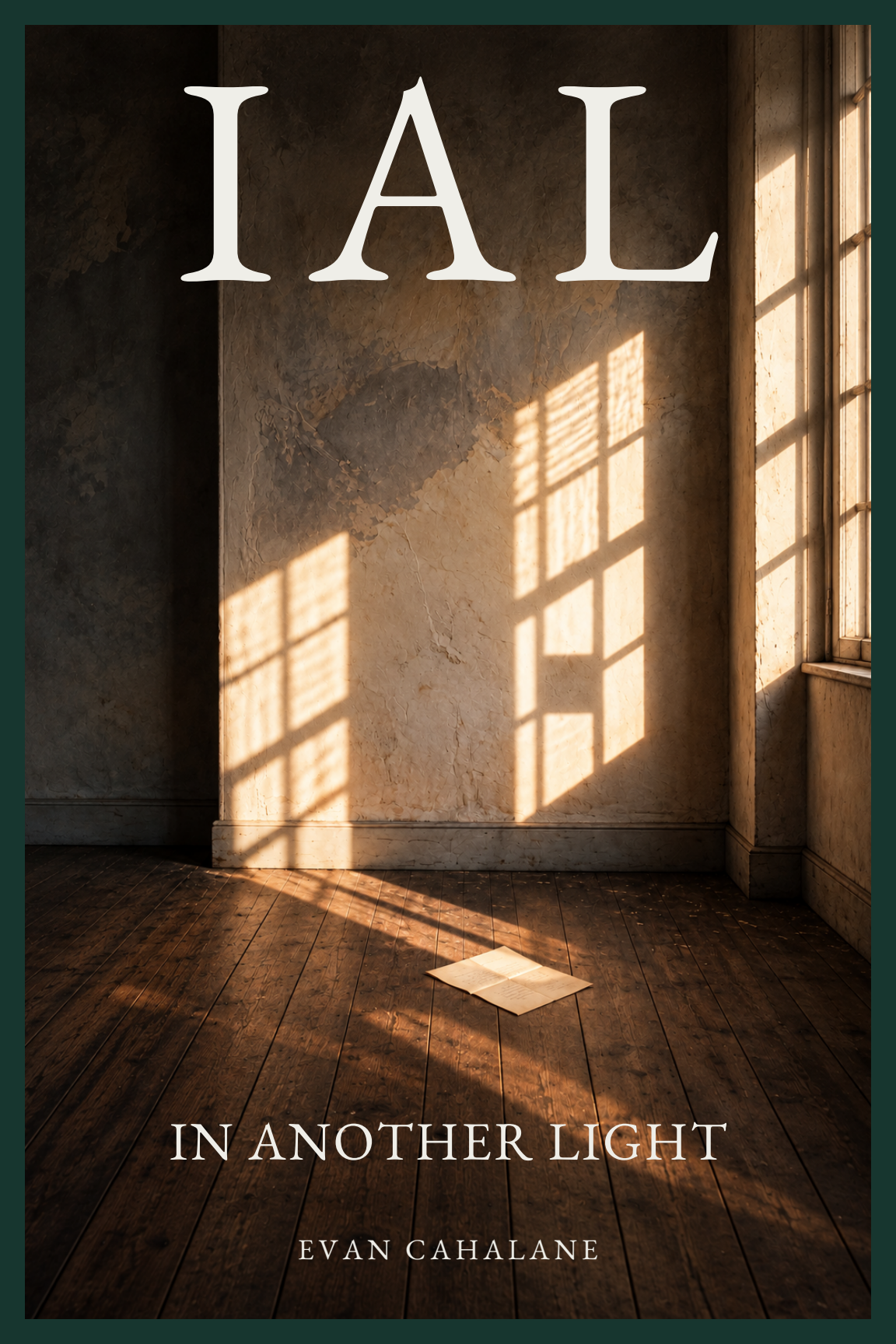


A photograph of a room with peeling wallpaper and sunlight streaming through a window, casting shadows on a wooden floor with a small paper on it.

