

The Second Space

And

A Contribution to the Narrative of Women's Literature: Themes from The Second Space - The Assumption of Autobiographical Writing and the Label of Women's Fiction

by

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## Abstract

*The Second Space* is a novel that presents the place of women in a patriarchal society, exploring themes such as sexuality, reclamation of space, and the power of physical objects. It follows the story of a woman who escapes from the prospect of marriage and works to discover her self-identity, forging meaningful relationships with other women.

The accompanying critical study contributes to the knowledge of women's writing and the creative process by acknowledging the existence of a distinct space for women in a patriarchal society. This concept is called 'The Second Space'.

This study refutes the assumption that women's fiction is autobiographical due to the use of themes such as domesticity and motherhood, demonstrating the value of building a narrative for women.

The sources that support this research include creative, critical and feminist texts, as follows: Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment*, Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, and Miranda July's *The First Bad Man*, Carla Kaplan's *The Erotic's of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*, Sean Burke's *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, Micaela Maftai's *The Fiction of Autobiography*, Margaret Atwood's *On Writers and Writing*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.

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## The Second Space

### Chapter 1

The first time I became aware of my sex was when I was about seven years old. Perhaps I was younger, it's hard to gauge. For around a year I knew that if I lay on the carpet in a certain way, it felt good. These moments would take me by surprise. I wasn't aware in any way that this was something private. I'd think nothing of lying on my front while I watched the telly, gently rocking back and forth, side to side. The rush from this activity would climb through my legs and shoot through my stomach, as though I were spinning. It made me need the toilet, desperately.

Soon, I became aware of the triggers. It started off being boys, just boys. Boys doing nothing special, as though I were aware that these were the things supposed to prompt my feelings. I can't recall the exact moment, but pretty soon, girls started to be a part of my fantasies as well. I had no reason to think that only boys should be attractive to me. My friends and I would play families in the playground together, all female, pretending to be married.

Before long, the small fantasies that I allowed myself to have were more than shared affection between two people. There were arguments as well. Sometimes they involved force, myself

pretending to be above a boy, to be better than him. As these fantasies grew I became aware that what I was doing was private. It wasn't the sort of thing that you spoke about, with your family. But, my family weren't the only people around. I had friends at school, and one in particular, Katy. Though I'm unsure how it started, Katy and I developed a private game of our own. We played at being husband and wife, taking turns to be each. The wife would go out for groceries, returning home to an argument and being forced into bed by her husband. How we came up with these ideas, I do not know. At such a young age, I'm embarrassed to think that they were from my side alone, though with a broken home being my safety net, the invention doesn't seem entirely impossible.

When I was twelve years old my mother took me shopping to an outdoor market. She bought me a whole new wardrobe, but I was too shy, on the threshold of becoming myself, and wouldn't try on any of the clothes. We estimated sizes, holding them over my large childlike body. Once home, few things fit me. I sobbed and wailed at the sight of puppy fat spilling over jeans, as though it were the most horrifying thing I'd seen. My mother comforted me until she became irritated, her comments about womanly figures turning into threats. I'd have to wear the clothes, whether they fit me or not. The market didn't do returns. I should've tried them on like an adult.

I wore the outfits. That week, I chose a particular skirt that I liked very much. It was a pleated, red, mini skirt. It

reminded me of a kilt. I wore it with black knee high socks from school, and a black jumper with a white collar sewn on, so that it looked as though I was wearing a shirt beneath it. I found a pair of my mother's heels that weren't too big or too high, and wore them as well. I looked in the mirror and felt pleased with my reflection, for the first time ever I saw an adult looking back at me. The skirt was a snug fit but it clung in a way that I admired. I saw curves instead of fat. I had to show the world this new me.

I took a short walk, only five minutes up the road. My mother allowed me to walk up to the local newsagents at that age, and no further. London was dangerous, she would tell me often, but she also struggled with her memories of being allowed out as a child. We lived just off Roman Road, near Mile End. I could go up the road, but I knew that she was watching from the window. Sometimes from the front garden. Sometimes from the street. On this day though, she didn't. I let myself drift off, imagining that I was twenty plus, walking home from work. My outfit was exactly the sort of thing that women wore, I was certain. I was a young woman living her life, older than my twelve years. Perhaps I'd arranged for my friends to meet me, though I don't remember. As I neared the newsagents, my cut off point, a white van silently drove up beside me. I ignored it, ignored the middle aged man that sat in the driver's seat, window down. I wasn't afraid, why should I be? I was a street from home, a short

walk from my mother. The van disappeared and then showed up again, on the other side of the road, closest to me.

'What's your name?'

I ignored him.

'You! What's your name?'

I quickened my step.

'Do you have a boyfriend?'

I nodded quickly, though I'd only played at such things.

'Oh? And how long have you been together?'

I thought of the longest relationship that I could imagine, 'Six months.' Tugging hard on the length of my skirt, I cursed my decision to wear it.

'I love him,' I bleated, half under my breath.

'You what?'

I repeated it a little louder, turning to catch sight of his face. He laughed in a spiteful way, two stubbly chins and thin lips.

'Do you want another boyfriend?'

As I heard this I began to run, mere doors away from my home. Bile rose up through my throat and I swallowed hard as it hit my tongue, the acidity making me wretch. I clumsily let myself into the house and raced up the stairs, two at a time, and knelt on the floor beneath my bedroom window. I sobbed, long and hard, face stained and blotchy. Later that night, as I readied myself for bed, I folded up the clothes that I'd worn and placed them carefully at the bottom of my wardrobe.



I'd dressed, and been treated like, a woman, for the first time. My body rippled with fear, and I lay in bed, silent.

The counsellor looked up from the page and smiled at me encouragingly, 'How did it feel, writing that?'

I inspected the skin around my fingers that I had stretched away from the nails while she was reading, something that I did as a child when I was feeling especially anxious. It was a hard habit to stop, as I seemed to do it without even realising. I would only notice once a little stream of blood began to spread from my thumb to my palm, and then I would look, shocked at the sight of it. My thumbs had healed unevenly. I fought the urge to pick the skin again, glancing at the counsellor. 'It felt okay.'

She smiled, 'I hoped as much. Many people feel that writing down these kinds of events are a way of unburdening yourself. Sometimes it's easier than talking. It gives you time to think about what you're saying.'

I nodded politely, aware that she had just read a situation that in reality had spanned years, within minutes. The situation of being a woman. Surely her own stories must match my own? I guessed at her age, she must have been about fifty. She had asked me to call her Dawn, but I hadn't yet tried it. She smiled, and nodded back at me.

'I'm glad that you came here to discuss things with me. How many years has it been since you last spoke to someone?'

I shrugged, giving the impression that I had no idea, when really, I did know, 'It's been a couple of years,' I lied. I had never spoken to anyone, not really.

‘Two years is a long time to hold on to something. Do you have the support of your partner?’ She began to pat the edges of the pages on her lap, smoothing them before her as though she were making a bed.

Partner. I always smiled at the word. It was used when someone wasn’t quite sure, were you straight? I imagined a woman waiting for me in the waiting room, reading magazines, and wondering what was taking so long.

‘He is sometimes supportive, yes...I wouldn’t say that he completely understands everything that I worry about.’

I didn’t often speak to him in this way, and more specifically, I’d never spoken to him about this memory. It wasn’t just that he wouldn’t understand, I was afraid of his reaction. I could imagine him getting angry, the way that he might if a man came on to me now, and for the same reason. Dawn nodded again, but slower. Her hair was short, though it looked like it was growing out of a style, the strands hitting the top of the oversized collar on her shirt.

‘Okay, Erin. I’m going to set you some homework. Do you have time in the evening?’

I thought of sitting next to Mark, watching the television, and excusing myself to do homework. I nodded.

‘This week I would like you to try this again. Write down the things that you are desperate to say, the things that you’ve been holding in. Like keeping a diary, if you like.’

‘And I’ll bring them to show you?’

She balanced the papers on her legs and held her palms out flat. No threat.

‘Yes, if you want.’

## Chapter 2

I walked home in the morning sunshine, my shadow overtaking me on the pavement. It was an autumnal sun, crisp and clean, with a pink hue that bled across the London skyline.

Though it warmed my skin it could not settle the pimples that spread across my arms. He had proposed. The night before, the night before this one. As I walked down the street I clenched my left hand into a ball and closed my eyes. The ring dug in to my palm, and I let it.

‘It’s a little tight,’ I told him previously. The first night as his fiancée, I woke in the middle of darkness, unable to feel my left arm. Pins and needles spread to my shoulder, and silently, I stretched out my fingers to relieve the numbness. He stirred beside me, murmuring into the darkness.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. My arm’s dead, that’s all.’

A gentle kiss on the forehead before he turned his back once more. ‘Go back to sleep, it’ll be fine in the morning.’

I didn’t. I tried to revive my arm, but nothing would work. Eventually, I removed the ring, placing it on the bedside table. I must have slipped back into sleep quickly, my arm regaining consciousness as the ring sat, abandoned.

‘Erin.’

I stirred.

‘Erin.’

I sighed slowly before opening my eyes. He was sitting on the edge of the bed beside me, cup of tea in hand.

‘Oh! You got me tea. Thanks love.’ I shifted my weight up toward the pillow and stretched my hands out for the cup.

‘That’s what I thought.’

I paused mid grasp, curious.

‘Where’s your ring?’

‘It’s on my fi- oh. It’s...well, where could it be? It didn’t come off in the night, it couldn’t have.’

‘You said yourself it was too tight.’

I eyed Mark steadily. He took a long drink from his own cup.

‘I said that it was a *little* too tight. It’ll be in the bed covers, don’t worry.’

‘I’m not worried.’

I leant forward and took both our cups from his hands, then turned to place them down on the table beside me. There, I saw it, the delicate ring that had woken me so abruptly.

‘Here it is. I’ve always had problems sleeping in jewellery.’

Mark nodded and accepted a kiss. I could feel his jaw tense slightly. As I moved away I pushed the ring back onto my finger. The skin around it puckered. So began the engagement.

We were engaged in what a colleague described as a ‘blur of romance’. To me, it wasn’t that, it was inevitable. The inevitability was the one thing that I hated, the inevitability of the rest of my life seemed linked with the moment that I gave a slight nod of my head.

He got down on one knee, of course. I watched him and felt myself want to sigh, want to shrug. Do something new. Shock me, surprise me, sweep me off my feet. And a

diamond, how brave of you. Hadn't we both read about the diamond engagement ring being the most successful advertising campaign ever? Hadn't I said at the time I'd prefer a plainer ring?

*If* we get married, *when* we get married. When we get married we should invite your cousin Sue, the one you haven't seen in eight years. Even thinking of making an invitation list was exhausting.

By the look on his face, I could tell that he too thought it was inevitable. He didn't look nervous, he didn't look afraid. He looked smug, if anything, certain. And I understood that, because I too was certain of my answer. The word 'Yes' fell from my mouth fully formed. I stared down at him, and he smiled. The ring was placed on my finger, with a little force. I quickly developed a habit of checking for its presence.

The other carers at work were nothing short of ecstatic. I knew the people who worked the same shift pattern as I did. Part timers, afternoons only, unless covering for somebody else. I had no close relationships at work, but I was known for having a good sense of humour. Really, it was an act. I acted as though I loved to come in, to help out.

When I told them the news, two people actually screamed in my face. I was manhandled, cuddled, rubbed and touched by people that I usually used hand-sanitizer after sharing a keyboard with. I accepted the excitement as best I could, I nodded and cooed in reply. You have to have said something life changing for somebody to scream in your face in that way.

Mark told me about his colleagues' responses when I got home, that they were all in on the trick. He wrapped his arms around me while I was washing up and told me quietly about the engagement party he'd organised. Since I'd said yes a small hourglass had turned

over in my mind and I felt every grain of sand drop. I felt increasingly unsure of the agreement, a little more confused about our future. It didn't feel like it was my future any more, mine to be excited by. Suddenly it was only our future, the only thing we talked about. With an exception. Our future ended the way a Disney movie ended, the way *Pride and Prejudice* ground to a halt. The wedding. What came after that? Did Lizzie and Darcy actually find themselves in bliss, or did Lizzie realise that a couple of kind acts and a huge house didn't really make up for the way Darcy looked at her when she used the wrong spoon at dinner?

I hadn't known Mark since school, like a lot of my now married friends. By the time I met him I was twenty years old, and old enough, I felt, to know myself and what I wanted in a partner. He was twenty five. We met at a bus stop. That has always been the only part of the story that we can both agree on, our memories seem to have split before us.

I asked him the time. He's sure of this, but why I'd have done this I don't know. I wasn't supposed to be anywhere that day, not work, not home. I remember that feeling. The relief of unallocated time. However we disagree on our first words, we began speaking. About the weather, about our days, about the buses and their timekeeping. He had long dark blonde hair scraped back into a messy ponytail, and wore a shirt and tie. These two things made him interesting. He was handsome, and he knew it. He was on his way to an interview, and obviously nervous. He kept wringing his hands. He disputes this version of events, and says that no, he was on his way back from an interview. He was nervous because he liked me, that's all.

We stayed in touch through email. I learnt that he got the job, and he took me for a celebratory drink. He cut his hair within the first month of our being together, and I

mourned it slightly. Those five years between our ages meant that, to me, he was wise. I watched him play at being an adult, and began to do the same.

My mother told me that you change the most between the ages of twenty and thirty, 'If you and your partner change together, well, that's just a stroke of luck.'

I thought about it as I began to near our house. Had Mark and I changed together? The last five years merged into a blurred memory. Nights in on the couch, over-eating, and promising to love each other through the fat that we might gain. Was that a love affair?

### Chapter 3

Mark had left for work already, before I had arrived home from the counsellor. London in late autumn was starting to freeze the outside of the windows of our shared car and shared home. We had a small, two-bedroom, terraced house, a short walk from Mile End, the area that I had lived in my whole life. I could never have afforded to live in a house alone, especially as I worked part-time through choice, but since I met Mark his salary had grown from straight out of University to capital city competitive, and he had saved for a mortgage before we celebrated our second anniversary. He moved in alone before he asked me to join him, and the décor was not my choice. He had painted signature walls in every room, including the bedroom, with one bright red wall. He hadn't put any picture frames up, but instead had Blu Tacked pictures and photographs to the walls. He didn't understand why I thought this was strange, but it also felt as though it wasn't my place to challenge anything in the house. Even when I moved in, I was very aware that I was paying rent to my boyfriend. Was I allowed to move anything? I went through stages of trying to make my stamp on the house, to move things. First of all I tried to paint the front door green. Mark wrinkled his nose and said that it wasn't really his style. I couldn't argue, I hadn't put down any money, so I said nothing. Desperate to be creative with the space, and repeatedly coming up against brick (and Mark's red) walls, I began to decorate with small accents that he hardly noticed. But then, about three months in I started to make clay vaginas. At the time, it was for reasons unknown. I had the urge to make a mess; to sculpt. What I wanted to make only began to be obvious when my hands started to do the work for me. The shape that I created was clearly a vagina, labia, cunt. It was so obvious to me, that I laughed out



loud and took it to Mark, to show him. He didn't see it, and couldn't tell what I had made.

Once I pointed it out he raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

'Why?'

'It just happened, I don't really know,' I lied. I knew why I had made it, why it felt so natural. It was more than about making something within the house, being creative inside the space that I was supposed to belong in. I was trying to understand something, trying to find a part of myself that I felt had been lost. I was trying to remind myself of who I was.

I displayed this one proudly, on the mantelpiece. It watched us as we ate. Mark began to take it down at weekends, in case his parents showed up at the door. I tutted at him and rolled my eyes.

'Your own mother has one, I'm sure she won't mind.'

I tried to get him to join in, to help me with the creating. After dinner we sat on the floor, on top of newspapers and old magazines, and I showed him the way that I wanted my vaginas to be made. I dug my fingers into the clay and watched it mould beneath my grip, shaping the walls of the labia, and pushing deep into the centre. He took a clump of clay and began to copy me, and I watched him briefly, before continuing with my own.

'Why do you want to make these Erin?'

I glanced at the first vagina, watching us from its throne above the electric fire.

'Because of the feeling that I get when I make them. It feels right. I don't know.'

Mark sighed as he pushed the clay with his fingers. He was concentrating with all of his effort, and looked miserable.

'Are you okay?'

'I'm not finding this too easy, the clay won't do what I want it to. Or what you want it to. It's just frustrating.' He began to roll the clay together into a tube, and glanced at me.

‘Maybe I’ll make a penis. It’s easier.’

I wrinkled my nose, ‘I don’t want you to.’

‘Why? It’s the same thing.’

‘I don’t think it is. How do you feel when you see a cunt?’

He laughed and rolled his eyes, ‘How do you think I feel?’

‘Alright. Well, the way you feel when you see a cunt, is the way I feel as well. Excited, free. It means freedom, don’t you think? If that’s the case, what does a penis mean? I think it holds with it a slight threat.’

‘I just don’t know what to say to that, Erin. I mean, I don’t feel free when I see a vagina. Do you find my penis threatening?’ Mark shook his head slowly and dropped the clay in front of him, squashing the tube back into a shapeless lump.

‘No, not yours. But I know yours. But the penis in general? Yes.’ I paused for a moment, watching him. Body parts, gender, our own sexual relationship had always been a tough thing for us to talk about. He stuck staunchly to rules around sex. He would not have sex with me while I was on my period, though I tried to explain to him that women can have sex while they are bleeding, without any real issue. He found this amusing, odd. He wrinkled his nose and shook his head vehemently. He wanted to try anal, but wouldn’t let me go near his own behind. The difference with this, he wouldn’t discuss. We hadn’t lost our virginity to each other, but when we first met, we had only slept with one person each. At first, it was awkward, nervous kisses and uncomfortable removing of clothes. We struggled through together, never talking about what we actually wanted from each other, not mentioning the things that turned us on in private. As our relationship progressed, sex became rarer and rarer. Sometimes when he kissed me, I wondered whether he was interested because he

really wanted to make love to me, or because it was expected, an inevitability of a long term relationship.

‘Oh god Erin, let’s not do this conversation. I’ve been at work all day. I just want to do nothing.’

‘So do nothing.’

He dropped the clay in front of him and stood up, walking out of the room. I heard a can open and fizz, liquid glugging as it was tipped into a glass.

‘Do you want some beer?’

I bent the clay around my finger and watched the brown spread to my skin. The smell of it reached my nose and I breathed it in. ‘No.’

Eventually, they were put away. Mark complained of the lingering scent, the mess that I made with the clay, and said that I wasn’t being careful enough. He took the piece from the mantle and thought that I hadn’t noticed, and I said nothing about it.

Back to the frozen windows of our shared house. I stared at the iced pattern melting on the window pane. Alone, on a morning off. I wanted to be alone, but I always felt that I was only happy to be alone if hassled. I wanted the phone calls, the messages. I wanted people to knock my door down, and for me to be aloof, and busy. They didn’t. I sat inside and leant my forehead against the window, watching the world below. The rain tapped hard against the glass, and I sighed. Autumn was never crisp for long, rain soon washed away the memory of summer. For all my dreaming of being alone, loneliness had crept over me. I thought of my homework, that familiar feeling of wanting to do anything but work. I hadn’t had it since I was at school, but it began to crowd me.

