

THE LAST MINUTE

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THE LAST MINUTE

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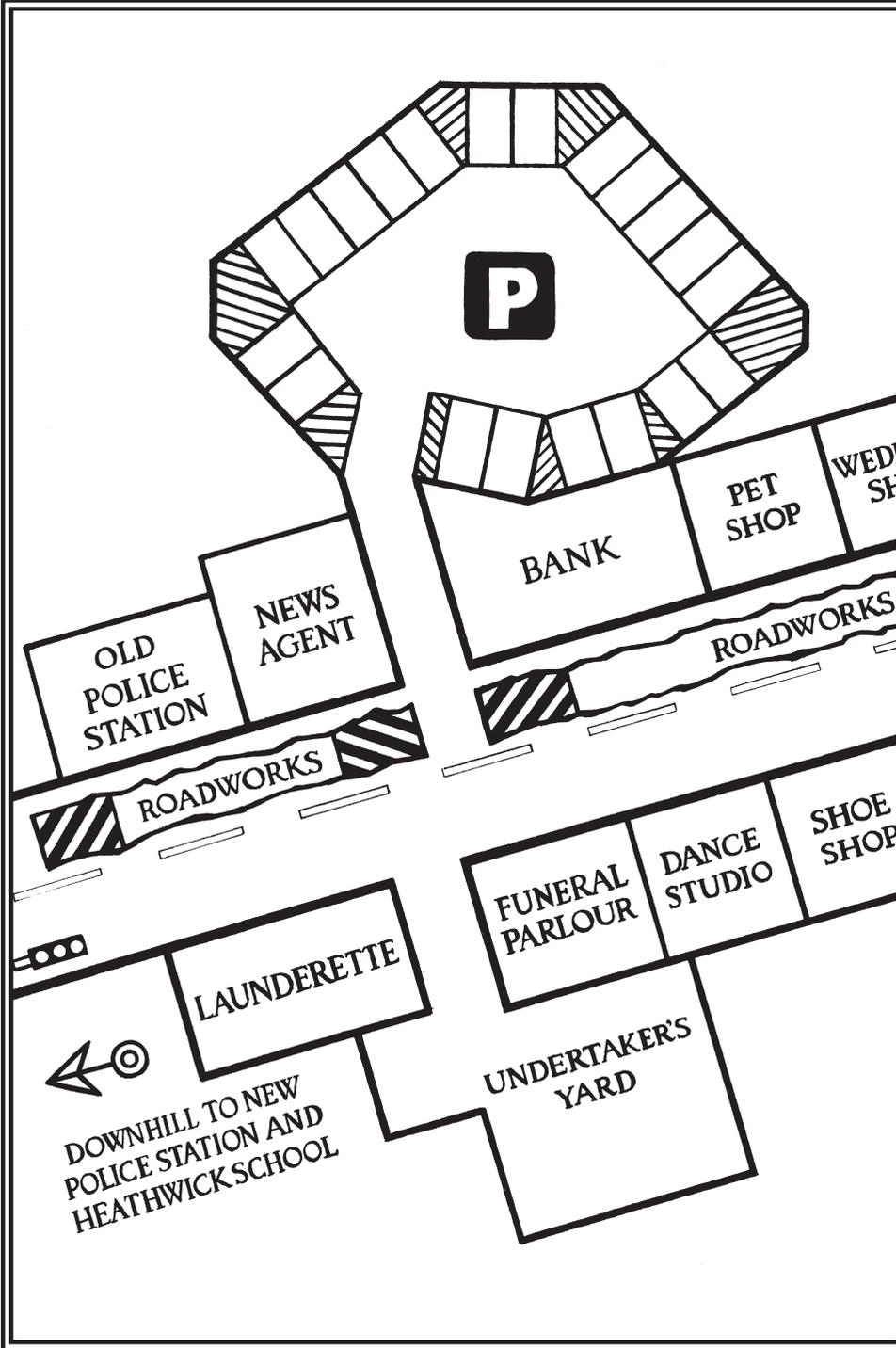
