

The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

Chapter Three.

That weekend was the hottest of the year—the hottest for at least five years, it seemed to me. Nadine staying, as planned, with Ashley’s mum and dad, Ashley and I found ourselves able to luxuriate in the heat, give in to its little whims and insistences. We sunbathed in the most irresponsible of ways—grabbing the midday rays like our lives depended on it and even nodding off on occasion (something Mam had always warned me against). The minutes ticked by steadily and we embraced this new, albeit temporary regime, drinking vodka from the freezer (strawberries in our glasses for added flavour) and eating when it occurred to us. At one thirty Saturday afternoon, I even reached over and slipped my hand into the delightfully sweaty interior of Ashley’s bikini bottoms—my fingers working away at her for a good few minutes before she awoke with a start and a patio-shaking shudder. She told me off (apparently the neighbours could have been watching from their bedroom windows) but smiled to herself when she thought I wasn’t looking, her hand unconsciously straying to her crotch as if surprised by its multifarious possibilities.

I didn’t sense the change until the Sunday afternoon. It was gradual, creeping in like a new season—a noticeable (and quite possibly imagined) chill the only harbinger.

Working had been out of the question. This was our time together and even I could never have been so insensitive as to expect to work even briefly during such a rare and pleasant period of respite—however much I looked forward to returning to Richard and his adolescent adventures. I therefore gave in and enjoyed, thinking only of myself and Ashley, but by the time Sunday arrived I found thoughts of the journal

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we'd discovered tugging at the fabric of my imagination, reshaping it with suggestive contours and colours, and I could no longer resist; I brought it out onto the patio to read whilst we soaked up the sun.

"I don't see the fascination," Ashley said. She was flat on her stomach on the sun-lounger beside me—head on her crossed arms as she stared at me evenly. "It's the diary of a nobody—what could be so interesting about that?"

I'd only given it the most cursory of glances since we'd read the first paragraph together—Ashley growing bored before I'd even got to the second sentence. It was almost impenetrable in places—the spastic handwriting as dense as the use of language—and I had to admit, my initial thoughts had been as dismissive as Ashley's. Upon further reading, however, I was finding it both disturbing and wonderful—not to mention frighteningly synchronistic.

"She was a patient in the asylum," I told Ashley. "A nobody, yes—but an absorbing nobody."

"Asylum?"

"The Sorrow Street Asylum? That was on this site before these houses were built?"

"Oh, right."

I'd told her about this many times over recent months and it was vaguely annoying that she'd needed her memory jogging. I wouldn't say that my work didn't interest her, as such. She was as enthusiastic about the finished project as the most ardent Sonuel Moore fan. It was more that the whole creative process bored her. Had I not accepted this a long time ago, it could have been infuriating.

"Maggie phoned earlier," she said—the subject of the journal and the Sorrow Street Asylum summarily dispatched. "She was wanting to know if you're still gonna

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be helping her out this coming week. Keeping an eye on her and all that.”

Since discussing this with Oliver, I had to admit (if only to myself) that I was beginning to have misgivings. I was a writer, not a private detective—and the thought of possibly becoming embroiled in something I wasn’t cut out for didn’t really appeal. Nevertheless, I had made a commitment, and however distasteful it might be, I always found it nigh on impossible to go back on my word.

“Of course I am,” I said. “I wouldn’t say I was going to do something like that and then not.”

“I know,” she said, watching me carefully, eyes slitted against the harsh light—face misshapen and pouty from resting on her arms. “She’s just anxious, that’s all. This is really getting to her, Sonny. She’s got it into her head that whoever’s doing this to her wants to take Wee Mark away from her. Kidnap him.”

“Has a specific threat been made?” I asked—closing the journal and resting it on my lap, suddenly quite concerned.

“Not that I know of.” She shrugged as best she could, given that she was flat on her stomach with her head on her hands. “But you know what she’s like. Especially since Jim died. She gets spooked. Her mind works overtime. I wouldn’t be surprised if...” She let the sentence trail off and I looked down at her. Her eyes tightly shut, I wondered what she was thinking.

“If what?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Forget I said it.”

“Easier said than done. If what, Ash?”

Again, that shrug. “I just... I wouldn’t be surprised if she was making it up to have you running around after her.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

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“Is it?”