I looked around the room. Clothes everywhere, dusty sideboards. Blu Tack had dried up and dropped a few pictures on one side, cluttering the walls. I had to get out, to get fresh, clean air. The house was closing in on me, threatening to take my day and do nothing with it. I looked in the mirror before I left. I'd filled time earlier that morning painstakingly doing my makeup, creating thick wings on either side of my eyelids in black, something I never usually had the time to do. I was wearing too much blusher, and tried to rub the nectarine glow off my cheeks as I left the room, feet thudding down steps.

I thought I'd go for a coffee, and sit alone, without actually being alone. As I walked down the street, dodging puddles and rainfall, my eye caught a summer dress in the window of a charity shop. It was a deep yellow, like bright mustard inside a clean jar. It had a sweetheart neckline and the skirt fell just above the knees. I stopped and imagined myself in it, and then stepped into the shop and approached the empty desk, waiting, both eyes on the dress.

'Can I help you? Did you want to have a look at this dress?'

I turned to see a woman, a little older than me, with short, cheekbone length chestnut hair. She had dark eyes and even darker eyebrows, coloured expertly with a pencil, the clash of the black of her eyebrows against the red of her hair somehow complementing each other. Her eyebrows dipped slightly in the middle, as she asked the question again. There was something different about her accent that I couldn't quite put my finger on. She had a slight London drawl, but pronounced dress like 'driss'. Was she Australian?

I nodded, 'Yes please.'

Her mouth was full and neat, a deep bow in the top lip, which almost disappeared as she smiled broadly, 'That used to be mine. I only brought it in this morning.'

I followed her to the window display, 'Oh! Did you make it?'

She laughed again as she unzipped the dress and began to slip it off the mannequin.

‘God, no. I bought it. I think it’s vintage though.’ She gave a final tug as it came over the head, ‘Of course, that’s why most people shop here now. Vintage. Everything second-hand is vintage really.’

She held it out to me and I took it, thanking her. I stood for a minute, awkwardly holding the dress. She was the sort of person you wanted to inspect, to take a photograph of so that you could go home and stare at it properly. I felt uncomfortable with the fact that I couldn’t look away, but she didn’t seem to notice. She began to talk about the shop, about the work that they did. I was familiar with it already, and made the right noises to convince her that I was listening. As she spoke I tried to work out what it was that made her so fascinating. She was curvy, with a round face and a small waist, shown off by an old leather belt that she’d tied in a knot at her hip. The dress that she wore was short, baring strong thighs hidden behind black tights that gathered and crinkled at her slim ankles. As she spoke she reached her arms behind her head and half-heartedly held her hair back, and then let it fall back around her face. She smiled at me again, and stopped talking. I realised that I’d not been taking in what she’d said.

‘Did you want to try the dress on? We close in ten minutes, that’s all.’

I nodded and she showed me to the dressing room. Behind the curtain, I stared at myself in the mirror. I didn’t try the dress on, but held it up to me, watching the colour clash with my cheeks. I pulled the material across my waist and breasts, and thought that it’d fit, probably. I could hear the chestnut-headed girl humming a tune outside the changing room, the dull clatter of coat hangers as she began her close down.

‘How are you getting on in there?’

Her shout made me start, and I squeaked out an answer and then repeated it quickly, 'Fine!' I pulled the curtain back and stood face to face with her again.

She grinned and held her hand out, 'Would you like me to pop it through the till then?'

I nodded and let her take it from me. She wandered around to the other side of the desk and began to fold the dress carefully, 'Such a lovely colour. We need some summer around here.'

I nodded and began to get my purse out, 'Yes! Why did you give it away?'

'Oh,' she shrugged slightly, 'I have no room for clothes at the moment. I've just moved house, and I'm trying to condense all of my belongings. And really, I only wore it a few times.'

'I need to have a clear out myself.'

'Oh?' she gently placed the dress inside a plastic bag, 'And do you have anything you could donate here?'

I nodded silently.

'That's good then. And now you have something new to replace it with. It's only five pounds.'

I handed the money over and took the bag, and began to make my way out of the door.

'Thank you! Have a nice day.'

I turned and nodded, 'Thanks. You too. Good luck with your unpacking.'

'Oh, it'll be fine. I hope you come back soon. My name's Sofia.'

‘Erin.’ I left, and went to the closest coffee shop on Brick Lane, far too noisy and crowded, and ordered myself a flat white. I sat alone, but felt as though I was part of something. I let the bag sit in between my knees, carrying Sofia’s yellow dress.

## Chapter 4

When I got home, I tried the dress on properly. It pulled across my chest and skin, it didn't fit me properly and I felt cross with myself for not trying it on in the shop. I look at the seams. Could I take it out myself? Would I ruin it? My phone buzzed beside me. It was a message from Mark, I knew without looking. There was something that had begun to play on my mind about our engagement, our marriage, almost instantly. He wanted me to take his name. We had never discussed it previously, why would we? Now though, the subject had become an atmosphere between us. I leaned forward and picked the hem of the dress that had once pulled across Sofia's skin, and stretched across mine uncomfortably. I sat on the floor in front of the mirror, and stared at myself, at the fabric that spread across my knees. He wanted to marry me, I knew that, for me to join his family.

'Be proud of it!' he'd told me, 'Don't you want people to know we're married?'

I did. Of course I did. That was why we were having a wedding, wasn't it? So that people would know. I was going to wear a ring. I was wearing a ring right now. I paused before I replied, because I knew what his reaction would be.

'So, why can't you take my name?'

He'd sighed at me. A long weary sigh. Rolled his eyes, let the teabag fall from the spoon in his hand back into a cup, causing tea to cascade onto the kitchen counter. Slow precise drips, as though they were being timed.

He reached for a tea towel, 'I can't take your name. I'd never live it down.'

He meant at work. I was pretty sure of that. At least, that's what I'd thought at the time. Now, as I curled my legs beneath that dress, I wondered what he had really meant.



'I'd never live it down,' I said aloud. I'd heard once that that's what you should do with nightmares, tell someone as soon as you wake up. Banish the bad thoughts and so you'd never think them again.

'I'd never live it down.'

The words hung in the air. Maybe he didn't mean work. Maybe he meant life. At this thought, my heart began to burn. I placed a hand over the top of the dress, and closed my eyes. How could I marry a man that didn't value my name as much as his own? The thought came to me quickly and quietly, as though it didn't want to be heard at all: *you don't have to marry him*. My mind swam with images. Calling the wedding off. His face. His face.

I opened my eyes again and picked up the phone that lay beside me. The message was from him, as I knew it would be. It said three words. As I read them I shook my head slowly.

## Chapter 5

When Mark got home from work, he didn't mention the name issue. Neither did I. It was as though there was a silent agreement between us, that we wouldn't talk about it, and that surely, everything would be okay from the point of the actual marriage. I knew that it would just arise on the day of the wedding instead, but somehow, that seemed so far off, that it didn't seem like a real day at all. We hadn't even set a date. Like planning next Christmas in January.

I was grateful for work the next day, for giving me something to get up for, something to bring me out of the house. My clients had been good to me, and I reached the last visit with a bounce in my step. Olive lived in a maisonette in Sutton, South West London, and had the lower floor, meaning a front and large back garden, which I was envious of. She had a gardener, and in the summer her lawn breathed a deep green light from the turf to the window. I was always impressed with it. I pushed the key in the lock. The door opened with a shove, and I called out to make sure that she knew I was here.

She was in her chair, watching the television. She was always in her chair, watching the same thing, complaining loudly that the people on those shows were idiots, incapable of spotting an antique at a car boot sale. I made her lunch, cheese sandwiches, and a cup of tea, and sat with her. When she spoke crumbs rained onto the floor, and I often wondered whether that was something she had always done? Talk with her mouth full. She grinned at me, showing a toothy gapped smile. She always boasted that she didn't have to wear dentures, that her teeth were as strong as mine.

‘How are the wedding plans then?’ she asked, and stared at a remaining crust on her plate, as though she were asking the bread the question. She was one of my only clients that remembered things about my personal life, and I was always quite touched.

‘They’re okay, Olive. We’re having trouble agreeing on a venue.’

‘Ah well. You’ll get there. I had my hair done the other day. What do you think?’ She looked from the crust back to me, bobbing her hand underneath her newly light purple hair and grinning.

‘It’s fantastic. Did someone come round?’

Her cheeks flushed at the compliment, and she nodded, encouraged, ‘Oh yes. They asked whether I wanted a pink rinse, you know, and I said no. Let’s go further. They wouldn’t do my eyebrows though.’

I laughed, ‘I don’t think you should do your eyebrows.’ Her attention was back on the television. I was talking to myself.

Eventually she finished her crust, and held her plate aloft for me to collect, small wrists straining under its weight. I found this bit the hardest. There was always a spray of crumbs on the plate and it turned my stomach.

I made sure that she was comfortable before I left, that she didn’t need to go to the bathroom or change her clothing. She brushed me off with a wave of the hand. She’d had enough of me, enough of the nonsense of people. I understood where she was coming from.

As well as being the last on my route, Olive was the least complicated, so by the time I left her house, I was winding down already. As I was part time, and only worked afternoons, I was trying to be other things in the mornings. So far all my great plans for self-improvement had fallen by the wayside, turning instead to lie-ins and wedding research.

I drove the long way home, made longer by the traffic. Mark was waiting for me, I knew this, with a dinner cooked in too much oil. We had been engaged for two weeks. For some reason, a lot of people expected a lot to happen in this time. The day after we became engaged, he asked me to go and look at venues with him. I was surprised, it was the weekend, and I had plans to do nothing. He sulked for about an hour before I agreed to look around one venue.

He took me to a large conference centre about thirty minutes from our home. It had beams stretching across high ceilings, but the closer that I looked at each beam, the faker it seemed. The gentleman (because that's how he referred to Mark) was smarmy and patronising. He spoke to Mark about the money side, focusing on him like a hawk. He nudged me and asked me about flowers and my favourite colours, wrinkling his nose in faux glee. When we got into the car, a sigh escaped from my mouth before I could stop it.

'So? What do you think?'

'It's alright.'

'Alright!'

Much strained laughter, a playful punch on the arm.

'Come on Erin, it's fantastic!'

'I didn't like it. It's a bit...clinical.'

'How is that possible, did you see the beams?'

I laughed loudly, and it came out mean, 'Sorry. Yes, I saw the beams. Even with the beams, it seemed just stale. And the guy showing us round was a moron.'

Mark rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. I watched him for a moment.

'It's the first place that we've looked at Mark.'

'Well, what do you want?'

I stared at the dashboard. I had no idea, really. I wasn't even trying to be difficult, I just had no possible idea what sort of venue, or even wedding, I wanted. I saw myself standing awkwardly at an altar with the eyes of family, friends and strangers burning into my back, stuttering over words that weren't my own.

'I don't know.'

Mark tutted, 'Well, do some research will you?'

We drove home in a silence occasionally broken by outbursts from Mark, about other venues we should try and where friends had gotten married. I listened, saying nothing. The venue was the least of my worries.

Far down on the list of 'Things to do for the wedding' was the word 'Honeymoon'. I knew that this would cause an argument between us. I knew that we wanted different things. We both agreed to research separately on the subject, which in retrospect was the first mistake. If we had done that together, it would have been one less debate. He went first. He'd chosen a holiday package, two weeks in an all-inclusive resort in Jamaica.

'It'll be great. It'll be warm, we'll get to lie by the pool, drink as much as we like.'

I stared at the brochure, at the walls that surrounded the relaxation. He watched me study it, and placed a warm hand on the small of my back, misunderstanding what I was thinking.

'Don't worry Erin, it's perfectly safe. You don't leave unless you're accompanied by a tour guide and group, and they've got security,' he took the brochure from me and flicked to the back page, pointing at a picture of a tour bus with tinted windows, 'See?'

I looked from the picture, back to him, 'Does that sound like fun to you?'

He paused, smiling slowly, 'Yes! Don't you think?'

‘Can I show you my idea now?’ I didn’t have a brochure, but instead a map. I rolled it out on the living room floor before him.

‘This is a map of the world.’ He said slowly, as though I had no idea what was going on.

‘Yes. We could take a year out, maybe two. We could visit everywhere, we could go around Europe, through America, and we could go to Jamaica too, yes. We wouldn’t stay in a cornered off resort, we’d have to be careful, but we’d be living. We’d see the real world, take a break from all of this.’

Mark shook his head and laughed, ‘Oh! I’ll just pop into work and tell them that I’ll take a year off shall I? Great. And then I’ll pop into the bank and withdraw all of our money. All the money we’ll have left after the wedding, anyway. That’ll be enough to travel for a year.’

I said nothing, but left the room quickly. It was what I’d expected, it was the reason the conversation was last on my list of things that I hadn’t yet done. I didn’t want to waste my money on a two week stay in a walled paradise. I didn’t want to be fawned over, to be waited on. I didn’t want anyone to gleefully turn to me and say ‘All inclusive!’ every time we ate until we were too full. I wanted adventure. To see real people, to stay in good places and bad. I wanted to feel alive, sometimes afraid, often safe.

I stood in the kitchen and felt Mark enter.

‘I’m sorry. But really Erin, you know that we can’t take that time off work don’t you?’

I folded my arms, ‘Actually Mark,’ I repeated his name in the same tone that he had used for my own, ‘I can.’

‘Alright, fine. So your job isn’t a career, that’s fine. For me though, it is. I can’t ask for a year off.’

I nodded. I understood, of course I did. I just hated the idea of being so trapped. I wanted to scream that he shouldn't let work rule his life, that it was up to us to decide where we went and how long for.

'I do understand that, honestly. But how long can you get off work, maximum?'

'I wouldn't feel comfortable asking for more than a couple of weeks.'

I stared at him for a couple of seconds too long, 'Comfort aside though, how long are you allowed off at any one time?'

He sighed and put his hands up to his face, rubbing his fingers slowly under his eyes. 'I'm not asking for more than a couple of weeks off, as I said.' He stared at me through stretched skin, and I noticed how exhausted he looked, how worn.

'Alright.' I folded my arms tighter still, squeezing out the longing for an adventure.

'Alright,' he mimicked, stepping toward me with open arms. He wrapped them around my shoulders and held me for a moment. 'You're going to love Jamaica.'

True to form, the dinner was ready when I arrived home. Mark greeted me with a hug, kissing my forehead hard. I noticed his smell. It was as familiar to me as my mother's scent, comforting and safe.

He pulled a chair out for me at the head of the dining room table, and I sat. I dreamt of eating dinner in front of the television, but this was only something that I could do when I was home alone. Mark had listened to his parents when they forced him to sit at the dining room table night after night. He'd heard of the importance of conversation.

'You made dinner again. You really didn't need to, you know.'

He grinned and pulled up a chair beside me, 'How was your day?'

'It was...the same. Fine.'

‘And what did you do this morning after I left for work?’

I thought about it for a moment. What had I done? I’d taken a cup of tea to bed and lay for hours. I’d wished that I worked in a gallery, admiring paintings and discussing art. I thought about reading, but didn’t actually do it. Then I’d gotten up and left for work. ‘I didn’t do much, really.’

He looked at me for a beat too long, and then nodded, going back to his dinner.

‘Okay. Have you given much thought to wedding plans?’

I shook my head, and shovelled a forkful of spaghetti into my mouth.

‘Great. I was thinking, you seem to have a lot on your mind. I’ve come up with an idea.’

I smiled encouragingly. Mark was warm and kind, intelligent. You could leave him in a room with other people and not worry about the things that he was saying. He was the man that parents loved.

‘How about my mom comes round every morning between ten and twelve and helps you plan the wedding? It would be a weight off your mind. She did the same with my sister.’

I paused for a moment and swallowed, ‘I wanted to take an art course or something with my mornings, remember? That was my...that was the plan. That’s why I got a job that I could do part time.’

A nod in response and a slight shrug, ‘Yes. You haven’t signed up for anything though. Even if you did you’d still have time between now and starting. Mom is really excited about the idea.’

Mark finished the sentence as though it were the end of the conversation. I laughed nervously.

‘Mark, your mom is great.’



'I know.'

'But I don't know if I can handle her being around every morning. For your sister it was different. They're family. What would you say if I said that my mom wanted to come round every evening to help you cook?'

'I'd say, wow, what a generous offer.'

'Okay.'

I began to saw through my spaghetti, chopping it into little strips. I focused on this, each strand sliced in half. We sat in silence for a moment. I glanced up to look at Mark, who was watching me concentrate on playing with my food.

'I thought it might be okay, Erin. You seem to need help with things. You don't have much enthusiasm.'

I rolled my eyes. Mark reached across the table and put his hand over my own.

'Maybe the engagement party will help,' Mark beamed at me. 'That's a great dress.'

'Thank you.'

We ate for a little longer, and I told him about Sofia. He nodded occasionally as I spoke.

'So, you're going to donate some of your clothes?'

'Yes. I have a lot. Too many, really.'

'Hmmm. Maybe she'll offer you some hours in the shop?' Mark was on a mission to get me out of the house, 'Mom said she'd come by tomorrow morning.'

I paused. 'Actually, she asked me to work there. I start tomorrow morning.'

Mark cocked his head to one side and smiled. He didn't look certain that I was telling the truth. 'Okay. Great. I'll walk you there in the morning. What time does it open?'

'Ten AM. You have to be at work earlier than that, right?'

Mark grinned widely, 'I can make an exception.'

I nodded and ate the rest of my dinner. An exception for his special girl.

## Chapter 6

When the morning came I tried again to make Mark go to work without worrying about dropping me off. He was as he always is, helpful and loving. Any suspicion seemed to have disappeared and it was replaced by a genuine desire to help me get to my destination unscathed. I got up slowly, imagining the nightmare of him walking me into the shop to meet Sofia, and giving my lie away.

Mark fussed over me as I got ready, irritating me. For all of the love that I felt for him, his love for me was on occasion far too much to handle. He would tell me that I was beautiful too many times in a day. I began to wish that he'd say it less, which felt a little selfish. I wanted other parts of myself to be recognised by him. I wanted him to tell me that I was smart and funny. I wanted him to praise my wit. Perhaps it wasn't even this, but occasionally I would stare at him and realise that we had turned into entirely different beings. We were branches of the same tree, growing apart, and I was certain that he could see it too. Doubt plagued the worried little smiles, and pats on the hand, that he never used to do. He would never have pawed over me in this way two years ago, but his desperation to make it work between us, to fill whatever void had been created by our growing up, had turned into irritable sweetness.

Eventually, I'd done as much messing around as I could without it seeming too strange, and Mark held the door of the car open for me and I sat, silently irritated. We pulled up outside the shop within three minutes, and I quickly pulled the handle on my door, hissing at Mark not to get out and open the door for me, as though I was a teenager begging my father not to embarrass me.

'Alright Erin, I'm just trying to be nice.'

'I can get my own door, that's all. I'm capable of that.'

