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The
Benefits of
Passion

CATHERINE FOX



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For
Bridget, Mary, Katy, Kate
and the other Cathy

CHAPTER 1

Isabella Deane was downwardly mobile. Her elder sister Hermione, who was not, deplored this tendency. So did their mother. Their father was a solicitor and made no comment either way. Poor Isabella had always been like it, even as a little girl. She had gone quite happily to the local village primary school and made friends with girls like Debbie Ambridge – the sort of girl who used to do handstands against the school wall to show her knickers when the RAF apprentices were going past. Hermione had thrown a tantrum after her first day at Nettledon County Primary and had to be sent instead as a day girl to a little private school in the next town, where they wore a uniform and learnt to play tennis. Isabella and Debbie played in the quarry and on building sites or up on the railway line where Isabella was once almost cut in two by an express train.

However, she lived long enough to pass her eleven plus and join Hermione at the grammar school (the only kind of state school Hermione would countenance). Mrs Deane was optimistic about the school's polite influence; but it soon became apparent that Isabella had waved goodbye to the likes of Debbie Ambridge only to meet up with the Tracy Wattses of this world, who were like Debbie Ambridge only they had brains. The sort of girl who rolled her school skirt over and over at the waist to make it short enough. She and Isabella and their kind went out illegally during the lunch hour to ogle the men, tacking back and forth across the busy high street (where Isabella was once almost crushed by a lorry) in pursuit of the local talent. They ate large slices of Black Forest gateau from the baker's as they went. *Walking the streets and eating!* The headmistress was speechless when the matter was brought to her attention. Letters were sent to the relevant parents. Mrs Deane despaired. Mr Deane made no comment.

Then there was a turn for the better. Isabella, having lived long enough to reach the sixth form, surprised everyone by getting a place at Cambridge to read English. Mrs Deane was an old Girtonian herself and her spirits rose again. Hermione, now in her first year at the Other Place, was thoughtful when she heard the news. It was as though in some obscure way her younger sister's success undermined

the value of her own Oxford scholarship. On reflection she was pleased. She shared her mother's belief that Cambridge would reverse the unfortunate downward trend.

Isabella's wedding dress three years later – like an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual truth – showed them just how wrong they were. Tight oyster satin split to the thigh.

'You look unspeakably vulgar,' said Hermione as Isabella postured in front of the spare bedroom mirror a week before the wedding.

'Barney will like it,' said Isabella.

'I imagine he will,' replied Hermione coolly.

He did. Oh my, oh my – didn't he just.

'Barney, we can't possibly!'

'Why not? We're married.'

'But...'

She was on her back on the spare bed with the unspeakable dress ruched up round her waist. Voices and chinking glasses from the marquee on the lawn, and Barney on top of her, consummating their marriage in long, unhurried thrusts.

'Barney, I can't believe you're doing this!'

He grinned.

A sudden cramp stabbed into her right hip joint and she squealed and squirmed, and in the end had to wrap her legs round his waist to dislodge the pain. This was mistaken for passion and the dress was in sudden crisis. She heard a couple of stitches crack, but those seams held. Polite voices on the lawn. She clung on like a shipwrecked sailor to a mast. A tap at the door. Her mother's voice.

'Everything all right, darlings?'

'Just coming,' said Barney. A pause. He came.

Isabella's thighs shook as she scrambled into her going away outfit. She looked up and saw Barney rub a towel over his fair curly head and smile his slow smile at her. It struck her that marriage might be one long process of interesting discovery. But that was on her wedding day.

Annie sat cross-legged on a chair with her notebook. She was hovering about twenty feet above the lawn looking down on the guests and trying to decide what kind of weather to have. It should have been one of those blazing August days which melted the tarmac on the roads and turned the marquee into an oven, but as she watched she could see that a stiffish breeze was blowing and making Mrs Deane

clutch her hat as she talked to one of Barney's older sisters. Hermione seemed to shiver slightly in her bridesmaid's dress, but it might simply have been a fastidious shudder. Barney's family were decidedly *not* her sort of people. Her frown transformed into a frigid smile as one of Barney's brothers-in-law bore down on her with a video camera. 'Give us a nice smile, love.' A wedding video. Good God. How incredibly tacky. The other bridesmaid, a tall blonde, received the camera's attentions with amused contempt. The lawn was very green. Barney's sisters' stilettos (shudder) kept sinking into it.