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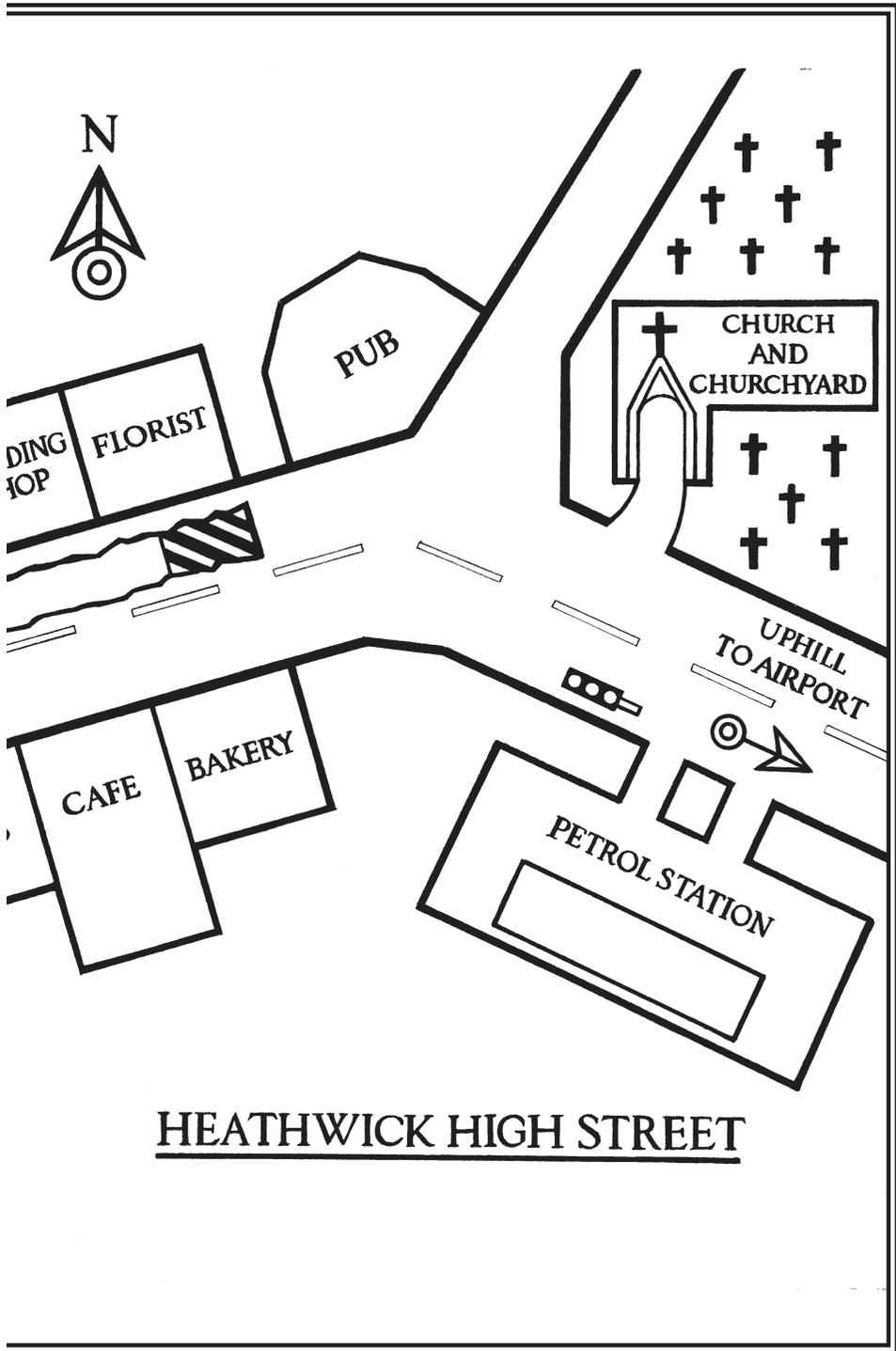
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*To Eleonore, Vivian and Maria.
With admiration and thanks.*