He sighed and nodded, and then kissed me on the cheek. I accepted it and got out. He waited, watching me walk into the shop. I could feel his eyes on me, and I turned around, batting at him to drive away. I hated that. His insistence to make sure I was okay. This too was a new thing that he had started doing. I stared at him and jutted my chin out, shaking my head. He mouthed the word 'Fine' and slowly rolled away.

I took a deep breath and turned, pushing the door. Sofia sat behind the till yawning, a large mug in her hands. She looked mildly surprised as I walked in.

'Hi, you were in yesterday weren't you?'

'Yes,' I smiled, trying again the place that accent.

'Great, can I help?'

'Oh...no. I'm just looking about.'

Sofia nodded and turned back to her drink. I saw Mark drive away out of the corner of my eye and let out a sigh of relief. I began to look half-heartedly through the rails of clothing, my fingers lingering every now and then on soft material.

'Who dropped you off?'

I turned to Sofia and smiled, 'Oh, just a friend.' I lied, unsure why.

She nodded. I walked over to the bookcase and ran my eyes over the various books. They didn't seem to be in any order at all. Fiction lay next to school text books, authors beginning with 'A' fell against the 'W'.

I settled down on a comfy leather seat that was priced far too highly considering the stuffing was coming out of the seams, and reached for the first book that I could touch. It was a beautiful leather bound version of *Little Women*. The front was embossed and I ran

my finger over it, touching the letters. I loved *Little Women*, though it made me cry an abnormal amount.

I opened the book. Two things were written in pencil on the first page. I love this, anything that tells the story of an item is priceless. Sofia had priced it at thirty pounds. This was steep, I thought, but it was also beautiful so I could imagine how she had come to this price. If I worked here full time I wouldn't want to see the beautiful things leave either.

The second pencil marking was slightly fainter, and it was the name of a woman: Rose Sanderson. I studied it for a moment, tracing the name with my fingers. The writing was childlike and precise, someone had written it with concentration. I closed my eyes and imagined Rose, saw her writing her name in pencil in the front of her new book, delighted that she'd been given such a beautiful thing, hoping never to lose it. I wondered how it had ended up here, who had handed it in. I couldn't imagine that she'd handed it in herself. Perhaps she'd died. I began to read the book, delving back into the lives of those women that I knew so well, and passed the time this way for about an hour, nobody coming in at all.

Eventually, Sofia made her way over, cup still in hand. She smiled, 'It's a beautiful copy isn't it?'

'Yes. I love this book. I hope you don't mind my having a read. I start work in a couple of hours and I've sort of found myself with some time to spare.'

She shrugged and sat on the floor before me. I stared at her for a moment, and she stared back at me. The eye contact was almost unbearable, each second made my heart thump a little louder in my ears. Eventually I broke first, staring down at the book.

'So, are you going to buy it, do you think?'

I laughed a little, 'Well, thirty pounds is a little more than I have at the moment. I'm supposed to be saving money.' I flicked my finger over the pages, enjoying the old book smell that flew from the paper.

'Ah but it's worth it for such a lovely thing. And for charity.' She grinned at me and I turned back to the front page and looked at the name again.

'Do you know what would be nice? If you could find out who this Rose Sanderson person is. I'd love to do that. A little investigation. She must have lived round here at some point.'

Sofia laughed slightly, shrugging, 'That book was left outside in a bin bag. We have a sign about that by the way, drives me nuts. Anyway, why would you want to reconnect somebody with something they no longer want?'

I shook my head. I didn't know why I wanted to do that, I just did. And I would. I told Sofia so and she looked at me for a moment, her expression one that I couldn't place. Was it confusion or boredom? I looked at the name again and saw something that I hadn't noticed before in tiny detail on the bottom of the front page. It was a date. I couldn't make out the first few numbers, but I could make out the year; '1934'.

'Just don't link this back to me or the shop in any way. It'll seem like I'm running some sort of lost and found, and it might even be a little bit creepy. You donate something, we force it back onto you.'

'Maybe it was left by another charity shop. That happens, doesn't it?'

Sofia nodded, 'Yeah, it does. If they can't sell stuff, maybe it isn't right for their area. Or the old library, they let us have books that aren't good enough to lend out anymore. Most of our donations come from people though, and other places probably wouldn't have left it outside on the step.'

I closed the book and watched Sofia, 'I don't think a bit of research would hurt anybody.'

She made a small hum under her breath and stood up, brushing invisible nothings off her legs with her hands, 'It's up to you.'

I thought about this and popped the book into my bag, telling Sofia that I would let her know how it went. She went about tidying a few things on the shelves, and then turned to me as I was about to make my way to the front door.

'That'll be thirty pounds.'

I cocked my head to one side and frowned, feeling embarrassed for having misunderstood.

'That book is thirty pounds.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I thought that you meant it was alright to try and find the owner. Honestly, I don't have that money at the moment. What do you think, if it all works out, I'll give you the money then?'

Sofia walked over to me and held out one hand, while putting the other on her hip. She lifted her chin and stared me straight in the eye, 'I don't let anybody else 'pay me later'. I'm running a charity shop. Charity is the important word here. You pay for it now, or you leave it here and it goes back on the bookshelf, and you can hope that no one else buys it while you're saving up for it.'

I gave her a tight smile and took it out of my bag, placing it in her hand. She made a display of putting back on the shelf and pretended to rub fingerprints off it with the sleeve of her cardigan.

'I really appreciate you coming to see me today,' she smiled suddenly and brightly, surprising me with how quickly she could change her expression. I nodded and turned to

leave, her change in reaction jarring, and stepped out into the wet and windy air. I was still planning on doing some research, book or no book. I had convinced myself that it was a lovely thing to do. If Rose Sanderson was pleased, I'd go back and buy it for her. If it was still there, of course. If it wasn't, that would be another story, and perhaps a difficult conversation.

My phone buzzed inside my pocket, Mark flashing up on the screen. I answered slowly.

'How did it go?'

So eager, so thoughtful.

'Fine. It was fine. We just sorted out books and stuff.'

'That's great. Are you going back tomorrow?'

I thought quickly about his mother coming over and sighed, 'Yes.'

'Erin, I'm delighted!'

I agreed. We said our goodbyes. I thought for a moment about us. Our relationship. Why had I become so irritable? All of the thoughtful stuff that Mark did, things that I used to delight in, now got under my skin and bit away at my patience. It was as though every time I pushed him away he swept me up in a hug. I felt I was losing my sense of self. I was becoming Mark's Erin. I was gaining another name before my own, and, when we got married, after my own. I was terrified of my lack of experiences, though one in particular scared me to death. There were things that he didn't know about me, about seeing a counsellor, about my hopes and dreams. I would sometimes obsess over the idea that I was missing out on a world that I had never had the chance to experience, on relationships that I had never tried. I stood for a moment outside the shop, and turned to see Sofia lean over a counter to rearrange some cards by the till. She glanced up at me and smiled, waving, her



hair falling down over her right eyes slightly. I waved back. I wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

## Chapter 7

‘And so, now we’re engaged!’

Mark squeezed my hand tightly and lifted it up to show the crowd, a gathering of family and joint friends, a wall of people. Laughter and squeezing of arms. They grabbed my hand and passed me around. I barely said a thing, afraid of saying the wrong words. And then, when they drifted, left to mingle with each other and to leave me alone with Mark, I watched him. His brown eyes softened when he turned to look at me, never letting go of my hand. ‘Soft like butter,’ I thought to myself. The phrase was one that my mother used to describe the dog next door when I was growing up. It made me think of stroking him, a greasy residue dripping from his fur. Mark leaned toward me and kissed me, gently.

‘What are you thinking?’

‘The wedding.’

He narrowed his eyes playfully, ‘Really?’

‘No. I was thinking about the dog next door, that’s all.’

‘Oh.’

I smiled and kissed him in return, once, on his cheek. He was good-looking. I felt that. People often told me that we made a handsome couple and I liked being described as handsome. In fact, a long time ago an English teacher had likened my face to that of a sculpture, ‘You have a classical beauty,’ she had told me. I held onto that memory with fondness.

Mark began to circle the room, preying for compliments. I snuck off to the bathroom, to sit alone for a while. As I sat behind the locked door, a gentle knock came.

‘Someone’s in here!’

'I know, Erin. It's me, Sash.'

I stood and flicked the catch back, leaving the door ajar as I retook my seat. She stood in the doorway, green eyes shining kindly, her caramel hair curled to just below her shoulders. She was one of our joint friends that had started off as my own. I realised in that moment, that I had no friends to call my own anymore, they were all ours.

'I was wondering where you'd got to. Everything okay?'

I nodded and smiled, 'Of course.'

'Okay.'

Sasha closed the door behind her and squatted in front of me, pulling on the end of her tight skirt as it creaked under the squat. She smiled sadly, and grasped my hands.

'Do you remember in year 8, when we planned that trip to Canada?'

I nodded.

'We stayed up all night, we wrote in that tiny book that we'd covered in wallpaper.

All the mean stuff we used to write in that. Remember?'

'Yes. I remember.'

'And now look! You're getting married. You're making me feel old.' Sasha smiled and patted my hands before she let go again, 'But, all that aside, I think I know you very well.'

'Of course.'

'And you seem miserable. In fact, Mark thinks so too.'

I glanced at her, curious, 'Does he?'

'I hate to be the bad guy, but your mother is out there with your fiancé, and you're sitting in a cubicle in a toilet in a village hall.'

'What did Mark say?'

She shrugged, shaking her head, 'Nothing in particular, but he asked where you were, and from the look on his face, he definitely looked concerned that his bride was not by his side. You need to get out there Erin, show everyone how happy you are.'

I took a deep breath and stood up, and she nodded and held out her hand. I wanted to tell her how I was feeling, how uncertain I was about this next stage of my life. How scared I felt. But I couldn't. She was Mark's friend too now. She wasn't mine to talk to. I took a hold of her outstretched hand.

'Good. Exactly.'

## Chapter 8

The first argument ended with Mark telling me that he loved me for the first time. He shook the same response out of me, though I knew I did really. I was just afraid to say so. We'd been together for over two years, and I'd just moved in. We'd moved slowly, in comparison to our friends. To move in together seemed far more natural than declaring love for some reason. It was a cold winter night that I finally arrived with the last of my things. I was excited, until he told me that his parents were on their way over. I'll never forget the look on his face; he was excited.

'Tonight? Why?'

'Because we're living together!'

I sat down on the sofa and kicked a box with my foot. No words. He sat beside me and rubbed my back, but I shook him off. I had met his parents, once before, over Sunday dinner at their house. It had been comfortable in a strange way, his father pushing to hear all about my work and life, and his mother's questions delving too deeply into my childhood. When we'd got back to his, I'd cried, briefly. I had 'let slip' about my father leaving, and scolded him for his parents' reaction. What reaction is appropriate? He said they didn't know me, and they were from a conservative family. He said that my father leaving was rough on me, but that he could see from his parents' side that they didn't know how to bridge the gap between those comments and the Sunday roast before them. They wanted an easy breezy sort of lunch, gently welcoming me into the family. I said again that I wanted the same, and that I wasn't ashamed of my father. I couldn't be held responsible for his behaviour. I had no feelings about it anyway, I growled at him, through tears. But that wasn't an argument, not really. I eventually slept, and he said nothing.

I didn't want his parents to meet me for the second time on moving day. For some reason, this hadn't occurred to him. He told me that it was his home, so he was baffled by the thought that his parents shouldn't come round. I told him that now this was my home too, and his lack of thought was shocking. There were boxes everywhere. He told me that I was snarling as I unpacked. He helped from a distance, or rather, not at all. Eventually they came.

His mother, occasionally sharp tongued, is the sort of woman that delivers a back-handed compliment while giving you a hug.

'A bit of extra weight really suits you!'

This comment is the one that she delivered to me that night. I was wearing jogging bottoms and an oversized hoodie, hair scraped back into a bun, bits flying everywhere. Mark gently squeezed my shoulders when his mother told me this, scared that shit was about to fly. I felt my eyes narrow, but said nothing, politely smiling. We made it through the evening on a bare minimum of conversation. As they left, his mother told me that I should spend some time clearing the boxes away. I held my breath and again, said nothing, just laughed, and agreed that I would get round to it. As the front door closed, I turned to Mark.

'I'm not the sort of person to bad-mouth somebody's mother.'

He nodded. I said no more and climbed into bed without a word.

'Erin? I'm sorry about her. I think she's just trying to be helpful.'

'I'm not the sort of person to bad-mouth somebody's mother.' I repeated, turning my back to him.

'Okay...'

'Why have I even moved in?'

'Because you wanted to? You wanted to see me more, remember?'

I sat up in bed and put my head in my hands, irritated, 'Yes. I remember. And what about you?'

'Well, I want to see you more. I want you to be there when I get home.'

A pause.

'Great. How exciting.' I could hear my voice, cold and dull. Mark sighed and started stroking my back. I flinched with each movement.

'I want to be with you, that's why.'

I turned to look at him, noticing his large eyes inspecting my face. He nodded at me, trying to encourage agreement. I said nothing.

'I am sorry that I invited my parents over. I don't know why I didn't think that through properly.'

'Well, that's a start.'

'Yes, Erin, I'm trying to apologise.'

'Why has your tone suddenly changed? I'm the one that's angry with you.'

'I'm allowed to be angry too.'

'No, you're not. What do you have to be angry about?'

'You being arsy, because of something my mom said? I can't control her, you know.'

I laughed, matching his irritability, 'Well then, you shouldn't invite her out in public, should you?'

'This is a great new side that I'm seeing of you. I love it.'

I grinned a hard smile, one that I knew didn't reach my eyes. 'I love it too, Mark.'

'Do you love it?'

'What?'

'Do you love this side of me too?'

‘No, Mark, I don’t.’

A heavy nod, ‘That makes sense then.’

‘What the hell does that mean?’

‘Well, why would you love this side to me? You haven’t even told me that you love the other side of me.’

Silence. I paused for a moment and wrinkled my brow.

‘Well, I love you, Erin.’

I smiled, and said nothing, giving him a light kiss on the cheek. I didn’t speak again that night, just left him to wallow in worry and regret while I pretended to sleep soundly beside him. When morning came I made coffee and handed him a cup, and then quietly leant in and kissed him on the mouth.

‘I love you too, but from now on you have to tell me a week in advance if your mother is coming over.’

He laughed, ‘Ditto.’

‘Nope. My mother is normal.’ And with that, I left for work.



## Chapter 9

The next day I had a slight hangover from the engagement party, on my way to work but already looking forward to the end of the day, where I could disappear into the bath.

Standing at the tube station waiting, earphones in my ears, I was listening to a meditation course that I had found online for free. You probably were not supposed to listen to it while you were surrounded by people on the underground, but I knew that I wouldn't find the time at home. I already had homework from the counsellor to avoid. I practiced the breathing, conscious of looking as though I was breathing strangely in public. I closed my eyes for a moment. Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder. A tall, very slim man in jeans and a white t shirt grinned at me. I pulled my earpiece out and frowned.

'Sorry?'

'What are you listening to?'

I looked around me, for some signal that everything was okay. Why was this man talking to me, this stranger? I lifted my shoulders in response. Why did people try to talk to you when you were listening to music or reading a book? I would never interrupt a stranger even if they didn't have anything distracting them.

He shrugged back, mocking me, 'You don't know?'

'Well, I do know, I just wasn't sure why you were...asking.'

'You're a pretty girl, why shouldn't I ask?'

The train came rushing through the underground, and I stared at the carriages as they flew past. They were mostly empty. That was the worst thing that could have happened, as it gave me no opportunity not to have the seat beside me empty. I sighed and stepped to one side, waiting for the train to stop and the doors to open. Once they did the

man stood next to me, getting on at the same carriage. I chose a seat. He chose the seat beside me.

‘So, you in to music?’

I tried my best not to curse audibly but I just wanted to tell him to fuck off. I didn’t want to be spoken to by a strange man. I didn’t want the attention.

‘It’s fine.’

He nodded a slow emphasised nod, supposedly trying to engage me in further discussion about music. ‘I love it.’

I said nothing, just made a face that acknowledged that he had spoken.

‘Yeah, big into my music I am.’

‘Right.’

‘So, where you going?’

The meditation course was still running into one ear. It told me to step into an orb of light. I considered saying this in response. Pretending that I was crazy, so that he would leave me alone.

‘Home.’

‘Yeah, where’s home?’

I rolled my eyes and stared at him, ‘Well, I’m not going to tell a stranger where I live.’

He held up his hands as though I had offended him and he were protecting himself.

‘Alright love. No offence meant. I’m headed to Stratford.’

*Breathe deeply. Imagine that the orb of light surrounds you. You can see your friends there, your family.*

‘You got any plans tonight?’

I shook my head.

‘You fancy going for a drink?’

‘Not really.’

He sat back a little, still watching me. ‘You got a boyfriend or something?’

I nodded, and held up my left hand, showing the engagement ring that puckered the skin beneath.

‘You should have said.’

I put my hand back on my lap, ‘Again, not keen on sharing personal information about my life with strangers.’

The man laughed and shook his head, as though I were making a great joke.

*Take a moment to notice the way that your body is contacting the space beneath you. Go through each stage of your body, from your head, to your toes. Notice any pain that you feel. If you get distracted, don’t worry. Notice those distractions and let them drift away.*

‘You’re alright you are, a bit moody but you’re a good laugh I bet. Can I have your number?’

The train pulled into Liverpool Street station, which was not Mile End, where I was supposed to get off. I considered getting off here instead and not giving this man the opportunity to know where I lived. I stood up and took a few steps toward the doors, holding onto the poles as the train slowed.

‘Hey, I said can I have your number?’

The man stood up and joined me, and I shook my head, ‘No.’

*You may be lying down, you may be sitting. It’s important to find a position that works well for you.*

The doors opened and I stepped out, holding my bag close to me. I always suspected people like this to be trying to distract you for a greater reason. They wanted your belongings. Mark always told me that I was paranoid, but it made sense to me.

He stepped out beside me and I sighed, turning to him on the platform. 'Don't you get off at Stratford?'

He grinned and winked, 'I was hoping to get off with you sweetheart.'

Again, I looked around me, but for all the people there it seemed that I was entirely alone. Not one of them noticed that I was uncomfortable, none of them made eye contact or even looked our way. Would I have done? Probably not, I'd probably have thought that two people chatting didn't equal a problem.

*Don't forget your breathing, in through your nose, and out through your mouth.  
Make the breathing audible, so that you can hear it.*

I took a deep breath, 'Fuck off.'

I turned and began to walk quickly, up the steps of the escalator, the underground wind in my face, battling with my hair. Each time I passed an advert I could see in the reflection of the plastic that he was right behind me. My heart began to beat harder and I tried to climb the steps quicker, eventually reaching the end. Two men stood in blue jackets at the top, chatting about a whiteboard between them. I rushed up to them, breathless.

'This guy, he's following me.'

They looked behind me and shook their heads, 'Who's that then?'

I turned and looked, and saw his head disappear as he moved down the escalator on the other side. He turned at the last minute and winked again.

