

# **The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts**

**Gary William Murning**

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**In memory of Jean Currie**

**Also by Gary William Murning**

If I Never

Children of the Resolution

## Chapter One

“Are you planning on staying in there all day?”

I looked up at her. Ashley Moore, my beautiful if sometimes rather apathetic wife – our sleepy two-year-old daughter Nadine Verity perched on her hip, head on her mother’s comfortable chest. From my hole in the ground, at least four feet down, and with the sun behind her, she was an impressive figure. Actually a little on the short side, and with a carelessness about her that had once been attractive, my perspective imbued her with an elegance that quickly made me forget my irritation at being interrupted.

“You know me, love,” I said. “I don’t plan.” This wasn’t entirely true, and she knew it. I could actually be methodical to the point of fastidiousness when the mood took me – and whilst I may have rarely planned in any overt way, I was nevertheless inclined to think well ahead. With my work, if nothing else.

She gave me her best I’m-trying-to-be-patient look and lifted Nadine higher on her hip. “Yeah, whatever,” she said. “But are you staying in there all day, or what? In case you’ve forgotten, a certain little lady is having a few friends round later and... well, let’s just say I’d rather have that living grave of yours filled in before they come, if you don’t mind.”

We’d already had this conversation and she knew very well that filling in my hole at this early stage in the game was simply out of the question.

The day was warm – promising intense heat and high humidity – but it was cool where I was, and, briefly, I took solace in that. Closing my eyes and breathing in the damp, fibrous scent of soil and clay, I tried to remember what it was like to be autonomous, to never be answerable to anyone, alone, selfish and focused entirely on my own goals and obsessions. That had been the post-university bachelor me. An alien figure, it now seemed. And however annoying Ashley’s

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nagging could be, I found I didn't truthfully envy that shadowy half-man.

And so, very calmly, I reminded myself just how lucky I was and said for the umpteenth time, "Darling, you know I can't fill the hole in. I haven't fixed the problem, yet."

Nadine had picked up on the tone of exaggerated patience in our voices. She glanced warily from her mother to me and back again. The fleeting suspicion I saw in my daughter's indigo eyes made me feel like a stranger. I wanted to smile at her, tell her that everything was going to be all right – but I just wouldn't have been convincing.

"There isn't a problem, though, *darling*," Ashley insisted. "So the lawn gets a little water-logged now and then. It's a lawn. It's not as if our foundations are filling with water or anything."

"I want the lawn to be nice."

"Because your dad always kept it nice. I know. And that's lovely, it really is, but how is a bloody big hole going to help?"

I wasn't entirely sure, but I couldn't tell her that. The hole had been an impulse – something I'd felt I'd needed as much for the hole itself as for the solution I'd hoped it might provide. Some men collect beer mats or pornography, but I had discovered a love of holes – this hole in particular – and protecting my latest obsession required a little creative reasoning.

"Clay," I said, wondering if I'd perhaps inadvertently hit on something. "It... it holds water, you see. And there's an awful lot of it down here, which means that because this section is lower than the lawn it's not allowing the run-off to... well, run off."

I thought I saw a brief flicker of admiration pass behind her squinted eyes – but it was difficult to be sure of anything with the sun where it was and my neck beginning to ache from looking up at her.

"The clay holds it?"

"Indeed. The clay holds it."

"Cway," Nadine chuckled. I reached up and tickled her bare foot and she reflexively pulled it away, laughter hiccupping from her as she buried her face in Ashley's chest.

"I see," Ashley said, refusing to be distracted. "So what if there's clay under the lawn? You gonna dig that up, too?"

"I won't get it filled in today," I said sullenly. "But I'll make it

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safe.”

After I'd piled bags of sand and cement from the garage around the hole, and laid some old fence panels over it, I went inside to get washed up and changed.

Nadine was playing with a spatula on the kitchen floor whilst Ashley watched the portable television on the worktop in the corner as she ostensibly made eggy sandwiches for the “party”. I stepped over Nadine and soaped my hands meticulously in the sink – scrubbing beneath my nails and ensuring that not a speck of dirt remained.

The woman on the telly said, “But Charley, I'm ready to forgive you”, and Ashley snorted derisively.

“Anything interesting?” I asked, drying my hands on an inferior brand of kitchen roll.

“Just the usual brain-dead twonks subjecting themselves to superficial analysis,” she said. “You're not wearing that T-shirt, I hope.”

“I was planning on the white shirt with blue stripe.”

“I thought you didn't plan.” She knew I was still a little pissed off about the clay, so her tone was light and conciliatory. I was happy to meet her halfway. After all, whatever had been said, I still had my hole – if only for the time being. That had to be a kind of victory.

Grabbing her around the waist, I pulled her close – some mashed up egg flicking from the spoon she was holding and landing on the carpet tile nearest Nadine. Frowning at it and sniffing the air thoughtfully, Nadine swatted it like a fly with the spatula – gleefully grinding it into the carpet.

“You're a right smart arse today,” I whispered in Ashley's ear. “But you knew that already, right?”

It had been difficult for Ashley and me recently, and we were both quick to acknowledge that. I couldn't recall the last time a day had passed without there being friction and badly concealed impatience between us – without either one or both of us finding something in the other to irritate and distract. For me, it was usually a mark of frustration – with Ashley and her couldn't-care-less attitude, with my work, with the waterlogged hole. For Ashley, I suspected her moods were more complex than that. She was a deep creature who had too

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much time to think, even with a two-year-old to run around after, and I couldn't help feeling that all it would take for her to find me a little less irritating would be for her to work a little harder around the house, get a part-time job, even.

Today, however, it felt different. As I pulled her to me, trying to ignore the stink of the hard-boiled eggs, I looked into her eyes – almost as rich a shade of blue as Nadine's – and saw something of what we had once been reflected there. The energy, the sublime sense that anything was possible – the overwhelming attraction and the heartfelt conviction that this brought with it. Life was a fairytale in which evil things happened, but good always prevailed. Love was real and enduring, something to be counted upon and which would always inspire the correct choices.

“One of the many things you love me for,” Ashley whispered huskily. “Don't fight it.” She put her free hand in the back pocket of my jeans and pressed me firmly to her – kissing me on the mouth. I felt her warmth – a supremely personal thing – and thought of the way the perspiration dribbled between her breasts on the really hot days.

“We have company,” I said – reminding her that our inquisitive daughter was sitting on the floor not two feet away, quickly losing interest in the squashed piece of hardboiled egg.

“She'll be okay here for a short while. She can finish making the sandwiches.” Ashley grinned, her perfect teeth somehow intimidating. She was joking, of course, but I couldn't help feeling that sometimes – *just sometimes* – she would gladly leave Nadine all alone, or dump her with a relative stranger, if it meant she could get a little instant gratification of one kind or another.

