinch of salt
Crushed biscuits/cornflakes/muesli/rice crispies etc.
Raisins

Method

Put equal amounts (e.g., one tablespoon) of golden syrup, sugar, butter and cocoa powder into a heavy saucepan.

Add a few drops of vanilla essence and pinch of salt.

Stir over heat till it melts and bubbles.

Remove from heat and fold in a cereal of your choice: cornflakes, rice crispies, muesli or crushed biscuits and raisins.

Put into a buttered tin or dish and place in fridge to chill.

When cool cut into squares.

Eat.

The Wednesday after that fateful night of babysitting, Theresa had met up, as arranged, in a hotel bar in Covent Garden with five of her old schoolfriends. She hadn't seen any of them in about forty years. They all exchanged memories and news of their old classmates and the nuns, laughed and drank a little of wine.

'Another bottle?' asked Theresa, as she wiped away tears of laughter after another of Ann's tales of marital life. Ann had always been the class clown, the girl who, when reprimanded by a nun, always talked back.

She had just described the expression on her ex-husband's face the day she caught him in flagrante delicto with one of his patients. 'If I'd wanted to I could have reported him to the General Dental Council and had him struck off, but my plans for revenge included a decent settlement and if he lost his job that would have been zip. So I simply dangled the threat.' She waved for a waiter. 'After the divorce came through I knew continuing my life in that town was unthinkable. My husband had slept with half the population, and the other half was baying for his blood. I didn't want to live the rest of my life getting sympathetic looks from the greengrocer, the butcher and even the paperboy. So I took the lump sum that the court offered and buggered off to the sun.'

Theresa sat back and watched the girls – though they were all sixty she found it impossible to think of them as anything but girls. Three of them, Catherine, Louise and Margaret, seemed so cowed and the lines on their faces spoke of struggle and disappointment, while the other two, Ann and Sarah, still had a youthful light about them.

'Are we all divorced then?' asked Theresa. 'Traded in for a younger model?'

Theresa, along with three others, raised her hand.

'And you two are still married?' Theresa said to Sarah and Catherine.

'I'm widowed,' Sarah said brightly.

'I'm still married,' said Catherine, who seemed so brittle and burdened, her inner light dimmed with old.

Perhaps it was losing her job, but Theresa feared she was on the edge of spiralling down into the same huge air of disappointment.

She wanted to be like Ann and Sarah, who appeared hardly to have changed since the days of hockey sticks and homework. Despite life's vagaries, both women seemed so radiant and full of energy. What was their secret?

'Mmm,' said Sarah, sipping the red wine. 'A lovely Tuscan red. But not nearly as good as the stuff we get from the next-door farm.'

'You get wine from a farm in Wiltshire?'

'Oh God, Theresa, keep up! I left Wiltshire ages ago, about a year after Ron died. Too depressing staying. Too many memories, you know, so I sold up and moved to a run-down old shack without water or electricity a few miles south of Montalcino. Our local wine is Brunello, the taste of heaven.'

'You live without water and electricity, Sarah?' shrieked Ann. 'Gah! I have to have my comforts.'

'No, silly. The house has been my project. Fifteen years' work and it's almost like a real home. Every mod con you could wish for in Islington, but I'm smack in the middle of an olive grove with lovely views of the Tuscan hills. I even have my own private swimming pool.'

Theresa felt a stirring of envy. 'So are you in Italy too, Ann?' she asked, dreaming of olive groves, lemon trees and bowls of huge red tomatoes.

‘Andalucía,’ Ann replied. ‘Cadiz, in fact. It’s like a very hot, sunny, Spanish version of Liverpool.’

‘Don’t you get homesick?’ said Catherine. ‘I still live in the house where we brought up the kids. I enjoy the familiarity.’

‘Me too,’ said Margaret.

Sarah shuddered. ‘Nothing on earth would get me back to the UK. I don’t know how you all put up with it.’

‘Me neither,’ said Ann.

‘I live just round the corner from my son,’ said Louise. ‘Though, to be truthful, I don’t really see that much of him. Dan and his wife seem to spend half the year jetting off to exotic places. But they really need me there, you see, to take care of the grandchildren for them whenever they’re away.’

‘It’s the grandchildren for me too,’ said Catherine. ‘My daughter wouldn’t be able to manage without me. Or him indoors. I don’t think Jonathan would want to leave Blighty. He’d miss the cricket. And anyhow all that foreign food disagrees with him.’

