

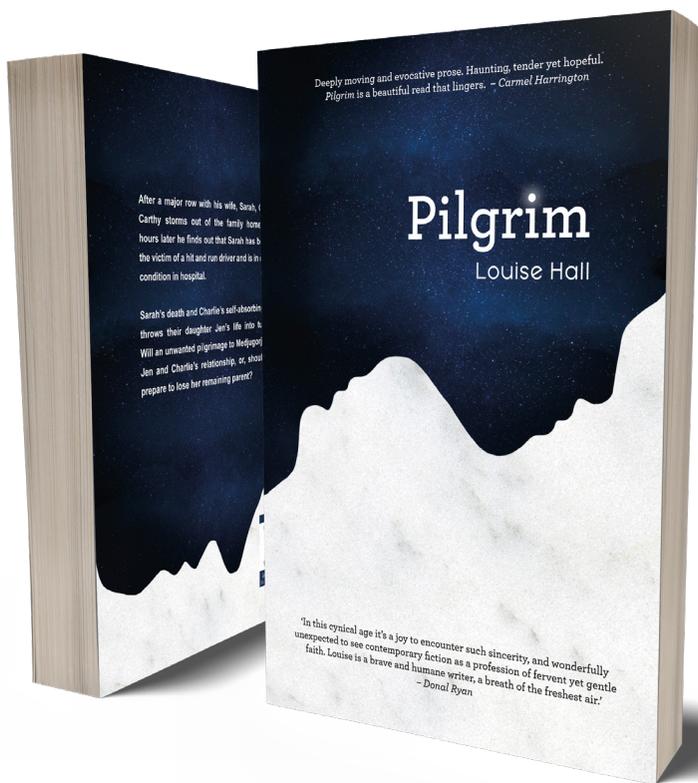
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Pilgrim

Louise Hall

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Pilgrim

Louise Hall



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PROLOGUE

On 24 June 1981 six children from a poor Catholic farming village in the communist country of Yugoslavia claimed to have seen a vision of the Blessed Virgin on a small mountain called Podbrdo. The children said that a beautiful woman appeared to them on the hill, holding the baby Jesus in her arms. They said that the woman they saw was young. She had black hair, blue eyes and wore a greyish-blue dress with a long white veil. A crown of twelve gold stars sat comfortably on her head. However, they became frightened and ran away.

The following day they returned to the hillside and the children, who were aged between ten and sixteen, saw her again. This time, they said, they spoke to her, asking why she had appeared. Her reply was simple: 'I have come to tell the world that God exists.'

1981

1

YUGOSLAVIA

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The foreigners come in droves, laden down with heavy backpacks and full suitcases that have been rooted in and pulled apart by the milicija at the airports of Mostar, Dubrovnik or Split. When they arrive in the village they flock to the hillside of Podbrdo, their bare feet scraping off the loose stones. In the evenings, the pilgrims camp on the outskirts of the village beside the forest, two-person tents lit only by small torches. At night, I hear the strumming of guitars alongside the chirping of crickets, the hint of laughter and singing. When it stops I know the milicija have come and moved them on from their makeshift campsite. The language barrier does not matter; the milicija get their message across. In their eyes there is much suspicion. Their voices are stern as they shoo away people like they are unwanted dogs. After the foreigners gather their belongings, they walk along the dark, dusty road, unable to see a footstep in front. But the lights inside the church of St James stay on, so they move in that direction. They move towards me.

Some will pause and sit outside the church for a moment. They will kneel beside the local woman whose lips move in prayer. At the gable end

of the church there is a trickle of water that falls from a rusted pipe. In the humidity of the night they will queue here and wait patiently for their turn. Then they will move around to the back of the church and sleep in the fields as the locusts swarm above their heads.

In the morning time I see their faces more clearly. They are men and women who come from the continent and further afield. Young men with uncut hair, whose shoulders are heavy from the load in their lives. Women of all ages, some holding the hands of their children. There are those who are giddy with excitement; others subdued with awe. Their skin is warm and sallow, or pale like porcelain and they all pull at their clothes to allow some relief from the hot air. They are all unique in their own wonderful way, yet one thing they have in common: eyes that are wide with curiosity.

‘Why such a large church for such a small village?’ they ask.

‘Where are the children who see the Gospa?’

‘When will she appear?’

‘What message does she bring?’