Annie rose up higher for a moment and scanned the suburban gardens spread out beneath her. Lush as far as the eye could see. A rainy August, then. The tiny guests circulated. Annie watched the progress of Mrs Deane's custard-coloured hat among the groups. She would be smiling and checking that glasses were full, glancing every now and then at her watch. What on earth was keeping Barney and Isabella? A stuck zip? A sudden flood of tears? Perhaps she should –? Annie watched her go into the house.

Some of Barney's nieces and nephews had got underneath Mr Deane's raspberry nets and were busy scrumping. There was Barney's father's bald head. He'd spotted what his grandchildren were up to. Little buggers. Still, no wonder they were hungry. Pinwheel smoked-salmon sandwiches. Fresh bloody dates stuffed with cream cheese. And only wine to drink. I ask you. Plenty of everything, he had to admit, but he knew that he and Maureen would be stopping for steak and chips that evening before they got halfway up the M1.

At last Annie saw the guests being herded round to the front of the house by the best man. He was tall and thin. Dark-haired. He flapped his long arms at them, encouraging them on with a kind of despairing good humour, like a shepherd who loves sheep tenderly but is under no illusions about their intellectual powers. Who was he? An old school-friend of Barney's probably. Perhaps they had played cricket together in the First XI.

The guests gathered on the drive. The couple emerged. Cheers. Confetti. Photos. Isabella was wearing a minute black dress and a straw hat as wide as a cartwheel. Barney's father winked and mimed some paternal encouragement to his son. His wife cuffed him, a practised back-handed blow to the chest. Her face did not change at all. Nobody was quite sure whether she liked Isabella. The couple climbed into a red car crammed with balloons, and bearing the shaving-foam motto 'Vicars do it on their knees'. They drove off amid more cheers.

Annie watched the car climb the hill and head out of town, balloons bobbing and scraps of shaving foam blowing away in the wind. The guests stood about on the pink gravel drive. They looked like passengers diverted to a strange station on a Sunday afternoon. Barney's father rubbed his hands together briskly and said, 'Well, now.' But everyone continued to stand.

The car was a red dot heading north, a mite crawling across an endless green carpet. Annie could hear the larks as her chair rode along in the sky.

'Can I tempt you?' Edward appeared beside her on a cloud holding out a treacle tart. Annie jumped in surprise.

'Yes. Just a small slice, thanks.'

Edward peered over her shoulder. She shut the book, although it was written in her own secret shorthand. 'What's this?' he asked. 'Doctrine essay?'

'Well ...' she shrugged to avoid telling an outright lie. The cloud had given way to grey theological-college carpet.

'What about a cup of tea?' His brown hair was wet from a recent shower. He'd probably been out rowing.

'Thank you.' He left the room. She listened to his brogues clumping along the corridor to the kitchen. The green August day had vanished and Annie could see the miserable north-eastern rain speckling her window. She hated February.

'Earl Grey all right?' He had a hearty voice. Coverdale Hall chapel sounded more like a packed stand at Twickenham than divine worship when Edward and his kind were in full cry.

'Lovely, thanks.'

Edward began singing, "'Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son!'" Annie waited, tense, wondering whether she could snatch another moment for her novel. 'Milk?'

'Yes, please.' Silence. She opened her book again. The car crawling northwards like a –

'How strong do you like it?'

Annie pounded her fists noiselessly on the desk. Just give me the tea and go!

'As it comes.' It was there the whole time, this murderous irritability, crackling away like background radiation. "'Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won!'" boomed Edward's fine baritone from the kitchen. Clump, clump, came his brogues along the corridor. She reminded herself that Edward was a good friend and that she liked

him. He brought in the tea and cake. The problem was hers, not his. She was guiltily aware she would have found him even more irritating if he hadn't stood a good-looking six foot two in his rugby socks.

'You're busy,' he said. 'Shall I leave you in peace?'

'Would you mind? Sorry, Edward.'