'Shit,' I put my hand over my chest and took a deep breath.

The men glanced at each other and one of them shrugged.

'Are you alright?'

I shook my head, saying nothing.

*With each breath out I want you to relax more and more. Let the worries of the day dissipate before you.*

Back home I stood in front of the mirror and undressed. I stared at my reflection, at my naked body. I looked at my breasts, at my thighs, my large hips and my labia. Finally, I stared at my face. This is the body that attracts so much unwelcome attention. The body that asks to be yelled at in the street, to be touched by unwelcoming hands, to be watched by others. I stared at my body and I cried, for all the things that I am, attracts all the wrong attention.

## Chapter 10

‘Olive?’

I stepped into her hallway and saw with mild surprise that she had vacuumed the carpet. I went into the lounge, where she sat with a cup of tea, watching the television.

‘She swapped the boxes, and it was the wrong one! Ha! She lost out on fifty thousand pounds. Can you imagine?’ She grinned at me and nodded.

I removed my coat and looked at Noel Edmunds faux sad face, large on the screen, and laughed. We were both pleased at the box that revealed a pound.

‘That’s no good is it? Hardly worth the journey.’

‘Exactly. I always prefer these ones. I like the banker,’ Olive leaned toward me conspiratorially, ‘I always did go for the bad boy.’

I laughed. She had bad days and great days, and this was the latter. I leaned in toward her also, ‘Did you really?’

She took a long sip of tea and stared at me steadily, ‘Oh yes. Before Walter? Yes. I had a fair few boyfriends. In fact, when I met Walter, I was going out with such a man! He was a gentleman. He was a bit on the wrong side of the law though. I think he was mixed up with the twins...you know. The Krays.’

I almost swore, but stopped myself just in time. She raised her eyebrows and nodded, as if answering the word that I had never spoken.

‘Did you meet them?’

‘Oh gosh,’ She pursed her lips and shook her head, ‘I shouldn’t think so. If I did, I don’t remember it. My mother hated that boy anyway, and then Walter came along and he was a sweetheart. And there you go.’

She turned back to the television and took another sip of tea. I watched her for a moment, wanting to hear more. 'Did you vacuum, Olive?'

She glanced at me briefly, 'I shouldn't think so, no.'

'Oh. It just looks tidy.'

'Oh yes, my daughter got me a cleaner. I think she thought that you lot would do all of that you know.'

I smiled. It was something that I got asked a lot, 'Well, I'm happy to help with your housework Olive, I can take your plates and mugs and wash them, that isn't a problem, but I'm really here to talk to you.'

She nodded and rolled her eyes at somebody crying on the television, 'I know that. So what do you want to talk about then? How are the wedding plans?'

I was pleased that she had remembered again. 'Not bad.'

Suddenly, she picked up the remote control and turned the television off. She looked at me, 'There's something in the tone of your voice that suggests it might not be going so well.'

I cocked my head to one side and considered it, 'Well, it's okay. It's just usual stuff, arguments about the choice of honeymoon and things like that.'

'Yes. The man always gets his own way.'

'Do you think? I think that's the first time I've actually heard someone say that, you know. I do feel that his decisions about the wedding are sort of...winning. But people always make jokes about 'bridezillas.'

She scoffed, 'Nonsense. I can tell that you're not, for a start. That's a stupid word. Men always get their way in everything, why a wedding should be any different is beyond me.'

‘Well, people have said to me that the wedding is for the woman-‘

‘-Ah, because that’s the only day you get for yourself, in your whole life? Yes. I remember that. Though I didn’t quite believe it. Now I do,’ she looked at me kindly and sighed. ‘It’s a little different now, you might not have the same sort of time that I did. You shouldn’t worry about it. I didn’t even have my own money, my own job. It was so frustrating, I was stuck at home waiting for him. And I loved him dearly, and he was kind and caring, but after a while cleaning and making pies only goes so far. I couldn’t get a job, he said he’d be offended. We had the kids, we had all that. I suppose it kept me busy.’

I shook my head automatically at the thought of having children. Giving up my life for something so consuming seemed terrifying. Mark wanted children though, I knew this from the way that he smiled at them in the supermarket, wrinkling up his nose and grinning as though he had won the lottery. We had not spoken about it because I was afraid of his plans, and how soon he might want to bring life into the world. I thought that he might want them immediately, as soon as we married. I couldn’t think of anything worse at this stage in my life. Every time he tried to talk to me about it I changed the subject. A coward.

Olive shifted in her chair, ‘When I was married, I went from my parents straight to our house. That was it. There was no in-between, not for women. You couldn’t even sign for your own house if you had the money, your father did that for you, and then your husband. The men made the decisions. You can do anything you want, Erin. You can go anywhere. Alone!’

‘I don’t know how you coped.’

She laughed, though it was clear that she didn’t find it funny. ‘Who’s to say I coped? Perhaps I didn’t, you don’t know. We kept things quieter in my house, that’s all. You put



your problems away in the cupboard, along with the bottle of gin. You locked them up there, for safe keeping. Gin and problems together!’

I laughed and nodded, ‘Yes, well, we both do something similar then.’

‘Oh I don’t drink anything anymore, not since Walter died. Not that he was the catalyst for it, it’s just the way it turned out. I had all these great plans when he died, but then I just stayed here. I’ve probably got some gin you can have in the kitchen, if you’d like. I won’t touch it.’

‘Oh no, thank you,’ I responded, quickly. How it might look to my manager if she found out that I was taking gin from elderly women, I hated to think. ‘So, your last name, did you take that from your husband?’

‘Of course I did. That’s what marriage is.’

‘Is it? I don’t want to give up my name, it feels like I’d be giving up a part of me.’

Olive rolled her eyes, ‘No, that’s a dramatic way to see it, I think. What’s in a name?’

I said nothing. A lot though, I thought, a lot is in a name. Was Mark willing to give something of himself up for me?

‘It’s about give and take, compromise. I wanted to work but Walter said no, but also, I wanted to live here, close to my parents, and so he had to move far away from his. Compromise. My own daughter compromises now with her husband. He’s a dog person, she’s a cat person. They got a budgie.’

I laughed, ‘Is that the same thing?’

‘Of course. Compromise.’

Listening to Olive say those two things out loud shocked me. They were suddenly real issues, grown up, marriage-wrecking, problems. One hardly seemed to quantify the other, they were too different, too stressful to imagine finding a compromise on.

‘Aren’t those pretty big issues? Children, names? That’s just...huge, isn’t it?’ I began to pick the skin from my thumb with my index finger again, only vaguely aware that I was doing it. Olive watched me carefully. She seemed to be weighing up her answer, aware that she was suddenly involved in a serious conversation with the carer. I had been visiting her for around a year, but beyond idiots on television and conversations about our lives that skimmed real emotion, we were basically colleagues. She reached out and patted my hand, gently, her large watery eyes softening.

‘A problem is as big as you make it. Every relationship has problems. They are hard work, and that’s just a fact.’

I stared at her. I didn’t think this was much of an answer to my question, it was a beige response, vague.

‘If you are meant to be, you’ll overcome it. If not, you won’t. There are plenty of other men in London, you live in a capital city.’

I smiled briefly, ‘It’s true, but no one ever speaks to each other. I’ve heard from friends that it’s a nightmare to meet someone new.’

‘Is that right? When I was your age it wasn’t such a problem.’

‘Well, it’s the atmosphere...I don’t know. People push by you on the tube...no one has time to stop and chat.’ I thought of the man that I had told to fuck off, wondering if what I’d said was actually true.

‘Ah well. You can always change it.’ She picked up her remote control and flicked the red button, bringing Noel Edmunds back onto the television. He was clapping his hands and laughing at a man doing a little dance behind his red box. We watched in silence for a moment, neither of us laughing or finding it as funny as the audience on the screen. Olive tutted, ‘I bet that man goes home after filming every day and just cries in bed.’

I laughed loudly, Olive was on good form today. Better form than I had ever seen her. The clock above her mantel piece chimed on the hour, signalling to me that I should leave. She glanced at it and then held her cup out to me, nodding as I took it from her.

‘Make me a cup of tea before you go, will you?’

I took it and walked into kitchen, every inch of which was shiny and clean. I noticed as I filled up the kettle with water that it had been descaled.

‘Your kitchen looks great Olive,’ I called out, but only heard Noel’s voice in response. I made the tea and took it through to her, where she sat, asleep in her chair. I placed it down carefully on the table beside her and picked up my coat, making my way out of the house as quietly as possible.

## Chapter 11

On our two year anniversary, Mark and I hired a rowing boat on the Thames. The sun was glorious, warming us enough to mean that we could wear short sleeves. We drank from a miniature bottle of prosecco, and his face was crinkled in happiness, joy shone from his pores, and I knew that I looked the same.

'Can I have a go at rowing?'

'Of course!' He handed over the oars and we swapped positions, the boat rocking gently. Beneath my hands the boat flew through the calm water, the bare minimum of effort needed. It was a pleasure, it was simple. I closed my eyes and basked in the sunshine for a while as I rowed, relying on Mark to steer.

'I've got the same idea as this guy, let the woman row!'

Laughter caused me to open my eyes, and I set them on a boat beside us, with three men inside it. The man talking grinned at me, signalling to his friend, 'Haha! He's the woman!'

There were no words for this, nothing could be said. I was being told, in a jokey way, that I was worthless, and that this was all down to my gender. My gender was the insult. Mark rolled his eyes, but I was incensed. The overriding memory, from a glorious trip down a river with a loved one became intrinsically linked with the stinging feeling of humiliation.

I paused and reread what I had written, imagining that I was Dawn. She must have the same stories. Did she even want to read mine, or had I offered that to her without thought?

## Chapter 12

Mark dropped me off at the charity shop again, and it was closed. It was a Tuesday, and I had the whole day off. I usually had one complete day off in the working week and today was the day. Mark frowned at the door and then at me, 'It's closed. Do you have her number?'

'Yes. She's a little late sometimes, I think.'

'Oh. Are you sure?'

I nodded, and kissed him gently on the cheek before stepping out of the car. He paused for a moment before driving off, and I mouthed the words 'I'm fine' at him through the car window.

I peered into the shop, trying to see if anybody was in there. Suddenly, there was a gentle, fake, cough to my left. It was Sofia. Her hair was clipped up away from her face, too short to wear in a ponytail. It struggled with the grips, strands falling around her ears and the nape of her neck. I smiled awkwardly.

She widened her eyes, 'You're back, Erin. To buy the book?'

'Oh! Maybe, yes.'

'Great. Well,' she pointed at the opening hours on the door, 'We're not open today. We don't have the volunteers to run six days a week. See?'

'Ah. Okay.'

Sofia paused for a moment, watching me, 'Do you want to go for a drink?'

I stared at her for a moment and quickly checked my phone for the time, though I knew it was still morning, 'A drink drink?'

She nodded, 'Yes. Don't worry, I'll take good care of you.'

Sofia said that she knew of a Swedish bar on Brick Lane that sold elderberry red wine. She described it as tasting just as you imagined wine to taste when you were a child, before the inevitable disappointment of that first sip. It made me uncomfortable, drinking in the day. I always felt desperately tired afterwards, and was unable to go about the rest of my day properly.

We walked to the bar in bursts of conversation and silence. I asked about her work, but didn't listen completely to her reply. She spoke as though she were talking to an old friend, not somebody that she didn't know very well. I felt as though I was being strange. Each footstep seemed a little practised, and I was very aware of the way that my hands fell. When we arrived she told me to take a seat wherever I liked, the drinks were on her. The bar was small, with only three tables already filled with people. I squinted into the darkness, and Sofia gestured at a sign pointing toward a roof garden. I followed it, up a small creaky staircase, to a much preferred bright area. It was filled with different height chairs and blankets, but empty of people. I sat in a large wicker chair and waited for Sofia.

'Do you like it here?'

'Yes. Very much. Thank you.'

I took a glass from her hand and smiled. She sat before me and held her drink aloft, angling it so that the sun shone through.

'Doesn't it look like Ribena? Try it. It must be my favourite thing.'

I took a sip and let the sweet currant taste slip over my tongue. Saliva sprang from the back corners of my mouth, and I swallowed.

'It is delicious. Thank you for bringing me here.'

‘Oh,’ she took another long sip and waved her hand in front of me, as if to say ‘It’s nothing.’

‘It’s never too late to make new friends!’

I nodded and felt my eyes widen, unsure of how to reply, but excited at the prospect of having my own friend again.

‘Of course, it gets harder as you get older. Well then, Erin, how’s the dress?’

‘I haven’t had a chance to wear it yet,’ I lied. I was unsure as to why I hadn’t admitted to wearing the dress, it was as though I was afraid that she would think I was desperate to wear it.

‘Ah, maybe the weather hasn’t been great. Still, I’m happy that it’s gone to a new home. So, tell me about yourself!’

I looked into my glass and swirled the liquid around, enjoying the game of not letting it reach the edge. ‘I work as a carer, part time.’

Sofia looked disappointedly at me. I tried again.

‘I mean, I won’t always do that. But the hours are good, you know? One day I’d like to travel. I’m saving up to go away, that’s why I’m working in a job like that, I don’t know. It gives me the time that I need to work on myself.’

She nodded. ‘To work on yourself? What does that mean?’

The wine reached the edge of the glass and fell over the side in a single drip. I reached my finger up to stop it. ‘I don’t know. I’ve started...writing things down. Well, I did once. My story, in a way. It doesn’t matter, really.’

Why had I started to tell her about my meetings with Dawn? I frowned. I wasn’t writing my own story, was I?

She smiled encouragingly, ‘Well, that’s admirable. What was your degree in?’



'I didn't go to university.'

She nodded quickly and shrugged again, 'I don't know why I'd assumed you had. That's my bad.' She paused and took another drink of the soft red liquid. 'It isn't for everybody. I've always said that. It just isn't suited to everybody.'

'I think it is suited to me,' I replied.

'Of course. There's always time,' she reached for a fallen strand behind her ear and tried to squeeze it into a clip, 'I've always said that.'

I laughed gently. She seemed suddenly awkward, and it occurred to me that she thought that she'd made me uncomfortable. I rolled my shoulders back and sat up straight, trying to look alert and confident, a part of the conversation.

'What did you do at university?'

'I slept with a lot of people,' she laughed brightly, 'Isn't that what uni's for? I learnt some things, but really, I'm not sure I worked until the last few months of the last year.'

I wondered if she would tell me what her degree was actually in, but thought against asking again. I didn't want her to think that I was dull.

'And now, I work in the charity shop. I mean, I don't get paid well for it. But it's good for me.'

'And so, do you live at home?'

'What, with my parents?'

I nodded, as the idea brought a great burst of laughter from her long throat.

'Lord, no! No, I have my own place. They live in South Africa.'

I smiled, suddenly realising that her accent was a merge of South African and London. Her own place? Did she own it? How could she afford that? It would be rude to ask.

I thought about the fact that she'd bought the drinks and felt a pang of guilt, imagining a daily struggle with money.

'I'm very lucky. My parents have money,' she said, answering my silent question, draining her glass. 'Always give your children enough to do anything, but not enough to do nothing.'

I smiled weakly. A great fear of mine was that I'd have children without being able to provide the support that I'd enjoyed myself.

'Will you have another, or do you have work this afternoon?'

I shook my head, and drained my glass also. She raised her eyebrows and I handed her my glass. I let her take it back downstairs without offering to pay for the next myself. Just how lucky was she?

'Welcome to my humble abode,' Sofia sniggered, and pushed open the door of her house. She had invited me back after another few glasses of wine, excited about showing me her new home. The door fell heavily to the wall behind it, ricocheting back into her. She pushed it again and I stood behind her, excitedly waiting to see the inside of the house.

She walked into the hallway and turned around to face me, 'Come in!'

The hall was small but bright, with light green tiled walls and a large bay window at the back. Sofia threw her keys down onto an old dressing table that was pushed against the wall, the only furniture that I imagined could really fit in there. It held a large vase full of tulips, some of which were dying and drying next to the bright colours of those alive.

The wine seemed to have affected her faster than me, though I certainly didn't feel sober. She wandered through a large white door and I followed her. Her sitting room was

beautiful. It seemed full of organised clutter, and I was momentarily surprised that she had only just moved in. Everything seemed to have been there forever, each ornament and photo frame, pictures of friends lying in sunshine, placed in the perfect spot.

Sofia smiled, soft dimples hitting her right cheek, and pointed at a photo on the table beside her. A group of girls clung to each other, laughing and posing, against the backdrop of a wet day. I picked it up and carried it to the window, so that I could see it clearly, though my eyes were already adjusted to the dimness of her home. Sofia was in the photograph, her hair a little longer than now. Her eyes were scrunched and small, and I smiled at her glee. She had her arms wrapped around a taller girl, whose long golden hair was tied messily into a ponytail. She pouted and sucked in her cheeks, and I noticed that both her hands sat firmly on her hips, oblivious to the fact that Sofia was touching her at all. This was fascinating to me. To be oblivious to Sofia. For Sofia to allow it. Suddenly, she was beside me, taking the frame from my hands.

‘I love this photo. That’s my ex.’

She pointed to a short girl at the end of the line, who was stretching her hands up towards the sky.

‘She looks like a pixie.’

Sofia smiled as I said this and nodded. ‘You’ll probably meet her. I’d like you to meet her.’

‘Sure,’ I said, curious as to why she would want me to meet her ex-girlfriend. I let her take the photo and put it on the window ledge beside us. Neither of us had moved, and I realised that we were standing particularly close. I could smell her perfume. She cocked her head to one side, serious expression.

‘So, the fact that my ex was a girl, does that surprise you?’

I thought about this. It didn't, not really. It's not that I'd assumed Sofia was gay, I just hadn't decided either way. I told her as much.

'I suppose I thought the same about you. What does gender have to do with love, really? You can fall in love with a man as easily as a woman, it's about personality.' She lay heavily on the sofa before her fireplace, and smiled, 'It's only 4 o'clock.'

I sat next to her gingerly, aware of how rigid I was being.

'You are funny,' she said, as she sat up and pulled her knees to her chin. I smiled awkwardly.

'Am I?'

She nodded, 'Yes. I can't really explain it. It's a little like, and please, don't take offence, but it's a little like, you haven't really spoken to anyone before.'

I frowned, 'Well, offence taken.'

She laughed, pushing me gently on the arm. 'Oh, you're not offended! You're just a little uncomfortable today. Were you this way in the shop the other day?'

'I suppose I was. I don't really think it's like me to go for wine with people I don't especially know in the middle of the day.'

Sofia smiled and stretched her legs out, resting them on top of my own. Beneath my jeans my skin prickled, a shiver running over me. I rested my hands on top of her bare shins, noticing how smooth they were, in comparison to mine.

'Erin, just try and relax.'

I thought about this, and Sofia lay silent beside me. I looked over at her after a few minutes and saw that she had her eyes closed. I started as she suddenly spoke.

'That wine has made me sleepy.'

My hands remained on her shins. 'Yes.'