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IN ANOTHER LIGHT

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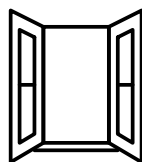
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Part I



Chapter One

The shoes had to go back by Saturday, and Mrs Dunne wanted Sarah to be the one to tell her daughter.

They were under the bed in a box with a silver lid, pushed far enough back that Sarah had to kneel to reach them. She wiped a line of dust from one edge before setting the box on the chair, where Mrs Dunne could watch her take off the lid.

Inside, the shoes lay toe to heel beneath thin paper, each with a rounded buckle and a heel broader than Sarah had expected. Claire had described them yesterday as sensible; Sarah imagined a higher pair, or a narrower pair, against which these had seemed a kindness.

“She’ll listen if you say it,” Mrs Dunne told her. “She thinks I haven’t given them a chance.”

Sarah took out the nearer shoe and checked that the paper had been removed from the toe. Mrs Dunne’s feet had been uncomfortable the previous evening; she had asked to have the end of the sheet lifted and then, almost at once, wanted it back. Sarah had spent part of the handover from the night staff hearing about this and part looking through the window at the August morning, bright already on a strip of grass that nobody seemed to use.

She suggested leaving the shoes for another day, when Mrs Dunne might feel more like trying them, and was reaching for the lid when the older woman put out her hand.

“That’s what we said on Monday. If she leaves it much longer, they’ll only give her a credit note.”

Claire’s eldest daughter was getting married in September, and the photographs on Mrs Dunne’s bedside table had acquired, during the past week, a card showing the hotel, a scrap of fabric and a pencilled list of people who might be able to drive her. Sarah knew about the wedding because Claire talked about it when she came in, generally while doing something else: taking washing from a bag, finding a charger, peeling the lid from a yoghurt her mother might or might not want. Mrs Dunne contributed corrections, chiefly about the distance to the hotel and the bride’s changes of mind, although

yesterday she had also questioned the choice of driver, who had just had an operation himself.

Sarah had yet to hear Mrs Dunne say whether she wanted to go.

She drew the chair closer and asked if she wanted to try one shoe, just sitting, with no need to stand. Mrs Dunne considered it, then moved her foot towards the side of the bed. Sarah supported it while easing the shoe over her heel; the strap would fasten, though only with the edge pressing into her foot. She held the two ends together so that Mrs Dunne could see.

Mrs Dunne looked down at the shoe for long enough that Sarah was about to ask where it hurt.

“They’re very beige.”

Sarah laughed, surprised enough to let the strap slip. In the box, under the grey tissue, the colour had scarcely registered; against Mrs Dunne’s skin it spread from her foot as though the shoe had been made by someone unwilling to decide where she ended.

There was a pair at home, Mrs Dunne said, with silver across the front, which she had worn to her brother’s retirement dinner and managed the whole evening in. Claire would know the ones. Then she remembered that Claire had spent that evening arguing with somebody in the hotel car park, and began explaining why; by the time Sarah had the shoe off, there were two brothers involved and a disagreement about a lift which seemed to have survived considerably longer than the journey.

Sarah put both shoes back beneath the paper.

“I’ll be here when she comes. We can talk about taking them back.”

Mrs Dunne wanted the receipt found as well. It might be in the bag, although Claire sometimes kept receipts separately in case her mother saw the price. Sarah checked between the box and the side of the bag, finding a loyalty card, a folded piece of tissue and, at the bottom, the narrow slip. Mrs Dunne asked her to read the amount.

Mrs Dunne lay looking at the ceiling for a few seconds before telling Sarah to put the receipt inside the lid, where Claire would see it as soon as she opened the box.

Outside the room, a man was waiting to ask about breakfast for his wife. He had brought something from home and was unsure whether to give it to her before the tray arrived. Sarah went with him, carrying the conversation about the shoes into the next room until his wife asked for the lid to be taken off the dish and she had to attend to what was in front of her.