“She'd eat all the bread and mash the egg into the carpet,” I said. “Nice thought, though. Maybe we can talk your mam into having her over the weekend – have a couple of evenings to ourselves.”

Ashley pulled away and went back to making the sandwiches, shrugging. “Not exactly spontaneous, though, is it?” she asked.

“Spontaneity is what got us Nadine in the first place. Now that she's here, however, well, you know. We are parents first and foremost.”

“Are we?”

“Yes.”

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“First and foremost?”

“I like to think so.”

Looking at me over her shoulder, she was about to say more. Her breathing was slow and measured, her eyes fixed and unwavering. Someone on the telly was shouting about how his bitch should show him some respect, man, and I couldn't help feeling that that was the shape of things to come – for us all. Fame at any price, everyone the celebrity, the media validating antisocial behaviour, making it perversely respectable to wallow in the mire as long as you remembered not to talk into camera. Ashley enjoyed this daytime mish-mash of dirt and dysfunctionals, whatever she said to the contrary, and as she stared at me, her mouth open with a partially formed response, I half expected her to spout some suitably inane chat-psychology crap about mothers not losing themselves, how they needed “space” and an “identity” separate from the child. Thankfully, she was not quite so crass.

“Go get changed,” she told me. “And take a shower first. You stink.”

I stopped by my study on the way to the bathroom – just to see if the notes for my next novel had finished writing themselves while I'd been down in my hole – and read through what I had written earlier that morning, wondering where in the hell this was going and if it was destined to be as dire as the rest of my recent, as my agent would have it, unpublished work.

*Examine the possibilities of the Sorrow Street Asylum, I read. Look in particular at ways in which it can be connected to the Cult of Elvis and, specifically, the M' Boy, M' Boy story.*

There were any number of problems that would need to be solved if this novel were to be viable – but I instinctively knew that that could only be achieved during the writing. It was largely true that, as I had said to Ashley, I didn't plan. Beyond a little preliminary research and a few rough ideas as a jumping off point, I preferred to solve the problems along the way – knowing from past experience that a plan in excess of a thousand words would kill the project stone dead for me. But it was a hair-raising way to work, and now I had my hole to occupy me, I couldn't see myself starting it for a week or two yet.

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At the window, I peeled off my T-shirt and looked down onto the back garden. It had been my father's pride and joy before the car crash that had killed him and my mother five years before. It had always had a certain order that I couldn't quite fathom in Dad's day – a quintessential pattern that existed within the deceptively apparent chaos. Plants and flowers I couldn't name sprouted randomly, but never clashed or looked inappropriate. Rows of vegetables filled one corner – so crisp and succulent I now felt nostalgic for them. And the lawn... his lawn. It had possessed a certain simplicity, and yet had an obvious quality about it that came from hours of care and dedication. Precisely mowed contrasting rows of light and shade, consistent length no matter the time of year and never so much as a hint of a yellow patch – these were the things in which my father prided himself, and this pride had carried itself over into the rest of his life. An unassuming, gentle man, he had moved through life with generosity and grace. And all this had been typified by his little patch of garden – bought with the house from the council when I had been no more than a babe in arms, an “investment”, Dad had always said, though I'd always suspected that money had been the last thing on his mind.

Now, looking down onto the lawn, something occurred to me. I sat down at my desk and stared at the skirting board, mulling over the anomaly as the screensaver – images of a very nearly naked Ashley and a mischievous Nadine – kicked in again. Nothing had changed since Dad's day – that was the first thing that occurred to me. The house was where it had always been, the garden was where it had always been – and the boundary fence hadn't been messed about with, as far as I could tell. So why the sudden drainage problem? For as long as I could remember, the lawn had been the epitome of perfection and however lovingly Dad may have tended it, I doubted that that would have been possible if he'd had to contend with the problems I now found myself facing. Could drainage problems develop spontaneously, I wondered.

I pondered this briefly as I took my shower, but quickly dismissed it.

I wasn't entirely sure what I was supposed to do in a room full of e-

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number high toddlers, so when I felt I'd made my toilet last as long as was reasonable and finally went downstairs, I was rather relieved to see that only a couple had thus far arrived.

Maggie, an old school friend of Ashley's had brought "Wee Mark" – a bruiser of a kid who had a habit of pinballing through the house with a maniacal air about him. He was trouble but I couldn't help but admire his rough-and-tumble resilience. Beside him, Nadine's other little friend, Veronique looked even more sickly than usual – sitting in the corner of the settee, hugging her knees and staring around the room with the biggest, brownest eyes I'd ever seen.

Nadine guarded her latest Action Man suspiciously, holding him tightly by the head whilst Molly, Veronique's mum, talked to her about Jesus.

Ashley rolled her eyes at me from the kitchen doorway and said, "Looks like there's a bug doing the rounds. The rest of them are either busy soiling themselves or trying keep out of its way."

"A right stinker, by all accounts," Maggie said. "If you'll pardon the pun." She giggled – and judging by the flush of her cheeks I guessed Ashley had already introduced her to the Vodka bottle (not that they weren't already well acquainted).

"Projectile vomiting, the lot," Ashley said – with rather too much enthusiasm for my liking. "Maybe getting Mum to have Nadine this weekend wasn't such a bad idea after all."

"Do you feel that's wise?" Molly – all slacks and sensible shoes – stood from her crouching position and her knees popped. Apparently her tales of crucifixion and resurrection when all done with for now.

"Why wouldn't I?" Ashley said.

"Oh, no reason," Molly replied – meaning she could think of plenty, at least half of them with a perfectly workable Jesus reference.

"Spit it out, Moll," Ashley said impatiently as Wee Mark shuffled off the edge of the settee and tried to stare down the blank television screen. It occurred to me that maybe I could have made my shower last a little longer – until the hot water had run out, perhaps.

"It's just that it strikes me as a little inconsiderate," Molly said artlessly. "Your parents aren't spring chickens anymore and to be possibly subjecting them to diarrhoea and projectile vomiting doesn't seem all that Christian to me, that's all."

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“You’re forgetting, I’m not a Christian,” Ashley said. Maggie chuckled and helped herself to another vodka.

I pushed past Ashley into the kitchen, and then went out into the back garden – deciding that the best course of action was to just leave them to it. Ashley was more than a match for Molly’s promise of perfection in Christ. She’d read enough to be able to pull Molly’s favoured crutch right the fuck out from under her, if she so wished, but I didn’t particularly want to witness it. Ten years ago, I would have ridiculed Molly for her belief – but no more. As ridiculous as it all so clearly was, a part of me envied her that conviction. No doubt, no questions that couldn’t be answered with “the Lord moves in mysterious ways” – there was a kind of attraction in that.