And with that, Sofia's breathing changed gently. I watched the slow rise and fall of her chest as she slept, arms raised above her head, hands clasped loosely. I noticed the occasional flicker of eyelashes, and inspected the small freckles on her right shin. Eventually, I must have nodded off.

By the time Sofia woke up I had moved. I remained on my chair but sat, awkwardly, in the corner of it, as though I was trying to squeeze myself into the furniture, to stop Sofia's skin from touching my own. She stretched and sat up properly, pulling her legs back into herself.

'Sorry about that, I didn't mean to drift off.'

'It's fine, don't worry.'

'I'm not.' She stared at me for a second longer than she had to, and stood, beginning to let her hair down. It fell from the clips in short bursts of auburn brown, drifting between cheekbone and chin. 'Come on. We'll go for coffee.'

So we did. We walked to a coffee shop on Brick Lane that Sofia told me was her least favourite place. I agreed. It was noisy, they served drinks in paper cups, and art of varying quality filled the walls haphazardly. We ordered two cappuccinos. The barista rolled his eyes at us. It was not my usual drink but I'd panicked slightly when Sofia had asked me what I wanted. I led her to a small table among the few free, it was busy and filled with suits and students alike. Sofia used her spoon to push the froth on top of her coffee back and forth. The milk had been burnt, and I winced slightly as I watched it slip off the shiny surface.

'The Espresso Gallery.' Sofia sniggered and motioned to the name, adorning the table tops around us.

'It's loud.'

‘Yes. I know the owner actually. When he’s here, I can usually get a discount. They change the art every week or so...some of it’s better than others.’ She nodded to a painting of a coffee cup on the wall to my left and shook her head, rolling her eyes.

‘Sometimes I think about taking an art class.’ I said suddenly, instantly flinching at my honesty.

‘Oh? Do you paint?’

I stared into Sofia’s face and drew a breath in, wondering if I could trust her with my private hopes, unspoken to even myself.

‘I sculpt.’ I said quietly, thinking of my clay vaginas.

‘Any exhibitions?’

I laughed and shook my head, firmly dismissing her question.

‘Well, Erin, as I said, I know the owner here. It’s not the best venue for a first exhibition but it would get your work out there. You want me to have a word?’

I shrugged, not knowing the answer. I wanted to have my sculptures seen, didn’t I? The thought of it was exciting and terrifying in equal measures.

‘Okay...yes. Maybe.’

She winked at me and mouthed the word ‘Done’ before taking a sip of her coffee. I watched her nervously, my stomach battling with my mind, willing her to change the subject.

‘Who was the last person you slept with?’ She smiled widely at me and I frowned at the question. How personal it was, how out of the blue. She seemed excited by my surprise, she was pleased that she had shocked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Of course you know.’

I took a sip of my drink, unsure of what to say. 'Mark.'

Sofia nodded, and waved her hand to signal that I should carry on talking.

'My...fiancé.'

'You're engaged?' Her previous look of curious glee was taken over by surprise.

'Yes. I am. To Mark.'

She thought for a moment. 'Is that the guy that dropped you off at my shop yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'Alright weirdo. Why didn't you say that?'

I shook my head, 'You didn't ask.'

She laughed, 'I suppose I didn't. Were you wearing an engagement ring? I didn't notice at all if you were.'

I nodded, 'Yes.'

She leaned back in her chair and pushed her paper cup away, smiling. I noticed that she didn't ask to see the ring. Most people did.

'So tell me about this wonderful man, with whom you are to spend the rest of your life.'

As soon as she'd said the words, heat began to tingle on my cheeks. I felt myself blushing, but more than that, it was as though my whole body was experiencing a heat wave. I put a hand up to my forehead and sat forward slightly, resting on an elbow.

'Oh god, sorry.'

Sofia disappeared suddenly, and then returned with a glass of water. I took a sip, and breathed in deeply. She watched me closely, and I took a few more gulps of the cold water, feeling my skin cool as I swallowed.

'I don't know what happened there.'

'You don't want to talk about Mark.'

It wasn't a question. I glanced at her, and nodded slightly. 'I don't think...I don't know what I want at the moment.'

Sofia looked very serious, as though she understood entirely. I noticed that I was telling her more than my own friends, the ones that I had known for years. But then, I couldn't talk to them anymore, because they were no longer my own, just for me, for my problems. I stared at her and shook my head apologetically, 'I don't know why I'm telling you this, I'm sorry.'

She acted as though I hadn't spoken at all, 'I think that you're lovely. You shouldn't worry about being engaged, or not being engaged. Just do what you want to do. What do you want to do?'

I looked at her. Her eyes smiled in response. I wanted to touch her, to reach out and put my hand on her cheek. I fought the urge. She paused for a moment and took my hand across the table. I flinched and then relaxed. I was excited at the thought of us holding hands. I felt as though she were offering me a different life, from a moment of touching.



## Chapter 13

The next morning, after Mark had left for work, I stood staring at my clothes. I had the urge to do something, to be someone new. Sofia's image danced around in my mind. She was interesting, easy to be around. She was the sort of someone that I wanted to be.

I dressed in a beige overcoat with big pockets, and played with flicking the collar up and down. I put on bright red lipstick, something my mother did when she needed to feign confidence. I was ready.

First, I swung by the charity shop. Sofia had gone on her lunch, and a dim-witted looking boy sat behind the till, swinging his legs into the desk in front of him, smacking his trainers against the wood. With each crash I winced slightly. You can't tell volunteers off for being a pain as they give their time to you for free.

I perused the book shelf. I wasn't going to steal the book, I just wanted to borrow it. I was desperate for excitement, and this was the idea I'd come up with. I couldn't afford to give money at the moment, especially when it could be for nothing. I would borrow it and try to return it to Rose. If she didn't live there any more, or she wasn't interested, I would return the book in the same way that I'd taken it. If she loved it and was delighted with me, I would return and pay for the book, coming clean to Sofia about my trick.

I went up to the boy behind the till and smiled widely. I asked him about his day. He shrugged a response and gestured around the shop to the empty space.

'So you're happier when it is busy?'

'Yes, though I never think it when I am.'

'Perhaps you don't have time to think it.'

He leant his head back a little and raised his eyebrows in a thoughtful way, as though my comment were inspiring. I felt pleased with myself.

‘Do you think that you would do me favour, and go and see if you have any vases in storage?’

He looked at me straight again, ‘We have vases down here.’

I nodded, eyeing them vaguely, ‘Yes, but they are all too small. I am looking for something gigantic. Huge.’

He glared at me and then stood, then made his way to the door at the back of the shop. I knew that there was no such thing there really, and I think he must have known this too, but he probably wanted me to go away as much as I wanted him to leave.

Once I heard the door click I went to the bookshelf and found the large book. I lifted it, feeling the weight, and then placed it into my large coat pocket, placing my bag over the top. As I did so, the door swung open and the boy trudged out, followed closely by Sofia.

‘I’m sorry, we don’t have any...’ she began, before recognising me.

She smiled slowly and gently pushed the boy toward the till.

‘This is Jack. He’s a work experience...boy.’

‘Hi Jack. I’m Erin.’

He shrugged.

‘Erin, are you looking for a ‘gigantic’ vase?’

I nodded, holding onto my bag and trying not to stand awkwardly.

‘Well, we don’t have one. We have vases. What is your idea of gigantic?’

‘Very, very large.’

Sofia glanced at the books and then back at me. ‘So buy two medium ones. How big can your flowers be?’

‘Quite big.’

Sofia walked toward me and placed a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it gently. She leant in and said quietly, ‘If you wanted to see me Erin, you just had to call, really.’

I laughed, guessing that she meant it as a joke. ‘I’ll bear that in mind next time.’

She removed a hand and nodded, and I realised that actually, she wasn’t trying to be funny. ‘We are friends, after all.’

I made my way out after successfully dodging a goodbye hug, turning the attention instead to Jack, who had just knocked over a jar of pennies. The book hung in my jacket and made each step down the street difficult, though I felt I must have deserved it. A liar and a thief, I turned my collar up with one hand, while the other remained firmly placed on the book beneath material.

‘Erin!’

Sofia’s voice stopped me short. I turned and smiled slowly, as she caught up.

‘You walk fast. I wanted to say, about the book. I’m up for it, I’m interested in the mystery of it. Why don’t we try and return it, together?’

I watched her carefully, feeling the heaviness of the book weigh down into my hand. Did she know?

‘Oh! Sofia, I don’t know.’

She stood back, and glanced down at my body. Suddenly, she reached a hand out and placed it on the book beneath my coat, and rolled her eyes dramatically.

‘You are so weird. I want to do the book thing, okay?’ Removing her hand, she leaned in and said under her breath, ‘I don’t think that stealing from a charity shop is great, Erin.’

I pulled the book out and gave it to her with both hands, but she shook her head at the offer.

‘Keep it. Do your research. Let me know, alright?’

I nodded, and she moved forward and kissed me slowly on the cheek. I smelt her perfume as she moved away, and tried not to look as though I were savouring the scent.

‘Hey, I did you a favour. I texted Paul, the owner of that café, about your work. Go see him.’

I widened my eyes and smiled, despite my nerves. ‘Thank you, Sofia.’

‘Oh, and you know that thing you said about writing your story?’

I nodded and pulled the book closer toward me, as though it would save me from having to answer any difficult questions.

‘When do I get to read that?’

I smiled, automatically cursing myself for having told her in the first place. ‘I’m not sure you ever do.’

## Chapter 14

The next day I dropped into Olive's house for the last hour of my shift, as usual. The rest of the shift had not been very smooth, I had been yelled at by an older man for not making a ham sandwich correctly, and felt irritated. I was looking forward to seeing Olive.

I parked in her driveway, and took some steps toward her front door. Straight away, I could see that something wasn't quite right, as the usual blare of the television was replaced by silence, and the light that it gave off sat dark inside her living room window. I hurriedly entered her key safe code into the box by her front door and fumbled with the keys trying to find the right one for what felt like minutes. I eventually pushed open the door, and walked into the hallway, to see Olive lying in front of me on the ground.

'Olive!'

I knelt to the floor, checking her pulse and making sure that she was breathing. As I felt her wrist she opened her eyes and looked at me.

'Oh, hello dear.'

'Are you okay?'

'Oh yes. I tripped on my way to the lounge. I couldn't get up. I must have fallen asleep.'

'Right...I'm going get you a pillow – hang on.'

I stood and ran into her bedroom, grabbing a fleur-de-lis patterned pillow from her bed. I rushed back to find her turning over, on the floor. She smiled at me, shakily, from her back. I knelt down and carefully lifted her head, placing the pillow between her and the carpet.

'Olive, I'm going to call an ambulance now. Please don't move any further.'

She scowled at me and rolled her eyes, 'Don't be so dramatic. I'm fine.'

'How could we possibly know that?'

'I tripped over that bloody cat.'

I looked around the room and frowned, 'You don't have a cat, do you?'

'I let one in.'

'Oh.' I pulled my mobile from my pocket and dialled the emergency number, asking for an ambulance. Olive tutted at me the entire time.

'They're going to be ten minutes.'

'I hope they don't take me in.'

I sat down next to her head and leant on my arms, 'Better that they do and make sure nothing is broken.'

'Oh nothing is broken, don't fuss so much.'

'It's my job. Nowhere hurts?'

'No!'

I held up my hands in surrender, and her brow sank into her eyelids.

'Do you want me to call your daughter?'

She shook her head firmly and I drew a sharp breath in.

'Please stop moving so much Olive, for me.'

'Don't call my daughter. She's bad enough as it is.'

'What does that mean?'

'She thinks I'm ready for the glue factory.'

I started to laugh, and Olive joined me. We smiled at each other.

'I shouldn't think that's true.'

'Oh it is. She doesn't do well with having an elderly mother. It isn't becoming.'

The front doorbell went, loudly echoing around the hallway. I stood up quickly and answered the door, letting two male paramedics in to attend to Olive.

They checked her over, asking her questions about how she felt and eventually helped her up, holding her steady on her feet while she regained her balance.

One of them smiled at me. 'Your mother will be fine, nothing is broken.'

'Oh, great. I'm her carer,' I motioned to the uniform in surprise.

'Oh. Alright. Where's best to go then, Olive?'

'In the sitting room.'

'Alright.'

They walked her in and lowered her into her chair carefully, handing her the controller which she gleefully took. They motioned to me to come back into the hallway with them. I did so.

'Does she have daily care?'

I nodded, 'About an hour a day.'

They looked at each other, and one of them shook their head, 'She needs more than that, I think, if she has started to have falls. Time for a reassessment of her needs.'

'Yes. You're right. I'll talk to her about it.'

With that, they nodded, and turned to leave. I shut the door after them and walked into the living room, where Olive was happily watching the television.

'Olive?' I sat down opposite her. She glanced at me briefly.

'Where's the cat?'

'What cat?'

'The cat that you tripped over in the hallway? I would have thought that we would have seen it if it was about.'

She shrugged, switching channels.

‘If you had fallen, you wouldn’t have been able to let it out, so where do you think it could be?’

She glanced at me again, fleetingly, ‘Who knows?’

‘Was there really a cat Olive?’

She nodded, ignoring me.

‘I think you might need more than an hour’s help a day. I’d like to call your daughter to discuss it. I’ll have to discuss it with my superior, you having a reassessment. What do you think about that?’

She suddenly turned her full attention to me and raised her eyebrows, ‘I’ll talk to my daughter about it, if anyone will. I’m a grown woman.’

‘Alright. I’ll get you the phone.’ I walked over to the cradle that sat next to the television and picked up the receiver, bringing it back to Olive. She took it and narrowed her watery eyes at me, pressing speed dial three. She brought it up to her ear and covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

‘You can go now, thank you.’

I smiled and nodded, it had been about an hour and if she wanted to be alone I would honour that. I stepped out in the hallway and paused, listening in to the beginning of her conversation.

‘Hello. It’s me.’

I left her to it, carefully double locking the door and replacing her keys into the key safe.



## Chapter 15

'I hate it when women drop friends for men Erin, you know that.' Sasha stared at me.

I nodded, breathing deeply into my glass of wine, the scent of my own mouth coming back to me and hitting my nose. It smelled sour.

'Women choose men, and men choose men, I must be the only person who chooses women.'

I raised my eyes and focused on Sasha, 'I choose women.'

She laughed bitterly and shook her head at me, 'No, you choose yourself.'

From experience I've found when you're young and in a new relationship, at some point your friends rally round you to give you a speech about loyalty. I had gotten around that by organising group outings, making sure that my friends knew Mark as well as I did, that our friendships merged together. When I became engaged to Mark I noticed that speech halted at once, and by wearing a ring I'd given myself the freedom to spend as much time away from people as I'd like. Apart from Mark. You're expected to spend time with your fiancé.

'What do you want to do tonight anyway?'

I hadn't felt the urge to go out in a long time, but it was Friday night, so I had no excuse. Bars, pubs, I could handle, they were easy. They stopped serving at a certain time, they gave you the chance to hold up your hands and shrug that you had to go home now. Suddenly I hated staying out past eleven, I longed for the warmth of my bed, the sweet scent of myself on my pillows. I looked into her eyes and smiled weakly, shrugging. Outwardly my body agreed, we can go anywhere, do anything. Please, please let me go home. I just want to sleep.

‘We could go dancing.’

I took another long drink from my wine and nodded. Of course, we could. We could go dancing and get chatted up by strangers and drink too much, ignore real life.

‘Great. Where do you want to go?’

I racked my brain for places that I once went to. Somewhere that would be suitable for the young and the old Erin. I thought of a place that Sofia had told me about, and mentioned it.

‘Yeah, I’ve been there. I quite like gay bars actually, I like being left alone. We can just dance, good idea.’

So we went. My brain went from tired to excited within a minute. I was excited because I thought that Sofia might be there. On the way there I played out possible encounters. I’d be standing at the bar, sharing a drink with my friend, and Sofia would see us and get the wrong idea. She’d be furious, but silently so, her eyes locking onto mine as she stalked past me. I looked to my friend as she walked beside me and considered telling her about Sofia. But telling her what exactly? As I opened my mouth to speak she yawned widely and turned to me.

‘Erin, I’m not really in the mood for tonight. I’m sorry. I know we haven’t seen each other in a while, but I just think I’m going to go home.’

She leant forward and hugged me tightly, kissing me hard on the cheek, and I let her walk away. I stood for a second, slightly shocked at being abandoned, the chance of my seeing Sofia leaving along with Sasha’s footsteps. I checked myself quickly, a few minutes ago I hadn’t wanted to go out at all. What did I want now? It was freezing outside, autumn quickly descending into winter. Before I could consider my options I found myself continuing to walk toward the club. I didn’t need anybody to do this. I didn’t need anyone to be this

person. With each step a new knot formed in my stomach and I breathed in deeply. I can be this woman tonight.

The club was down a dark staircase, sending hot air pumping up to the street. As I walked down the steps I removed my engagement ring and dropped it carefully into my pocket. As soon as I stepped inside I found the toilet, and passed women leaning against and into mirrors, transfixed by drunken reflections. I found an empty cubicle and locked the door behind me, my face suddenly flushing in the heat. I took handfuls of toilet paper and lay them carefully out on top of the seat, before sitting awkwardly. My stomach was nervous enough to cause me pain, and I wrapped my arms around it and leaned forward. That's when I realised what the noises were in the toilet beside me. Whispers and moans slid under the gap of the thin wall that separated us, the sound of heels skidding on a wet floor. I cupped my hand around my ear and pushed it against the divide, straining to listen. Stifled giggles sailed into my brain, followed by a gasp. One of the women shushed the other, and my stomach punched its way back into my attention. I shivered slightly, and considered the other times that I'd felt this way, leaving me stranded on toilets for hours. The first day of secondary school. My first date with Mark. When my mother first grounded me. All firsts, all the time. As I leant back and began to feel relief the couple in the toilet beside me began to forget where they were, making even louder noises.

I unlocked the door and stepped outside, pausing slightly in desperation to see those involved in the toilet tryst beside me. I pushed my way through the girls that filled the mirror. A few scowled at me and sighed. The tuts from other women often cut through me. I was never tutted at by men. They might howl and screech and holler from car windows, but the tut said a thousand words in barely a syllable. You're rude and selfish. You're wrong. You

messed up. You're not behaving the way that you should be. I pushed the urge to shout back down into the twisted knot in my stomach. Don't yell, don't cry. You're made of glass.

A girl did the same and pushed her way next to me. She knocked my shoulder and held her hands up, grinning at me. I smiled in reply and began to fish around in my bag, pretending to look for something.

'I haven't seen you here before.'

I gratefully placed my hand on a lipstick and pulled it out, shrugging. As she watched I ran the deep red across my top lip, careful to follow the bow. She cocked her head to one side, still smiling.

'What is your name?'

She spoke in a soft voice, her accent so British that it reminded me of old films, of curling up on a Sunday and listening to voices that no longer existed. I didn't look in her direction, but paused before I began on my bottom lip.

'Bree.'

As soon as the lie was out of my mouth I felt better. I could be somebody else tonight. Not Mark's fiancée. I tried not to think of him, pushing him far from my mind. Bree was somebody else, I was somebody entirely different. I wasn't engaged. Lipstick finished, I replaced the lid and put my index finger into my mouth before popping it out again and wiping the red residue off my knuckle, a trick that my mother had taught me.