They ask the questions with urgency but I do not answer. ‘Go inside to the church. To Holy Mass,’ I tell them, pointing to the oak double doors at the entrance. Inside, the monstrance sits patiently in the tabernacle until the hour of adoration arrives. On the altar are clear vases filled with fresh flowers and the scent softens the clammy air. ‘That is where the Gospa’s son is, and He is waiting for you.’

I have a responsibility now to many: the locals, the pilgrims, but most of all the children. Given my humble beginnings in life, I never expected to be involved in something like this. Lord knows I took a strange, looping path to get here.

My parents were simple people who lived on and farmed the hills in a neighbouring village. Although we had very little, Tata taught us the way of the land and sang songs of old as we toiled throughout the day. At night, Mama would wash the dust and grit from our clothes, telling bedtime stories as she cleaned. When we looked into the tapestry of the rolling hills, which seemed to stretch forever along the skyline, we saw a huge part of ourselves in them. They belonged to us and we revelled in the beauty of their majesty every moment of every day. Each morning, I would watch my father rise before the sun and step barefoot out through the frail wooden door of our small house. After just three steps, he would fall to his knees and stretch his arms wide as he reached out to the mountains. And he would stay there for some time, allowing the air to fill his lungs and the earth to seep into his skin. From his right pocket dangled a pair of wooden rosary beads that Mama had made for him. When he lowered his arms, he would take the beads from his pocket and for the next half hour he would lose himself in prayer. Towards the end, when he was just finishing the final mystery, Mama would come up behind him and place her weather-beaten hand on his shoulder.

‘Come, Josip,’ she would say, ‘let us sit and eat so you have nourishment to start the day.’

And Tata would smile at her and say, ‘My darling Vesna, it is from you and the children, from the sky and the mountains, and God himself, that I find nourishment.’

I was the youngest of five and unlike most of my brothers, who preferred to learn the ways of the land, I enjoyed going to school. Each morning after Mama had fed us, she took me by the hand and we walked between the hills for more than five kilometres before reaching the classroom of a small school. There were days when the air was so humid we could barely

catch a breath as we walked. At other times the rain poured from the heavens, drenching our skin and saturating our clothes. Yet we persevered. We walked in the bitter cold, when the mountains were covered in a blanket of fresh snow, and in the spring, when the first shoots were dotted on the hills. In the afternoon I walked home by myself, my belly empty but my mind brimming with information.

Just like my father was fulfilled with the sky, the mountains, his family and God, I became satisfied with knowledge and books. But soon the knowledge I received in that small school in the neighbouring village did not seem enough; there was an emptiness inside me that longed to be filled. That was how I found myself drawn closer to Tata. He seemed to possess a rare, effortless peace in his life. We had so little and at times life was very hard, but Tata would always urge us to be grateful for what we had, reminding us that there was always someone else worse off. I began to rise with him each morning and go outside, where we would kneel and face the mountains to pray. At first, I was just going through the motions, whispering the prayers I had been taught to recite from a young age. But soon these words began to hold true meaning. They consumed my thoughts and took hold of my soul. It was as though someone had clicked their fingers and suddenly I was at one with God. Now I could see why my father was so happy, why he wanted for so little. He put all his trust in God, and God was always by his side. I knew then that I wanted to dedicate my life to prayer.

The only thing I had to do was tell Mama.

‘But you could be anything you want,’ Mama said. ‘You could travel to Zagreb and train to be a doctor. Your teacher tells me how interested you are to learn about the sciences.’

I understood her concerns. Although I would be educated well in the

seminary, becoming a priest would automatically make me an enemy of the communists. Mama often saw our local curate being pulled aside and questioned by men of the regime. She pointed out how the curate's uncle was one of the many Franciscan priests whom the communists murdered at the monastery in Široki Brijeg. We all knew of how the communist soldiers had stormed their church one afternoon in February 1945. They lined the Franciscans up and shouted at them, saying there was no God, no Church. They ordered them to remove their habits but the priests refused and began to pray. They would not denounce their faith and, for this, the communist soldiers took thirty of them outside, slaughtered them and then burned their bodies with gasoline. But even as they had stood facing their executioners in their final moments, the Franciscans prayed and asked God to forgive their attackers. This image of these martyrs is one that is ingrained in the hearts and minds of many of our people.

'I will place my trust in God, Mama,' I told her as she took a handkerchief from Tata and dabbed her wet eyes.

As I spoke, I looked over to Tata for reassurance. His smile was wide, making the lines on his weathered face smooth. I knew I already had his blessing. I got it the first morning I came out of the house and knelt down beside him in prayer. Soon after, I began my vocation.

