

CROSSING OVER

ANN MORGAN



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RENARD PRESS LTD

124 City Road
London EC1V 2NX
United Kingdom
info@renardpress.com
020 8050 2928

www.renardpress.com

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FOR THOSE WHO DIDN'T MAKE IT

He creeps into the yard and freezes, back pressed against the gatepost.

Is it him, or is the house watching? Is that black shape in the window a person staring out? That, there, glinting in the shadows beside the drainpipe – is that some kind of camera lens?

The urge to run wrenches at him. What if this is a trap? What if they have waited until now because they know he will be too wrung out to put up a fight? What if they plan to corner him like a rat? They may have been trailing him, piecing together reports, tracking him from the air, sharing intelligence with the police.

The night sky is peaceful, the stars glistening, but that means nothing. He has seen beauty birth ugliness too many times to be taken in. He knows how life can hide hideousness behind a smile. He has seen, ah, he has seen...

He shakes the thoughts away – his head playing tricks. Probably.

For now, he is too knotted with need to care. He aches. He is cold. He is hungry. He has to hide. These things crowd out all else.

So. The wooden door. His hand on the bolt.

The creak of it opening rakes his brain. He glances back, alarmed, at the house. The place stays silent and still.

Then he is inside, trembling in the mousey gloom. Moonlight shines through the knotholes like torch beams and something flits above his head, making him gasp and duck.

The floor heaves and he is back on the boat, roiling with a nausea that has nothing to do with the pitch and plunge of the waves.

He grips a pillar to steady himself, the wood rough in his hand. Its solidity unlatches a door inside him, breathing in a kind of calm. Fluttering in the rafters flaps into stillness, slowing his heart with it.

It is all right. It is all right. It is all right. He has made it. As long as he stays quiet, he is safe. They will not find him here.

ONE

She notices that it's open for the first time when Jean drops her home on Tuesday afternoon. They are in the car coming back from the thing at the village hall. Reckoning? No. Reckoning's what you do when you – you know – tot up numbers. Meeting. The word is meeting. They are in the car coming back from the meeting.

Jean swings the old Morris Minor into the yard, narrowly missing the gatepost, as always, and there it is: standing ajar, the padlock askew.

Luckily, Jean is too busy talking to realise. Her topic of choice at the moment is the U3A and the outing they had to that artist's house in Dungeness the other week – the name of which escapes her, but don't worry: it'll come. Really, shouldn't Edie think about joining, because it is such a good way of keeping the brain active and meeting interesting people and making new friends. Wouldn't she like to get out a bit more?

Edie nods and smiles. Coach trips with loads of blue-rinsers waffling on about holidays with their grandchildren to Centre Perks? She has no intention of doing anything of the sort.

'Mmn,' she says. 'Oh yes. What a great idea.'

Over Jean's shoulder the barn door gusts to and fro, opening and closing like a mouth muttering.

'Mmn,' she says again. 'If you say so.'

Silence. Jean is looking at her oddly. Edie blinks and redoubles her grin.

‘I’m sorry. Got distracted there for a moment. You were saying?’

At all costs, she must keep the fact of the door being left open from Jean. She can’t bear the thought of what will happen otherwise: the way the other woman’ll smile and be kind about the oversight. Claim this sort of thing happens to the best of us. And afterwards the knowledge that will seep through the afternoon of how they’ll whisper about it down in the village – Edie alone up in that big house on the cliff, struggling to cope. The plans they’ll make to be helpful. The sour little pots of supper left on the step. Being kind to be cruel.

‘...So I’ll ask, shall I? Put in a good word?’

‘Mmn,’ says Edie once again, grinning. Her eyes stray to the wispy curls poking out from Jean’s headscarf. She must dye her hair to get it that odd shade of... oh gosh, what would you call it? That tart fruit. The one they use as a fragrance in bathroom cleaners. Lemon. Yes, lemon.

An image comes to her of Jean stumbling into the chemist’s in Totwith every eight weeks in search of a bottle of stuff in a box with a young woman’s face on it. Funny, foolish Jean. Always anxious to fit in. Eager to copy the trends. So conventional in her little house with roses round the door and photographs on the mantelpiece of Graham, who shared it with her for more than sixty years, until the day he slumped to his knees in the post office clutching a value pack of masking tape to his heart.

‘Right,’ she says abruptly, grasping the handle and snapping the passenger door open. ‘Thanks ever so for the lift. I’d drive myself, of course, only...’

They look towards the byre, where the Vauxhall Astra sits mouldering next to the rusted boat trailer, its wheels swathed in grass.