“You know it is. Why on earth would she want to do a thing like that? It’s bloody preposterous.”

“I don’t think it is,” she said quietly, her eyes still closed—speech a little slurred. “Unlikely, possibly—but given the fact that she has no man in her life right now other than Wee Mark I’d say it was anything but preposterous. She’s still grieving, love. A grieving, lonely woman is a peculiar creature. A woman is a peculiar creature, full stop.”

I saw an opportunity and I unashamedly took it. “You won’t get an argument from me on that last point,” I told her—hoping to steer the conversation away from Maggie’s unlikely infatuation with me.

“We disappoint you?” Finally she opened her eyes again, watching me carefully—measuring every twitch and tremor like an emotional seismologist.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it.”

“It was a joke, Ash. Lighten up.”

I watched her buttocks clench as she did her pelvic floor exercises—a thoughtful and deliberate tensing that reminded me of a thug cracking his knuckles. A pool of sweat had formed in the small of her back and a lone hover fly set down beside it, supping heartily. Ashley reached behind her and slapped it away.

“It’s not easy, you know,” she said.

“What isn’t?” I wondered if she meant slapping flies away or clenching one’s buttocks.

“Being me. It’s not easy being me.” Her voice held a treacly, retarded quality that I’d heard before and didn’t particularly like. Introspective and suddenly quite

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gloomy, I tried to figure out where this had come from—and how I’d failed to spot its imminent arrival. “It’s all well and good you taking a cheap pop at Womankind in general, but... it’s just not easy. Being me. Being a woman in the twenty-first century. *Being.*”

I knew better than to argue with her. It wasn’t what she needed and it most certainly wasn’t what *I* needed. As she spoke, I imagined her shrinking on the sun-lounger—Alice-like and vulnerable. Her voice became weaker and weaker, until it was little more than a whisper, and I listened without interrupting, hoping she might purge herself.

“I used to think it would all amount to something,” she said. “Something I’d be able to see and touch. Something tangible. I’d spend a few years in preparation, doing the emotional groundwork, and then, one day, everything would just fall into place and I’d be... you know, fulfilled. But it’s not like that at all. Every day it just gets harder and harder, even though I know how lucky I am, and sometimes... I just... I should be happy, so why is it so hard? I just... I’m not *giving* anything.”

None of this was new to me, of course. For a good few years, since well before Nadine had been born, I’d heard it or something very similar at least every couple of months. It all came down, as I saw it, to a lack of fulfilment and self-worth brought on by one very simple underlying problem; Ashley was too bloody idle to do anything about it. She wanted to feel of value. I tried to point out that Nadine and I needed her, that our lives would be lousy without her, but that didn’t help. Ashley was a clever woman. Cleverer than me in many ways, she could have walked into any number of rewarding positions if she’d put her mind to it. But that would have required discipline and commitment—the willingness to march to the beat of someone else’s drum.

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I waited a moment, just to be sure she had finished, and then said, “I don’t know what to say that I haven’t already said a hundred times. If you’re that unhappy, we can change things but to be frank, every time I suggest a solution, you don’t want to know.”

“That’s because all your suggestions add up to the same thing,” she said in a sulky whisper. “Get a job.”

“Is that really such a bad idea?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not addressing the underlying problem.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know.”

It was difficult to know where to go with this. The more we talked, the more pointless the task seemed to become. I looked at the garden—hole finally filled in, lawn looking fairly healthy now that the summer storms had stopped and given it time to dry out, the green stained fencing so reminiscent of childhood—and tried to understand how we had reached this place. As a couple, we had always seemed to work well, in spite of these hiccups—but I couldn’t help asking myself just how much more of this our marriage could take. I didn’t understand the problem and I was damn certain Ashley didn’t, either. So how on earth were we to ever find a solution?

I was about to say this to her when I heard the familiar sound of footfalls coming along the path at the side of the house. Someone whistled the Dambusters March through his teeth and Ashley rolled her eyes at me—sitting up and putting on a long, thin blouse that covered up the important stuff. I usually locked the side gate when Ashley was sunbathing, but today I had forgotten and, sure enough, it opened

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and Old Man Ned came strolling round onto the patio—hands clasped behind his back, stooping as though he was about to speak to a very short child.