'Amber. It is an absolute pleasure to meet you, Bree.'

She held her hand out, and I turned to shake it, focussing on her for the first time. She had long blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, and sharp green eyes. She was slim and tall, with pale skin stretched over high cheekbones. She struck me as ethereal. As we shook hands her eyes locked onto mine and she pulled me gently.

‘I would like to get you a drink, Bree. Come with me.’

So I followed her through the pulsing toilets and down dark corridors, each step taking me closer to thumping noise. I watched as she climbed stairs before me, tight jeans stretching over tighter skin. At the bar she stood aside and let me order, but my mind went blank. What would Erin order? What would Bree order? The bartender viewed me with contempt, wasting her time. Gin? Should I order gin? Should I order it for myself, or should I order two? Should I order champagne? I stood, saying nothing. After what felt like full minutes, swallowing me whole, Amber stepped in and put her hand on my shoulder.

‘I’m drinking vodka and tonic. Would you like the same?’

I nodded, dumb. I felt lost. Had I never been to a bar before? The drinks came quickly and I gratefully took mine from Amber. She smiled before taking a sip, and watched me gulp it down like a child drinking chocolate milk, her eyes curious and with a slight hint of pity. I was certain that it was pity.

‘What do you do, Bree?’

I swallowed my vodka and felt it rush to my cheeks. ‘I work in an office.’ I lied, ‘Whenever anybody says that to me I zone out, so I won’t explain what it is that I do. I work in an office and you can imagine me sitting in front of a desk, if you like.’

Amber laughed and squeezed the top of my arm, eyes shining, ‘I knew you’d be funny. I work in fashion.’

I pictured her, sitting behind a till, bored. That’s what fashion meant, usually. It meant you worked in retail, and to get by you embellished your title. Though I often embellished my own; consultant, warrior.

‘So, new friend Bree, you can’t be here alone tonight?’

‘I am,’ I nodded.

‘Does that mean your friends refused to come out with you or you’re broken hearted?’

‘A little of both, I suppose,’ I lied. My friend wouldn’t come out, but was I broken hearted? We finished our drinks quickly, and she winked at me, reaching for my hand. She led me back to the toilets, up the stairs covered in liquid that made each step stick to my shoes. I watched her back as she took my hand, noticing the curve where my own was straight, her shirt clinging with dampness on the base of her spine. Each person that walked past her smiled knowingly at her. It made me tingle with paranoia. I did not want to be the last in a long line, but I let her lead me anyway, my mind occasionally flickering to other thoughts, of Sofia, of what she might be doing at this moment, of how she might feel if she knew what I was about to do. Of my mother, and the inappropriateness of her face flashing into my mind. Of Mark, and how disappointed he would be in me, how betrayed.

Amber held open a cubicle door and showed me in, bowing her head as though she were leading me to an expensive table at a restaurant. I didn’t smile for fear of seeming juvenile. An adult would enjoy herself with stoic confidence.

‘She doesn’t care what you are doing right now, you should forget about her for tonight,’ she smiled and closed the door behind her with a thud.

‘I wasn’t thinking about anything.’

Her reply was silent, a reassuring smile, as she moved toward me and picked up my chin with her hand. She kissed me, softly, her mouth opening slightly and inviting me in. She tasted different to Mark, her kiss was more gentle and warm, and as she touched her lips to mine she moved her hand through my hair, quietly bringing it down to my right breast.

Where she was quiet and soft, Mark was hard and safe. This woman knew that nobody was watching us. It was me and her. I felt a surge of heat run from my thighs up to

my stomach and pulled her into me, her hair tickling my collarbone. I began to unbutton the front of her top, but she placed her hands over mine and pulled it over her head. She stopped and looked at me, her hand back among my hair.

‘Suddenly you don’t seem so afraid, Bree.’

A strange noise left my body, something between a snort of derision and a weak growl of acknowledgement. I did not want her to think that I was afraid. She seemed to be, suddenly, the exact opposite of everything that I had found attractive in everybody I had ever slept with. Oh, those two people, that made up an extensive sexual history.

‘I’ve never been with anybody like you before.’

Her angular face softened and she laughed, her cut glass accent coming through in the sound. She was beautiful, and as I reached for her again and began to kiss the space between the back of her ear and her neck, I drank in her moist pale skin. She became everything in that moment. I undressed without realising, desperate to merge our skin.

She eased me down onto the toilet seat behind me and laughed as she did so, whispering into my ear, ‘This will be awkward, but try not to think about where we are.’

I shook my head, instantly thinking of the dirty floor and wondering when the toilets had last been cleaned, ‘Can’t I take you somewhere else, a hotel room maybe, or back to yours?’

She was stooping, about to kneel, but stopped at this. ‘I’m not saying that we’ll never see each other again, but who can say how we’ll feel once we’ve stepped out into the night? We’ll stare at each other under a street light, we’ll wait for a bus in the rain. Everyday worries will creep into our minds. You’ll start to worry that the girl you’re here to forget might see you out and about with somebody else. I’ll come back to yours and see

photographs of your parents and wonder why you didn't wash up whatever you had for dinner before you came out to a club where you might have met somebody.'

I smiled and took her hands, knowing that she could never come back to mine, 'Or, we could get a taxi?'

She laughed and pulled me back up off the toilet, then picked up her top and pulled it over her breasts and stomach. 'You're lovely, Bree. I'm actually not sure that this sort of thing is very you.'

I stood before her, inside the cramped cubicle, increasingly aware that I was naked, my bare feet on the dirty floor. I glanced down at them quickly, noticing the black smudges that crept up my toes, the dampness that held my heel. She leaned in and kissed me again, eyes open, and pushed a card into my hand.

'You can call me. I would like to go for a drink with you.'

With a silent smile, she turned around and left. I locked the door behind her, feeling the prickle of the cold turn my skin into bumps. Perhaps she was right, this wasn't something I did. I was disappointed. Why couldn't it be something that I tried? Who was she to decide who I was? The answer came back to me in a burst of depressing realisation. She wasn't saving me, she was saving herself. It wasn't that she was worried about a girl that she didn't know, she was worried that she was about to sleep with a stranger that wanted to take her home and love her. I knew that person wasn't who I was. Sexual experience didn't equal hardness, it didn't mean that you could make love to anybody at any time without getting attached. I pulled on my jeans and began to unravel toilet paper with which to dry my feet. I was going to be that woman, if that's the person I wanted to be tonight.

'Feminists can be terrifying on Twitter, even if you're one yourself.'



I let the girl beside me light a cigarette for me, trying not to inhale so that I didn't give away the fact that I didn't actually smoke. Her name was Laura. She smelled like cheap vanilla.

'Seriously. I once joined in a hashtag debate supporting women and I got it all thrown back at me. Men were having a go, but women really got involved. One of them even said to me, 'It won't be so funny when you get raped.' A woman said that to me. Her bio claimed that she was a feminist, but I have absolutely no idea what happened there.' She looked at me sideways.

'What did you say to get that reaction?'

Laura drew a deep breath in and blew it out through her teeth. 'I said that we needed feminism because rape jokes shouldn't be made so often. You can't join in with it online, they bite your fucking hand off for trying.'

I laughed a bit in response.

'I don't find it funny.'

'No. No, neither do I.'

She smiled at me and grabbed my hand loosely with her own. It was a little clammy, but I was reluctant to move away.

'Are you on Twitter Erin?'

I shook my head.

'No, well. My account is private now anyway.'

With this Laura turned to me and pulled me into her. She kept her eyes open and on mine, and I watched as they merged into one. She kissed with her eyes open. Could I close mine? Was I allowed? Her tongue dragged across mine and coaxed saliva from the side to

the tip. Our spit merged into one, tasting sweet, and I closed my eyes slowly, dropping my cigarette to the ground.

‘Bree?’

I snapped my eyes open to Laura, but her mouth was still on mine, eyes now closed.

‘You’re still here.’

The girl from the toilet cubicle grinned at me, and placed a hand on my shoulder.

Laura raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes at me.

‘I um...am still here. This is Laura.’

‘I know. Hey Laura.’

Laura laughed. They looked at each other briefly, and I recognised their expressions.

‘You two know each other already, don’t you.’ It was a statement, not a question. It was clear to me that they were more familiar with each other than I was with either of them. The toilet girl nodded. Laura looked at me and frowned.

‘Didn’t you say your name was Erin?’

I nodded, uncomfortable about the strange lie that had fallen from my mouth earlier, ‘Yes. It is.’

Amber laughed and took a sip from her drink, ‘Well! How strange.’

There were times when Mark would beg me to come home with him, before we lived together, and I’d refuse. I’d do this for the pleasure of knowing that he needed me, that he wanted me, that he missed me. I was his, perhaps, but I wouldn’t always be his. If I stayed alone for a night, I won a little of myself back. That’s how it felt to me. For whatever reason, sitting between Laura and Amber in a taxi heading through the night was the freest that I’d felt in months. The most myself. We sat silently, watching the dark world outside. I thought

briefly of Sofia, wondering what she might be doing at the same moment in time, whether or not she was thinking of me. When Mark came into my head I shook him out, double checking that my phone was switched off in case he called. Pulling up outside a dark house, Laura's hand brushed mine lightly. The house was lit dully on one corner by a dirty streetlamp, and it threw her face into darkness as she held out her hand. We stepped out of the taxi, the three of us, and headed in. They were both at home, with the house, themselves, and the situation. I accepted a drink in a glass with a lipstick mark around the edge, and let them lead me up the stairs, to the bathroom.

We undressed in threes, each helping the next to remove her top, her bra, unbutton her jeans. Apart from this we didn't touch skin, we just helped, we just watched.

There are three women together; two that know each other's bodies as well as their own, and one that clumsily fumbles over buttons and zips, cursing rigid fingers under her breath. This woman, with round hips and a deep curve of the waist, stands naked in front of the other two. Her arms fall by her side, and without reaching out, she watches the other women begin to kiss. They kiss for her, they put on a show, glancing at her now and then, the pale skin of Amber merging with Laura's olive body. They are similar heights, bare breasts aligned. Erin, though no longer Bree to Amber, is still Bree to herself. Laura reaches her hand out to her, saying her real name softly. They ease her down to the carpeted floor and take a side of her body each, kissing, at separate moments, her right breast, and then her left. Laura circles her nipple with her tongue, while Amber bites her left gently but firmly. Erin can't focus on either sensation wholly, can't give herself up to either. Her body still a little tense, she closes her eyes and rests a hand on each of the women's heads.

It's Amber that first begins to move down Erin's body. She finds her hip bones and begins to knead the doughy flesh just inside of them. Erin's pelvis tingles with each movement of her hands, and she breathes in deeply. Amber pulls back and spreads her legs with her hands, leaning down to rest on her elbows, bare bum raised in the air. With this Laura silently kisses Erin, and then moves away from her entirely. Amber pulls Erin toward her and lightly flicks her clit with the end of her tongue as Laura kneels behind Amber's raised buttocks and gently slides a finger into her vagina. Amber moans aloud, causing Erin to open her eyes and raise the top of her body up slightly, to see the women cascading over her in pleasure.

I watch as Laura focuses on Amber, making her body writhe. Each time she makes a movement, Amber translates that to my own body. I feel her pleasure as my own. They look beautiful, their bodies more real to me than my own. Perhaps I've never truly looked at a woman's body before. With these women I feel that I am in safe hands. Amber pushes a finger deep inside me, and I feel a sticky dampness spread to the inside of my thighs. She quickly moves another finger inside of me, and pushes in firmly, moving only the tips of her digits. It sends an intense shockwave through my pelvis, causing me to lean back onto the hard carpet.

Amber laughs, 'Don't get too comfortable there, newbie.'

Laura pulls back and smiles too, and then stands, walking toward a dusty dresser in the corner of the room. She opens a drawer and glances back over to me.

'Close your eyes.'

I do so. I hear the drawer close and sense her nearing me.

'Stand up.'

I move doggedly to my feet. One of the women takes my hands and holds them slightly aloft. I feel smooth and slightly cool material be passed around my hips and tightened against me gently, a weight added to my pelvis. I open my eyes to watch Laura fasten the clip and notice with interest, that she is wearing a dildo as well. Mine is bright purple, a fake bubble-gum sort of colour, while hers looks more realistic.

She catches my eye and her own twinkle, 'Some people say that real lesbians don't need dicks. I'm all about equality.'

I say nothing, but I smile slightly, trying not to look like a rabbit trapped in headlights, and feeling unusually relieved that out of the three of us, I am not the one without a strap on. Amber, on the other hand, seems delighted to be this person. She kisses me gently, the taste of myself spreading over my lips and onto my tongue, sweet and sort of salty. I kiss her back, gently nudging her with my plastic penis. She moves from my lips to my shoulders, kissing my skin firmly, until she is on her knees, facing my stomach. She reaches her hand to the base of the dildo and turns a dial, causing it to spring to life, vibrating against my clit. I automatically reach out and lean on her shoulder for support, and as a response she turns it down slightly. It emits a low hum.

'Erin, are you a bread or ham type of girl?'

I shrug at Laura, and she tilts her head to one side inquisitively. Amber smiles gently at me and turns to place her hands on the floor so that she's on all fours.

'She's bread, like you.'

Laura kneels behind Amber and strokes the base of her spine, gesturing at me to join them. I kneel behind them both, accepting the gift of lube and, following Laura's example, cover my fake penis in it. I resist the urge to wipe the rest from my hands onto Laura's back, instead gently inserting my finger into her vagina. She moans and then puts her hand

around behind her, pulling me closer into her, guiding the dildo instead of my finger. We glide together. She keeps her hand on my bum behind her, as though afraid that I might not fully understand to keep in time with her. Each time I move forward the vibration pushes against my clit and makes me press against her for a second too long. She in turn does this to Amber, whose hands have now changed to elbows onto the carpet, her forehead pressing into the ground.

For these moments I think nothing. I think not of time, of how long we've been in the room, or whether the light that begins to shine through the window hints at the morning. I think not of Sofia, of my nerves around her. I think not of Mark, of his wondering where I might be. Laura's back writhes in ecstasy, and I allow myself to let go and do the same. I feel a great weight lifted from my shoulders as I come, and I let the waves of pleasure hit me one by one.

## Chapter 16

I had switched my phone off before going into the club, and as I walked down the street away from the women's house, I became increasingly aware of my responsibilities. I hadn't called Mark at any point, I hadn't even messaged him to tell him that I wouldn't be home. I thought about turning my phone on, but I was too afraid to do it. I would just go home, I decided, go home and pretend that everything was normal and okay.

As I walked up the driveway I already knew that this was a mistake. I should have called, I should have thought ahead. I was so busy being a different person that I forgot about my real life. My mother's car was on the driveway parked behind Mark's. This was not a good sign. As I walked toward the front door it opened, magically. I was grabbed by both Mark and my mother, firmly and sharply.

'Where the hell have you been?'

'I'm sorry guys, my phone ran out of battery and I stayed over at a friend's house.'

'Who? I called all of your friends. I did a post online. I did the whole thing!'

'The charity shop had a stock-take, I helped out and it took longer than expected. Then I stayed at Sofia's house, because it was so late.' The lie came easily and quickly. I reached over and squeezed my mother's shoulder, 'Listen, I am really sorry.'

She rolled her eyes and smacked me on the arm, and then bumbled toward her car, grumbling in annoyance. Before she slammed the door she turned to me, 'Grow up Erin.'

I watched her pull off the drive, desperately keeping my eyes on her. The longer I watched her, the more chance I had of avoiding the situation. Playing for time.

'Erin,' Mark said my name sharply, almost a grunt, turning it from two syllables into one. I turned and offered a smile, raising my eyebrows apologetically.

‘Now that your mother’s gone, you can tell me, right? Where the fuck have you been?’

The new Mark, the man that fawned over me and petted me to make sure we were both surviving the relationship, was clearly not here. This was a different man.

‘Listen, it doesn’t look good, I know that. It’s as I said though, I was stock-taking. I didn’t want Sofia to be alone in the shop, and then it was so late and I didn’t want to walk home alone. I had no money for a taxi.’

He nodded and leaned in a little closer to my face. I could smell mint on his breath, and I noticed with interest that he seemed to be able to remember to brush his teeth in a crisis.

‘There’s a lot of lies in that explanation, isn’t there?’

‘No.’

‘Yes, there fucking is. I drove past the charity shop, I went up to the door, I banged on it. I shouted your name, I called through the letterbox. There was no one there.’

‘We were out the back. Stock-taking. That doesn’t just mean the front of the shop. You get such bad signal there anyway, and then I ran out of battery. If I had heard you I would have come out!’

‘You liar.’

I began to feel irritated with him for not believing me, as though I were telling the truth, ‘I’m not doing this with you.’

I pushed past him into the house, and climbed the stairs two at a time, trying to get away from him. I went into the bathroom and locked the door, then turned on the shower and sat on the toilet, fully clothed. His footsteps thudded up the staircase slowly, and came closer toward the door.



‘You can shower all fucking day, Erin, I don’t give a shit, but sooner or later, we’re going to talk about this.’

I heard him go back down the stairs, and took a deep breath. What was I going to say? I stepped into the shower and let the warm water cover my hair, doing my best to wash away the night before, to cleanse me of my sins.

Mark left me to get ready alone. I came downstairs carefully, quietly, aware that I was stepping into an argument that it would be hard to get out of. He was sitting in the kitchen, a cup of tea in front of him, staring into the distance in silence. He glanced at me as I walked in and sat opposite him.

‘Do you think we can move past this?’ I asked with a frown, forgetting momentarily that I was in fact lying. What’s the saying, that it’s the truth if you believe it?

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are we happy, do you think? Are you happy?’ I stared at him, willing him to speak. Please, tell me that you’re not. I can’t have made this up.

‘Sometimes.’

‘Something’s changed here,’ I thought of the way he tiptoed around me, of the irritation that I felt when he did this.

‘It’s hard to grow together.’ He moved the handle of his cup so that it was facing away from him.

‘But what’s the alternative?’

We both watched the cup, knowing what the alternative was. I said nothing. He glanced from the cup to my hand, and raised his eyebrows in surprise, ‘Where’s your ring?’

I took a sharp breath in, remembering slipping it off, and realised that I hadn't checked to make sure it was still in my pocket. 'Oh, it's in my pocket upstairs. It was just a little tight, it was hard to carry boxes with it on. I don't know, I think we do need to get it stretched.'

He shook his head in disbelief, 'What are you saying? Erin, I just don't believe you about last night. I don't. So what are you going to do, are you going to stick to this stock-taking story, or tell me the truth?'

I stared at him. He was so certain that I was lying, that it began to seem strange to deny it. I didn't know what else to do. A flash of flesh sprang into my mind from the night before and I closed my eyes, 'I'm...going to stick to my stock-taking story.'

He nodded, and took a deep breath in, 'That makes me really sad, Erin.'

He stood up and walked out of the room. I watched him, and reached my hands out to his now cold tea, cradling the cup.