‘Of course,’ says Jean, so earnestly that Edie feels a rush of affection for this woman, her dear friend of more than eighty years.

‘But you will be all right, won’t you?’ continues Jean, eyeing the string bag of bits from the Spar shop clutched in Edie’s hand.

Impatience seizes her and she gets out faster than she meant to, making her head swim. ‘Of course I’ll be all right!’ she shouts as the

yard whirls merrily around her, byre, barn, house, gate and open door capering before her eyes.

Jean nods doubtfully. 'Only...'

And once more it is between them, piled on the passenger seat like a heap of... what horses do; the mistake in the WI accounts. She flushes hotly. Oh, why won't they let her forget about it? As if it hadn't been humiliating enough having to go round asking everyone for an extra five pounds to make up the shortfall for subscriptions. Forty years she's been doing those books, without a single hitch. And then she goes and makes one fluff – one schoolgirl error – and they are upon her like harpies, like hyenas scenting blood.

She glares at Jean, at this foolish woman with horrid yellow hair whom she has never liked, this busybody driving into her yard and peering around, hoping to catch her out. Really she ought to let rip and tell her what she's always thought of her. Now would be the ideal time. She could bring it all out magnificently if she said it now. Every last scrap of truth. How Graham was an oaf and a ditherer, whose fingernails were never clean. How she knew it from the first of the starry-eyed letters Jean wrote from the farm she was evacuated to in Somerset all those years ago during the war – pages and pages of hogwash pinched from the motion pictures.

But instead she smiles graciously, steadying herself on the top bit of the car. 'I'll be fine,' she insists. 'All present and correct.'

It is not quite the right word group, but it passes. Jean nods and turns her head to look through the windscreen.

'They've made a start, I see,' she says, indicating the field on the far side of the track where last week the diggers moved in to begin excavating the foundations.

'Yes.'

'Must be noisy for you.'

It is noisy. Much noisier than she had anticipated. And the workmen have a nasty habit of loitering by the fence on their breaks, gawping into the yard. One of them is a devil for whistling out of tune. 'Oh no. Not in the least bit.'

Jean regards her.

‘Well that’s something.’ She turns the key in the ignition and the engine splutters into life. ‘I’ll pick you up at ten o’clock on Saturday,’ she calls out over it.

Eddie frowns. ‘Saturday?’

‘The charity cake sale. You said you’d make a walnut cake.’

She nods. ‘Right-oh! Walnut cake. Ten o’clock. Jolly good.’ She shuts the car door. ‘Mind how you go!’ she calls as Jean puts it in gear.

When the sound of the engine has died away, she goes to the back door and lets herself in. It is unlocked, but she won’t mind about that. After all, this is hardly a thieves’ paradise. They never used to lock it. Besides, no one comes here these days. Hardly at all. Since Father died, it has just been her. And that is how she likes it. Simpler that way. No mess.

In the kitchen, she puts the string bag on the table and is surprised by a pair of her sensible lace-up shoes placed on its surface. Silly old thing. What was she thinking putting those there?

She attempts a laugh. ‘Ha!’

But the sound is thin and the kitchen seems to frown at it. A gull outside the window above the sink taps its beak on the glass like a school conductor, as if to bring her back in line.

Suddenly she can’t bear it. She picks up one of the shoes and hurls it at the window, smashing a circle in the pane and sending the bird flapping seawards with an indignant squawk.

Oh, why did Jean have to go and ask if she’d be all right? She’d been doing so well up until that moment. She’d been feeling so happy. Even with all the business over the subscriptions, she had held her own. Not a single fluff, no wrong words, nothing. And then that silly idiot had to go and spoil it with her concern. Nasty, twittish, vulgar little woman. Remorseless, humourless, foolish old boot.

‘Ugh!’ she expels. Out in the yard, as if stirred by the vibration, or perhaps caught by a breeze, the gaping barn door creaks to and fro.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN MORGAN is an author, speaker and editor based in Folkestone. Ann's writing has been published widely, including in the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Financial Times*, and by the BBC. In 2012, she set herself the challenge of reading a book from every country in a year – a project that led to a TED talk and to the non-fiction book *Reading the World: How I Read a Book from Every Country*. Her debut novel, *Beside Myself*, has been translated into eight languages. *Crossing Over*, her latest novel, draws on her experience living just a few minutes from where many of the small boats crossing the Channel land. She is Literary Explorer in Residence of the Cheltenham Literature Festival for 2022 and 2023.

ANNMORGAN.ME   @A_B_MORGAN

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