I was a young man on leaving the seminary, full of zest and eager to progress. Initially, I moved from parish to parish, between Zagreb and Sarajevo, working with the people of my country, who had so much faith that I was sure it kept them alive in the harshest of times. During that time I furthered my studies and concentrated on psychology, as I was

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always eager to try to figure out the complexities of the human mind. When I got the opportunity to go to America, I accepted, and spent many years stationed at a parish in the borough of Brooklyn. I worked with the addicts who slept beneath the statues in our church when the streets became too rough for them, and with the poor women who knocked at the side door of the sacristy with crying babies in their arms, their tiny forms wrapped in a cocoon of blankets to protect them from the bitter cold.

Then, earlier this summer, I began to hear stories of what was happening back in my home country. The communists were calling it a revolution. The locals were calling it a sign from God. I wrote to my father, pleading with him to send me on any information he could gather. He got my brother, Tomislav, to pen the letter. Tomislav was only one year older than me and had been born a cripple with twisted legs and no hand at the end of his left arm. His mind was as sharp as a knife, however, and all his strength lay in his right hand. Growing up he hadn't been able to make the long trek across the mountains to attend school, so every night, just after Mama's stories and just before prayers, I sat with him on top of our father's winter coat and taught him to spell and read. So when Tata heard of my request, he paced around the room and dictated a response that Tomislav fervently transcribed:

My dearest son Petar,

The stories you hear are true. There have been some strange things happening in the municipality of Čitluk these past few weeks. It started just after mid-summer, on the Feast Day of St John the Baptist, and it has been happening every day since. The stories come from the hamlet of Bijakovići, in the village that is nestled between the hills. News travels faster than the

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wildfires that burn the mountains in the month of August. Each day we wake to some new information.

There are six children and they say that they have seen the Gospa and that she has spoken to them. My bones have become too weak to walk far, but Mama travelled to the village to see for herself. She went to the hillside where the children gathered one evening and watched as they glided up the mountain of Podbrdo. She said it was like their feet did not touch the soil, like they were carried by an invisible force. The locals followed behind, and even though Mama found the terrain uneven and the climb tough, she said she needed to see for herself if these claims were true.

And these children, Petar, some of them are not much older than you were when you left for the seminary. Mama knows of their parents, farming folk like us. They are worried about their children's claims and at times wonder why they would choose to bring this on their kinsmen. But the children tell them not to worry. That is what the Gospa tells them. She has chosen this village, these people. They must not be afraid.

Mama told me how they behave. When they reach the top of Podbrdo, one minute the children are murmuring prayers, and the next they fall to their knees in unison, their eyes transfixed on one solitary, invisible spot before them. Their lips move, she said, but no sound escapes their mouths. It is like they are out of time and out of place. They are lost in an ecstasy unknown to us. And those who gather around the children stay quiet. Yet they see nothing. Every one of them wants to see something, but it is not there. Not before their eyes anyway.

And now the milicija have arrived on the streets. There is a curfew in the village and the children have been told not to go to the hillside. They are forbidden and must stay in their homes. It is said that the authorities have sent them in to stop this 'revolution' from the local people. 'What revolution?'

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Mama has heard someone say. 'These people are simply praying.' But the milicija mock the locals. They spit at their feet and keep their hands on the guns that are strapped to their belts.

Mama has spoken to a cousin who says that the children are frightened. They yearn to go to Podbrdo to see the Gospa, yet they are kept hidden. Armed milicija roam the streets, waiting for something to happen, but they are blind to the reality of it all.

We have heard that cars came for the children. Each one was taken from their homes and driven to Mostar where they were put in separate rooms. The communists interrogated them for over five hours, without their parents by their side. A psychologist travelled from Sarajevo to assess the children. Mama heard from the cousin that the psychologist, herself an atheist, left Mostar with some comments to the chief in charge. She told him, 'There is nothing wrong with these children. They are telling the truth about what they saw. It is the people who brought them here who need to be assessed!'

There is a difference in the air around the mountains, Petar. I cannot explain the change with words.

These children have been chosen. Why? I do not know.

And though you can see the joy in their eyes, I am told, their bodies also tremble with fear at times. The local bishop is not happy. He does not give them his support and so they are left with no guidance for now.

Pray for them, my dear son, that they might find that guidance in their lives. And soon.