He was gone with a polite wave of the hand. She ate his cake and hated herself. Why do I feel like this? She had always assumed that the dark night of the soul was a noble thing. A solitary wrestling with your Maker. 'Comforter, where, where is your comforting?' But this felt like a case of permanent premenstrual tension. Waking one morning to find yourself doubting the divinity of Christ was one thing, but to be locked in perpetual crabbiness with your fellow ordinands was another. She looked down at her notebook again, aware that this was the one thing in her life that she enjoyed at the moment, but that there was always something else she ought to be doing instead. Preparing the prayers for tomorrow's service, for instance. Later. Later.

Now, where were Barney and Isabella going on their honeymoon? Northumberland. A long journey, but that was nothing to the happy couple. Barney and Isabella would not have to broil for hours in contraflows like us lesser beings. Their red car could travel three hundred miles in seven words: 'They arrived at last at the cottage . . .' But how had they met in the first place?

Isabella first saw Barney in the catalogue room of Cambridge University Library and she hunted him down and married him. It was the summer term of her second year and she was fiddling around one morning looking something up and not revising for her part ones because it was almost time for the tea room to open. Ten minutes to cheese-scone time. She glanced around and there was Barney: big and blond and beautiful, walking through the catalogue room minding his own business. All thought of cheese scones fled from her mind and she pursued him through the library and up several flights of stairs to South Wing 4.

It was a room she had never previously visited and it looked out across some playing fields. He settled down to work not knowing he was a marked man. April sunshine was coming through the window and turning his fair hair into a halo round his head. He had a sort of bruised and bewildered beauty, like an overgrown cherub after a night on the tiles. You, she thought, are gorgeous. She pulled a volume at random from a nearby shelf. *The New Testament and the People of God*.

Her jaw dropped. Don't tell me this is the *theology* section. She looked across at the broad shoulders and fair head. You can't be one of those Bible bashers. I won't let you be. She brightened at the idea that he might only be there because it was a pleasant sunny place to study with a good view of the prep-school rounders matches if you got bored with your work. Isabella slid the volume back on to the shelf and stood watching him. She was sucking a lock of her dark hair, a vulgar habit she had never outgrown and which undermined the impact of her expensive bob. As she loitered past she noticed that he had a pile of books beside him with reservation slips in them. She bent down and whispered in her husky voice, 'Are these yours?'

He looked up in surprise. 'Yes.'

She whisked the slip of paper out of the top volume. *B. Hardstaff*. She tucked it into her pocket and smiled her nicest smile. 'Thank you.'

She glanced back at him when she reached the doorway. He was watching her. Then she saw him shake his head briskly as though clearing the inexplicable incident from his mind before settling down to work again.

'I've just seen *the* most *gorgeous* man,' said Isabella to her friend Camilla as they went out through the library's revolving doors a couple of hours later.

'Yeah?' said Camilla. They paused on the steps while she lit a cigarette. She shook out the match and threw it away. 'What's he like, then?' Camilla herself was a tall blonde, aloof and cool as the stratosphere, the sort of woman who in a previous era would never have had to resort to lighting her own cigarette. Her expression implied that she found life faintly amusing.

'Oh, he's -' Isabella broke off. 'Don't look! It's him!' Camilla looked. He walked past them down the steps. 'Don't you think he's beautiful?' But Camilla had her eyebrow up.

Her incredulity acted as a dare on Isabella. 'Excuse me,' she called. He turned. 'I just want you to know you're the sexiest man I've ever met and I think I'm in love with you.'

He stared at her in blank astonishment. There was a ripple of amusement among those close enough to overhear. Camilla laughed mockingly. Oh, Gawd, thought Isabella. Why did I do that? But then he smiled at her, a slow, broad smile. Her heart raced. He turned and walked off towards the bikes without a word.

'I take it back,' said Camilla.

'Oh, you like him? Do you really?'

Camilla curled a wisp of smoke back up her nostril then blew a cloud away. 'He has a certain *je sais exactement quoi*. What's his name?' Isabella pulled out the slip of paper and handed it over. 'Hardstaff. Hmm. That has a promising phallic ring to it. What does the B stand for? Barry? Bert? Brian?'

'Oh, God! Please not!'

'He'll be bald and fat before he's forty,' said Camilla as he cycled past. 'That sort always are.'

Isabella put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. 'Hey, big boy – what's your name?'

But there was no answer, just another grin. They watched him disappear along the road.

'Self-satisfied bastard,' said Camilla, almost to herself.