Ashley hated Ned. He lived a few doors along and ever since she'd seen him with a pair of binoculars once she'd insisted he was a Peeping Tom—a dirty old man, she told me, “whose eyes undress me, find me not up to scratch and help me back into my clothes”. I, on the other hand, liked Ned. He was one of those old-fashioned storytellers; ninety-nine percent bullshit and always on the lookout for an audience, but generous with his wit and hospitality. Where Ashley saw a pervy old git, I saw a lonely old man with a rich store of local lore and old style common sense.

“Hello, Ned,” I said, getting to my feet and offering him my seat beside Ashley—much to her chagrin. He waved a hand and declined, without so much as a glance at Ash. “What can we do for you this fine day?”

“Is it a bad time, lad?” I was dressed only in shorts—my bare chest a little too red for comfort. “I wouldn't want to intrude if you and your good lady are enjoying the sun.”

“We were just going to have a cup of tea. Care to join us?”

“Actually, no. Thank you. I can't stop. I was just wondering if you might have a few minutes to spare to give me a hand with summat.”

Ashley hadn't even said hello to him yet—unless a weak and fleeting smile counted as a greeting. She sat on the lounge with her legs pulled up, hugging the blouse to her, and, I have to admit, I wanted to give her a good shaking. Bad manners in other people always got my back up, but when I saw it in my wife I felt a depressing sense of disappointment. We were a unit. Granted we were individuals, as well—but what we did reflected on and affected each other.

Before she could speak up with some excuse to keep me from helping Ned (I

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swear, I could hear the idea forming in her head), I jumped in and said, “Sure, mate. Now quick enough for you?”

“I reckon now would be just the job,” he said, showing his crooked, stained teeth. “If that’s all right with Ashley. You don’t mind me stealing him away from you for a few minutes, do you, love?”

There was nothing even remotely convincing about her smile. She shrugged her shoulders and started making herself more comfortable. “Be my guest,” she said. “The conversation was getting a little tedious and repetitive, anyway.”

Old Man Ned’s living room faced east, like ours, so at this time of day it was pleasantly cool—especially with the windows open as wide as they were. I stood amidst all the clutter—horse brasses, aspidistras, more books on the Battle of the Somme than I think I’ve ever seen in one place at the same time in my life, four Tiffany lamps in various states of disrepair, two circa 1973 tiled coffee tables, two televisions (one widescreen, the other a fourteen inch black and white portable), cable decoder, DVD player with somewhere in the region of three hundred DVDs, video recorder, stacks of magazines and newspapers, one threadbare armchair and a settee that looked hardly used—as I stood amidst all this, I felt a deep moment of peace, of tranquillity, almost.

Old Man Ned stood in the doorway watching me with a vaguely amused air as I took in my surroundings. During our short walk from my house to his, he had told me of his new pet project—a book, “not like what you write, or owt, just a little thing about the stuff that’s happened round these parts”—and I now understood his problem. If he was to do it properly, he’d explained, he reckoned he needed a computer—something easy to use with “one of those Internet things”. The thing was,

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he had little room for a desktop, especially if the other rooms were as cluttered as this.

“I thought of getting rid of the bookcases,” he said. “Putting it there. But that’d mean getting shot of a load of me books, and I can’t say I find that all that attractive.”

I thought of Richard and the delightful Mrs. Sutherland. He would know exactly what was required under such circumstances.

“There won’t be any need for that,” I told him, turning to the doorway where he stood and smiling. “All you’ll have to do is buy a laptop instead of a desktop, then you can use it wherever you like and put it away when you’re finished.”

Ned raised an inquisitive eyebrow and shuffled further into the room—almost cracking his shin on one of the coffee tables. He seemed less stooped in his own home, more at ease and less inclined to see himself as the old man the world insisted he was. He perched on the arm of the settee and said, “One of those things that look like a briefcase?”

“A laptop, yes,” I said.

“But... they’re not... they’re not *real* computers, are they?”

I wasn’t really sure what he meant, so I didn’t say anything—chewing my mouth thoughtfully and praying that he’d say something to clarify his point.

He sighed and dried the palms of his hands on the knees of his jeans. Shaking his head, he said, “I know. I’m showing my ignorance. It’s just that it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense from where I’m sitting. They’re *tiny*, so how can they be as good as real computers?”