By half past nine the sun had moved round to the windows along the other side of the unit. Someone had opened the door to the small garden, and whenever Sarah passed she could hear a scraping noise which she eventually traced

to a gardener trying to draw a hose round the corner of a wall. Each time it came free he managed another few feet, and she had begun to wish he would finish before noticing that he was watering a bed she had admired on her way in.

Niamh was at the desk, searching through the pockets of her uniform for a pen which Sarah could see beside the keyboard. When Sarah slid it towards her, she thanked her and began writing dates on the back of an envelope, checking each against something on her phone.

Her sister was coming over for four days, she explained, but the flights had changed and she was trying to find someone who could take the last few hours of a shift the following week. Patrick had to collect his daughter, and the other person she had asked was still checking.

Sarah began calculating which day it was.

"You're off," Niamh said. "Keep it. I'm only telling you because you asked why I was swearing at the printer."

Sarah had asked that ten minutes earlier, passing on her way to a room, and had forgotten the question. Looking at the dates on Niamh's envelope, she realised her own free days fell differently from the way she had been remembering them.

Niamh's sister had booked a restaurant for the first evening, despite being warned that she might arrive too late to enjoy it. Now Niamh was trying to persuade her to move the booking as well as the flight. The account grew increasingly complicated, involving a friend who wanted to join them and a second restaurant which had been suggested as though its existence might solve everything.

Sarah was smiling when the telephone rang. Niamh answered it, turning her chair away from the desk to hear, and Sarah went to help Patrick in the room at the end.

They worked together for several minutes, Patrick talking to the patient while Sarah fetched what they needed, his unhurried voice carrying through the doorway to where she had stopped to answer someone else. When they came out, he asked whether she had brought lunch. His had been left on the kitchen counter, where his daughter would probably eat the good part and leave the rest for him.

When she offered half of hers, Patrick wanted to know which half, having been given the apple on another occasion and heard her call it lunch.

"The cheese. Unless you'd rather have the apple."

He accepted the sandwich, and Sarah began thinking of the bakery on the way to Moira's, where she was going after her shift. They were supposed to spend the afternoon choosing somewhere to go for two nights, a holiday she

had lately begun to picture in considerable detail despite having settled neither the place nor the dates.

* * *

On her break, Sarah opened the message Moira had sent the previous night. There were three links, followed by a photograph of a dining room with large windows, and then a second message asking her to disregard the first link because the rooms were up too many stairs. Sarah had fallen asleep looking at the dining room, the phone slipping from her hand when she turned to make herself more comfortable.

She wanted two nights somewhere with a deep bath and breakfast she could eat without deciding when to make it, while Moira had already begun comparing coastal walks. During their last conversation they had agreed these wishes were compatible, although Sarah suspected that Moira's idea of a walk began at the point where she would be looking for somewhere to sit down.

At one of the places, a path ran from the gate to the sea; Sarah enlarged the photograph, following it past a low wall until it vanished beyond the edge of the screen. She could imagine Moira ahead of her, turning to say something which the wind would carry away, and herself pretending to have heard because she was enjoying the walk more than she wanted to admit.

The price beneath the photograph included a third night she would have to pay for whether she stayed or not, and she went back to the other link.

Her break had come late, and Claire would be arriving soon. Sarah had told Moira she would come over after the shift; now she sent a message saying she might be a little later, then sat with the phone in her hand while the reply appeared.

Moira wanted to know whether later meant later today or another day.

Sarah typed that she was coming. She added that they could look at the places over tea, if Moira still had time. It had been Sarah who suggested an afternoon together, after two evenings on which they had each been too tired to make a decision. One of the earlier weekends they had considered had passed; another had been taken by something Moira had already arranged with friends.

A photograph arrived of a plate with two slices of cake on it. Sarah was composing an appreciative reply when the next message said that one had just been eaten.

She put the phone away and finished her half of the sandwich.

Across the table, Niamh was working a knot out of an earphone cable. Sarah asked whether she had found someone for the end of the shift. She had, though the arrangement required her to work a different morning in return; now she

wanted to hear about Sarah's trip to the coast. Sarah tried to remember which version she had told her and described the rooms and the dining room overlooking the water, hearing the holiday become more definite as she spoke.