That evening they were in Camilla's room finishing off a second bottle of wine because it was Friday, and anyway, there was a limit to how much revision a sane person could do. Smoke rose in a straight line from Camilla's cigarette. She was lying on the bed with her feet up on the wall examining her legs. Her long blonde hair fanned out over the duvet cover and she looked like a 1940s advert for nylons.

'I just wish I had nicer boobs, that's all,' said Isabella, from in front of the mirror. She scrunched them up in her hands and wondered if an underwired bra might be the answer. 'I mean, they look so *arbitrary*. What are they doing there, exactly? If I didn't have tits I'd look like a boy, wouldn't I?' There was some truth in this. She had a straight, slim-hipped figure and broadish shoulders. 'They don't *work*, do they? Be honest.' Camilla blew a perfect smoke ring.

'You've got good legs, though.' There was a tiny pause in which Isabella did not say, as she should have done, So have you. Despite their length and slenderness there was just the slightest suggestion of teddy-bear ankle about Camilla's legs.

'But I've got piggy eyes.'

'Brian won't be looking at your eyes,' said Camilla.

'He's not called Brian, for God's sake.' Isabella polished a smear off the mirror. 'He's Ben, or something. He *has* to be.'

'Bruce,' murmured Camilla. 'Bernard. Boris. Bertram.'

'Shut up.' Isabella poured the last of the wine and Camilla writhed to a sitting position. *Sinuus*, thought Isabella, with tipsy aggression. She always felt hoydenish in Camilla's company.

'So how will you catch him?' asked Camilla.

‘I’ll think of something.’

‘Well, when you’ve finished with him, hose him down and send him round to me.’

But I might never finish with him, thought Isabella, surprised at this new idea. A man you might never tire of. Hmm. She downed the last of her Chardonnay thoughtfully.

Her tactics were simple: she went up to South Wing 4 on Monday morning in a very short skirt and sat beside him. After a moment he turned and looked at her. She smiled and fluttered her eyelashes. His eyes held a look of tired resignation. Beautiful grey eyes with deep laughter lines and long, long lashes. Older than your run-of-the-mill student. He must be a postgrad, she decided. He went back to work.

‘What’s your name?’ she whispered. But he only laid a finger on his lips and shook his head without looking up from his book. He sat reading – she timed him – for three solid hours without a break. When he finally gathered his books and left at twelve thirty, he cycled off so fast that she had no hope of following.

The next day he wasn’t there. Nor the next. By the third she began to think she must have scared him off, but on the Friday she saw him going out of the revolving doors at twelve thirty-one, and realized he must have been hiding in a different bit of the library. The following Monday she tracked him down in the Rare Books room and sat next to him with her thigh almost touching his. He glanced up and gave her another long, weary look. She fluttered her eyelashes and smiled again, and he returned to his work. And so it went on. He hid in increasingly devious places. Sometimes she found him, sometimes she didn’t.

After a fortnight of him steadfastly refusing to talk to her or be distracted from his work, she thought up a different strategy. She lay in wait in the bike park at nine o’clock, watched him arrive, then chained her bike to his after he had gone into the library. She came back at twelve thirty-two and found him waiting with his bike-clips on and his arms folded. He was not surprised to see her.

Hee hee! This is going to be fun! She went up to him, smiling.

‘Would you mind unlocking your bike?’ he said.

‘If you tell me your name.’

Eventually he sighed. ‘Look, there’s something about me I think you ought to know.’

Her heart gave a nasty lurch. ‘You’re gay!’ She saw a fleeting grin.

'Worse than that, I'm afraid.' Another lurch.

'You're married!'

'Worse than that, even. I'm an ordinand.'

'A what?'

'An ordinand. A trainee priest.'

She grasped at the word in bewilderment. 'A *priest*? You mean, like . . . Are you a virgin?' Several heads swivelled their way at this.

He was struggling not to smile. 'Actually I'm not, as it happens, Isabella.'

He knew her name! 'You know my name! How?'

'Can I have my bike now, please?'

'No. I haven't finished with you yet.' He looked at his watch, sighed again and waited. She savoured that look of sweet resignation, thinking how she would share it with Camilla later. 'You're Catholic, then?'

'Well yes.' A dismal bell rang. Something about celibacy.

'Not Anglican?' she pleaded.