‘He has a point. I couldn’t live without my English tea,’ added Margaret.

‘Ah, Margaret,’ said Ann with a wink. ‘I don’t miss England a bit. But I have to confess I occasionally pop over to Gibraltar to stock up on tea and Marmite.’

‘I don’t understand how you two can bear to live in some strange foreign land,’ said Catherine, ‘with nothing familiar around you and no family nearby.’

Sarah interrupted. ‘Well, I don’t understand how you three can bear *not* to break the ties and start anew.’

Louise sighed. ‘How can you leave your children and grandchildren?’

‘We have phones and Skype in Italy, you know,’ said Sarah. ‘Just cos there’s wall-to-wall sunshine doesn’t mean we’re in a time warp.’

‘And my lot come and visit.’ Ann shrugged. ‘Which feels like a lot more fun all round.’

‘Change is the important thing,’ added Sarah. ‘Perspective. Not letting the familiar ties trap you like a fly in a cobweb.’

When the evening came to an end Theresa rushed along Long Acre towards the tube station, wishing she’d had the foresight to bring an umbrella. The vertical sheets of rain burned her face and froze her hands. So much for the English summer. She was glad to get home.

But the next morning Theresa called in estate agents and put her house on the market. She liked the thought of change, blowing the dust away but, for the sake of the family, decided to stay put in London.

When she wasn’t working, she spent her breaks looking at websites displaying flats in Highgate. After work she went round to see some of the places for sale.

She was not impressed. In comparison to her well-worn but lovely, quirky old house, everywhere she went seemed characterless and anodyne. Everyone with a place to sell seemed to have cleared out the space, chucked out the carpets, sanded the floors and painted the walls off-white. The pristine sleek kitchens had not been designed by cooks, that was certain, and the bathrooms looked like operating theatres. Nothing had any personality.

Theresa wanted somewhere in a lively area with a bit of heart, but all the flats she saw were more like dentists’ waiting rooms than somewhere you’d like to curl up with a book on a rainy evening.

When Theresa got home from the viewings she was greeted by another accusatory phone call from Imogen.

‘As you couldn’t be bothered to come and babysit last night, might you be able to make it tomorrow instead?’

‘I’ve put the house on the market.’

There was a small silence down the line.

‘How could you, Mummy? All of our precious memories . . .’

It was at least eight years since Imogen had visited her here. That was how much she cared about her precious memories.

Theresa decided not to respond.

Another ominous pause.

‘I do hope you haven’t forgotten what I said about moving to Wimbledon, Mummy. It would be so much . . . easier for you . . . if you didn’t. We’d all prefer it, I mean, it would be better all round if you kept a decent bit of distance.’

Theresa braced herself, astonished to discover that it hurt just as much to be told this a second time.

‘You’re right, Imogen, of course.’

Theresa had no idea when in the thirty-five years since she had given birth to Imogen her daughter had become so high-handed. Was it Michael, she wondered, who had turned her into such a prig? She also couldn’t think why Imogen was always so tense. She had no job, other than being a housewife and a mother. She lived in a comfortable house with nothing more pressing to attend to than the calendar and the local gym. Perhaps it was because Theresa was always there, on hand. Perhaps she was to blame for being too ever-present.

Next morning Theresa asked Mr Jacobs for advice on buying abroad and he printed out a bundle of papers for her, which she pored over on the bus home.

She spent the weekend browsing the Internet looking at towns in France. She hoped that somewhere across the Channel should be a ‘decent’ enough distance. She browsed through articles about the Dordogne, the Ardennes, Provence and the Île-de-France. She came to the conclusion that the Côte d’Azur was the dream place for her: warm sun in winter to ease her aching bones, good food, the sea and lots of historical, artistic and literary connections. What could be better?

As much as anything because of the English meaning of the name, she plumped on Nice.

‘I am going to Nice,’ she said to herself. ‘I am leaving Horrible and going to Nice.’

Theresa went to Nice for a fortnight. Just to look at the place, she decided. A little autumn holiday by the Mediterranean. Then, if the place made her heart sing, she’d come back in spring and look around for property.

Theresa was surprised at how easy it was to get from the airport into the city centre. A boy sitting next to her on the plane told her not to waste her money on a taxi, just take the bus, and she tried to expect the worst.