Now I understood. Ned was of a mindset that insisted that big was better. Whether it was a generational thing, I didn’t know, but Ned wanted to *see* something for his money. When he bought a computer, he wanted a fifty-foot bastard.

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For the next five minutes I did my best to convince him that laptops, and miniaturisation in general, were good things. He resisted with the occasional derisive sniff, but ultimately he accepted my arguments—reluctantly agreeing that a laptop was the only workable option if he didn't want to get rid of anything.

“I reckon you're just feeding me a line cos you don't much fancy helping me hump all those books out of here,” he said with a wry grin as he showed me to the door. “Want to keep yourself fit for that woman of yours.” He winked and although I would never have admitted it to Ashley, it was one of the few times I felt uncomfortable around Old Man Ned. I didn't want him talking about Ashley, in any way, shape or form—and so I smiled politely, gave him a pat on the shoulder and left.

It was true I'd enjoyed his company. It was also true that it was good to be back out in the steadily freshening air.

That evening, I sat alone in my office—trying not to dwell on the silent afternoon that had followed with Ashley after my visit with Old Man Ned. My head ached from too much sun and vodka, and I felt an overwhelming sense of loss. A full, busy life suddenly meant nothing. It was an act of misdirection, nothing more, and understanding that was of no help whatsoever. Ashley had a point, I thought. Being happy was hard. Being *truly* happy was hard. Other people seemed to manage it, but I couldn't help asking myself just how real all that was.

Before going to bed, blanketed in depression and wilting perceptibly, Ashley had stopped by my study for a moment—leaning against the jamb and staring in at me. I'd stared back at her, admiring her still slim figure in the shorts and T-shirt she wore, unable to resist her sad, gem-like eyes. In that instant, I was wholly convinced that she thought I hated her. I didn't know where the thought came from, but it made

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perfect sense. She saw herself as the problem—forever upsetting the apple cart—and in her mind, that was more than enough of a reason for me to hate her.

“It’s still hot,” she’d said. “The weather. I wish it would cool down a bit. It’s unbearable.”

Before I could respond, she’d left—her gaze falling to the floor as she turned away, movements fluid but curiously ungraceful. It was all so premature. A space where there should have been occupation and vitality, a void that time could as yet see no way of filling. Something to be mourned, if not understood.

I thought about writing. It was true I felt like shit and should have really joined Ash in bed—but I just wasn’t sleepy and the thought of laying awake beside her, listening to her breathe as she listened to me breathe, filled me with a deep and oppressive brand of despair. But I wasn’t up to writing. The headache and my mood would compromise the fiction, I was sure, and I’d only end up discarding it, and so I picked up the journal and turned to the page I’d marked earlier.

I do not know or particularly care what day it is, I read. I should not be writing, and yet they let me, possibly grateful of the stillness it inspires in me. I am purged thrice daily, and only once into these threateningly blank pages. Weak and empty. It is their preference. It makes for compliance, the soul silenced and stilled, a dispirited and broken creature less likely to rail against their stoical and otherwise intolerable conventions. She is the worst. The Warty Nurse. I call her this because she isn’t worthy of a true identity and the wart on her nose seems to grow bigger shift by shift. She delights. That is what I sense more than anything. She delights in seeing me empty and husk like, standing in the doorway of the toilet stall and watching as the watery, foul-smelling stool erupts from me. Her pleasure as I wipe myself unsteadily, full knowing I will never be as clean as I wish to be, is nigh on intolerable—and had I

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the strength I would surely claw out her hateful, twistedly gleeful eyes.

The Warty Nurse knows the worst of me. She knows that all the enforced vomiting they can inflict on me won't stop me pleasuring myself beneath the sheets once the lights are turned down. She knows that however they might restrain me, I will always find enough movement to take me away from this hellish place. Sometimes a thought is enough—and this knowledge offends her so greatly that she can think of nothing more than how best to steal from me, how best to hollow me out that I might be filled with piety and rectitude.

This morning she inflicted a further indignity on me—or that was how she no doubt viewed it. I have suffered far worse and with a certain readjustment of thought it was not quite so bad as it otherwise might have been. I might say I even derived a degree of physical pleasure from it, being of such a Nature.