I sat on the low wall beside the rockery, looking at Dad’s lawn and sipping on a Stella I’d got from the garage. After a few minutes pondering afresh the conundrum of the waterlogged lawn, Maggie came out to join me – bringing her glass and the vodka bottle along with her.

Maggie and I had always got on. Conversation was easy, in spite of the fact that we’d once spent an entire weekend fucking each other’s brains out at her mother’s cottage in Wales – just weeks before my marriage to Ash. In retrospect, we both knew it had been foolish and relatively meaningless – but it was something we had shared, and I could only ever look on Maggie with fondness.

“Ashley’s on about the fundamental differences between the biblical Jesus and the historic Jesus again,” she said.

“Going to be a long afternoon, then.”

“Looks that way.”

We sat like that for a short while, neither of us saying anything – sipping at our drinks and staring at the garden. The sun was hot on the side of my face and I knew that if I didn’t move soon I’d end up looking like a crude Bowie alter ego. I was tempted to go inside to see how it was going between Ash and Molly, but I got the strangest feeling there was something Maggie wanted to say to me. I waited a while longer and just when I’d finally managed to convince myself that I’d been mistaken, she said:

“Something weird’s been happening to me, Sonny.”

As a conversational opener, it wasn’t all that unusual or

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compelling – especially coming from Maggie. She was the kind of person who attracted weirdness the way some folk attract junk mail, and I maybe took a little too much pleasure in telling her this.

“This is different,” she insisted. “I’m worried, Sonny. Worried for me and worried for Mark.... Since Jim... you know... since what happened I’m all that Mark’s got, and I don’t like what’s happening. It threatens me and by default it threatens Wee Mark. That’s just... I can’t live with that.”

Putting my bottle on the pavement by my feet, I twisted to get a better look at her. Since Jim’s death from cancer a little over a year ago, time had started to take its toll on her. Her dark hair was now streaked through with grey and her mouth seemed shrunken – the lines radiating from her lips growing perceptibly deeper. There was a degree of sorrow behind her lacklustre eyes, but more than anything I thought I saw fear there – fear of being alone, of having to face whatever it was that was going on in her life without having someone to help, someone to say the right thing and watch out for her and Wee Mark. I didn’t know if I was the right man for the job, but I did know that Ashley would be deeply disappointed in me if I didn’t at least try.

And so, without giving myself time to reconsider, I said, “What is it, Mags?”

She took her time – that’s what I noticed more than anything. It was so unlike her. Normally impulsive and a little dippy, she sat beside me and very methodically worked through the facts.

“It started about three weeks ago,” she said, ever so calmly – the sweet, onion smell of the vodka carrying to me on her breath. “I thought it was just my imagination to begin with. You know what it’s like when you live alone. Your mind works overtime. So I didn’t pay much attention to it. I tried to forget all about it, get on with my life, but I still couldn’t escape the overwhelming feeling that I was being watched. I couldn’t see anyone, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t see me...” It was starting to get away from her. She paused and closed her eyes, taking a delicate sip of her vodka – a sigh escaping her before she continued. “Then the phone calls started. From a withheld number. Silence, at first, then... he watches me all the time, Sonny. That’s what the phone calls are all about. He itemises my day – telling me what I’ve done, where I’ve been. It’s... I can’t see him, but it’s as

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if he's with me all the time, inside my head. I swear he even knows when I masturbate." She seemed to feel that this last was more than I needed to hear, so moved on quickly. "The police weren't much help. They suggested I keep a journal, change my number and get back to them when I had an idea who it might be."

"Change your name to Catherine Zeta Jones," I suggested. "That might help."

She smiled sadly. "If only it were that simple. I'm scared, Sonny. I mentioned it to Ash and she said I should have a word with you. She said you'd know what to do."

It was nice to know my wife had such confidence in me. The truth was, however, I didn't have a clue where to start, or what to suggest, even. I was a poorly paid (not to mention piss-poor) novelist and, yes, I had a few people I could call upon when the chips were down – but this certainly wasn't something I was in any way prepared for.

"She said that?"

"I'm afraid so." Taking my hand, she gave it a firm squeeze. I remembered what it had been like to be with her. Hurried, frenetic – nothing even remotely resembling love. Purely physical and very wet. It was all so far removed from who we now were, and I suddenly wished it could have been different. I wished that my parents and Jim were still alive, I wished that I could have loved Maggie *and* Ashley, I wished that the world were not such a complicated place with its death and betrayal, its confusing blend of love and need.

"Don't look so worried," Maggie said, squeezing my hand again. "I know it's a tough one. I just thought... well, three heads are better than one, right?"

Something occurred to me. It wasn't exactly the most impressive thought I'd ever had in my life, but at least it was somewhere to start (and something that would show Maggie and Ash that I wasn't about to dismiss this out of hand). "You said he always knows where you've been, right?" I said.

"That's right, yes."

"Detailed and consistent?"

"Very."

"But you've never seen him."

"Not that I'm aware of."

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I got quickly to my feet – kicking over the bottle of Stella in the process – and marched resolutely along the path at the side of the house and round to the front. I heard Maggie hurrying along behind me, breathy and concerned as her flip-flops shuffled and slapped. I smelt honeysuckle and the faintly ripe odour of the hedge that marked the front boundary of our property. If I'd had time to think about it I might have done it differently, but as it was I marched on through the gate and out onto Sorrow Street.

I don't know what I'd expected to see – some guy in dark glasses, perhaps, suspiciously lurking by the streetlamp, smoking and blowing rings into the air as he nonchalantly considered his next move. Maybe this was the moment he had been building up to all along; confrontation, the ultimate explanation. Weeks or months of steady surveillance followed by a formal introduction and... and what?

The street was deserted, of course – unusual in itself, but doubly so given that it was the height of summer and the kids were off school. I stepped out into the middle of the road, Maggie panting behind me as she rested against the gatepost, and turned full circle – scanning the full length of the road, looking at windows and cars parked in driveways, waiting for my eyes to lock with those of a stranger or, perhaps, someone I actually knew. A Tarantino moment would follow. Or perhaps not.

“Sonny?” Maggie said. “What?”

“I don't know,” I answered. “I just thought it seemed logical.” I shrugged. “It made sense to me,” I added as I walked back towards her. “He knows where you've been so... guess it isn't that simple.”

“And what if it had been?”

“Eh?”

“What if it had been that simple? What would you have done?”

Leaning against the other gatepost, I considered this for a moment – feeling my heart rate slow and the perspiration itch in the pits of my arms. The sour taste of beer in my mouth, I suddenly didn't want to think about the things that might have happened.

“I'd have given Ash a shout,” I said.