But the bus ride was cheap and rather wonderful. The route ran alongside the beach for the length of her journey, then she had a very short walk along the Promenade des Anglais to her hotel.

Her room had an old-fashioned window with a Juliet balcony that looked out over the huge blue arc of the bay. She had to drag herself away from the view to go out and explore the city.

The market was packing up as she swung into the Old Town. She bought herself a few pots of olive oil and tapenade to give to Imogen when she got back.

She was surprised that after crossing the avenue behind the Old Town that she was right in the middle of a proper city, with department stores and a modern tramline sweeping round and up into the hills. Although it was autumn the day was bright and warm, and the mountains, which rose protectively behind the town, were coated with a mantle of snow.

Theresa almost laughed aloud. Sun, sea, snow, mountains, city shops, historical ancient streets, port, art galleries, even an opera house! Where else could you find *everything* in such close proximity?

She had a truly delicious dinner in a little restaurant at the port before turning in and spent the next few days doing the usual tourist things: taking a walk down the Promenade, visiting some of the many museums and art galleries, buying more souvenirs, mainly of the edible variety.

On the final day, on the advice of the girl on the hotel desk, Theresa took a bus along the coast to Monte Carlo.

It was unlike any bus journey she'd ever taken. The road was high, cut into the hillside, with dizzying views out to sea. If you looked down you could see magnificent villas with turquoise swimming pools and lush green gardens; look up and there were more pilastered houses, perched on rugged brown crags.

A little fishing village caught her eye, with its multicoloured awnings and pretty rows of cottages lining the harbour. But all too soon the bus swung round a bend and there was another gorgeous view to admire.

But Monte Carlo was not quite so much her taste. The anodyne clean streets, with rows of absurd upmarket shops and all the parking spaces filled by Porsches, Ferraris, Bentleys and Lamborghinis left her feeling quite uncomfortable.

But as she had got there Theresa briskly did the sights. She viewed the Palace, which she thought a bit of a joke, very Disneyesque. The Opera House, designed by Garnier, who'd also done the Paris Opera, looked wonderful in the milky midday sunlight. Thinking of one of her favourite films, *The Red Shoes*, she knew she had to pop inside and take a look. But the theatre was closed for rehearsals and the only other option was a ticket to the casino.

Inside the ornate *salle de jeux* she couldn't resist having a go, and took a seat at one of the roulette tables. Theresa bought the minimum permitted number of chips, which still came to over a hundred and fifty pounds, with the firm plan of having only couple of spins then cashing in the remaining chips. She wasn't worried about losing twenty pounds or so for the thrill of imagining herself in some scene from a James Bond movie for a moment or two.

But half an hour later Theresa was still there. She had one chip left. Feeling hot and cold, and deciding she would not be telling anyone about this little escapade, she lay it down on a 6-line, all the numbers from 16 to 21.

'*Vingt,*' said the croupier as the ball fell into place, and he swept five pink chips towards her.

As the other players leaned over the table, placing piles of chips on multiple numbers, laying down thousands of pounds on a single throw, Theresa decided to cash in those last five chips and leave with at least a little dignity.

'*Rien ne va plus,*' called the croupier as she picked up her bag and climbed down from her stool. 'No more bets.'

The ball whizzed round the wheel and clattered into place.

Theresa strolled away from the table heading for the cashier's window, taking a good last look at the sumptuous decor of the legendary salon.

Behind her the croupier called out '*Dix-huit.*'

Theresa laughed to herself. If she'd left the chip in the same place she'd have won another five.

'Madame!' called the croupier, urgently. 'Madame!'

Theresa turned.

He was pointing down towards a pile of pink chips he was sweeping off the board. 'Your number!'

She looked over her shoulder. He must be talking to someone else.

She looked at the table and saw what must have happened. Her last chip had remained in place on the corner of the board but had somehow been knocked a few millimetres from the sideline on to 1

She'd won thirty-five more chips. She'd more than doubled her money.

On the bus home she found herself humming 'The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo'.

It wasn't a fortune, but it had more than paid for her break.

It seemed quite wrong now to go back to that hotel and pack. She had a pocketful of money – why not stop here, and find a place down on the seafront for a delicious late lunch?

On an impulse Theresa pressed the stop button just as the bus turned the corner above the colourful fishing village she had admired on her way to Monaco.

