

Also Sarah

She has been thinking, on and off, about suicide. Not committing it, not exactly; more a consideration of what it would feel like, whether there would be a moment in between being alive and being dead.

She has been thinking about this because it is her birthday, and she has never been much good at birthdays.

Plus she is drunk.

Plus she is in a graveyard.

Not so much a graveyard, as a tunnel of space in between the green and the pub with a path of gravestones laid from one end to the other. The hard voices of afternoon drinkers nursing pints and fags bleed over the back wall. Birds chirrup and cheep and shit their berry-heavy lunches across the grass and the worn grey stones.

It takes Sarah a while to realise that the women aren't dressed right, and another while to see that the faint shape of the far wall and the line of houses beyond it are just visible through them. It makes her laugh, the kind of laughing people usually keep for company, not sitting on a bench in a graveyard on their own, a mouth-covering, belly-holding explosion of a laugh.

The tallest of the women turns to look at her. Her dress reaches the floor, its sleeves are full and puffed around her elbows. She has black hair, pulled into a bun, and a pale, kind face.

'Sarah,' she says, in a voice so low that Sarah wonders if she heard it at all.

'It's my birthday,' Sarah says.

The woman smiles. 'Of course it is.' She is young, in her mid-twenties perhaps. Two small girls clutch at each of her hands. The other women stand with their backs turned. Sarah fixes her eyes on the stone at her feet: *Here resteth the remains of Thomas Taylor. Also Sarah, wife of Thomas Taylor... Also Jane... Also Hannah...*

‘We are all here,’ the woman says, and frees a hand in order to gesture to the other women. They do not turn around.

There are eleven of them. The oldest maybe in her sixties; two of them still babies. Sarah can taste the afternoon’s beer turning stale at the back of her mouth. She didn’t have lunch, and now her stomach begins to gurgle its complaint. She has a phone call to make.

‘Here is where the coffins rested,’ the woman points to the arched brick entrance of the graveyard, with its fancy tiled roof. ‘When it rained,’ she says, as if in explanation.

‘Well, it certainly rains, doesn’t it?’ Sarah says and laughs again.

‘And the church—’ The woman waves her arm past the entrance, towards the green, where three teenage girls in shorts and vest tops sit cross-legged on the grass, their eyes fixed on their phones. Then she looks along the line of gravestones turned paving slabs. *Here resteth the body of... Also Sarah... Also Sarah... Also Sarah...*

‘Nothing is here anymore,’ the woman says.

‘Well, it’s not my fault,’ Sarah finds herself saying. The woman blinks and Sarah wishes she’d kept her mouth shut. What she needs is a glass of water and a sandwich. What she needs is to make a list: pros and cons, and then just decide. All this – ghosts and gravestones and thoughts of a neat slash across each wrist – all this is distraction.

It is a problem, she realises, with the sudden clarity of the half drunk, of language. A problem with the word ‘also’. Her mother, if she was still alive, would roll her eyes. Such a little word. Such a fuss over nothing at all. And Sarah would feel obliged to try and explain that small words are as important as big ones, often more so. But her mother was a romantic; she’d have been far more interested in the grand narrative – man declares undying love and proposes marriage – than the detail of his language down the pub with his mates.

A young girl steps away from the group and approaches Sarah. She is three or so, dressed in thick skirts, which are tattered at the hems. She stops a hand’s breadth away and stares with big, almost comically round eyes.

'Hi,' Sarah says. 'I'm Sarah.'

The girl nods gravely. A bird flits across the grass; Sarah can see it quite clearly through the child's body. She is drunk, she tells herself. She has never believed in ghosts.

'What's your name?' she asks, but the girl simply nods and continues to stare. The bird pecks at the ground and then flies off towards the pub where a man has started to sing in a loud, sweet voice.

'We are also Sarah,' the woman says, softly, almost inaudibly.

Of course, Sarah thinks. Aren't we all? She stands up and reaches out her hand. The girl hesitates and then takes it. It is like trying to hold onto a cloud. *Here resteth the remains of Thomas Taylor. Also Sarah, wife of Thomas Taylor... Also Jane... Also Hannah...* They must have moved the bodies, separated them from their stones.

The girl tugs at her hand. The faintest of sensations, but definitely a tug. She gestures to Sarah to sit, and so she does, on a cold stone, etched with words. *Here resteth the body of...* *Also of...* *Also of...* The girl lies on her side and Sarah lies too, curled around her.

'I won't go with him,' she whispers in the girl's ear.

The girl says nothing.

'I would rather be on my own,' Sarah says. Her stomach is grumbling still. Her head is thick and heavy. The man has stopped singing. 'I would rather be just me.'