Feeling rather foolish, I returned to the back garden with Maggie –

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still considering her problem, but determined to do my best to find a more rational approach to a solution. I heard brittle, childish laughter as we walked along the path, and imagined myself lifting Nadine high into the air, spinning her around, covering her with kisses and blowing wet raspberries against her neck as she giggled with near-hysterical delight. Everything made sense because of her. She was the explanation and the cause and at unexpected moments like these I realised just how deeply connected we were.

When Maggie gasped, it took me a second or two to see what the problem was. She stopped and I almost walked into the back of her. Somewhere – far off, it seemed – I heard the word “Jesus” and understood that Ash and Molly were still arguing in the house, each as deeply entrenched and oblivious as the other. Maggie shuddered and reached behind her, blindly groping for my hand and pulling me level with her so that there could be no doubt that I was seeing what she was seeing.

It seemed that Wee Mark and Nadine had escaped the suffocating confines of the house and were now playing quite happily in the back garden – walking purposefully back and forth across the fence panels I’d placed over my hole, one of the sand bags split where they had apparently clambered over it. The panels bounced frighteningly as Wee Mark took his turn, singing the words “Billy Goat Gruff” over and over. The wood made a protracted creak and, as I ran forward to grab Mark whilst Maggie pulled Nadine away from the hole, I imagined it splintering – Mark’s rough and tumble resilience finally getting the better of him.

Blessedly, I got to him before anything nasty could happen. Lifting him and holding him to me, Maggie doing the same with Nadine, we stood like that for what seemed like a very long time – each holding the other’s child, neither wanting to acknowledge the things that might have been.

“We thought you and Maggie were out there!” Ashley insisted.

I held Nadine now, Maggie keeping a firm grip on a struggling Mark. Nadine smelt hot and sweet, and it was hard not to find this soothing. Veronique hadn’t moved from her place on the settee and she looked up at us as if this were all the confirmation she needed that

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we adults were indeed an entirely different and extremely peculiar species. Nadine blew a saliva bubble and it popped against my cheek.

“And you didn’t think to check first before you let them go wandering off?” I knew I was on shaky ground, but as, oblivious as Wee Mark to the dangers of the troll beneath his “bridge”, I just kept right on going. “Jesus Christ, the two of you sit on your arses in here arguing about some bloke who’s been dead for nigh on two thousand years and –”

“Jesus was not just some bloke,” Molly said indignantly. “He was the Son of God and if anyone’s to thank for Wee Mark and Nadine being safe, it’s him and I really don’t think you should –”

“Shut up, Molly,” Maggie said.

“Ut up, Molly,” Nadine whispered.

I could see that Ashley was approaching critical. Her jaw was clenched and the vein in the centre of her forehead stood out. She looked as irritated by Molly as the rest of us – but I knew that when her fists finally released themselves, fingers uncurling like the petals of some carnivorous plant, I would be the one at whom her wrath would be directed.

I could see this very easily getting nasty. Ashley wasn’t entirely in the wrong, here, maybe not even in the wrong at all – but I wanted to punish her for all the other times she’d been complacent, let her know that there was only so much I was willing to put up with. I remembered just the week before, coming downstairs in the middle of the afternoon after a long morning’s work only to find Ashley asleep on the sofa whilst Nadine played quietly by herself. All the doors through to the back garden had been open – to freshen the stifling air and no doubt let a few flies and bees in – and I remembered controlling my anger, reasoning my way through it before waking Ash. I made excuses, pointed out to myself that Nadine wasn’t the type for wandering far from her mother’s side but, ultimately, it had been an irresponsible thing to do, and I’d wondered how many times it had happened before. In the end I had woken her gently and given her the benefit of the doubt (not in the mood for an argument), accepting her explanation and apology, but now that little episode came back with all its unclaimed force and I suddenly felt that Ashley and I were alone, that we were the only two people on the fragile face of the

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planet, and the urge to tell her what I thought of her was too strong to resist.

Very calmly, I took a step towards her – glancing down and noticing that her fists were still clenched. Wee Mark grumbled and whined, trying to escape his mother's grip, but even that faded to the distance. My ears filled with a whirling, swooshing liquid sound and I heard my own voice as if I were under water.

“Our daughter is not a toy to be discarded once you've tired of her,” I said, a little menacingly. “She isn't just another of your whims – she's a precious little thing that needs looking after.”

“You think I don't know that?”

“I think you forget it far too often.”

I thought she would fight. Her hands remained clenched and she blinked rapidly, flushing with colour – her cheekbones becoming more prominent as emotion claimed her.

“I could never forget it,” she told me, taking Nadine from me and kissing the confused child on the forehead. “I would never *want* to forget it. But sometimes it's hard. Harder than you'll ever know, Sonny. It's okay for you. You hide in your office or down your hole most of the day – and you think you're justified in doing that. And you are. To a point. But me... I get tired. I get scared and lonely.”

“The burden of motherhood,” Molly said.

“Shut up, Molly,” Maggie and I said in unison.

“I'm only –” she started, but Ashley cut her off.

“I'll do anything to keep her safe,” she said. “You know that, Sonny.”

The danger had passed. I reached out and brushed my fingers over Ashley's cheek – seeing just how unfair I had been. Veronique watched us, her wet mouth hanging open, and I said, “Yes, I do.”

## Chapter Two

We'd planned to meet at our local – a pub just down the road from me that had a fine selection of specialist beers, a fairly respectable menu and a charming, eavesdropping waitress by the name of Polly – but my old friend Oliver Montgomery wasn't feeling particularly well. I'd therefore agreed to go round to his place and let him “bung something in the microwave” for us. It was not an arrangement I found all that attractive, but Oliver was a good mate and an excellent sounding board, so postponing just wasn't an option.

I got there at ten thirty, knowing that if we were going to do lunch the Oliver Montgomery way it would require a few warm up laps first. Before leaving, I'd promised Ashley that I wouldn't get too drunk – but we both knew that there was no such thing as “too drunk” where Olly was concerned and she'd said with a wry smile that she'd expect me when she saw me.

“We okay?” I'd asked before heading out of the door.

“Of course.” It had come out a little hesitantly and she'd had to repeat herself – telling me that I'd been right, we both had, and she loved me all the more for caring as much as I did. Waiting for Oliver to return to his shit-heap of a living room, however, I couldn't help wondering just how “okay” things really were.

“Right,” Oliver said, thumping into the room with two microwaved tikka masalas. He is a big man, is our Oliver. Twenty-three stone and six foot two, we'd once decided after sharing an especially expensive single malt that Oliver had received as a birthday present from his agent that he was ninety-five percent pure muscle. He worked out just about every day, could bench press in excess of six hundred pounds and had the biggest, blackest beard you'd ever wish to meet.

“Okay,” he repeated, sitting down in the armchair opposite the

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badly sprung settee where I sat. “Tell me about this bit you read in the DeLillo novel. *White Noise*, yes?”