She got off and walked down a steep zigzag path, through ancient covered alleyways, passing quaint little shops selling pottery and a delightful-smelling bakery, eventually reaching the harbour. She took a table at a harbourside bar-brasserie and ordered a large glass of wine. What a day! The excitement of her win, the hypnotic spell of the beauty of this place and the radiant October sun gave her a feeling of exhilarating happiness.

The waiter arrived with her wine and Theresa asked if she could see the menu. He shook his head dolefully. The French had stiff rules on mealtimes, and she was too late to get any lunch and too early for dinner. It was apéro time.

She ordered another glass of wine and he brought a dish of little black olives and a few one-inch squares of pizza.

Theresa leaned back, enjoying the nibbles, and savoured the wine while taking in the stunning view of the harbour.

Right ahead of her, near the Gare Maritime, some workmen were hammering at a wooden sign.

She polished off the snack but still felt hungry. So, reluctantly, she left her harbourside seat and went off in search of that small bakery and a sandwich.

By the time she reached the entrance to the alleyways, the men had finished erecting their sign and were gone. The sign read 'À VENDRE' – for sale. Theresa peeked over the little wall, trying to get a glimpse inside the front window of the property it advertised.

At that exact moment a woman came out through the front door. '*Puis-je vous aider?*'

Theresa jumped back in shock. She wasn't expecting anyone to be inside.

'Oh! I'm sorry,' she said, then remembered that she was in France and needed to try it in French. '*suis . . .*' she said, unable to get any further.

'English?' snapped the woman, gripping her clipboard and pulling the front door to. 'No problem. You want see inside? You want buy apartment?'

Theresa shook her head, then before the agent could lock up, stopped herself saying no. 'Why not?' she said, instead. '*Pourquoi pas?*'

As Theresa stepped across the threshold she heard her stomach rumble.

The estate agent handed Theresa a piece of paper with a list of room measurements and at the bottom the asking price in euros. She then perched on the low wall by the front door, scribbling notes on her pad.

Theresa took the paper and walked through the cosy rooms. The flat was gorgeous – small, but with a lovely view over the harbour.

Theresa stood by the window for a few moments and imagined herself living here.

A wonderful feeling of calm swept over her.

The agent came back in, pointing at her watch.

'I have to go now,' she said. 'You like?'

Theresa felt a wave of excitement and said: 'I'll take it.'

The agent raised her eyebrows and bustled back inside, flipping over the pages of her clipboard.

‘Can you come in the morning for the contract?’ she asked.

‘My flight home is at nine a.m.’

‘So, OK, let’s do it now. The office is by the station.’

Two hours later Theresa climbed aboard the train back to Nice.

In her handbag was a contract and a floor-plan of the flat she had just bought. She felt as naughty as a fifteen-year-old playing truant. She also felt exceedingly happy. She’d spent too much of her life pleasing other people: pleasing her parents by going to secretarial college rather than art school, pleasing her husband by turning a blind eye to all the expensive presents he bought for this secretary and that work colleague while he regularly forgot her birthday and never once remembered the wedding anniversary, pleasing her boss by always being willing to put in extra hours for no extra pay, pleasing her daughter by being constantly on call. She was almost sixty now. It was time she pleased herself for once. She had just bought a little part of paradise for herself, and why shouldn’t she?

French property law differs a lot from English and, once Theresa had shaken and signed on the deal, the flat went straight into the conveyancing process, no gazumping or procrastination and, subject to a survey, she was given a predetermined end date upon which she would receive the key and be able to move in.

As winter drew in offers started coming in on her old home.

As she sat in Highgate, filling in forms and studying guidebooks, Theresa kept the information on her new purchase to herself until the whole process was all but complete.

Then, the night before the move, she went down to Wimbledon to pay the family a visit.

‘Mummy! Have you got dementia?’ asked Imogen. ‘Who’s going to babysit for me now on my Pilates nights?’

‘How about paying a nanny or an au pair, like I did with you?’

‘Oh really!’ Imogen puffed. ‘What a ridiculous idea.’

‘What exactly is so ridiculous about getting professional help?’

Imogen rolled her eyes about and shrugged while casting about for a reasonable response, then said, ‘It’s just better if it’s *family*.’

‘Why?’ asked Theresa calmly. ‘It only makes the children think I’m one of your servants.’

‘Oh, Mummy, don’t be absurd.’