*Your loving father,
Josip*

Shortly after receiving the letter, I made the decision to fly home to visit my family. It was early morning when the plane flew over the mountains I

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was reared in and skidded onto the runway of Zagreb Airport. The arrivals hall was so hot and packed with people that I felt faint as I queued for passport control. When I got to the top of the queue, I was pulled aside and my only bag was searched. From it, they took my Bible and began to tear at the pages as though I had something hidden inside. It seemed they were not happy to find nothing on my person that could get me into trouble. I was brought into a room and left sitting there with no water for what seemed like hours. Eventually they told me I was free to go but that they were keeping my passport for the time being. It seemed that my visit to my family would be a long one.

When my provincial superior heard of my predicament, he had no choice but to reassign me. This is why I am now stationed in the village that Tata wrote about. Every day more people arrive. These pilgrims. They leave the comfort of their own homes in their own countries and somehow find their way to this tiny village. They have many questions. Not all of them can be answered. After all, we are all still students in this newfound school.

I will not lie. I too had my doubts when I first arrived. After all, why would the mother of God appear to six children from a poor farming village hidden behind the Iron Curtain in the country of Yugoslavia? Has she nothing better to do?

But then the children came to the church one night, crying and banging on the doors.

‘Father, Father, please let us in. They are chasing us.’

I could not ignore the pleas of these children, who were being chased by the milicija. I released the heavy bolts on the door and ushered them inside.

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‘Come,’ I said, as I led them through the church. ‘You will be safe here. I will not let them harm you.’

We stayed in the darkness of the sacristy for many hours that night. No sound escaped our mouths as the milicija pounded on the church doors and demanded to be let in. After some time, they gave up banging and shouting and all was quiet. It was then that I spoke with the children properly for the first time. No pilgrims, no locals, no other priests. I lit a candle so I could see their faces as they spoke and I listened to them as, one by one, they shared their story.

When they left later that night, I slept little. A million thoughts whirled around in my mind and, just as the children were frightened, I felt my own fears gather. Yet one thing was solid and unfaltering. These children were telling the truth. For through their eyes I had been able to peer into the gateway of their souls. In them I saw no lies. They had indeed seen the Gospa. She had spoken to them.

2

DUBLIN

SARAH

‘I think she’s gone.’

I hear the deep drone of a man’s voice between the shards of pelting rain hitting tarmac. Though my eyes are half-closed, I can see that the sky is a deep navy and littered with stars that shoot across the canvas, changing sizes as they move. The moon is full and clean and it spins like a brilliant white disc that’s stuck at the highest point in the night sky. And I’m warm inside, so very warm. The pool of murky water that has spilled out from the drains on the roadside soaks through my skirt and sucks at my skin.

‘I think she’s gone,’ he repeats.

I want to tell him that I’m not gone, that I’m still here, but my lips won’t move.

‘Keep working on her,’ someone else says. ‘I’ll not lose another one this week.’

They work in haste, their brows sweating and arms pumping. Big men with thick, dark hair, who are swamped beneath puffed fluorescent coats. The lines beneath their eyes are etched deep into their weathered skin. If I

look close enough I can see all the pain and suffering they have witnessed over the years swimming around in the pools of their eyes. Their minds yearn for respite and their bodies long to pause, and yet they continue to work, continue to sweat, continue to pump.

And all I can do is lie here watching the moon watching me.

They'll never get to Charlie in time. I'll be carried away before he even gets the news. I left without my handbag or purse so they'll not know who I am or where I live. I could be a serial killer or a mad woman, and yet, here they are, trying to stop the flow of crimson blood that oozes out from God knows where. Still they are trying to hold on to the sliver of life that lingers within my body. While one is keeping pressure on my head, the other is pumping down on my chest, cracking my already broken ribcage.

On the footpath, dark shadows stand in silence. Some place their right hands over their mouths. Others toy with gold necklaces that dangle close to their chests. They try but are unable to suppress the horror of what they are witnessing: the flashing lights and the stillness of my body that lies motionless on the now quiet main road.

As I lie here, I start to wonder if I'm ready to leave. Or indeed whether the world is ready for me to go. I think about this morning and how I woke with the feeling that everything would be all right. Things would get better with Charlie and we could be as we once were: carefree and happy, with our entire lives laid out before our feet. We would sit down tonight, I told him. We wouldn't let things fester for any longer. And I had other news to share with him. Something that would bring change. Positive change.

I can hear people talking. They are saying there's a car overturned behind the wall of the Esso petrol station up the road.

'There's a man trapped inside,' someone says.

'He's unconscious,' says another.

I hope they get to him soon and that someone tells him it will be okay. Even if they aren't sure whether or not he can hear them.

'It's not how long you live, Sarah,' my ma used to say, 'it's what you do during your life that counts.'