I forked with my tikka masala experimentally, and then took another large gulp of my third whisky. “DeLillo’s main character is a lecturer in Hitler studies,” I said.

“Ah, yes.” Oliver tucked into his lunch, the tray balanced rather precariously on his knee – his massive frame making him look as though he were somehow a part of the extra-large, no doubt reinforced armchair rather than merely its occupant. I tried not to look around the musty, manuscript- and book-cluttered room – knowing full well that my eye would light on something guaranteed to put me off my tikka masala. Not that that would take much doing.

Sure enough, I glanced to my left and spotted an old pair of Oliver’s voluminous boxers seemingly crawling out from beneath the sideboard.

“He invented the course,” I told him, not wanting to dwell on just what Olly’s boxers were doing beneath the sideboard in the first place.

“With the help of six million Jews,” Oliver said through a mouthful of rice.

“Which is beside the point.”

“Not if you’re a Jew.”

“And are you?”

“Not the last time I looked.”

“Then shut the fuck up and let me tell you this, while I’m still sober enough to string a reasonably coherent sentence together.”

“Reasonably coherent? You flatter yourself.” I could see it was going to be a long day. Oliver was still rather full of himself after the success of his latest charity event (which had involved him pushing a minibus a badly-measured mile) and experience had taught that attempting to resist his mood was futile. Better to just buy into it and hope there was plenty in to drink.

“You’re not interested,” I said flatly, shrugging and draining my glass. “Your loss, mate.”

Oliver chewed thoughtfully for a short while, arching his back every now and then – nursing a strain from the “Big Event”. He eyed me suspiciously but I suspected that somewhere beneath that beard he was smiling.

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“So this dumb-fuck American college professor runs a course on Hitler Studies and...?” he said, topping up our glasses.

“At the college where he works, there’s this other lecturer. I can’t remember his name. Not that it matters – the point is, he wants to do for Elvis what this other guy’s done for Hitler.”

“Let me guess. Elvis Studies?”

“Got it in one.” I loaded some rice and tikka masala onto my fork and put it in my mouth before I had chance to reconsider. It actually wasn’t too bad – swilled down with a hefty slug of cheap scotch.

“Sounds a fairly preposterous proposal from where I’m sitting,” Olly said.

“Couldn’t agree more – but the point is, during their discussions, this guy mentions that Elvis read the Bardo Thodol.”

“Ah.” Oliver nodded as a sliver of understanding peeped over the horizon. “The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Death and rebirth. I see where you’re going.”

That was one of the things I liked best about Oliver; his capacity as a fellow writer to understand the subtlety of the connections I made as I built myself up for a new project. He never failed to “tune in” and take pleasure in bouncing the ideas back and forth – and for that I was eternally grateful.

“I know the whole Elvis thing has been done to a death, if you’ll pardon the pun,” I said, “but my story won’t actually be about Elvis – it’ll be about the boy who convinces himself that the mysterious old man who’s just moved into his village is Elvis. A story of adolescent obsession and –”

“Unavoidably homoerotic.”

“What?” This hadn’t occurred to me and I could have almost been annoyed with him, had it not been for the gift of possibilities his comment provided.

“No matter how hard you try,” Oliver said, “you just aren’t going to be able to get away from the older man, younger boy thing. Christ, they even said it about King’s *Salem’s Lot*.”

“You always have to lower the tone, don’t you?”

“You think homoeroticism is lowering the tone?”

“I was referring to your mentioning King.”

Oliver twitched an eyebrow and I saw a flash of white teeth as he

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loaded more food into his mouth. I'd barely touched my "meal" so decided I'd better at least make an effort – managing to eat a good half of it before the over processed mush got the better of me and I found myself setting it aside on the floor and helping myself to another scotch. Oliver reached over and took my tray of half eaten food, scraping the remnants onto his and tucking in. For someone who was usually pretty careful and regimented about his food, Oliver had a hell of an appetite for junk.

When he was done, he looked at me and said, "How did yesterday go? Sorry I couldn't make it but... well, I was still too knackered after the bus push. Really twatted my back up, too."

"That's okay. You would have hated it, anyway."

"Too many screaming kids?"

"Too many screaming adults," I said. "Well, almost. You know."

"I do?"

"Probably not." I really didn't feel like telling him about it, seeing the act as something of a betrayal and misrepresentative. Nevertheless, I found myself sharing the full story with Oliver – finishing with some of what Ashley and I had said to each other before I had left that morning.

He stared at the arm of the settee when I had finished, and I saw the emotional exhaustion pass through him – something very physical and somehow removed, an alien presence that had little to do with the story I had told him. He took another drink, eyes still stubbornly refusing to meet mine, and I knew that he was thinking of Donnelly McCrane.

Oliver and Donnelly had met at the Frankfurt Book Fair a couple of years before – Oliver there to sit on a panel or three, Don, it seemed, simply because he had little better to do and his Daddy was "a much respected literary agent". The two, Olly-lore had it, had hit it off immediately. There had been nothing overtly sexual about it initially, neither of them wearing their "fagginess", as Oliver liked to put it, on their sleeves, but as the days had rolled on it had become obvious to the two of them that they were falling very heavily in love. The change in Oliver had been extremely noticeable. All of his friends had commented on it at one time or another and Ashley had been fond of saying, "I never realised just how lonely Olly was before he met

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Don. He seems so complete, now.” And this had been true. Oliver had entered rooms and claimed them – not because of his bulk, but simply because he was loved – and it had been a wonderful thing to see. Together, they were considerate and perpetually affectionate – even in company – but something happened, as it too often does, and that wonderfully precious thing that had existed between them became something else, something quite different.

It was a subject Oliver had never discussed in any depth – not even with me – and I admired that. Whatever had brought their relationship to an end was between the two of them, and no matter how many times Ashley quizzed him about the details I was still naïve enough to believe that Oliver would never tell.

“You were wrong, you know,” he now solemnly said, staring into his whisky glass. “But your reasons for being wrong were right. What you have... it’s not a fiction. Not something that can be rewritten. Once certain things are said and done there’s no taking them back.” Now he met my eyes and it occurred to me that this was perhaps as close as he would ever come to telling me just what had happened between him and Don. “Happiness writes white, mate. Keep the pages of the life you share with Ashley and Nadine clean and clear.”

I thought about this whilst Oliver went through to the poky kitchen to fetch dessert. The living room was like an oven, and as I got up to open another window I wondered just how wise it would be to take advice from a man like Oliver Montgomery. It was true that he had a degree of experience that I would never have, and that he could often think his way to the centre of the most complex of philosophies and concepts – but he was a man alone, a man who, whatever the success of his written work, still didn’t have the things he wanted most from life. I felt for him, admired him, but his quoting Montherlant (or the ever-reliable Anonymous, if some were to be believed) made me wonder; could listening to him ever make a difference?