Theresa took a stab: ‘Are you worried Michael will run off with an au pair like your father did?’

‘Michael and I are fine. You can mind your own business on that score.’ Imogen started frantically brushing non-existent crumbs from the shiny sofa. ‘Well, Mummy, I predict you’ll be back here in a few months, tail between your legs, begging me for help, so go.’ She folded her arms and sat back, her lips pursed. ‘I don’t care. You’ll never last out there in some horrid, strange place with no friends.’

‘I’ll be fine. Thanks for worrying.’ Theresa made for the door. She didn’t want to leave on a row. ‘Tomorrow will be a long day.’

‘Anyway, Mother, for a start, you barely speak French.’

‘I have a smattering, *chérie*. Living over there can only improve it.’ Theresa offered an olive branch. ‘I will miss you all. Promise me you’ll come over and have a holiday some time. It’s so beautiful and the sea is right on my doorstep. It’s so lovely. Come to visit me in France, and you’ll all be treated royally.’

‘What?’ Imogen laughed sardonically. ‘You mean you’re going to chop off our heads?’

Theresa laughed too. ‘Well, I won’t go that far, but I promise to lay on a feast worthy of Louis the Fourteenth.’

‘You’ve got to watch your weight, Mummy,’ snapped Imogen. ‘And all you think about is food.’

She stood with her hands on her hips and wearing a serious expression. Then she said: 'You'd better live frugally out there, Ma. We don't want you using up the children's inheritance.'

Theresa did not grace this parting shot with a reply.

As she clicked the garden gate after her and walked to the tube station, she wiped away a few more tears.

Theresa was shocked to realise that whatever she chose to do aroused this greedy disdain in her daughter. Making her way back to her now oddly empty and echoing house, she decided she must be resolute. Absence, she hoped, would make the hearts grow fonder.

She slept fitfully, and woke before dawn.

She left the key to the house with Mr Jacobs and, early that morning, flew out to Nice.

As Theresa stepped off the plane, her London house sold, the key to her new French apartment in her hand, the first thing that hit her was the heat. Then she looked up and had to shield her eyes from the glare reflected from the sun hitting the sparkling deep blue sea. Even though it was late January, Nice Côte d'Azur Airport was bustling with people.

She had arranged the sale of all her furniture and given most of her clothes to a charity shop, so she pulled only one suitcase from the luggage carousel. Of all her London treasures there was only one thing she had brought with her, a small painting that her mother had picked up for a few shillings back in the 1950s and which turned out to be an original Raoul Dufy. She would hang that in pride of place in the flat, and for everything else, well, she was looking forward to raiding the markets and bric-a-brac brocantes for furniture, painting it, hanging tapestries on the other walls, living the art-student life she'd dreamed of having before she'd sacrificed it to please her parents and, instead, taken the secretarial course at St Godric's College for young ladies.

Theresa rode the bus out of Nice, past the port (where she saw many enticing antique shops and signs indicating a flea market), up and over the hill, then along the coast, to the small fishing village which was to be her new home.

The views were stunning.

No wonder they called it the Bay of Angels.

It was coming up to noon when Theresa let herself in to her bright front door.

SALAD NIÇOISE

Ingredients

Jar of fine albacore tuna in olive oil
Small plum tomatoes
1 stick celery
Lettuce – cos or little gem
Spring onions
Fine green beans (blanched)
Black olives (naturally, Niçoise if possible)
Anchovies
Hard-boiled eggs

Dressing

Olive oil
Balsamic vinegar
Salt (fleur de sel, if possible)
Black pepper
Dijon mustard
Honey

Method

Dip the fine green beans in boiling water to blanch then immediately run through with cold water.

Lay the tuna in the centre of the plate, and layer on chopped celery, lettuce leaves and quartered hearts, halved tomatoes, green beans and chopped spring onions. Lay small black olives on top, and place quarters of hard-boiled eggs alternating with anchovies in a circle on top of the prepared salad.

Mix the dressing and pour on just before eating.

It was nine years since Sally Connor had moved to Bellevue-Sur-Mer.

When she bought her house, nestled in the heart of Old Town, she was told that it had once belonged to a dancer from the Ballet Russes of Monte Carlo, and that, according to legend, he had entertained Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Isadora Duncan and Mata Hari in his dining room. Though no one knew whether this was at the same time or on separate occasions.