HEATHWICK HIGH STREET

PROLOGUE

Eleven minutes later . . .

9.33 a.m.

Dust. A cold wind. The first shards of icy rain. The front of the shop has dropped away. Underwear and silk stockings wave, indecently, towards the street. A woman in a shredded wedding dress still poses – head tilted proudly, one hand on her hip – but she’s bald, and swaying on her mangled stand as if she’s had too much to drink at the reception. Metres away, her bridesmaid’s plastic arm rises in triumph above the rubble, clutching a posy of synthetic flowers. Another hand – paler, frantic, flecked with gory grime – forces its way between the fallen bricks, grasping for help, but finding only the bride’s lost nylon wig, its golden ringlets caked in plaster. Next door and two floors up, an Advent calendar is stuck on the wall, half its windows open to the street. A fireplace clings on in mid-air, with a couple of photographs still balanced on its mantelpiece. A chubby boy in a tight school sweatshirt squints awkwardly towards

the camera. A family group stares through a spider's web of shattered glass, their staged unflappability frozen in black and white a century ago. A television dangles upside-down from the plug alongside the grate. Banal chatter bleeds from its speakers onto the catastrophe below:

(The presenter starts fiddling with his earpiece) '... I'm sorry, Mavis, I'll have to interrupt you a moment, because we have some breaking news coming in. Excuse me while I take a look at my computer. There aren't many details. Unconfirmed – and I must stress, unconfirmed – reports of an explosion in Heathwick High Street . . . We've had a tweet from one of our viewers – Robbie (Thanks for that, Robbie) – saying some buildings have collapsed. Obviously, our newsroom has been on to the police, and for now they're saying only that they're investigating. But they're advising motorists to avoid the Heathwick area for the time being.

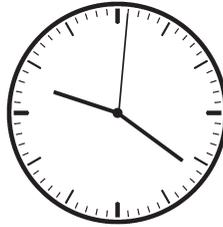
(He looks up again, at the wrong camera) 'Not very easy, if you're going to the airport. And it was bad enough already with those roadworks Trish the Travel was telling us about earlier. No doubt she'll have an update for us in her regular slot at five to ten, so stick with us for that.

(Turns to the right camera) 'To recap: that's unconfirmed reports of an explosion in the vicinity of Heathwick

High Street. And of course we will keep you up to date here, and on the website, as more details come in.

‘Now, Mavis. Back to the cake. Exactly how do you make those sugar holly leaves for the decoration?’

TICK



59 seconds to go . . .

9.21 a.m.

High on the hill, Matthew Larkin dips his brush into the pot of red paint he's holding in his other hand. His ladder leans against a hoarding at the front of the churchyard, and from the top he can see right down the High Street sloping away from him. He's seventy-two, and his overalls are loose on his shrinking frame, but after a lifetime as a steeplejack he's comfortable at such a height: secure in his footing, untroubled by the wind, and glad to be away from the pre-Christmas bustle below. It's a mess. Emergency gasworks have closed one side of the street, and traffic in both directions has been trying to cheat the slow temporary lights all morning. The result is gridlock, with two lines of cars facing each other at a standstill as a digger

waltzes around between them. In his time, Matthew has been part of many a campaign against widening the road. It's a major bottleneck on the way to the airport, but some of the shops on either side date back centuries, even if the businesses they house have changed. The new coffee bar, halfway down on Matthew's left, is the first, unwelcome, sign of the global chains moving in, and now that the petrol station behind him has been extended to include a section selling groceries, he wonders how long the newsagent down at the bottom on the right can survive.

It's cold, but Matthew is determined to get this job done before he leaves to meet his daughter, who's flying over from New Zealand. They both know that this might be her last visit in his lifetime, though neither has put the thought into words. He doesn't want to be late, or to have any distractions during her stay, so he's painting the sign now. It's a huge chart in the shape of a thermometer, showing how the fundraising for repairs to the church roof is going. Matthew promised the vicar that he would update it regularly, and the latest figures were announced on Sunday: another two thousand pounds, thanks to an auction at the local private school, where the headmaster's brassy American wife bullied the parents into paying large sums for things they didn't want. It will only take a few minutes to top up the red line.

There's another school in Heathwick – not the sort that holds charity auctions, but the place where most of the local children end up. Today, 8C are on a trip. They're in the coach Matthew can see bouncing to a halt halfway along the High Street, between the bank on one side and the new dance studio on the other. On board, the harassed teacher, Miss Hunter, is worrying whether they will reach the city in time for curtain-up on the special performance of *Julius Caesar*, and wishes she had insisted on an earlier start. Her nervous habit of repeatedly tucking her limp, prematurely greying hair behind her ears is more in evidence than usual. She was against giving Year 8 a Christmas treat in the first place. As far as she can see they have done nothing to deserve it, and apart from their joy at getting out of the classroom, none of them shows any sign of wanting to go to the theatre. This has been the most unpleasant term she can remember. Every day has been a struggle, and this one holds new horrors. Miss Hunter is looking ahead to an afternoon of humiliation and embarrassment in front of colleagues from other schools, where the children have somehow learned to behave. She flicks her hair behind her ears yet again.