'It makes me sad too,' I whispered. I was a cheater. I had cheated on my fiancé. I picked up my bag and left the house. I wasn't sure what to do, the gnawing in my stomach told me that I was a terrible person, but I felt strange relief at having had a break from us, and having experienced something new. I needed to see somebody who would understand that, who would know that I wasn't awful and without morals. All of my friends were now our joint friends, and I could never tell my mother. There was only one person I could really talk to.

I stood behind the front door of Sofia's house. Of all the people that I could escape to, she was the one that I chose. She was the only person who wouldn't judge me.

The previously bright hallway was now dim behind closed blinds, the pale yellow flowers grey. She led me through to her lounge, and patted the seat beside her as she fell onto the sofa, and so I sat. A light through the window caught her cheekbones, how odd that she still hadn't turned on any lights. She watched me with interest. I hadn't said anything yet, and now that I was there, I could see that I probably wasn't going to.

'You don't look well, Erin. Are you okay?'

'Yes, I'm just a little hungover. Mark and I had a fight. I don't know.'

'Do you still love Mark?'

I twisted my hands together, feeling the unevenness of the skin around my thumbs.

'Yes, and no. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I'm not sure if I've ever really been in love.

I think that I used to be very much in love with him, and now it's just grown stale. It worries me that every relationship is a little like that, you grow tired of just one person.'

'Perhaps.'

My body felt awkward. Sofia reached over and took my hand, standing up and guiding me with her.

'Erin, here's how it seems to me. I know nothing of your relationship, okay? But seriously, most 'Bride's To Be' are excited. They talk about their weddings and they talk about what comes after that. They talk about the marriage. Ever since I met you you've seemed just...miserable. You need to fix that. Forget about other people. Fix yourself.'

I closed my eyes for a moment and concentrated on holding Sofia's hand. She squeezed it.

'So what do you think you need to do?'

I nodded, 'I think I need to break up with Mark.'

Sofia said nothing in response and I opened my eyes again and took a long breath in. I'd said it out loud. Suddenly it seemed like the most obvious answer in the world. 'How do I do that?'

'Two ways. Honestly. Quickly.'

I realised (with faint surprise) that at some point she'd placed her hands on my hips, and though I could see them my body felt numb. I kept my hands by my sides, arms full of lead, palms clammy. She leaned toward me and kissed my cheek, the scent of her hair filling my senses, no room for anything else. Her lips moved across to my own, and we stood for a second while I struggled to move my hands upward to touch and lift her chin, the way that Mark would kiss me. The kiss was the most delicate that I'd ever received, and it occurred to me that she was being gentle for my sake. I felt so suddenly young. She pulled away and rested her forehead against mine, her cat eyes close to my own.

'Sofia. I'm still with Mark.'

She smiled at me and cocked her head to one side, 'Yes, I know that. But mentally, are you still with Mark?'

I thought of the previous night, of the anger that awaited me at home. Sofia was beautiful, and I wanted to be free to kiss her. I was going to break up with him. There was no way that I could stay, now.

'Erin.' She said the word softly, as though she just wanted to say it aloud, for herself.

She led me to the bedroom, tugging on the end of my fingers the whole way like a child vying for attention. She turned and giggled at me, and I found myself feeling disturbed by this act of naivety. Perhaps that wasn't what it was, and she was merely excited, but eventually I pulled my hand from hers, and nodded to her that I was following.

Her bedroom. Her bed. Clothes lay strewn across the floor, across chairs, across more clothes. Her bedside table held three empty tea stained cups, and I wondered whether they were all from her or if they were from other lovers. She closed her bedroom door and gathered me onto the bed, pulling me as though I was material, and I folded, because I didn't know what else I could do. She kissed me hard, and I kissed her back, waiting for the explosion to reappear inside my stomach. They didn't. A numbness sat in their place, and I focused my attention on acting. I felt more confident, because of the previous night, but this time I couldn't help but think of Mark. I didn't want to stop kissing her, I wanted to continue the exploration, to pull her into me and change my predictable future. I mirrored her. She pulled my hair slightly, I pulled hers back. She pushed my hands above my head and held them there, and I let them go limp, certain that if they held the slightest strength they'd fall back down. She began to kiss my neck, slowly and softly, and I closed my eyes and ran my hand over her head, trying not to remember Mark, when he did the same. Sofia eventually pulled back and sat astride me, lifting her top over her head, revealing her full bra beneath. If something felt natural it was this, that I should reach up and help her undo it, that I should feel their weight in my hands, mentally compare them to my own, and to Laura's, and Amber's. She didn't do the same with mine, but instead reached her arms above her head as though stretching before sleep. I clumsily felt the need to stop and she looked at me, head leant toward her shoulder before helping me to remove the dress that I wore. My hands felt clammy. As I lay and let her mouth move down to my belly button, I stared up at her ceiling. A small crack worked its way from the centre of the ceiling to the edge, and met the wall. It had been painted over in a different coloured white, a subtle variance, but I found myself imagining the culprit. Sofia began to pull down my knickers, and I snapped my attention back to her as she slipped a finger into me, working

her tongue around my clitoris. I could feel that I was dry, that I wasn't working hard enough to enjoy myself. Was it nerves or guilt? My hands still damp, I lay them on Sofia's head and stroked her hair. The strands stuck and pulled slightly as I moved them, and I closed my eyes and searched for the part of me that I'd kept hidden from her so far.

I tried to move the way that I thought I might if I could feel what Sofia was doing, but as I writhed gently and closed my eyes, I let myself slip off into another place altogether. I imagined that I was somewhere else entirely.

Alone I stood, ready to go out. I wore Sofia's yellow dress, and my hair was heavy, curled about my shoulders in deep waves. I was busy, smoking while packing a handbag, playing soft music that faded in and out of my consciousness. The door swung open. Mark.

'I don't have time for this, I'm on my way out Mark. Who let you up anyway?'

He didn't answer. He flew across the room, and tore the cigarette from my lips, throwing it on the floor beside him. I looked into his face and saw a man there that I didn't recognise, a rage lit behind his eyes. I let him kiss me, differently from the way he used to. He bit at my mouth, and I played dead a little, stiffened to his advance. When he pulled away, I spoke.

'I'm seeing someone else.'

He showed no surprise or heartache, and I reacted tenderly to his lack of emotion.

'Mark.'

I reached my hand toward his face, trying to stroke his cheek, but he grabbed my wrist and folded it behind my back. It hurt. I leant forward to kiss him but he moved away, and I winced at the rebuttal.

'I don't care,' He said, his forehead pressed against mine, eyes locked onto my own.

Sofia fell heavily beside me, smiling. I became increasingly aware that I hadn't touched her, not really, and I lay awkwardly, not knowing what to say or do. She reached for my hand and kissed it. I let her, my eyes falling upon her strong thighs, one weaved in-between my own and one beside it, flat on the bed. As she held my hand to her face and slipped into a shallow sleep, I did nothing, but watch.

## Chapter 17

I waited for Mark to come home, nervously. I had already packed my bags. I was expecting the worst, and I was ready to flee. I couldn't stay, not now. The last twenty four hours had marked the end.

He came home, on time, as expected. I was waiting in the kitchen on one of our dining room chairs that we had inherited from his parents. A hard chair for a hard deed. He came in, with a serious expression, and sat before me. No kiss, but then, I didn't expect one.

'Hello.'

'Hi. Listen, Mark, before you get comfortable, I really need to talk to you.' My voice faltered a little, but I kept going, 'I don't want to do this. I don't think that I can get married and do this happy family thing.'

I reached out and he pushed his chair back, and stood.

'Do you think we're a happy family?'

I shook my head, 'I don't think that I can get married.'

'Okay...is this to do with last night?' He began to pace up and down the lino, unprepared to wait for my answer, 'Okay, okay. We'll postpone, that's okay'

I stayed sitting and shook my head, 'No. I don't want to do it.'

'So, you stay out for a whole evening, lie about where you've been, and then you decide to break up with *me*? That doesn't seem fair. This whole thing, you 'acting out'. Are you getting cold feet?'

'This isn't cold feet. I don't want to get married.'



He turned and sat back down, putting his hands on his head as though he had just finished a marathon and was trying to catch his breath. 'You don't want to get married, or you don't want to be in a relationship?'

I covered my face with my hands so that I couldn't see him. 'It's both.'

'Erin?'

I parted my fingers so that I could see his face. He glanced at my ringless finger and smiled a short, sharp smile.

'Fuck you.'

He stood up and walked out. That was it. He slammed the door behind him, and left. I heard the car engine kick into gear and sat, staring at the empty chair before me. Was that really it? Two minutes to break an entire lifetime? I placed my hand on my heart to stop it thudding, and breathed deeply, desperately trying to stave off a panic attack.

I was left, alone in our house. I pulled my knees up to my chin and buried my face into them. Was I single? Was this it?

## Chapter 18

Sundays have always been reserved for dinner with my mother. Even when I moved out, she insisted upon it. Week after week I'd drag my tired body across town, knowing that my friends were free to sleep and squeal their hangovers away, Sunday's on the sofa, my impossible dream. As I got older I minded less. It became something of a comfort, a warm house and a full fridge. Today, my stomach was tied in knots about it.

The security light alerted her to my arrival before I could. She opened the door with a flourish, a smile, and then, when she saw I was alone, a frown. I walked slowly up her garden path, trying to make the journey last as long as I could.

'Hello sweetheart. No Mark with you today?'

I shook my head as I trudged toward her, and held my arms open for a hug. She didn't oblige, but instead held my face with her cool hands, that coolness only a mother has.

'You look like you haven't been sleeping very well.'

'No, I suppose I haven't.' I dropped my arms down by my side as she turned and bustled through the door. To look at, I do not take after my mother. Small and stocky, her dark hair was short and cropped to her head, showing off doughy cheeks. She was smart too, always in heels, lipstick, dressed for any event. As she reached the kitchen she pulled a chair out for me and indicated that I sit, and then did so herself, on the other side of the table.

'What's happening?'

I sucked my cheeks in hard. I hadn't cried, not at all. 'Why is it that you only cry when someone asks you what's wrong?'

My mother eyed me steadily in reply, and reached her hand across the table to grasp mine. 'Has he left you?'

As tears fell I heard myself laugh, bitterly. No, no he hasn't left me. 'No! I think, I've left him.'

Her lips pursed and she breathed deeply, taking in the information. 'Right. Is it anything to do with...the other night?'

I shook my head vehemently, 'No! He doesn't want to take my name.'

The half lie slipped out of my mouth. The name was, after all, where everything had started, wasn't it? Perhaps it was just where it had plateaued. I waited for her reply, unsure of what she might say to the daughter who cancelled a wedding over an argument about a name. I didn't know how to tell her the other reasons also, that the name was a minor thing, when I had cheated on him. What would she think? Her own daughter. I stopped myself from telling her more, because I was certain that mothers do not want to imagine their daughters in certain situations. Don't talk about your sex life. She doesn't want to know.

She squeezed my hand again and then let it go, placing her own on the table before her, 'Then, he's an idiot. That's all.'

Later that evening I watched my mother fall asleep on the sofa, and then decided to stay the night myself. I couldn't go home, where Mark would be waiting. My mother's room was downstairs, and had been for most of my life. In recent years she'd left the upstairs empty and untouched, my room only changed when I ventured up there. The floorboards creaked as I moved across to the bed, and slid into the familiar dip I'd left behind.

'I changed the sheets.'

I turned as my mother came in, and perched herself on the edge of the bed. I smiled in recognition and lifted the duvet up to my nose. She began to inspect her hands and spoke, 'I read an article the other day, about a new breed of women that don't want to get married.'

'Is it a new breed of women, do you think?'

She shook her head and reached over to my knee and patted it. I felt the warmth reach through the covers to touch my skin.

'I don't think it's new. I struggled with getting married. You know this, we've talked about it before. Your father was a difficult man, but I loved him. My mother told me to marry for protection, but when I met your father I knew that protection wasn't what I wanted. I wanted freedom, of sorts. I wanted to feel free. I never thought that marriage was for me.'

'Then why did you get married?'

'Because, I loved him. And I was free. He gave me what I wanted, and I don't mean materially. He let me go out into the world, he let me go travelling. He didn't hassle me, he didn't expect anything of me. In the end, I suppose, that's what the problem started to be. I began to long for that passion.'

I reached down and squeezed her hand, 'I don't think that control and passion are the same thing. You and he must have had passion, at some point?'

'No, I don't think we did. Perhaps that was my problem. That old love that they show in the movies, that passion that they show in *Gone with the Wind*, that's what I started to long for.'

I stared at our hands, joined together and wondered silently; had I ever known that passion?

## Chapter 19

Part of my plan for recovery was to get up early and take a walk, and I managed it on the first Monday. I woke up in my mother's house and helped myself to coffee. She smiled at me from the kitchen table, already up and dressed at seven in the morning. I was impressed.

'So, what about your stuff?'

I took a sip and shrugged. I didn't know. I hadn't let myself think about that yet. I was trying to avoid the thought of giving up my lovely home, full of my things, though I knew that it was inevitable that I would move out. It was his house, after all.

'I'll work it out. I'm going for a walk.'

I walked for at least two hours, watching commuters rush past me and feeling relief that I wasn't expected at work today. My day off had fallen on a Monday, and after the weekend that I had been through, I was grateful. Eventually I reached a road that I recognised, in Camberwell. Why did I recognise it? I stood and stared at the houses for a moment, before the very reason said my name.

'Erin?'

It was Amber. She wasn't dressed for work, but instead in jogging bottoms with her hair scraped back, and she invited me for a drink. We walked slowly to Church Street, sidling in to the first café that we found.

We had an awkward conversation about the weather and I didn't bring up the night that we'd spent together, though it made me happy to see her again. I said as much, and didn't

mention the backlash that I had faced, the split from my fiancé. How much had changed since I last saw her, two days ago.

‘It’s nice to see you too. Was it awkward for you when you realised Laura and I were together, Bree?’

I glanced at her, surprised that she had used the wrong name. She winked.

‘A little. Mostly because I wasn’t sure what the deal was with your relationship.’

‘The deal? I couldn’t say that there is a deal. We used to be exclusive. We both wanted to sleep with other women, but we were both afraid to say that, scared of losing each other.’ She paused and took a sip of her coffee, ‘Laura is my best friend, and I would hate to lose her. One night, we both had a few too many tipples and blurted it out. I don’t even remember who said it first!’

‘And that works for you?’

Amber considered this seriously, twisting her neck this way and that. ‘Yes.’ She said eventually, her upper class lilt softening as she thought of their relationship.

‘A long thought!’

‘Yes,’ she said again, ‘It did not always work for us.’

I could imagine as much. I said so.

‘The issue is, and you may or may not know this already, but I’m bisexual. I want to sleep with men as well. Laura has not always been very accepting of this. I understand why, because she’s gay, and for her bringing another man into our bedroom is like a ‘lesbian love scene’. She hates that. She hates the thought that someone might think we were ‘acting lesbian’ for them. Shit, there was one time-’ Amber snorted suddenly into her drink and pushed her hand over her mouth, trying to stifle the laughter of her memory. I began to

laugh as well, automatically amused at her amusement, the sound of her upper class swearing feeling naughty.

‘I invited a man home and he was so fucking excited when he saw that I had a girlfriend. He was ecstatic. I do not know what I was thinking actually, I was drunk, but he was not the open minded sort of person I usually want to bring into our lives. She walked out, acting all sexy, and came back in with a strap on and a mask. We do not even use masks! It was a Halloween costume!’

Amber wiped away tears and broke into fits of laughter again.

‘What did he say?’

‘He didn’t say anything! He left pretty quickly. I loved it.’

I imagined that man, meeting a girl that he liked at a club, joining her back at home. The same excitement that I’d felt when I’d been invited in, the nervous anticipation of a night with women that found you attractive. I smiled gently in reply to her story, feeling sorry for the stranger I had never met. Amber breathed in audibly and stopped laughing.

‘So, how do you identify Erin?’

‘I mean, I could find anyone attractive if they had the right personality...the right way of being.’

‘Okay. Labels are not important to everyone. From what you describe, am I correct in assuming that you are pansexual? I call myself bisexual, because that is how I identify myself. I am a woman, and yes, that is part of it too. I see myself in other women. I see myself in other men, sometimes.’

I nodded. Pansexual. I had been trying to find the word for the way I felt, and suddenly it had been dropped onto the table in front of me.

Amber smiled, ‘Do you know Cynthia Nixon? Miranda from Sex and the City?’

I nodded, I did.

‘She said that she chose to be gay. For her it was a choice, and people were outraged. They tried to make her withdraw that comment, and apologise. Do you know what her response was? She said no, you do not define my gayness for me. I love that! Don’t you? I have always found men attractive, and as I got older, I realised that I was allowed to find women attractive too. I had that realisation myself and I made that choice myself. I do not think that I was born gay, and for me, I allowed myself to be with women. There is nothing wrong with saying that.’

I thought about this. Maybe for Amber, it was a choice. Was it a choice for me or something that I felt lay dormant in my inner self until recently? I watched her drain her cup.

‘For yourself Erin, it may not be a choice and if you do not want to agree, then that’s fine. I have had this conversation many times. I’m not saying that there is the option to not be gay for those that are.’

‘Well, it could seem that you are saying that. I suppose the discussion of choice means that you’re opening up the idea that you can choose not to be gay. You can see how that could be offensive, no?’

Amber shook her head and shrugged, ‘Goodness, I am not trying to be offensive to anyone, and so what if I think that it is a choice for me and some others? Am I really suggesting that I’ve therefore decided your sexuality and how it came about? Anyway, you don’t even believe in these labels. You do not define yourself as gay, straight or bi. You are ‘open to gender’. I’m certain that you also made that decision for yourself. I also know that some people are born knowing that they are gay. I know that. And, if I married a man tomorrow, I would not be able to turn off the ‘fancying women’ part of my brain. For you



though, it's easier. You do not have to make a choice about any of this, you don't even have to decide whether or not you agree with me.'

I breathed out a short, sharp breath of surprise, 'Excuse me? Why would it be easier for me?'

'Sorry Erin, I really did not mean to offend you.'

I shook my head fiercely, I was fed up with everything being decided for me. 'I broke up with my fiancé this weekend, after sleeping with you and Laura. That was more to me than just a night of passion. That changed my whole life. You know, you made up your mind about me pretty quickly didn't you?'

'Erin, I am sorry. I had no idea that you were in a relationship, let alone engaged. If I had known, I might have...but you can't have been happy? I just meant that you should decide where you stand on these issues. You should build your arguments.'

I took my cup and tipped the rest into my mouth, frowning automatically. I placed it before me on the table and smiled at a waitress that came over to collect it from me.

'I wasn't happy.' I turned my attention back to Amber. 'And don't think that I'm sitting on the fence. I have to say though, if I took a woman home to my mother, she'd be fine. If I introduced my friends to my girlfriend, they'd be pleased to meet her. They might care though, if I agree that it's a choice and that I could choose not to be gay.'

Amber shook her head vehemently. 'I do not think that I said that, did I? Do you think that people don't care, or haven't you noticed? Come with me.'