'Actually, yes.'

'Oh, *Anglo*-Catholic, you mean?'

He rubbed his hand over his face wearily. 'I'm an evangelical. We're all catholic, but I wouldn't worry about it.' He shrugged apologetically at the complexity of the issue. There was a pause.

'Does that mean you *can* have it off or you *can't*?' asked Isabella, cutting briskly through all this nonsense.

I don't believe this, said his look. 'It means I can't.'

'Why not? Vicars can get married, can't they?'

'They can't just *have it off* when they feel like it.'

She felt a slight rush of shock at hearing him repeat this expression. 'I bet some of them do.'

'Not this one. Look, I'm late. Can I have my bike?'

'In a minute. Why can't you?' She lit triumphantly on a good argument. 'I mean, sex must be OK. After all, God created it, didn't he?' She slid closer and smiled up at him encouragingly.

'You might like to take a look at the Maker's instructions some time, Isabella.'

She stared, then drew back a little and began to suck her hair. A blush crept up her neck towards her face. 'I've read the Bible. Well, bits of it. Adam and Eve and the Sermon on the Mount.' Suddenly she wasn't sure she had. She knew what it was about, though. Roughly. 'I mean, I know the Ten Commandments.'

He raised his eyebrow enquiringly, and she turned away in case he asked her to recite them. The only one she could remember off-hand was the one about not committing adultery. The whole thing was going horribly wrong. She bent down to unlock her bike and to hide her embarrassment.

‘There you are.’ Her tone was almost as flippant as ever. ‘Have I made you late for your prayers, Father?’

He mounted his bike. ‘Lunch, actually.’

‘Wait. Do you belong to some kind of college, or something?’ He grinned at her and cycled off. ‘Hey! Which college? Come back!’ But he was gone.

Isabella stood a long time chewing her hair. Her insides felt raw, as though some meanness in her had been exposed and brought to light. I was only teasing him, she thought. He didn’t have to put up with it. He could have told me to get lost. But the feeling wouldn’t go away. She had always imagined that despite her outrageousness she was essentially an OK sort of person. Now she felt as though there were some vast overshadowing standard she was failing to measure up to.

She climbed on her bike and headed back to college, busy tailoring the incident into an amusing anecdote for Camilla. She was back in her room before she realized she still didn’t know the bastard’s name.

CHAPTER 2

'I want you to imagine, if you would, a town or city you know well,' said Muriel. 'At night,' she added.

The group obediently shut its eyes. It was four o'clock on Thursday afternoon; Annie's least favourite time of the week. After a moment's skirmish with irritation she closed her eyes too, and pictured the town where she had grown up. She was standing on the high street outside the Nonconformist chapel where her father was a deacon. Rain was spotting the puddles on the pavement.

'The street lights are on,' continued Muriel's voice. Well, of course they are, thought Annie crossly. It's night. She loathed these contemplative exercises. 'Imagine, now, that you are hovering over this town or city.' Pleased by this unexpected development, Annie rose up. 'In a helicopter.' She bumped down again angrily. Why a helicopter? Annie was capable of crossing the Rockies on a *chaise-longue*, but loyalty to Muriel made her call up a helicopter. She hovered over the town in the noisy cockpit as the blades chopped round overhead.

'Approaching High Street, over,' said the pilot beside her.

'Proceed to Western Road, over,' crackled Control. Chop chop chop.

'It is totally silent,' said Muriel. Annie tried to stifle the racket. 'And now I want you to imagine that a figure steps forward from the shadows. You haven't noticed him or her before.'

Oh, honestly! Annie's eyes popped open in exasperation. How could anyone conceal themselves in the cockpit of a helicopter? She scanned the group, but no one else seemed to be having difficulty with the idea.

'The figure says something,' Annie shut her eyes again.

'Listen, could you drop me off at that wine bar on Frogmore Street?' said the figure.

'And you respond,' went on Muriel.

Helicopter banks round out of control. 'Where the bloody hell did you spring from, mate? You nearly gave me a heart attack!' Annie spiralled down clutching her seat. We're going to crash! The hacking of blades filled her head.

‘And now,’ said Muriel, ‘let’s spend about ten or fifteen minutes in silence thinking about this exercise.’