From the window, she catches sight of Lenny Gibbon, the boy they wasted twenty minutes waiting for at the school gates. Eventually Lenny's mother had phoned

the office to say he was ill, but here she is now, dragging him along the High Street. Lenny's pale and tired. It would be charitable to suppose that they are on their way to the doctor's, but Lenny looks like that every day, and they're outside the shoe shop, with Mrs Gibbon making for a rack of cheap lace-ups. It wouldn't surprise Miss Hunter if Lenny had been kept off school just to be taken to the sales.

Lucy Noble, the pregnant woman with the expensive and unwieldy pushchair, is in a hurry. She's on her way to her mother-in-law's house, to drop off her daughter so that she can go to this afternoon's appointment at the clinic by herself. Just a few weeks now, and little Chloe will have a new brother or sister. Lucy knows that the midwife can see from the scans whether it's a boy or a girl, but she's asked not to be told. She's looking forward to the surprise that will await her in the delivery room, thrilled at the prospect of a new family member, whatever its sex. She's even secretly hoping that the baby might arrive just a little early: a special Christmas child. But even so, this pregnancy is less fun than the last. It's hard work trailing round with a toddler and all the tackle that goes with her when you're enormous and exhausted.

Lucy has already left the newsagent's and struggled past the white van that is blocking the mouth of the car

park. As usual, she's ignored the beggar who sits by the cash machine every day half-heartedly asking for change. She's looking for a space where she can get through the roadworks and across the street, when a young man with a large rucksack on his back taps her on the shoulder, and hands her a tiny pink mitten that's fallen to the ground.

Alongside Lucy, a tall, fat man – Bernie Blackstock, manager of the local pub – is looking with despair at the mess his dog, Ritzi, has deposited on the pavement. If the puppy had aimed just a few inches to the left, into the filthy trench of exposed pipes and clay that's being excavated by the noisy digging machines and drills, Bernie wouldn't feel obliged to clean up. But the pretty little girl in the pushchair is pointing excitedly at Ritzi, shouting 'Doggie! Doggie!' and Bernie suspects that her mother may be the source of the bossy sign on the community notice board outside the bank. THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS THE DOG POO FAIRY, it says, reminding dog owners that the microbes lurking in their pets' mess can turn babies blind. Bernie doesn't need that patronizing notice to tell him that he can't risk leaving the glistening brown heap where it is. Anyone could step in it. There are people around who might recognize him and spread news of his antisocial behaviour to potential customers. It doesn't take much to give you a bad name

round here, and he can't afford to lose trade. That's the thing about running a pub. You're never off duty – never out of the public eye. But Bernie's got Ritzi's lead in one hand and a letter in the other, so picking up the poo isn't going to be easy. He puts the envelope between his teeth, and rummages for the plastic bag in his pocket. He has no hands free to cover his ears as the brakes of the school coach give a high-pitched pneumatic wheeze.

TOCK



58 seconds to go . . .

Matthew Larkin wipes his brush against the side of his paint tin.

A spotty, skinny youth, wearing an orange jerkin with GIFTFORCE written in purple capitals across the back, has already sidestepped the beggar and the defecating dog. Now, hugging his clipboard and rubbing his hands in the cold, he takes up position a little further along the street: outside the florist's at the corner opposite the churchyard, where the pavement is so narrow that no one will be able to pass him with ease. This is Nicholas Birkham, who was hoping to have more fun on his gap year before medical school. He needs money quickly so he can go off travelling, and the only job he could get was with an agency that raises funds for charities. He has to persuade people to hand over their bank details in

the street so that regular payments can be taken from their accounts. This week he's trying to interest shoppers in the plight of the homeless. It's a harder sell than the animal rescue centre he was promoting in November. Nick's used now to the way shoppers cross the street if they spot him in time, so the roadworks are a blessing for him today. The gas company diggers have blocked off that escape route. With a bit of luck, and if the rain holds off, he might reach his target number of sign-ups before it gets dark and even colder. In some ways the time of year is an advantage – some folk are in a giving mood in the run-up to Christmas – but the days are short, and the extra costs of heating and buying presents put a zip on many a purse.