“Kneel on the bed, please,” The Warty Nurse said, cheeks flushed, fingers laced on her tightly starched belly. “Quickly now. We haven't got all day.”

She cannot reach me. That is what this woman will never realise. Probe and invade as she might, her fingers like the tentacles of some extraordinary sea monster within me, she can but scratch the surface of who I am—and surely will never understand the things I have done... the things I am convinced I will do again.

When she sang to me under her breath, whispery words and broken melody—with urgency and not a little fear—I thought I felt something loosen between us. It was difficult for me to see it clearly at the time, but now I understand it in that very precise way that can only come in the dead of night, when the angry halls are dark and broodingly silenced. A little of her power over me has been exiled, I now see. With that act, she gifted me something I'm sure she never intended. She took pleasure from the thing she did to me, of that I am convinced, and I better than any know that

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pleasure always has its price. I have learned and still learn. The lesson in and of itself has become the pleasure, in some unfathomable way, but this is something The Warty Nurse would never be capable of grasping. She still believes that this place grants her certain freedoms—that my imprisonment in this place I do not belong disempowers me and negates any opportunity there might be for me to impose my Will and correct the balance. But she is wrong. So very wrong. My understanding of her True Nature lends me a degree of liberty that she will never acknowledge until it is far too late.

A boy once held me. When I was a girl—a maiden and his equal in strength and intellect. A Sunday afternoon graveyard, solemn and sensual. I knew little in those times, little of the things my looks and scent would demand of me, but I knew enough to see that this boy was enamoured of me. He pushed and brushed against me at every opportunity, blushing and bulging as he panted an apology. I liked the game, but that afternoon behind the church he went farther than any had a right. I will not say I did not enjoy the act. I find pleasure wherever I can. It is my way. Rather it was his presumptuousness to which I finally objected. He believed he had some God-given right to enter me, to tear the very thing that was, then, so precious to me. He pushed me to the ground, and I did not try to stop him—as easy as that would have been. Hard and fast, it was, some might say, a cruel introduction into the ways of men, but it was one for which I was nevertheless grateful.

Three days later, the boy was found disembowelled down by the docks. I do not know if this was my doing. I do not recall. I like to think it was.

Her voice was distant and soft—at the far end of a long, extending tunnel. Close, yet light years away—delicate and, yet, somehow jarring and brash. She spoke again, and I saw a naked woman kneeling on a bed, buttocks large and relaxed as she waited and

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waited and...

“Sonny?” Ashley shook me gently by the shoulder and I sat up quickly—my neck and back immediately issuing formal, written complaint (in triplicate). “I thought you must have nodded off in here when I woke and found your side of the bed empty. Silly boy. You’re getting too old for shit like this.”

It appeared I’d fallen asleep face down across my desk. My right cheek was both sore and numb, and I had pins and needles in my fingers. Add to this the stiff neck and back and I think it’s fair to say I wasn’t in the best of shape.

Ashley appeared somewhat amused by my dishevelled and disjointed appearance—and after the afternoon and evening we’d had the day before, I could only find that promising. Wearing only a faded matching sky-blue bra and thong, her hair falling about her face as if in an effort to conceal a scar or defect, it struck me that the worst was over, for the time being, and maybe we could be happy after all.

“I owe you an apology,” she said, brushing my hair back from my brow.

“Do you?” My mouth was dry, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

“You know I do. I was an arse.”

“It happens to the best of us,” I said graciously. “Don’t worry about it, love.”

“You forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive.” I sighed and pulled her onto my knee, holding her around the waist as she put her arms around my neck. “It’s just... it’s life, love. It does that to us all every once in a while. It doesn’t have to make sense, it just *is*.

Oliver would no doubt call it existential.”

Ash nodded thoughtfully, grinning as she said, “Sartre was a fucking pain in the arse, too, then?”

“Naturally.”

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Quietly, we held each other a while longer—examining each other’s sunburnt bits and checking for melanomas like grooming gorillas. Ashley smelt of sleep and crisply baked flesh, just the faintest lingering whiff of her feminine hygiene spray and last night’s deodorant. Beneath that was something more personal, something particular and yet ephemeral. Her essential smell that existed just beyond the more describable frequencies.

“I do love you, you know,” she whispered into my ear, head resting on my shoulder. “I know I have a bloody funny way of showing it sometimes, but I do.”