Not on the same level, obviously, but Sally herself had once been famous. Back in the 1970s she had been a TV presenter on a very bumptious Saturday morning kids' TV show, and for a few loud years had had her face plastered over every magazine cover on the supermarket shelves.

On this bright January afternoon, a few months short of her sixty-second birthday, Sally came out of her little house in the milky winter sunshine, a canvas bag slung over her arm and strode along bound for the market down on the quay.

Today Sally had guests for dinner.

Outside the boulangerie, Monsieur Mari was chalking up the sign for his 'Sandwich du jour'. Sally gave him a smile and a wave. She'd stop to buy the baguettes for dinner on the way back, there to catch the latest warm batch.

Sally liked to think that her home was the hub of the English set. Only Zoe Redbridge had lived here longer, but as she was that much older than Sally, she felt Zoe didn't count.

She shivered as she plunged into the cool darkness of the alley which zigzagged down to the harbour.

Sally had been to the best-known ballet school, Elmhurst where, a few years before her, Hayley Mills had been a pupil. After this she had gone on to study at RADA and for a few years a successful career in the theatre followed, where she played leading roles in repertory companies from Dundee to Exeter.

When offered the TV presenting job she accepted for one reason only: the irresistible lure of money. She planned to save up, put aside a nest egg 'to fall back on', then, when the show finished, go back into proper acting, only with a slightly raised profile.

However, things didn't work out like that. The show made her very famous, and the image of her spotted, baggy dungarees, throwing buckets of brightly coloured goo over visiting stars, overshadowed any serious chance she had of establishing herself in roles like Hedda Gabler or Lady Macbeth. When her name was suggested directors in repertory theatres sneered. Only companies that spent all their time working with children or touring schools, were interested in using her.

Sally's years of fame had not lasted long, but her renown did attract a handsome husband in the form of Robert, an insurance broker. Due to her celebrity, their wedding was reported, with photos of the grinning couple, in all the women's magazines.

During the first few years of her marriage, when filling in forms, Sally still styled herself an actress even though she had no professional engagements. But, after her first baby, a bouncing boy, Tom came along, she started telling people that she had left the stage *for the moment* to concentrate on bringing up her family.

A few years later she gave birth to a daughter, Marianne.

After this, when people asked, Sally styled herself a 'stay-at-home mum'.

Soon after both children were settled in school, Sally made another feeble attempt at getting acting work. When she failed to land anything except a few unsuccessful auditions for tiny parts in regional

TV soaps, if people asked her whether she still worked she would shrug and tell them ‘No, she didn’t have the time any more.’ As a full-time wife and mother, she said, she had a far more fulfilling life than any glittering acting career could have given her. Every time her children had a birthday party, for Sally it was equivalent to another first night, every exam they passed was as though she had won an award.

At around the time the menopause hit her, both kids left home. Tom, having dawdled around ‘finding himself’, rather than going to university, took himself off on what he called a gap year. But once he arrived in Goa he found some kind of nirvana and never came back home, just kept wandering aimlessly round the world, painting, playing instruments and living, as Robert put it, ‘like a lazy, useless, money-sucking hippy’. Tom never asked his parents for cash. But he had no ambition in the financial world either, almost in opposition to his father’s obsession with money.

Robert had made a major event of disowning his son. He cut him off and refused to have any communication, while devoting all his energy towards helping Marianne succeed in her brilliant academic career. Tom’s ‘gap year’ lasted more than a decade.

Publicly, Sally gave a show of support for her husband, but secretly she kept in touch with her son, sending regular emails from computers in Internet cafes to Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

Marianne finished university with flying colours and immediately took a management job with an international oil company in Aberdeen. She was following in Daddy’s footsteps, aiming high in the business world.

Empty-nest syndrome shook Sally hard. She hated being alone. And now, with the kids gone, she only had Robert, who became more preoccupied with work and seemed to lose all interest in her.

Sally suspected he was having affairs, but could never prove it. Then one day he was found dead in his secretary’s bed.

All it took was one lone tabloid journalist, who worked out that the errant corpse’s widow was Sally, the beloved star of the old Saturday morning television show, and suddenly all the newspapers and magazines remembered her again. The story made vivid headline news.

It didn’t take long either for it to become clear that her husband had not been the financial whizz-kid he always boasted of being. He died in debt, having blown not only all of his own money but also every penny of Sally’s TV nest-egg.