The scotch was making me woozy and I hoped Oliver had something sweet and substantial for dessert. I was in the mood for something with rich, thick chocolate and lots of fresh cream, but what I got was warm apple pie with a house-brick sized slab of vanilla ice cream.

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“Just like mother used to make,” Oliver said, sitting back down in his armchair and putting his feet up on the cluttered coffee table. “One thing’s been bothering me,” he continued. “You and Maggie. Where the fuck were you? Ashley thought you were out there, but you weren’t. So where?”

Oliver was about the only person other than Maggie and me that knew about the cottage in Wales and what had happened there, and he had never been shy of making his disapproval known. He liked Maggie, and he liked me – but he also thought the world of Ashley and he had told me many times that what I’d done had been despicable. The “premeditated” aspect of it all had especially repulsed him, and even though he seemed to accept that it was something that had never happened again and, I assured him, never would, he still got suspicious every once in a while.

On this occasion, I chose to ignore the implication and merely answered his question.

“Stalker spotting,” I said. “Maggie’s got a stalker. She reckons he phones her up and tells her everything she’s done and everywhere she’s been. She even reckons he knows when she masturbates, if you can believe that.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“So I figured...”

“Stalk the stalker?”

“Something like that. Came to nothing, though.”

“Didn’t spot any likely candidates?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Oliver grew introspective and since the apple pie and ice cream was actually rather good, I didn’t push it. His booted feet twitched on the coffee table and he slurped melted ice cream between his teeth, staring into middle space and humming to himself.

“Do you believe her?” he suddenly asked.

I didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Absolutely.”

“She’s a recently bereaved ex-lover,” he said, as if I needed reminding. “Do you still believe her?”

A couple more drinks and it could have got nasty. As it was, I sat back, sighed and repeated my original answer, adding, “She mentioned it to Ashley before mentioning it to me – and before you

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say that that doesn't mean a bloody thing, it does to me, okay? And that apart, you weren't there. She was sincere and clearly worried about Wee Mark."

Oliver nodded and held up a massive hand by way of an apology, satisfied. "She tried the police?" he asked.

"Naturally."

"And?"

"What do you think?"

"As much use as a crepe paper condom."

"You do crepe paper condoms an injustice but, yes, that's about the long and short of it. I had a chat with her and Ashley about it, once Mad Molly had left, and I agreed to spend a little time following her myself over the next week or so – see if I can't spot who the hell it is that's doing this."

Oliver took his feet from the coffee table, knocking a stack of books on existentialism and Consequentialism onto the floor. Sitting forward, he placed his bowl in the space left by the books and rested his Popeye forearms on his knees, his bearded face suddenly more animated.

Pointing a large, callused finger at me, he said, "Now *that's* what I like to see. The proactive approach. Brilliant. Give the bastards a dose of their own medicine. When do we start?"

"We?"

"Maggie's my friend as well. Plus I owe it to Jim."

Jim and Oliver had never really got on – Jim possessing a barely concealed homophobic streak that had actually had the beautifully ironic effect of placing him in a minority of one in our little group of friends. I didn't mention this, however, instead pointing out that it was going to be difficult to be inconspicuous with a twenty-three stone bus-pusher in tow.

But Oliver was difficult to dissuade in his post-bus-push omnipotent euphoria. He sat there before me, happily making plans with very little by way of input from me other than the occasional grunt and all too reluctant nod. Apparently, inconspicuous was nothing more than a frame of mind. It was merely a question of pushing all thoughts of being noticed out of your head. Once that was done, Oliver assured me, you were home and dry.

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“It’s very Cartesian,” he insisted. “If we exist because we think, the trick of inexistence is really very simple; stop thinking.”

He seemed deeply satisfied with this uncharacteristically inaccurate interpretation and I knew that any effort I now made to talk him out of “helping” me would be futile.

And so we agreed (or Oliver agreed – I simply didn’t disagree) that we would start our surveillance the following week, since Maggie was reluctantly spending time with her mother over the weekend. Also, I wanted to spend time with Ashley and Oliver had a short story called *The Cup and the Cusp* that he really needed to get finished before Boots, his agent, really lost her patience, so Oliver decided we would start Monday morning – taking it in two hour shifts and keeping in touch by mobile phone.

As I was leaving later that evening, rather the worse for wear, Oliver said, “You know something? Life isn’t so bad after all.” It was a strange thing to say, but I attributed it to an excess of alcohol. We said goodbye and I tried not to think about the following Monday.

The silence and stale, overpoweringly thick air hit me full on in the face as I entered the living room and I knew right away that Ashley wasn’t home. I stood by the settee for a moment, listening and trying to imagine what it would be like if it were always this way. The emptiness sighed sadly against the back of my neck, brittle and icy even as it made me sweat, its weight bringing with it realisation and disharmony – and I remembered afresh the time before Ashley, the time before Nadine Verity. It could never be like that. That man had never known these two wonderful creatures – he had wandered, solitary and under the illusion that he had happiness of a kind right there in the simplicity and calm. He had been a fool, I decided – calling out Ashley’s name, just in case, and receiving no response. Whatever complications it brought with it, I needed people in my life – I needed Ashley and Nadine. I heard natural movement, the house shifting somewhere as timbers warmed or cooled, and I knew I could never live with that alone.

I decided to use the time alone productively, however, and headed upstairs to my office – the booze inspiring or misleading me, it was difficult to say which.

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My PC was always on, even when no one was home, as was my broadband connection. I checked my email (more spam trying to sell me the usual selection of Viagra and debt consolidation), and then read through my notes again. My story felt closer than it ever had, so I tentatively opened a new Word document, set it for double spacing, and started typing...

*He was a boy who liked to look through other people's windows, I wrote. The lives of complete strangers held him, took him away from himself in a way that nothing else could, and often he would wonder just what it must be like to be that unknown woman – to eat as her, breath as her, to dream her dreams in the dead of the night. Sometimes he would imagine himself as the woman, naked before her mirror – depressingly alone as she slipped her fingers deep into her cunt, the pleasure and the pain, the comfort of her own body – and he would masturbate frantically, the come ripping from him violently as he imagined what she would smell like, sound like, taste like as she slipped her sopping fingers from inside her and sucked on them, eyes shut tight against the loneliness.*

*More often than not, however, it was the watching that held him, rather than the sexual possibilities. He liked to think that he owned a part of these people – that, unobserved, he could somehow reach deep inside them and touch something essential that even they themselves had been unaware of. Possession, he had once heard his drunken, thieving father say, was nine tenths of the law. Well, if that were the case, Richard was most assuredly a good, lawful citizen.*