“I’ve never doubted it,” I lied.

Ashley took me to bed. We had at least a couple of hours before Pippa, Ashley’s mum, brought Nadine back and Ash seemed determined to finish our weekend alone on a high note. As out of sorts as I was, I did not resist—falling into our tried and tested method of lovemaking and actually finding that, yes, the intimacy and release helped. I held her like my life depended on it as I penetrated her and she cried quietly as we worked together, fighting for her curiously elusive climax. Downstairs, the telephone rang—and we ignored it, caught up in our sudden desperation and something I would later think of as akin to panic.

Ashley finally satisfied, after much hard work on both our parts, we settled back in each other’s arms and listened to the sounds of the street outside. Children playing, cars and the occasional motorbike passing by—the susurrations of the newly resurrected breeze in the trees. It took me back to my childhood, my teens. Growing up in this place with so many dreams and unfulfilled ambitions. I’d wanted so much, but above all I had yearned for simple contentment—a wife, a child, a facsimile of the wonderful (and quite possibly unattainable) example set by my parents. Where others

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might lay in their bed dreaming of rock stardom and excess, I would dream of times such as this—love and leisure, simple understanding. I had believed that all obstacles in a relationship were surmountable, that any broken part could be easily fixed with patience and application. Naïve? Perhaps—but it didn't stop me from now pausing and, in spite of our difficulties, acknowledging all the good things we had. Maybe the constituent parts of our relationship were a little shaky, but our foundation was solid and if we could only keep on the way we were going, I was sure everything would work out all right in the end.

Ashley moved so that she could get a better look at my face, plumping the pillow and making herself more comfortable. “Happy?” she said, lips soft and a little pouty.

“Happy,” I said, not wholly convinced but determined not to show it. I would fight my way to happiness if that was what was required, and in the meantime I would just bloody well fake it.

“So yesterday is all forgotten?”

“I'm sure I haven't got a clue what you're talking about.”

“It's that easy, eh?”

“If we want it to be.”

Those soft lips pursed and I thought she was going to disagree—insist that nothing was that easy. However, she merely smiled and said, “You really believe that, don't you? You really believe that we can make things the way we want them to be.”

After a little consideration, I said, “I believe it's possible, but not necessarily probable.”

Sitting up and turning to face me, hugging her knees—naked and uncharacteristically vulnerable—she sighed and shook her head. “It's early and I've

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just come my brains out. You're going to have to explain that."

"I think every individual has the capacity to create the life of which they dream," I told her, "but one thing invariably gets in the way."

"That one thing being?"

"Life itself."

"Life gets in the way of life?"

"Life gets in the way of *a* life. Or, rather, chance, rogue elements do." Not bad for a Monday morning. Olly would have been proud of me.

"Define 'chance, rogue elements'," Ashley said, eyes crinkling with smug self-satisfaction.

"Random events and encounters," I told her, knowing full well I was getting in way over my head. "Unpredictability. Sensitive dependence on initial conditions. That kind of thing."

"A moody, irrational partner?" Blessedly, she was grinning. Her eyes lit up and she chuckled to herself, shaking her head and adding, "Sorry. No, really, I am. That isn't a fair question."

"Sounds fair enough to me," I said with mock-solemnity. "And it's a very interesting point, actually. I suppose what you're really asking is do I think you've held me back? Does that sound about right?"

"Well I wouldn't quite—"

"It's unavoidable, really," I continued, laying it on thick and hoping the humour was evident (my life probably depended on it). "Man is the driving force behind the whole, incredible patriarchal system, naturally—whilst Womankind is... how shall I put it? Womankind lacks vision and insight. It continually strives to stem the flow of progress, ever fearful that it will be left behind and—"

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Grabbing my sleepy penis beneath the sheet, Ashley said, “Much more talk like that and I *will* stem the fucking flow. *Permanently.*”

I surrendered gracefully, giving in to yet another chance, rogue element.