"Book somewhere you can get dinner," Niamh said. "My sister once booked us a place because there were horses in the pictures. We had to drive half an hour for anything to eat."

Sarah asked whether they had ridden the horses.

"They belonged to the field next door. We weren't even meant to feed them."

Niamh pulled the knot loose and put the cable in her bag. She had ten minutes left and intended to spend them outside. Sarah nearly went with her, but the garden was on the other side of the building and she had already taken out her phone again.

The edge of the sea was almost lost against the sky. It was probably a picture taken in better weather than they would get; still, she could see herself arriving, leaving her bag in a room and finding Moira already looking for the way out.

* * *

Claire came carrying the shoes' matching bag.

Sarah saw it before Claire reached her mother's room: a small thing with a clasp, protected by a transparent sleeve and held away from the larger shopping bag as though it might mark easily. Claire had stopped to speak to Patrick, and Sarah waited until they had finished before asking if she could come in with her.

Mrs Dunne had been dozing. At the sound of her daughter's voice she opened her eyes and asked about the traffic, giving Sarah a look which made it clear that the shoes were still her responsibility.

Claire put her things on the chair. She had been to three shops, she told her mother, because the first had the bag in a colour which the assistant insisted was the same and Claire knew was different. She held it up in its sleeve, turning it so that her mother could see the clasp.

Held beside the box, it was almost exactly the colour of the shoes.

Sarah hesitated, noticing that Claire had made an effort with her own appearance that morning, with earrings and a carefully fastened blouse, though her hair retained a slight dampness at the neck. Perhaps she had gone out intending to enjoy the shopping. Sarah could picture her between one visit and another, checking the time in a shop window, holding two shades of the same colour together under a light that made neither of them easier to judge.

"We tried one of the shoes earlier," she said. "The strap was uncomfortable. Your mother would like you to take them back while you still can."

Claire looked from the box to her mother and said they could leave the strap looser; she had checked in the shop, and there was another hole. Sarah explained where the strap had been when they tried it, keeping her voice ordinary, aware of Mrs Dunne watching both of them.

They might fit differently another day, Claire said.

Mrs Dunne drew her hand back beneath the blanket, and Sarah, who had expected her to mention the colour by now, began explaining again where the strap had pressed.

"For now, they're uncomfortable. She mentioned a pair she has at home."

"The silver ones?" Claire turned to her mother. "You said they killed you at Uncle Gerry's dinner."

"It was the other pair. I changed."

Claire sat with the bag in its sleeve on her lap, one handle laid over her wrist. She began to tell her mother why she had thought these would be easier, mentioning the heel and the way the sole bent; as she spoke she took one from the box and bent it again, showing Sarah before she showed her mother.

Sarah moved the water nearer to Mrs Dunne, beginning to think they should leave the discussion until later, although later would put Claire in the shops again on the last possible day.

Mrs Dunne asked whether the bag could go back too.

From the corridor came a burst of laughter, followed by an apology which was audible in the room while Claire sat looking at the bag.

"I thought you'd like it," Claire said.

Mrs Dunne asked to hold the bag, waiting while Claire removed its sleeve before trying the stiff clasp. Claire reached to help, but her mother had already given it back.

She did like it, she said, but the silver shoes would need something else, and there was no point in spending money twice. Sarah heard herself agreeing before she had decided whether agreement was needed. Claire set the bag beside the box and began explaining how the wedding morning could be arranged, who could collect whom, how little her mother would have to do. Sarah had heard some of it already, but there was a new possibility involving a room at the hotel where Mrs Dunne could rest. Claire had spoken to somebody about it.

When Mrs Dunne closed her eyes, Sarah let Claire finish what she was saying about the room before suggesting they pause. Claire could leave the information and they would talk about the practical arrangements with the rest of the team; there was time to consider what her mother wanted and what might be manageable nearer the day. Claire asked if Sarah thought they were being foolish.