*He was three days away from his fifteenth birthday when everything changed. He was sore from another drunken beating and Mrs. Sutherland was wearing the thinnest, clingiest summer dress he'd ever seen. The breeze pressed it against her and he knew today was a good day – a day of distractions and protracted wrist exercises. Her routine was by now so predictable that he had learned he could actually pass by her at times and arrive at her eventual destination before her – thus making his surveillance even less conspicuous – and, so, when she followed him into the mini market, it was no surprise that she immediately headed for the newspapers over in the far corner, beneath the smeared convex mirror. He remained in his place by the freezers, their chill welcome on such a stubbornly humid day, and*

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*watched as she bent to pick up her copy of The Sunday Times. Her buttocks – still firm and pleasingly confined for a woman in her late thirties, he thought – stretched the dress's material and he played with the idea of just walking up behind her, brushing against her, allowing her to know he was there as he spilled into his shorts. How would she react if she knew? Richard wondered. Would she be horrified or amused? Or would some primitive part of her welcome and encourage his peculiar attentions?*

*She was standing now, the folded paper in her hand as she studied the headline. Her face was difficult to make out in the bulging mirror, but for just a moment he thought she glanced up and met his gaze. A fleeting recognition. An invitation, he was sure. I know, that look said. I know, and I like it.*

*Richard left the shop before her and walked south along the High Street before turning left onto Briarburn Lane and walking the few yards to his favourite bench. Mrs. Sutherland, a widow for more than a year and a half, now, lived at the end of Briarburn Lane and he knew that in a matter of minutes she would pass him and say good morning as if she didn't have a care in the world.*

*Sure enough, she came breezing along a couple of minutes later. As she entered the quiet lane, he prepared himself – pushing the Armani sunglasses that his father had stolen for him further up his nose and flicking his long, lank hair out of his face. The newspaper was tucked under her arm and he imagined her sweat soaking into it – the print bleaching from the paper and staining her skin. “One right classy fuck,” his dad would have called her, and however much it would have irked him to do so, Richard would have had to agree. Mrs. Sutherland was the kind of woman who knew how to hold herself. She was elegant, but not snooty – clearly intelligent, but with a blood-rich sensuality that bubbled just beneath the surface.*

*Richard braced himself for the exchange of good mornings but, much to his surprise, the expected greeting didn't come. Mrs. Sutherland sat down on the bench beside him, slapping the folded newspaper on the remaining seat space, tucking her hands between her legs in licentious prayer and smiling straight at him. He felt his cheeks flush and his cock twitch – suddenly certain that the game was over.*

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*Her sweet, cocoa-butter summer scent drifted to him and she said, "Our bedrooms look over at one another."*

*She didn't need to say anymore. There could be no mistake. She did indeed know. A deep sigh whilst she waited for him to say something. A physical readjustment, her hip against his.*

*"Yes," he said. Feigning ignorance was pointless. How could he have not noticed, given that she so often stood at her bedroom window – staring out across the field that stood between them and hugging herself?*

*"Why?" she said.*

*The question confused him. "Why what?"*

*"Why do you follow me all the time?"*

*All the time was a bit of an exaggeration, but he didn't think she'd quite see it that way. "Summat to do." He shrugged and let his hair fall over his face.*

*That sigh again. She slouched down and let her hands rest in her lap. Richard wondered if she realised just how fucking provocative that really was.*

*"Village life." She smiled at him sadly and he noticed that her two front teeth were rather crooked. "No cinema or nightclubs for miles," she went on, "a crappy selection of DVDs at the local shop... is it any wonder we're all a little fucked up?"*

*He relaxed a little. Maybe this was going to be okay after all. Hearing her voice so close, so conspiratorial was good enough – but for her to be comfortable enough to swear in front of him...*

*"You need the Internet," he said, knowing something was required of him and grasping hold of the only area of expertise that he possessed. "That helps. You don't feel so... you know."*

*"Isolated?"*

*"Aye."*

*"It's something I've thought about," she admitted. "Jim – my late husband – he left a laptop but we never got hooked up or whatever the correct term is. I expect it would be too difficult and expensive for me anyway."*

*"Nah, it's a piece of piss, and you could start off with a basic package to keep cost down."*

*"Really?"*

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*“Yes, really.”*

*The morning had certainly taken and unexpected detour, and as Richard found himself volunteering a little too enthusiastically to help the strange but wonderful Mrs. Sutherland set up an ISP, he wondered if any of this was wise. The lonely woman befriends the lonely boy. It was an act of charity, nothing more, he was sure.*

*As they said their goodbyes, after having arranged a time for Richard to call and help arrange her Net connection, Mrs. Sutherland lightly touched his arm and said, “I don’t mind, you know.”*

I read through what I’d written, sitting back in my chair, legs stretched out beneath my desk. It occurred to me, as it so often did, that the story was already deviating from the course I had envisaged. I saw any number of possible ways of getting it back on track – but knew enough to understand that that would probably be fatal. Far better to just let the story be what it wanted to be.

I closed the document and briefly looked at my notes, highlighting the material I believed I needed to focus on next time and feeling the post-work, post-alcohol hangover start to kick in. Nauseated and a little shaky, I was about to close my notes and head downstairs for a glass of water when I noticed a highlighted comment at the bottom of the page. The highlighting was in red so I knew right away that this was none of my doing (I always used blue or lime green).

*Fill in the hole*, it said. *That I might happily return*. Shaking my head, I smiled at the screen. Ashley. The quintessence of persistent womanhood. I pictured her standing over the hole, me looking up at her, and I finally understood that I was fighting a losing battle. As attached as I had grown to my hole – and the work it involved – I had to concede that she was right. It was a pointless task, one that would probably never achieve the desired result, and my refusing to fill it in would merely serve to show how pig-headed and obsessive I could be.

Downstairs, the house seemed even emptier than it had earlier. I thought of calling Ash on her mobile but I knew she’d only resent it – thinking I was checking up on her. Maybe Oliver, then? Anything to break the imperious silence. But no. Oliver would be asleep or working, I was sure, cocooned in his own little world of dialectics and dirt.

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I put the receiver back in its cradle without dialling and instead did what I knew I had to do. I headed out into the back garden to fill in my hole.

My father once told me that a garden was a place in which a man could safely lose himself. It was a realm of possibility only confined by the limits of one's imagination, a playground for the soul and a heavenly, spiritual release. As a boy, I would watch him late at night from what was now my office window – standing in the middle of the lawn, looking up at the sky with his hands in his pockets. A man comfortable in his skin. A man comfortable in his location.

At times like these, I missed him and Mam more than ever. Warm, almost intolerably quiet summer evenings – the sun dipping beneath our neighbouring houses, cool, long shadows reaching for the back door like unreadable portents, heat beneath one's feet as the air, still thick with midges, began to cool. These were times we, by rights, should have spent together. Mam, Dad, me, Ashley and Nadine. Family as it once was, family as it should be forevermore.