I’d just come off the phone to Oliver—returning his call and agreeing that we would carry out our first surveillance of Maggie together, until we got into the swing of it—when Pippa, as prompt as ever, turned up with a frighteningly serene Nadine. The two looked a perfect fit, grandmother and granddaughter, the latter riding the former’s hip as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Pippa was a stunner, even though she was in her mid-fifties. Slight and energetic, auburn hair tied back and a light dusting of make-up highlighting her fine features, she was the archetype I’d once imagined Ashley growing into. Authoritative, but only occasionally imposing—comfortable in her own skin and with her place in the world. But daughters rarely become their mothers in my experience, whatever the clichés state to the contrary, and Ash certainly wasn’t the exception that proved the rule.

She came through to the living room without needing to be asked, putting Nadine down and sitting in the armchair beneath the window with a perceptible sigh—stretching her legs and wiggling her toes. Ashley was still in the shower, no doubt begrudgingly washing away the remnants of our second sweaty sex session of the morning, so I offered Pippa a coffee and she declined with a smile.

“I’m cutting back,” she told me. “All those toxins, just not good, you know—especially for a woman my age.”

I perched on the edge of the settee and playfully patted Nadine’s Pampered bottom as she waddled past. “Ah, I see,” I said. “And just how old are you, now? Thirty? Thirty-five?”

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“Fifty-five, as well you know.”

“A lot to be said for toxins, then, from where I’m sitting.”

“Then I’d say you need to sit somewhere else.”

I laughed and shook my head, steadying Nadine when she nearly tripped over my foot. “How was she?” I asked Pippa, indicating Nadine with a nod. “Behave herself?”

“As good as gold. We spoilt her rotten, of course, so she’ll probably give you hell all week. Makes for an interesting life, though, right?”

“We don’t know how to thank you.”

“A progress report would be good.” When it became clear that I didn’t have a clue what she meant, she added, “Ashley. She seemed a little distracted and in the doldrums the other day.”

I didn’t like talking about Ashley to her mother. I didn’t like talking about Ashley to anyone. It always struck me as just about the worst thing anyone in a relationship could do, because it implied a weakness within the unit, a lack of loyalty and honesty. It had been difficult enough talking to Olly, but with Pippa I often felt that, as nice as she was, she was inclined to judge her daughter harshly. Ashley was not Pippa, and for Pippa this was a disappointment and affront. Nevertheless, she was concerned and I supposed I had no real choice other than to tell her how Ash was doing now—even if it meant being less than generous with the truth.

“She’s fine,” I said. “She was just in need of a bit of a break. We both were, if I’m honest.”

Nadine, her dark blue eyes large and perpetually astonished, climbed onto the settee beside me and snuggled in, whispering a Kylie song under her breath. I rearranged myself, putting my arm around her whilst Pippa studied me sceptically.

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“There seemed more to it than that,” she insisted. “It looked to me like she was having one of her bad times again.”

It was easy to forget that others had seen Ashley at her worst, too. I was so used to protecting her and bearing the brunt of her moods and depressions that it could almost have come as a surprise to see that Pippa had been there before me—had had to guide her through the difficult years before we had met. Ashley rarely spoke of her childhood and early teens, but I’d always got the impression that, in spite of the inevitable conflicts, theirs had been a fairly harmonious household. Now I looked at that again and wondered if, perhaps, it had been more difficult than I had realised. Ashley as a teenager. Not exactly an alien concept to me, since we’d met when she had been just sixteen. But maybe I had seen the best of her. Where Pippa had had a troublesome, moody and depressive daughter to contend with, I had had the mischievous and fun-loving girl who nearly always made me smile.

Pippa was not easily misled, and I knew better than to try. “She had a bit of a blip,” I admitted, “but she seems to have got over it just fine. She’s back to her old self this morning.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. She gets like that when she’s tired, that’s all.”

“Oh, I think it’s a little more complicated than that, Sonuel, as well you know.” She glanced at the hall doorway, ensuring the coast was still clear, then added, “Maybe there’s nothing clinically wrong with her. I don’t know. I’m not qualified to say. But she has it rough at times, and that can be hard on those around her.... I want you to know, Sonny, that we are here for Ashley, too. For Ashley and you. You don’t ever have to feel alone.”

It was an unexpected and moving speech—one I was in no way prepared for. I

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started to mumble an ineffectual reply, but Nadine beat me to it.

Shuffling her bottom to the edge of the settee, she hiccupped and then, with raised chin and dimpled cheeks, said very precisely, “Splendid.”

An exaggeration, but welcome nevertheless.