

As the light of day began to seep through the curtains, Sally thought back over everything that had happened. Despite it being months ago now, she often woke early, mulling it all over. She never thought that at the age of 52, she would be living alone.

It had all happened so quickly, really. First, Lara went off to university. Then, the year after, so did Freddie, and the house turned so quiet and empty. Just her and Paul left rattling around.

It was then Sally realised just how little they had in common. She liked American sitcoms and period dramas. He liked thrillers and action films.

When the house had been filled with noise and chatter from the kids, it hadn't seemed like a problem. Then increasingly, he began to work late. So she ate by herself, ready for bed by the time he came home – his dinner covered in tin foil.

The rare times when they did go out for a bite to eat, they had stopped having things to talk about and sat in silence. A year after the children left, they both knew things had come to an end.

It took another eight months to sell the house, sort the finances and pack up the belongings they had accumulated over a 26-year marriage.

Not one for fuss, Paul kept largely out of her way. Not one for arguments, she agreed to everything he suggested about dividing their stuff.

It was painless. There were no histrionics, no shouting,



Changing ROOMS

Sally's nest was empty, but perhaps all it needed was a splash of colour

no drama. Shame, really, that things could come to an end with little more than a whimper.

Now, she brushed away a tear that had trickled down her cheek and swung her feet out of bed. She wasn't sad exactly about not being with Paul any more, but she felt a sense of melancholy over the finality of the divorce. The surprise was that she didn't actually miss him. She missed having someone. There was a difference, she reminded herself.

With the money from the sale of the family house she

had bought a small cottage on the coast. She chose it carefully. While she couldn't quite afford somewhere with sea views, it was in a peaceful location, which she had always dreamt about, looking out over a patchwork of fields.

She also ensured it had enough room for when the kids wanted to come home. In truth, this was becoming rarer now, with Freddie spending holidays with

a new girlfriend, and Lara arranging to visit friends in various parts of the country.

She switched on the radio to fill the silence.

Sally had spent the past few months attempting to make the house her home. With so many decisions to make, she had found it a daunting task. It was a blank canvas to fill and, without Paul's decisive voice in her ear, she couldn't quite remember what her actual tastes were any more.

She'd ordered swatches and paint samples, but the dull taupe and magnolias she had gone for were still sitting on the side. She wasn't sure what she wanted, but she knew these weren't right. They reminded her of Paul. She tried to remember what Agatha would have done.

She started making a coffee, and popped a bagel in the toaster. Before marrying, she had worked as PA to Agatha Zarensky – a talented and in-demand interior designer. With her statement jewellery and colourful clothes, Agatha was one of a kind.

'Don't be afraid to be bold, Sally!', she'd often say.

Agatha certainly dressed to be noticed. An emerald green dress would be worn with a sapphire scarf. Her wrists adorned with bangles in primary colours and red-framed glasses. Interestingly, by contrast, she spoke in a quiet, considered voice, but with such gravitas that people always listened.

It had been a job Sally had relished pre-kids. Looking back now, she often wondered why she had so readily agreed to give it up.

'You'll need to give your notice in now', Paul had repeatedly said, when she got pregnant with Lara. At the

time, she reluctantly agreed, but it was a shame she had not kept in touch with Agatha.

She looked at the clock. Time was ticking and she had to get to work. She had managed to find herself a part-time job in the local haberdashery. It didn't pay much, but it was a start.

At first, she was nervous around using the till, dealing with fussy customers, and the ins and outs of helping run the shop. But Maria, the owner, was gently encouraging and she had quickly picked up the daily routine.

The first part of the morning in the shop had started off slow. Maria had asked her to rearrange the bundles of wool, and she was knee-deep in pastel yarns when the phone rang.

'I'm going to need help with this order', Maria called out after she had hung up, and so they set about boxing up various tassels, trims and cords in a riot of colours.

'It's for an important customer', said Maria. 'So it needs to be correct. Oh, and they want it hand-delivered today. Would you mind going in to town?'

Sally felt a dip in her stomach thinking about how out of practice she was driving anywhere busy. But she could hardly say no.

'Yes, of course. What's the address?'