Sarah looked at Mrs Dunne, whose eyes had opened again.

"I think we'd need to talk it through properly. Has anyone shown you the room?"

Claire found photographs on her phone and began showing her mother the bed, the bathroom and a window overlooking the car park, enlarging a picture of the shower when she came to it. Mrs Dunne asked whether the room was included in what they had already paid.

Sarah stayed long enough to hear the answer, then said she would come back. At the door she remembered the receipt and told Claire where it was.

In the next room a visitor had moved a chair in front of a cupboard Sarah needed. He apologised and stood up too quickly, catching his foot beneath one leg, and she steadied the chair while he freed himself. For several minutes the work required enough of her attention that she stopped arranging replies to Claire.

When she returned, the box was on the floor beside Claire's feet. The matching bag had gone back into its sleeve.

Claire had found a photograph of the silver shoes. Mrs Dunne was pointing at the screen, trying to make her enlarge it.

"There. Under the coat. That's the pair."

Claire brought the picture closer to her face. She had been looking at somebody else in it, she said; she had forgotten her mother was there.

Sarah saw only a crowded table, a raised glass and part of a man's shoulder before Claire turned the screen away. Mrs Dunne asked for another picture, one taken outside, and her daughter began searching.

Sarah went back to the desk while they were still arguing about where the photograph had been taken.

* * *

Earlier, while holding Mrs Dunne's foot, she had remembered a man who wanted his own shoes brought in, and she returned to him now as she waited for the computer at the desk. Eight years earlier he had occupied the room for part of the ten weeks she remembered caring for him; the furniture had changed since, and she could no longer be sure which way the bed had faced when he made the request.

He wanted brown shoes, a pair someone had apparently offered to replace, although Sarah remembered the complaint more clearly than the person who eventually brought them. There had been a conversation about the shape of his feet and about the cost of having shoes repaired; he knew a man in another

city who would have done the work properly, and spoke for a while as though sending them there were still a practical undertaking.

At the time she had been more interested in whether they would be comfortable. She remembered checking inside one with her hand and finding a hard ridge near the heel. He took it from her, felt the same place and said it had always been like that. Then he began describing a long walk on which he had worn them, losing her for a moment among streets she had never seen.

Somewhere in the account there had been a meal he disliked and a woman who enjoyed it. Sarah had remembered that part for days afterwards, perhaps because he had laughed while telling it, or because she had been hungry herself and his description of the food had seemed unfair. Later, when she tried to recall the story, she could recover only the disagreement and the pleasure he had taken in it.

She knew there had been a woman in the story, although she could no longer be certain that she was the person walking with him.

Patrick called her to look at something on the screen, and she bent beside him to read, losing the remembered voice as he scrolled back to the passage he wanted her to see. By the time they had finished discussing what needed to be handed over, Claire was leaving.

She had the shopping with her, and Sarah went to ask whether she had found the receipt.

Claire held it up between two fingers, then put it in her purse. Her mother had remembered another bag at home, she said. Apparently this one had a chain which could be tucked inside.

Sarah smiled, expecting another question about the wedding, but Claire wanted to know where she could get a sandwich, having come straight from the shops.

Sarah told her, then remembered the bakery and added that it was a little farther but better; when Claire asked for directions, they walked as far as the entrance together so she could point.

There were other things to finish before Sarah left. Niamh was dealing with a call from a relative; Patrick had gone into a room where the bell had rung twice. Sarah stopped to answer a question and then went back to Mrs Dunne, helping her settle while the afternoon light reached across the bed.

The shoes had gone, but the wedding card remained against the photographs. Mrs Dunne asked Sarah to turn it so that she could see the hotel's garden. From this angle, Sarah noticed, the building looked much smaller than it had on Claire's phone.

* * *

Moira opened the door while Sarah was still trying to find a hand free to ring. "You've missed the cake. I was going to save you a piece, but I kept cutting the edge straight."

Sarah held up the paper bag from the bakery. She had bought enough for two and then added something she wanted for herself, arriving with more food than either of them needed. Moira looked inside and told her to come through.