Looking down at the hole, spade in hand, I felt as though I was about to do something far more meaningful than it at first appeared. This was for the good of my marriage, the safety of my child – and as such, it was the right thing to do. Nevertheless, it felt somehow sacrilegious – a sin against something I wasn't entirely sure I believed in.

“Just fill it in,” Dad would have said. “You know damn well it isn't going to solve the drainage problem, so why fight it?”

I drove my spade into the mountainous pile of excavated soil, listening as Dad talked me through the process – Mam and Ashley laughing together in the kitchen – and stopped immediately, my spade hitting something unexpectedly metallic.

I looked around questioningly, but Dad wasn't there to provide any answers. I stooped – pulling out the spade and tossing it aside as I worked to uncover the mystery object. It was close to the surface, the soil loose and yielding, so it took no time at all to pull it out and brush it clean.

The rectangular tin looked like it might have once held biscuits or sweets – the faded picture on the lid showing a poor Turneresque

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scene, the lettering scraped away and rusted. It had weight and as I turned it over in my hands, I felt movement. Whatever was inside was solid and... *soft*. It didn't clunk or clatter, just shifted dully. A quiet thud.

"What you got there?" I jumped and almost dropped the tin into the hole – getting quickly to my feet and juggling it before trapping it against my chest.

"Ashley. Don't do that, for Christ's sake."

"Don't do what?"

"Creep up on me like that. I nearly had a bloody heart attack."

She had a playful look about her eyes and I knew that she too had been drinking. Rocking back and forth on the doorstep, her hands clasped before her, she giggled rather stupidly and said, "Who's creeping? I've been banging and clattering about in here for the last five minutes. You've been spending too much time in that there hole of yours. You've got soil in your ears."

"You've been drinking."

"So have you."

"Bet you're drunker than I am."

"Bet you I'm not."

"Prove it, then." Gotcha, I thought smugly.

She hopped down from the step, eyes squinting suspiciously. "How?"

"Fill in my hole for me."

But Ashley was more interested in the tin I held. She stepped forward and chewed her lip thoughtfully – her eyes a little glassy and distant. More colourful than usual, her skin looked ruddy and reassuringly healthy. A beautiful woman, I told myself proudly. One to cherish and accept – in spite of her faults. A lock of hair flopped over her eye and she blew it away, her attention still focused on the tin.

"So what is it, then?" she asked.

I shrugged and turned it over in my hands again, smelling the coolness of the soil and the sharp, metallic odour. "I don't know," I said. "Well, I do. It's a tin – but I don't know what's inside it."

"You think there's something inside it?"

"It feels like it."

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I handed it to her so that she could feel for herself and she shook it experimentally – grinning with strange satisfaction. I'd forgotten she could be like this, youthful and easy to please, and I have to say, I think it brought out the best in me. I could have dismissed it, moved the conversation on until the tin was forgotten – as I might have at another time – but instead of so doing, I took the tin from her and said, "Let's see what's inside it, shall we?"

We squatted down and I placed the tin on the floor between us. The light was starting to fail and birdcall marked the beginning of night. I felt the evening waiting at my shoulder as Ashley and I held our breath – and in my heart I felt a sudden, inexplicable sense of loss.

"Go on, then," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

I'd expected the lid to be rusted in place – immovable, bringing our excitement to an anticlimax. A good whack with a hammer and screwdriver would soon loosen it, of course – but, Ashley being Ashley, she would tire of the idea before I'd had chance to fetch my tools and it would simply be left on the patio for me to open the following day.

As it was, of course, the lid came off the tin very easily and Ashley and I found ourselves staring down at the surprisingly well-preserved leather-bound journal of a woman who (although we didn't know it at the time) would change our lives forever. It looked old, the dark blue leather worn and cracked – but it didn't seem to have suffered unduly from its time buried beneath my father's garden. I wondered briefly if it was something Dad had put there – a time capsule to annoy people who hadn't even been born when he'd thought of the idea – but that had never really been his style. It was too forced for Dad, too deliberate, and if Mam had been the power behind this, well, she would certainly have seen to it that it had been packed with greater care.

"Whose is it, do you think?" Ashley said in a reverential whisper.

"I don't know," I answered. Neither of us had so far plucked up the courage to touch it – as if we imagined it might crumble apart in our hands. I thought of Richard in my story and said, "Ours, I suppose. Possession being nine tenths of the law."

She nodded and looked at me expectantly – her mouth twitching impatiently. "Well?" she said. "Are you going to, then, or what?"

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“I thought that you might like the honour.”

“Scared?” She grinned and I shook my head, sticking out my tongue at her. The truth was, though, the journal did frighten me a little. I understood the power of words – especially those never intended to be read by anyone else – and whatever this was, I felt certain that it was overflowing with personal mystery and grief. I ran my fingers over the leather binding, trying to summon up a sense of its history and any implicit warning – but all I was truly aware of was the leather’s grainy texture and the thumping of the hangover at my temples.

I carefully removed it from the tin and opened it. “It is certain to me that I should not be in this place,” I read.

### 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 and eating when it occurred to us. At one-thirty on 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 assorted 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 we’d discovered tugging at the fabric of my imagination, reshaping it with suggestive contours and colours, and I

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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.

“Maggie phoned earlier,” she said – the subject of the journal and the Sorrow Street Asylum summarily dispatched. “She wanted to know if you’re still going to be helping her out this coming week. Keeping an eye on her and all that.”

Since discussing this with Oliver, I was beginning to have misgivings. 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.

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“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. “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.”

“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 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 unashamedly took it. “You won’t get an argument from me on that,” I told her.

“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.

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“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 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.

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.

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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 – the hole finally filled in, the 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. 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'd forgotten and, sure enough, it opened 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

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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 were 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 – 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 shake.

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

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

“I thought of getting rid of the bookcase,” 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 respond – 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.

For the next five minutes I did my best to convince him that laptops, and miniaturisation in general, were good things. He resisted

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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 with Ashley that had followed 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 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

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to be mourned, if not understood.

I thought about writing. It was true I felt like shit and should really have 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 to the water closet 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 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,*

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*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 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 pleasure always has its price. I have learned and still learn. The lesson 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*

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*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 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). “You’re getting too old for shit like this.”

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.”

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

“Naturally.”

We held each other for 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 might lie in their beds 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

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could be easily fixed with patience and application. Naïve? Perhaps.

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. But 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 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,

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“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 depending 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 –”

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. Even in her mid-fifties, Pippa was a stunner. 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.”

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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?"

"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 an 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.

"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

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Pippa had been there before me – had had to guide her through the difficult years before we’d 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, and 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 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.

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If you enjoyed this sample, please forward it on to friends or family members who may be interested. Thank you!

GWM.