Outside the bank, Bernie gets his free hand inside the plastic bag, and Lucy says a quick 'Thank you' without really looking at the man who gave her the mitten. Chloe, apparently untroubled by the cold, is waving her bare hand and giggling as she repeats, 'Doggie! Doggie!' The cute little puppy, a golden cocker spaniel with glistening brown eyes, beats its tail against the side of the pushchair as it tries to pull Bernie downhill towards the park.

Behind them, in the narrow lane between the newsagent and the bank which forms the exit from the car park, Anthony Dougall (who has been sounding the horn of

his top-of-the-range Audi for some time) angrily flings open the door. The driver of the van in front of him has taken no notice of the tooting and the flashing headlights, and is still blocking the way out onto the main road.

Anthony Dougall is a local councillor, and now a prospective parliamentary candidate. It's his birthday. He's on a tight timetable, and he's not used to having his plans upset. That's just as well because, for the past few months, Anthony has had to plan very carefully. What started as a quick fumble with a young volunteer at his party offices has somehow turned into something more serious, deliciously threatening everything he has schemed for over the years. He wasn't to know that a by-election would arise so soon, before he'd had time to explain everything to his wife, or quietly get rid of his mistress. What bad luck that his big chance was brought about by the disgrace of the sitting MP, caught in a squalid fraud, and that his own wholesomeness would inevitably be part of his party's election pitch. He'd thought Sharon (sweet, naïve Sharon) understood that their relationship didn't really mean anything. But it turned out that it did (to her) and so might for him, politically, whether he likes it or not.

From behind the van, Anthony can't see that the traffic in the main road is static, and hardly worth joining, anyway.

Across the street, opposite the bank, is the long-empty video shop that has now been turned into a dance and exercise studio. Through the plate-glass window the first ‘keep fit’ class of the day can be seen limbering up. They are mainly mothers fresh from the school run, dressed in everything from pyjama bottoms and sloppy T-shirts to bright, tight leotards. They gossip and chuckle as they roll their shoulders and stretch their calves.

Two doors along, past the shoe shop, in the café that used to be the public library, less athletic parents are queuing for cappuccinos and skinny lattes. Eighteen-year-old Sam Riley, the new trainee – too new to be allowed to serve at the counter alone – is reminding himself that he’s lucky to have a job, even though his boss is a stickler for cleanliness, and Sam is having to wield mops and brushes in a way that doesn’t come naturally at all. He’s a quiet boy, small for his age, and well aware of what a disappointment he is to his parents. They’d expected him to study law, as they had done. Sam did everything asked of him at school, but somehow the grades didn’t come. He’d like to be a carpenter, but he knows his father would laugh at the idea of his son doing anything ‘manual’, and his mother would shriek with social shame. He hasn’t dared tell her about the café job. She thinks he’s revising for retakes. Sam eases his way between the oversized

buggies to collect empty mugs and rearrange chairs, but he's too shy to disturb the earnest group by the window, all dressed in black, who are clearly killing time before a funeral.

Over the car horns and the noise of the diggers, the beggar shouts to Bernie, even though he's just a metre or so away. 'Here, mate!' he bellows, as Janine Nailor, the florist, pushes past, clasping a large wreath of red and white flowers, trying to find a place to cross the road. She's agitated, and her breath turns to vapour as she mumbles to herself about how stupid she's been. She promised to get the wreath to the undertaker by nine, but lost track of time as she sorted out her shop for the day. How could she, when she'd been up half the night weaving the blooms into the wire frame? Of course, that sleepless night may be the reason. Janine aches with tiredness. You'd think making a wreath in the form of a lifebelt would be easy. After all, it's circular – nothing like as much of a challenge as the guitar she'd had to do last month. But she'd found it really difficult to settle to the work, and that was why it had taken her so long. It made her feel uncomfortable. She'd had some pretty tasteless requests before, but a lifebelt for a dead man? Still, it was what the widow wanted, and she'd paid for it. The deceased had been a keen yachtsman, apparently. Janine hadn't liked to ask whether he'd drowned.