The table was covered with a newspaper, a pair of reading glasses and the pieces of a lamp which Moira had decided to repair. She moved the newspaper to a chair, warning Sarah not to put anything on it because she would lose a screw. The shade lay on its side near the window, exposing a pale ring on the table beneath.

Sarah sat down and took off her shoes. She had intended to be here an hour earlier, with time to look at the places before Moira went out, but the thought of going home, changing and coming back had become intolerable on the bus. She had come directly, carrying the day with her in the stale warmth of her clothes.

While Moira made tea, Sarah described the man ahead of her in the bakery, who had bought the last of something she wanted and then stood deciding whether he needed another bag. She had watched him divide his purchases between two bags with an attention that now embarrassed her.

Her sister laughed and pushed the plate towards her.

They ate while Moira explained the lamp. She had thought it needed one small part, but removing that part had revealed another which seemed to belong to it. A shop had been recommended, and she had gone there during the afternoon only to find a notice saying the owner was away until Monday. Sarah offered to look at it.

"You can look. Don't take any more of it apart."

She turned the shade upright instead, so that it occupied most of the table between them, and Moira had to lean sideways to continue talking. For a while they discussed where it could stand if she got it working again.

The room was warm enough to make Sarah want to sleep, and through an open window came a neighbour calling somebody in from the garden, repeating the name with increasing confidence that it was being ignored. Sarah wanted to remain where she was until evening, eating the rest of the pastries and letting Moira choose what they did. Her sister had already mentioned when she needed to leave.

Sarah took out her phone.

Of the three places Moira had sent, one had no rooms left for the first weekend they had considered. The second could offer two nights if they arrived on a Thursday. Sarah looked at the dates and thought she might be able to change

a shift, then remembered Niamh's arrangements and the days she herself had mistaken that morning.

Moira reminded her of a commitment on the Friday, something Sarah had encouraged her to go to and then forgotten when considering dates that suited herself.

They tried another weekend, bringing up a room with one large bed which Moira said would be fine until Sarah reminded her of the last time they had shared. Each remembered the other opening the window; neither admitted to getting up to close it.

"I want my own bed," Sarah said. "And I want to lie in it after you've gone walking."

Moira went back through the rooms, checking photographs against descriptions. Sarah read about breakfast, then followed a link to dinner and began choosing what she would eat. She had found a fish dish she liked when her sister asked which dates they were looking at now.

The page had returned to August, discarding their dates when she followed the link, and Sarah put the phone down with a weariness that made Moira laugh before admitting she had done the same thing twice. Moira gathered the plates and took them to the sink, leaving Sarah with the lamp and a cold mouthful of tea.

"I'll bring my rota on Sunday," Sarah said. "The proper one. We can have another look."

Moira rinsed a plate, then told her she would be out for most of Sunday. The following evening might work. She wanted to book soon, while there was still a choice, and she had already spent more time looking than she meant to.

She wanted to say they could choose anywhere; there were still the stairs, the shared bed and the place she had rejected because dinner meant going out again.

"Monday, then. I'll come with the dates."

Moira dried her hands and sat down again. She had ten minutes before she needed to get ready. Sarah moved the lampshade onto the floor and asked about the people she was meeting.

One was bringing photographs of a new grandchild. Another had promised to explain a disagreement which had begun in their walking group and now involved the woman who organised the Christmas lunch. Moira had heard only part of it and was looking forward to the rest.

Sarah asked her to remember enough to tell her on Monday.

When they left the house, Moira locked the door and walked with her to the corner, where they had to go in different directions. Across the road a bus was

pulling away into the bright evening, and Sarah, who might have caught it if she hurried, stayed to hear the end of what her sister was saying.

Moira was describing the walk she hoped they would do, a path that continued beyond the place in the photograph. There was supposed to be somewhere to eat at the other end, though she wanted to check how far it was.

Sarah asked whether they could get a taxi back. Moira began laughing, then stopped to consider it, and they waited through another change of the lights while she looked for the name of the village on her phone.