Annie fought the temptation to open her eyes. Most of the time Muriel was a normal middle-aged woman, but under the pressure of preaching or leading a small group she broke out into peculiar stilted gestures a little out of sync with her words as though she were a badly dubbed foreign film. ‘Let’s try to explore, in the silence, what God might be trying to say to us about our calling.’

Annie crossed her legs restlessly. Ideas like *God* and *Calling* had long been the staples, the bread and rice of her spiritual diet. But now they seemed more like French black truffles: so hard to get hold of they may as well not exist at all. The time had long passed when she should have gone to talk to a member of staff, or even her bishop, about this. Her self-imposed deadlines came and went: summer, Advent, Christmas. And now Lent was bearing down on her. It was cowardice that held her back, or pride; for although it was not uncommon for people to drop out of their training at Coverdale, Annie could not bear to be one of them. She had put herself forward for the ministry in opposition to her parents. Bad enough to become an Anglican, let alone seek out a role which was in flat contradiction to the Scriptures. A woman could preach (under certain circumstances), but she certainly couldn’t have charge of a congregation. The Bible was quite clear on the subject. And as for wanting to be a priest – *well*. Where do you read anything about *priests* in the New Testament? To say nothing of academic theology. What had a bunch of atheist intellectuals got to do with the Word of God? People who studied theology lost their faith. It had been proven time and time again. You see, Anne? We warned you it would happen. The slippery slope.

I really must go and talk to someone, thought Annie. Dr Pollock, the Principal of Coverdale Hall and Jesus College, was a terrifying woman. Annie couldn’t imagine approaching her. David Tuckerman, who was the Warden of Coverdale Hall, was a nice man, but she couldn’t confide in him either. It was his very niceness that made the idea impossible. Her doubts weren’t strong, clean and brave. They were furtive and unpleasant. They were to do with hating church and wanting to get off with an entire rugby team. If this was her biological clock ticking, then it was built like Big Ben.

Annie made an effort to drag herself back to the group. What were they supposed to be pondering? God and Calling. The wrecked helicopter smoked on the street below. A camera crew circled its

remains. Annie could make out the shape of a smart young correspondent with a microphone. 'The cause of this tragic accident hasn't been established yet.' An unknown figure stepping out from the shadows and saying something. Who was it? The dark stranger of the tea leaves, for ever in the future waiting to be met. Dark and thin. Intelligent. Intense . . .

'GOD AND CALLING,' said Annie firmly to herself. Outside, the cathedral clock struck quarter past four. She wondered if the other members of the group were sitting thinking about sex as well. Perhaps everyone found the session illuminating except her. Her imagination was too finely tuned. It resented being jerked around by other people's inexpert handling. She had escaped to private worlds of her own for as long as she could remember; places where things didn't require engines and propellers to make them fly. All you needed was a stiff breeze and you could circumnavigate the globe in Grandma's bloomers. The problem for Annie was remembering that it was the real world that was real. Half the time the characters in her novel seemed more convincing than the people around her. If she were to run into Barney or Isabella on the riverbank it would be a while before she thought, Just a minute – you're not supposed to be here.

She opened her eyes and looked round the rest of the group again. There were five of them sitting with her in Dave's room in Coverdale Hall. On the wall were several batiks – women with waterjars, elephants – which dated back to Dave's various stints overseas as a voluntary worker. Annie's eyes twitched away from the colourful squares. They made her think of her ex-fiancé Graham, who was now a missionary in Africa. Eleven years after the event, she could no more remember why she had ditched him than why she had ever got engaged to him in the first place. Well, you'll end up never getting married if you carry on like this, Anne, said her mother. Right so far. Annie was thirty-one and still single. Her mother hadn't particularly liked Graham, but women shouldn't expect too much.

Dave had his eyes shut. He was about thirty as well, but looked younger. Annie sympathized. People were constantly mistaking her for an undergraduate, or worse still, a teenager. It was a serious disadvantage in her chosen profession. The Ten Commandments seemed more like ten diffident hints when she pronounced them. She had been a fairly hopeless teacher, as well; but fortunately she had only ever taught in a polite girls' private school so she had just about got away with it. The girls had expressed their rebellion in furtive novel-reading and

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'Lovely, thanks.'

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'Yes, please.' Silence. She opened her book again. The car crawling northwards like a –

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