Apart from the man who'd undercut her at a roundabout, the journey had been plain sailing and she arrived at the smart stucco house in good time.

She rang the doorbell and a young man in paint-splattered overalls answered.

'I have a delivery from Buttons & Braids', Sally said. 'Oh, come in', he said,

pacing off down the partly decorated hallway.

'Er, OK,' Sally replied. In the living room, there was a huddle of workmen around some drawings. The young man pointed Sally in the direction of a woman who had her back to her.

As she turned, it was the swish of skirts and the jangle of bracelets that gave her away...

'Agatha! I can't believe it!' Sally exclaimed. 'After all these years! How are you?'

Agatha peered over her scarlet-framed glasses. She'd aged, but gracefully, her hair once-black was now silvery-white and cut in a sharp bob. Reassuringly, she was dressed just as flamboyantly as before.

'Sally Townsend! Is that really you? Well, well, well!' said Agatha, eyeing her in that knowing way she had.

Sally suddenly felt self-conscious in her simple black jeans, white T-shirt and tan suede loafers.

But Agatha beamed. 'You look a million dollars. What on earth are you doing delivering boxes, for heaven's sake?' she said.

Sally brought her up to speed as Agatha listened. 'Everything happens for a reason, Sally,' she finally said.

It turned out that Agatha had relocated nearby, and had downsized her business. As Sally left, she vowed to keep in touch.

A few days later, Sally was sorting out a delivery of cotton reels when her phone buzzed.

It was Agatha. 'Do you fancy getting some fresh air next Tuesday?' she asked. They arranged to meet early, at 7am, at a nearby

beach Sally had never visited before. Despite it being September, there was a chill breeze, so Sally wrapped up warm, looking forward to a bracing walk along the sand.

Agatha was waiting. 'Ready to take the plunge?' she smiled, handing her what looked suspiciously like a swimming costume and towel. Over Agatha's shoulder, Sally spotted a group of women laughing on the beach.

'Who... What? We're going swimming?! But it's freezing!' stuttered Sally, shaking her head. 'No way!'

'Yes! I know, that's the point! Come on. You can change in there', Agatha said, chuckling and pointing to a small stone building. 'See you down there.'

Sally had no choice but to do as she was told and met the group on the beach. 'Ready, steady, let's go!', someone shouted. Agatha grabbed her hand and in they ran.

The swirling water engulfed her. The cold waves took her breath away. It was shocking. What on earth was she doing?

But then, something changed in her. Sally felt an energy coursing through her veins. She felt invigorated, full of life. She looked around at the other women cheerfully bobbing in the sea, and her mouth stretched open – this time from joy, and not the cold.

After that, Tuesday mornings became a regular event in the diary. It was great to be back in touch with Agatha. She had always found her so inspiring. But, also, there was something about cold-water swimming

that just seemed so life-affirming. It had given Sally a renewed spring in her step.

At home, she took the plunge and started making her mark on the cottage. She suddenly felt empowered to make her own decisions.

Paul had been solid and reliable, yes. But he was also rather controlling and, dare she say it, rather boring.

'That's just not practical, Sally', he said when she'd once picked out a mustard felt armchair she had loved.

Or 'We don't live in a show home, you know', he had said, shaking his head, when he came home one day to find the furniture rearranged. It had become easier to just agree with him.

She spent the money from the divorce settlement wisely. She tried her hand at DIY, looking up tutorials on YouTube so she could save the pennies.

First, she whitewashed the floorboards in the living room and painted accent walls in rich shades of rose pink, petrol blue and moss green.

Then she invested in a small, sea-green velvet sofa and a thick cream rug laced with swirls of turquoise.

In her bedroom, behind the Victorian-style metal bed she had sourced from an antiques fair, she hung wallpaper printed with smudged clouds. It was all beginning to look like her own.

'This is your chance to shine', Agatha had told her one morning after a bracing swim. 'My advice? Be brave. When in doubt, add a splash of colour. Where there is dark, add a touch of light.'

Sally wasn't sure if she was talking about houses, or life. But she was sure going to find out.

THE END
Angelina Villo-Clarke, 2022

STYLING: PAULINE WATTS. 2022. PHOTO: PHOTOFEST BY NICKY GATTI