



# How Not To Disappear

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In a brief Prologue, seventeen year old Gloria spins and dances on a South London common sometime in the late 1950s, celebrating the gentle warmth of a Spring Sunday morning, free from her joyless Roman Catholic School and equally joyless home. Her cowed mother stands anxiously by: "Father will be wondering where we are." "I can't bear her fear," Gloria tells us, "her quiet desperation to prevent confrontation."

Quick as a change of typeface, we're into Chapter One's witty email from our main narrator, Hattie Lockwood, chatting to her friend Reuben, who's mingling with the beautiful people, including exotic new girlfriend Camille, on the St Tropez waterfront. Hattie's missing Reuben and she's also missing best friend Kat, away at the Edinburgh Festival with her new lover, Zoe-from Kettering. Meanwhile Hattie is grinding out shifts at The Happy Diner. What she's not told Reuben is that she's pregnant. By him.

The connection between Gloria and Hattie is soon established. Hattie takes a phone call which reveals she has a relative she's never heard of, a Great Aunt Gloria. The caller, a caring neighbour, is anxious because Gloria isn't at all well. Dementia and maybe worse. Time may be running out. Gloria's alone, and has never mentioned any family, but the neighbour has somehow got the Lockwoods' number and thought they might want to be in touch.

Hattie decides to visit and finds a sparky if irascible retired actress pouring the champagne and gin slings very early in the day. It's soon clear she's got loose ends in her life which she is desperate to resolve before memory and body fail. She needs to travel to Cambridge, the Lake District, and then Whitby. Why? She's not saying. She can't make such a journey alone. So Hattie decides she'll take her why not? She's just passed her driving test, Mum is in Spain with would-be husband Carl, and her Fiesta's in the drive doing nothing.

Throughout their road trip, the dual narration continues, so we share Gloria's confused perspectives alongside Hattie's clearer understanding as the secrets of past and present emerge. The parallels are often exact. Both had an unwanted pregnancy aged seventeen. Both had fathers damaged by war. Both become involved with boys who, in different ways, break the conventions of the day. And, although we learn just how harsh life has been to Gloria, we know she would agree with Hattie's determined "I'm not scared of anything?". As Gloria and Hattie travel, they won't allow the other to evade their searching questions. More than 50 years divide them, but their growing care for each other enables ever more significant family secrets to emerge. Time is pressing though, since other issues demand resolution. Does Hattie

want to keep her baby? Gloria says her story will end at Whitby ? given her health, her failing mind and her impulsiveness, Hattie cannot rule out her Great Aunt stepping off that high cliff.& The supporting cast ? Reuben, Kat, Hattie?s mother, Carl - also have life-changing decisions to make.

Here, the women are complex, caring, usually eager to learn and to grow. Males are often far less nuanced; they include men who are feckless, devoid of empathy, violent to the point of rape or unwilling to handle responsibility in relationships. An exception to such male inadequacy is Sam, the boy Gloria loved in her teens. He?s kind, reflective and he is responsible; but more than half a century ago, his skin colour precluded his acceptance by her family members ? especially the men. So Sam disappears from Gloria?s life quite early; thereafter she meets first with appalling brutality and later makes three marriages to vacuous husbands. In a novel whose female characters are drawn with engaging subtlety, there may be a risk of imbalance.

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