She'd gone into floristry to try to get away from the pressures of her office job, and in the hope of having more time to look after her son, Calum, and her demented elderly mother. But it's just as bad – no, worse – working with perishable goods and still up against deadlines like this funeral. In the flat above the shop, her mother, Margaret Sharp, was awake till the small hours, rattling the front door, and crying out about some imagined danger she couldn't explain. Janine had locked her mother in her bedroom for her own safety when she went to the early-morning market to buy today's stock. Then Calum had left it till after breakfast to mention that he needed a packed lunch for the school trip. In the end, Janine hadn't had time to brush her own hair, let alone wash her mother's, before opening the shop for the day.

Now she's hurrying to get the wreath to the funeral parlour before the hearse sets off for the church. She doesn't even look at the beggar as she steps over his feet. The scruffy man is such a feature of the place that she has stopped wondering who he is, or how he came to be there. Everyone refers to him as Matey – no doubt because he calls everybody 'Mate'. He must have a real name, but she has no idea what it is, or any urge to find out. When she'd first moved in, she would sometimes exchange a smile or a quick word about the weather, but she soon learned not to get trapped listening to his

painfully unfunny jokes, which usually take the form of rambling stories, often with a forgotten punch line. If asked, she'd probably put the beggar's age at about fifty, though it's hard to tell: he's always swathed in an assortment of oversized clothes, with a cap pulled down over his eyes. He looks too hot in summer, and too cold in winter. With no man in the house, Janine has no cast-offs to pass on to him now. Her husband died five years ago, taking with him all the laughter in their lives.

Janine's son, Calum, is on the coach of course, though in her panic his mother is unaware that she is just a few metres away from him. He's sitting next to his best friend, Rahil Nandi, who fills the fun gap with his effortless clowning. Even Miss Hunter has been known to be won over by his mischievous smile (once or twice). Now she stands up to check that all the children are still strapped in.

TICK



57 seconds to go . . .

Two girls on the coach, Charmaine and Chenelle, who sit together in class, eat together at break, and whisper together in assembly, have stopped plaiting each other's hair and are looking through the dance-class window, pointing at people they know, and half laughing, half singing '*Hey, fatty . . .*' On the other side of the aisle, a boy has spotted Bernie bending to pick up the poo. 'Gross!' he cries, making a retching noise at the back of his throat. Sitting on her own, Kayleigh Palmer, always keen to keep in with the teachers, and universally despised as a sneak, sees Lenny Gibbon outside the shoe shop, puts up her hand, and calls out Miss Hunter's name.

Lucy leans awkwardly over her eight-month bump to put the mitten back on Chloe's hand. The nearest drill

falls silent, but Matey the beggar is still shouting. ‘Stop a minute,’ he yells, and Bernie does stay put, but only because – with creaking knees – he’s struggling to find a way of grasping the dog mess without letting the hem of his fawn coat trail in the stinking residue on the pavement. He’s as keen as his dog to go to the park. He wants to get the morning walk done in time to prepare the pub for the gathering after the funeral. But he wishes Ritz would stop tugging on the lead and pulling him off balance.

The foreman of the gas workers jumps down into the trench. He’s seen something he doesn’t like the look of, and wants to examine it more closely. His team won’t thank him if he has to stop them working to make a safety check. They want to get the job done as fast as they can, and not just so that the traffic can move smoothly again. Two of them have children at the local primary school, and if they finish early, they’ll make it to the nativity play.

At the bottom of the hill, Lorraine Lee runs out of the park gates and turns towards the shops. She can feel her phone vibrating in her tracksuit pocket, but she ignores it. Can’t – stop – now. Her feet are hurting, and every breath burns and stretches the inside of her chest, but Lorraine is pleased with herself. She’s kept going from

the moment she closed her front door, has circled the boating lake seven times, and now she's ready for the challenge of the climb towards the hot drink she's promised herself. In her mind's eye she can see the whipped cream and flakes of chocolate on top of the mug that will warm her hands as she settles into the leather sofa at the back of the café. She's conjuring up the sweet cocoa smell that in just a few minutes will be her reward. But that's not the only reason she can't afford to lose momentum. The marathon is only four months away, and she's got to build up her stamina. Who would have thought she'd get this far? When she and her friends signed up for the race it was just a joke, really, and the others dropped out long ago, defeated by the winter chill. Lorraine had never expected to get addicted to training; to long to get out of bed in the morning and into the open air. Determined to maintain the speed and rhythm of her strides, she pushes hard against the upward slope.