And yet I've never done anything worth mentioning. Nothing that anyone else hasn't done, anyway. I married Charlie and had Jen. They have been my greatest achievements. There's nothing else.

Charlie. I hope this doesn't break him. I know Jen, for all her youth, will be strong, but Charlie is delicate inside. His heart is tender and can crush like crêpe paper.

'Don't read it out to me, Sarah. Read it in your head for crying out loud,' he'd say if I tried to read out the headlines in the *Herald*. 'I don't want to hear about it.' Whether it was a child killed in a farming accident down the country, a horse tortured to death in the fields beside the dilapidated concrete flats, or the teenage victims burnt alive inside a Valentine's night disco because the emergency exit doors had been bolted too tight, Charlie said that he couldn't cope with the images. They messed with his head.

It's as well that he's not here now.

For a moment, I think I can feel my body once more, but then realise it's only because I'm closer to the stars. They've lifted me onto a stretcher. My legs are warped at a strange angle and my head is prevented from falling to the side by a thick neck brace. They've stopped pulling at my half-closed lids and shining the small torch inside.

'Move back, please,' one of the men says, as they shuffle towards the back of the ambulance.

'But I know her,' a woman's voice cries from the footpath. 'That's Charlie Carthy's wife. She only lives down the road. Not five minutes

from here. Just down past the Littler shop and at the end of the cul-de-sac, I think.'

She's pointing down past the row of lush evergreens whose leaves are hanging low from the weight of the rain that had been falling most of the day.

'Do you have a telephone number, love?' the man at the top of the stretcher asks. 'For her husband.'

The woman taps her long nails against her temple.

'She might not make it, missus,' he pleads.

'I don't even know if they have a telephone,' she says. 'I don't know her that well. Only from seeing her down at the Saturday market with her little girl buying wool and needles.'

I think about the new pattern that's sitting in my handbag. Jen hasn't seemed too interested in learning so far, but I take her along all the same, hoping she might find a hobby or some sort of escapism to pass the long summer days, instead of spending them up in the woods with no one for company but young Francis Nelligan. Though they're good friends all the same; they look out for one another. But she won't see as much of him when she starts the girls' secondary school in September. I hope she makes new friends. She hasn't found that too easy in the past.

'Is it down on the Close?' some man pipes up from behind just as they're placing me inside the ambulance. 'Yes, that's Charlie Carthy's wife. Jaysus, this will kill the poor man. He's already going through a rough time, I hear.'

Two gardaí, who wear soaked uniforms with loose ties and dark peaked caps, move closer to the man.

'We would appreciate you showing us the house,' the younger one says. 'We'll do the rest ourselves.'

‘Beauvalley is the hospital on call tonight,’ the paramedic says, about to close the back doors of the ambulance. ‘We’ll be bringing her straight to A&E there.’

The guards nod and take a step back.

They’ll have to bang hard on the door of our house, I think, because Jen will either be asleep or have her headphones on in her bedroom upstairs. And Charlie, if he has made it home, will be sleeping on the couch with the television on full blast. He always does this after we’ve had a row. He’ll sleep downstairs on the couch, and the next morning, when I come down, he’ll kiss me gently on the cheek and whisper that he is sorry.

I think back to this morning. I had played music in the house for the first time in what felt like an age. I kissed Charlie’s head and made him tea. He smiled, bemused. But the atmosphere changed as the day went on. First, I found all the letters from the bank. How he thought he could keep them buried was beyond me – the envelopes with big red stamps and letters detailing months and months of arrears. But I still wanted to help. We were in this together. He needed to know I was there for him. And I had other news, too. News that would lift his spirits and remove the damp from his soul. It was only when he told me that he was going to give Pat O’Mahony a dig out in The Beauvalley House this evening instead of staying in to talk with me – as he’d promised he would – that I snapped. I was sure I heard my own heart crack as he said it.

‘Since when have you been friends with that miserable so-and-so?’ I said. After telling him the things I had heard about Pat O’Mahony and his pub, I asked him to stay away from it, but he told me not to speak to him like he was a child. That he would be home later and we could talk then. I showed him the letters I had found, the ones with the red ink stamped on them. And I asked him how long he thought he could

keep them a secret from me. Then I told him to leave, if that's what he wanted. And he did.

When Charlie left I cried like I hadn't cried in years. But I couldn't let things go. I couldn't settle. There was an urgency pounding in my chest as the evening wore on into a dark, wet night.