At his funeral a number of women turned up, none of whom Sally recognised. They all wept profusely.

At the age of fifty-three, alone, broke, embarrassed and humiliated, Sally sold up and, using every penny left from the proceeds of selling the house, moved to Bellevue-Sur-Mer. No one in France had ever had the vaguest idea who Sally had once been, and now that her dark brown hair was streaked with grey, even the visiting English package-tourists who piled out of cruise ships no longer recognised her.

As she swung out into the warm sunlight of the harbour Sally’s eagle eye was alerted to some man removing the ‘For Sale’ sign in front of the ground-floor flat of the old apartment block near the Gare Maritime. It had had a slash across it saying ‘VENDU’ – sold – since the day it went up.

When local properties bore a sign reading ‘á vendre’ – for sale – English eyes watched keenly to see whether their number would swell with a new couple from Surrey or Kent going into retirement, maybe something exciting like a writer, following in the footsteps of Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham, moving out here to concentrate on writing a new book . . .

This sale had been presented and snapped up without a by-your-leave. What was going on?

Sally had more reason than the others for watching out for these property sales.

Last year her parents had died in quick succession and the money from their house was now sitting in a bank. Like everyone else, Sally was very aware of the precarious banking situation and was keen to get the money tied up in property, rather than risk it vanishing overnight in a surprise bank collapse.

On top of this her daughter Marianne had told Sally she was looking to buy a holiday home. Sally hadn't actually talked about buying here in Bellevue-Sur-Mer, and was actively looking in the Dordogne and Tuscany, but Sally felt that if she could show her something lovely here Marianne wouldn't be able to resist and that would mean that, hopefully, Sally would see her daughter now and then. A few days ago, Marianne had phoned her mother to tell her she might drop in on her very soon for a weekend between business meetings in Zurich and Rome.

If only Sally could buy a house or flat here, to let out during the high season and bring in a little extra income, maybe Marianne would like to come and stay in it, out of season.

But Sally wasn't having any luck. All the decent places in this village were pounced on within days of going on the market.

As she shopped for fish, cheese and vegetables, she gritted her teeth.

'Penny for your thoughts, dearie.' It was David Rogers. 'You look as though you're preparing to play Cruella de Vil. Surely we're not that hard to cater for!'

David and his wife Carol, American neighbours who lived further up the hill, were two of her dinner guests.

'I hate cooking. I'm going to buy almost everything pre-cooked. Sorry, David.'

'Oh, dear. Let me carry the shopping bag, sweetie.' David thrust out a hand. 'You look all done in.'

Sally envied Carol having such a charming partner, so attentive and thoughtful. Perhaps it was an American thing. David was always so well dressed too. This morning he was wearing a navy blazer, pale slacks and a panama, and looked as though he was about to head off to a party at a tennis club. She was reading some novel by P.G. Wodehouse.

'Look at the red of those tomatoes! It makes you wish you were a painter, doesn't it?' David grinned. 'Or a juggler!'

'That flat by the Gare Maritime, the one that was for sale . . . someone's moved in.' Sally realised she had blurted this out, for no apparent reason.

'So I believe.' David shrugged up his shoulders. 'According to my friend in the immobilier's office it's an English woman of a certain age.'

'I'd my eye on it.' Sally gave the stallholder the money for a jar of honey. 'It's silly of me but I'm starting to feel as though the world is conspiring against me.'

'The old widow Molinari's place will go on the market soon. Those children of hers don't want the responsibility. You wait and watch. They'll cash in their inheritance by the end of the summer.' David picked up a lemon and paid for it with a handful of coins. 'For Carol's gin and tonic!'

He took Sally's arm and they walked along together. 'I gather practically the whole town will be in attendance at Villa Sally today.'

'No, no.' Sally smiled, but realised he was almost right. It certainly felt like the whole English speaking set in town anyhow. 'It's only me, you two, William and Benjamin and Ted.'

'Doesn't Ted have Sian, the Welsh she-dragon, in tow at present?' David pursed his lips and gave Sally an arch glance. 'I heard she was seen at the airport this morning.'

'Oh, no,' said Sally, panicked. Secretly she was terrified of Sian. And, with Sian round the table everyone would have to be on their best manners, even the irrepressible William and Benjamin. She thought she wasn't due here till tomorrow.'

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