I needed to see him. I had to tell him the news. Our news. The thought of him not coming back till all hours and us not sorting things out had me driven demented as I paced the kitchen floor.

'Never go to sleep on an argument,' my ma often said.

So I left the house just before eleven o'clock and went to find him. Up to the top of the cul-de-sac where I took the small wall like I was taking a hurdle. On down the slip road that was hidden behind the Littler and out onto the main road. I just kept on running, knowing that when I found him all would be well. I didn't care that the roads were flooded and my eyes were blurred from the rain.

That's why I failed to see the car.

If Jen comes to the door as well when the gardaí knock, then she might catch Charlie when he stumbles and she'll be able to grab the keys and lock the house after them as they rush to the hospital. They won't have to go in the car with the gardaí; they can just take the shortcut into the church grounds at the back of the house and through the gap in the prefabs at the primary school. The wall is not fully built yet, only four feet high, so Charlie can give Jen a leg over and then climb up himself into the hospital grounds. That way, they'll get there quicker than if they drive on the main road.

And I know that I'll hold on. Not just until they arrive, but for some weeks after. I'll pull and grab and grasp and hold on to any bit of life left lingering beneath my skin. I promise that I will.

Promises are made to be broken, Sarah.

Not now, Ma.

I try hard to focus as we burst through double doors and bypass the waiting area of the emergency room. The fluorescent lights overhead dazzle. Heads turn as the trolley wheels scrape along the floor. There are too many people packed into this small room. A footballer with a broken leg wears his blue-and-white-striped club shirt proudly as he sits on a chair and waits to be seen. Elderly people lie on steel trolleys, hoping that someone will eventually notice them. A drunk sways as he leans against the wall and touches the bandage that is wrapped around his bloodied head, wondering what on earth happened to him. The trolley I am on glides past them and into a closed-off room. People's eyes move with me before likely returning to stare in the direction of the nurses' station as they wait for their names to be called.

A doctor with thick eyebrows and a stained white coat stares down at me in this new room. He is trying to figure things out. Others appear and look over his shoulder, down at my too-still form. One of the paramedics speaks to him. 'Female, mid-thirties,' he says. 'Hit and run accident on the Beauvalley Road. A stolen car is what the witnesses reckon. Tore through a red light like a mad man, ploughing through her as she crossed the main road. She has two broken legs and a dislocated hip. Severe trauma to the head with multiple bleeds. There's a lot of swelling. Left lung is collapsed. We've been working on her at the side of the road for the past twenty minutes. She's coming and going. We didn't think she'd make it here, to be honest, but she's hanging on for something.'

'Has the family been informed?' the doctor asks.

In my mind's eye, I see Charlie racing through the hospital doors, his hair all tousled and his T-shirt wet from the rain. Jen grips his left hand,

her body shaking. The bottom of her pyjamas are soiled with mud. A pretty nurse with wide eyes and tied-up hair avoids their questions as she leads them into another room.

The lights overhead are getting brighter with each passing second. The desire to be closer to them is overwhelming. But I hold myself back. I won't go just yet. It's not my time. I'll fight. For Charlie. For Jen. For us.

Memories flood my mind. The first time I saw Charlie standing awkwardly in the corner of the dance hall. The moment I grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the floor. The apprehension of the first night we shared a bed after we wed. The wonder of holding our first-born in our arms. The first fight, the first tears, the first time we realised it was all part of the motions. Helpless laughter as we shared a cheap bottle of wine. Joy as we flicked through piles of developed negatives from a camera we bought ourselves one Christmas; the pain of cruel words we threw at one another and the relief at knowing they could never be true. They move like a motion picture before my eyes.

Someone says it again.

'I think she's gone.'

But I'm still holding on.

'Keep working. We mightn't lose her yet.'

It's there if they listen hard enough, pulsating slowly beneath the flesh. Not one heartbeat but two.

And I'm smiling inside. They don't understand how I'm still here when I should be gone.

But I do.

I think of Charlie and Jen. I see them, entwined in a fearful embrace. Their bodies moulded together, their pain lessened because of their unity.

'I'm not gone,' I whisper to them. 'Never gone.'

After a major row with his wife, Sarah, Charlie Carthy storms out of the family home. Just hours later he finds out that Sarah has become the victim of a hit-and-run driver and is in critical condition in hospital.

Sarah's death and Charlie's self-absorbing grief throws their daughter Jen's life into turmoil. Will an unwanted pilgrimage to Medjugorje heal Jen and Charlie's relationship, or should Jen prepare to lose her remaining parent?