She grabbed my hand and pulled me out my chair, marching me out onto the street. We walked down the road holding hands.

'You get crap for being a woman Erin, just for stepping out of the front door. You can dress nice, and they will call you a slut and ask you to suck their cock, because that is what

they think is funny, and maybe once they heard a story about it working. You can dress in jeans and a hoodie, hood up, shoulders rounded, and they'll call you dyke, because they think that it's funny, and they hope that you might pull down your hood and stop being who you are, and maybe you'll suck their cock after all. You can fight back and risk your health and life, and they'll tell you to calm down and take a joke. You can say nothing and let it happen to you, and they'll laugh and jeer and then move on to the next woman that passes their way. You can be gay or straight, they don't care, but if you walk past them holding hands with a woman? It's Christmas. They hope that you'll both suck their cock, and forever and ever they'll be able to tell the story of how they met a couple of lesbians in the street, took them home, and banged them.' She interlocked her fingers with mine and slowed her step down, and I noticed that when she got angry, her voice went from soft to sharp, the edges of her words almost crisp enough to touch.

'Amber, I know about street harassment. Of course I know, it happens to me daily, with or without a woman holding my hand. I know that people have prejudice. I'm a woman.'

She looked at me carefully and nodded, her eyes softening, 'On my way here a man leaned in very close to me, I could feel his breath on my cheek, and whispered, 'Watch yourself'. Honestly, it ruined my day. It ruined my mood, everything. No one was around, and I questioned what on earth he could mean by that. Was he going to hurt me? Follow me? And then what?'

I squeezed her hand, and told her slowly about the first time I realised that I would have to fight similar situations my whole life. About the time the man in the van followed me down the road, and I was so young, and afraid. We walked for what seemed like hours, telling each other in turn of the times that we'd been humiliated on the street. Times that

we'd been yelled at to smile, times that we'd been dragged down. It seemed that not a soul drove or walked past us for that time, and I wondered if it were really true, or if we just hadn't noticed. For each story that we told my heart grew a little heavier, and my limbs dragged slower along concrete and tarmac. Our hands grew clammy and then cool and then clammy again, but we kept them clasped together, a squeeze for each comment and heartache. Eventually it was my turn again. The air was growing cool around us, and my skin was starting to prickle and bump.

'I was walking to work the other day, and a man said 'Good morning'. That's all. I said it back, and I didn't make eye contact, but I felt furious. Why is that? He only said 'Good morning'.

Amber nodded and said nothing. I continued.

'Maybe it was the tone. It wasn't a cheerful tone. He seemed like a threat to me, and I wanted to be left alone...but perhaps I'm being oversensitive now.'

Her hand squeezed my own. 'I think you become so used to being under threat that sometimes that happens. Listen, perhaps he meant 'Good morning' in the most sincere, I hope you have a wonderful morning way. But, you are a human being and you have spent a fair amount of time learning what other humans mean by tone and body language, and so if you picked up on something else that felt like a threat, then that is totally acceptable. You have to be able to walk down the street and feel okay. Goodness, I don't say 'Good morning' to people I don't know in any tone at all. We're not living in the forties.'

We walked on a little in silence, and Amber let go of my hand and paused. She mimed looking at her watch and rolled her eyes, and I noticed with surprise that the sun had already set, the red sky slipping beyond our eye sight, and darkness was falling fast. She embraced me quickly, her head too far to one side for it to be considered a real hug. I saw

that we were standing outside Amber and Laura's house, darkness pouring out of the windows.

'Will Laura be angry that you're late?' I asked her, feeling a warmth envelope me. The warmth of a new friendship. She shook her head.

'I don't think she's at home currently anyway. See you soon, Erin. Keep in touch.'

I gave her a kiss on the cheek, to say goodbye. She paused, and waved behind me, her face lighting up. I turned to see Laura, walking quickly toward us, eyebrows raised, no smiles.

'Hello. Erin, do you want to come in for a drink?' She barely acknowledged Amber, and stalked past us to the front door, unlocking it and holding it open. I glanced at Amber to try and gauge the situation, but she widened her eyes at me. She didn't know either. We walked in and she sat at the kitchen table, and gestured that we should do the same.

'Are you okay?' Amber sat opposite her, and frowned.

'Imagine my surprise, I'm getting a lift home from my boss, we pull up to a light – and there you both are! Holding hands and strolling down the street.'

'Oh,' Amber visibly relaxed and began to laugh, 'We were proving a point, we were talking about street harassment. Honestly, Laura, don't be daft.'

Laura shook her head and didn't back down, and I hung awkwardly behind Amber's chair, waiting to bolt. She fixed me with a steady stare over Amber's hair.

'Two things occurred to me. Perhaps someone in Erin's family had died. No, Amber, you don't know Erin very well, at least as far as I know, but when you're in a city and you don't have many friends, who can you really turn to? The other thought was that you may be having an affair.'

Amber rapped her knuckles on the table before her and shouted sharply, 'Hey!' causing Laura to turn her attention back to her.

'I told you what it was. Enough, now. You either believe me, or you don't. Do you?'

Laura gave a weak smile, as surprised by Amber's outburst as I was.

'I've had a fucking awful last hour of my life.' She responded suddenly, focusing entirely on Amber. I stayed where I was, unsure of my role in the room.

'That asshole boss of mine.'

Amber breathed in sharply and shook her head. 'What happened?'

'He put his clammy little claw on my leg, and told me that I was getting a promotion and that we should 'celebrate'. I told him I had a partner, and he said that I had never spoken about 'him', so he assumed it wasn't serious.'

'And you corrected him?'

'Of course I fucking corrected him. I could be sick, honestly.'

I stepped forward and pulled another chair out, still standing, 'What a dickhead.'

Suddenly, Laura seemed to realise that I was still in the room, and gave me a sad smile. 'Sorry Erin, would you mind? I want to be alone with Amber right now.'

'Oh, sure, that's fine. I'll let myself out.' I walked away from the table to the front door, until their words turned into mumbles that I couldn't decipher. I closed the door and walked up the path from their house. After a few steps, I turned back to see if they were watching me leave, but of course they weren't. These things only happen in films.

## Chapter 20

‘When are you coming to pick up your stuff?’

The message was short, and his voice was serious and stern. I played it on the speaker phone for my mother, who glared at me.

‘So we’ll do it tonight.’

‘We will?’ I asked. I didn’t want to do it at all.

‘Yes. We’ll take my car. Come on. Let’s just get it sorted.’

We drove there in silence. My stomach was pulsing and beating inside me, and I rubbed it gently, begging it silently to please let me do this without any awkwardness. The awkwardness was coming though, I knew that much, and my mother was here to see it.

She pulled up to the house, and I looked out of the car window and viewed it. It sat in darkness, waiting.

‘Do you have a key? Isn’t he in?’

I shook my head. ‘No. I messaged him. He didn’t text back. I guess he made himself scarce. I still have my key though.’

We got out of the car and walked slowly up the driveway, and I pulled out my key and pushed it into the lock. The door opened, and then stuck immediately. I pushed again, into the darkness, to hear rustling and air. I reached my hand round to flick the hallway light switch, and stared at the culprits. There must have been about twenty bin bags, all packed to the brim, and tied at the top. On the small table that sat by the door was a note.

‘Erin, I packed for you. Leave your key.’

I stepped into the house completely and sighed, my mother close behind me.

‘Oh well. That saves us some time.’

‘I suppose it does.’

She lifted the first of the bags, clinging to it as she made her way back to the car. I just stood and stared at them. What had I expected? For him to be here, for us to have a heart to heart? For us to laugh over shared items?

‘Erin, do you mind?’

My mother glared at me, hands on her hips, and gestured toward the bags. I picked one up that felt like clothes, and carried it to the car, forcing it in amongst those my mother had already moved.

After a few trips, it was done. My mother dusted off her hands and got into the car, and waited. I didn’t know what to do, whether to check that everything had been packed for me, or to leave, straight away. Could I even be certain that he had gathered all of my things? I wasn’t sure if it was rude to look around the house now, as it was clearly no longer somewhere that I lived. I heard the horn beep, and pulled the key out of my pocket and placed it on top of the note on the table.

As I got back into the car, I turned to my mother. ‘Why did you beep the horn? Don’t you think this is emotional for me?’

She sighed, and placed a hand over mine. ‘I certainly do. But let me say this, if Mark is so afraid of seeing you that he would pack up your stuff himself, and clear out your wardrobe, and then make himself scarce – is that really the place that you want to be in? Shouldn’t we move as quickly as possible?’

I nodded, put my feet up onto the dashboard and leant back onto the chair.

‘Quickly then, let’s leave.’

## Chapter 21

Back home I tried to distract myself from the piles of boxes and bin bags that suddenly filled my childhood room. It felt like a step backwards in my life, to return again. It was almost as though I had returned to the womb, the comfort of my mother. I stared at one of the smaller boxes, a shoe box, haphazardly taped up by Mark. I picked it up and pulled the Sellotape off, lifting the lid to see what was inside. My clay vaginas sat, crowded together. I hadn't seen them in a while. I picked one out, and held it in my hands. The pink and purple clay merged into a marble, and I touched the lips. I suddenly remembered the pleasure of creating, the enjoyment that I got from making them. I placed it carefully back into the shoebox and looked at the rest of the mess in the room. On top of one of the boxes by my bed sat the book that I had taken from the charity shop. I stared at it for a second, and then went toward it, picking it up. The soft leather creased in my hand. I sat back down on the bed carefully, pulling my laptop toward me.

I looked up an ancestry website that I'd seen on an advert, excited once more about my find, the distraction. There were a few people with the name Rose Sanderson that I could find, but only one that had been in this area around that date. She had two children. One looked like a son, clearly marked with his name. The other was not written in but was created, as though the person that had linked the branches had not known the other child well, or perhaps wanted to remain anonymous. It gave me the option to send the son a message on the site, and so I eagerly clicked, only to be taken to a direct debit page. They wanted me to pay to send a message? I sighed, and then tried typing his name into Facebook. Many people came up. I went back to the ancestry page and typed my bank details in, promising myself that I would definitely look up my own family history within the



year to make it worthwhile. I struggled for a moment with what to say to this stranger, who may not wish to hear from me at all.

Hi, I work in a charity shop. I came across a book with your mother's name in it.

Delete.

If I realised that I had something of yours, would you want it back?

Creepy. Delete.

I found a copy of *Little Women* with your mother's name written in the front. Do you have an address I could send it to? Here is a photo for proof.

I sent it, and waited. The son got back to me within an hour, amazingly, and I imagined him retired, his ancestry account linked up to his phone so that he received alerts. A hobby that gave you a shove if you forgot to join in. I clicked on the message received button, butterflies in my stomach and a warm feeling of smugness as I thought how happy he must be. It read:

Hi. No thank you. The last address I have for her is as follows:

24, Alice Lane, London.

I do not wish to have anything of Rose's, please do not contact me again regarding this.

I sat back in the chair, the glow leaving me instantly. I couldn't have got that more wrong, and it cost me money for the privilege. Still, I had Rose's address, I could go and see if she might want it back, or if there was a forwarding address for her.

I decided to deliver the book on a Saturday, when I could be certain that somebody would be at home. I hadn't told Sofia about it, it had been a few days since we had spoken, and I was trying to focus on recovering and not rebounding. I said that aloud to myself a few times in front of the mirror. I had worked through the week quietly, dinner with my mother, working afternoons and unpacking slowly in the mornings, putting some of my clothes back into childhood drawers. When Saturday arrived I was excited to deliver *Little Women*, and thought about texting Sofia to let her know. Maybe every few days was the right amount of contact for us.

I spent a while deliberating over what to wear, wondering what sort of outfit this required. I felt a little like a secret spy, stalking through London, but I was also aware that the woman I was delivering the book back to may be old fashioned, and probably didn't want a stranger turning up dressed head to toe in black with a beret pulled down over one eye. I was desperate to dress this way for some reason. I compromised with all black and the beret on the back of my head, and began my stalk. I'd wrapped the book in brown post office paper, tying it with string, and I tucked it under one arm as I walked. I kept catching sight of myself in shop windows, and received a few funny stares from other women. Other men don't often give me funny stares in this way. They watch you as though you are meat. That look, the eyes rolling over your body, the slight smirk on the lips, the full head turn, sickens me. It makes me feel invisible and all too naked at the same time. As though I can't hide myself. I used to try dressing in men's clothing at night, heavy jeans and large hoodies, hood up. It didn't stop the stares.

Women watch you in a different way. No, not all women, and no, not all men. Women glare at you as though you must have mental problems. They scan your body too, but quicker, and avoid eye contact. Have I ever done this to another woman? Perhaps I

have, perhaps nobody could say that they hadn't. Maybe the thoughts are as simple as 'Hey, I like that outfit'. The glare never quite matches up to this though, and it follows you for the day, in much the same way as the man undressing you does. You're suddenly unsure of yourself. Perhaps it's down to the woman being stared at to keep herself together, but has anyone ever really smiled at me when they didn't want anything in return? Or if they did, would I automatically assume that they wanted to fuck me or make fun of me?

I had the address written on a scrap of paper along with a homemade map. My phone wasn't one of the fancy ones that have GPS. I pretended that I preferred it this way, the excitement of getting lost just around the corner. It didn't take me long to get there, and I stood, double checking the address with the large letters on the front of the house. It was grand, to say the least. I climbed the steps that led to the front door and looked up at the building. It was run down, paint chipping off each window frame and the glass of each one smudged. I noticed with mild surprise that none of them was double glazed. It must be freezing in there. The door was large and painted green, though clearly it had been painted many years ago. It was so large that another door had been cut into it, a sort of pretend door, for normal people. It had a knocker, a strange face that was hard to make out underneath rust. I pulled my cardigan over my hand and grabbed hold of it, and knocked, twice. I waited.

I continued to wait. Nobody answered. I tried again.

Eventually, I heard footsteps come toward me, the click of heels on a hard surface. A woman opened the door, blonde hair coiffed into a bun high on her head, eyebrows drawn in dark pencil that didn't match her hair colour. She was stern, serious. I smiled, apologetically.

'Yes?'

'Hello, does Rose Sanderson live here?'

'No.' Her eyes rolled over me and I stood, trying not to retreat.

'Oh. I have this book you see, that belongs to her. Do you know the name?'

'What? No. Is this some sort of scam? I don't have time for this.'

I shook my head and showed her the book, as though that made a difference.

'Listen, I have a child in here with the chicken pox. I don't have time for whatever this is.'

She withdrew and slammed the small green door in my face. I looked at the stolen book, the worn leather and carefully printed words. The project had failed already. I turned and stepped down the concrete stairs, pushing the book beneath my coat. So what now?

As I stood back on the street, I texted Sofia.

*The book returning didn't go very well.*

She messaged back almost instantly.

*So give up.*

## Chapter 22

I was on my way home from the supermarket when I passed the café that Sofia and I had visited, and noticed new paintings being put up on the walls. It was quieter than before, the paper cups neatly stacked beside the clean coffee machine, seeming smarter than it had originally. I stood back and stared up at the sign, the faux stencilled letters on wood that read: 'The Espresso Gallery'. I took a deep breath and held the grapefruit that I had just bought close to my side, the peculiar comfort of knowing that there would be a moment after this one where I would be alone and enjoying my fruit.

As I walked through the door a tall middle-aged man holding a piece of artwork turned and smiled at me.

'We're closed, I'm afraid.'

'Oh. That's okay. I'm Erin, I think my friend Sofia has talked to you about me?'

He looked from me to the picture that he was holding, and frowned.

'Sorry?'

'Sofia? I'm a sculptor.' I paused, gathering my courage, and continued, 'My friend Sofia told me that she had messaged you about my work.'

'You're a sculptor? Oh right. Was this about having work in here or...? I get a lot of requests, sorry.'

I took a deep breath, 'Yes. I am.'

'Well, we have a waiting list, but actually, I've also just had a cancellation in two weeks. I was going to make some calls, but maybe there's a reason that you came in today.'

'Maybe there is.'

He leaned the painting against the wall in front of him and came over to shake my hand. I juggled with the grapefruit apologetically and shook his back.

‘What kind of thing do you do again?’

‘Sculpture.’

‘Okay, well, how would you use this space for your sculpture? We haven’t had a sculptor here before actually, that could be a fresh idea.’

I stared at the walls, wondering momentarily what I was doing. Was I even a sculptor? I had made art, yes. I called it art. Did I have the courage to do this? How could I display them? Could I handle strangers staring at my clay vaginas? It would be a struggle, but I was desperate not to let go of this sudden opportunity.

‘I could...put some shelves up-’

I watched the man wrinkle his nose automatically and tried to change tack.

‘Or, each table could have a sculpture?’

‘Maybe. What sort of thing is it that you sculpt?’

I paused. ‘Well, abstracts. Mostly.’

‘Alright. Do you have any examples...a website I could look at?’

I shook my head and held my grapefruit a little firmer, ‘It’s being re-designed, so I won’t have it for a few more weeks.’

He paused and glanced from my face to the grapefruit and back again, and I stared at him, willing him to agree to something that made absolutely no business sense at all.

‘Listen, I can’t just give you a whole week when I’ve got artists that I know on hold for cancellations...but if you want to do the table thing, while someone else has their work up on the walls at the same time, we can do that. We don’t charge to display here, but if you sell anything, we get five percent commission. How does that sound?’

I nodded slowly, trying to calm my heart down.

‘So when can you have them here then? It’ll need to be quick, so I was thinking tomorrow?’

That left me with no time at all. I stared at the tables. ‘How many tables do you have?’

‘Um...sixteen. Is that a problem?’

‘No...no. Tomorrow is fine. I’m Erin.’

‘Erin. I’m Paul. Here’s my card.’ He handed his card to me and turned back to the picture that he was hanging. I began to walk out the door.

‘Who did you say contacted me again?’

I turned and shrugged, ‘Sofia?’

‘Sofia...I’m not sure. Listen, this is all subject to your artwork fitting in with the vibe of the café, okay? Just bring them in, we’ll have a think.’

‘I understand.’

‘Erin – get yourself a website sorted by the weekend too.’

I nodded haphazardly, feeling as though I had just agreed to something almost impossible.

## Chapter 23

I decided to ask Sofia for help. As I walked into the charity shop she glanced up with a customer service smile already painted onto her face. She gasped in mock surprise as I walked through the door.

‘Erin, is that really you?’

‘Yes. How are you?’

‘Fine,’ she closed the book she was reading and narrowed her eyes, ‘So, what can I do for you?’

I shrugged, though mildly embarrassed I tried not to show it.

‘I’m just playing, Erin. What are you doing today?’

‘Well, at the moment I’m putting together a little exhibition of clay vaginas for the café.’

Sofia laughed, ‘Yeah? Very Judy Chicago of you.’

‘I’ve only really got tonight to do it. I’m panicking a little.’

‘How funny. I’m quite impressed actually, that you put yourself out there like that...I wasn’t sure you would actually go in to see Paul.’

Today she wore her hair up successfully, without any strands falling about her face. She looked slim and tanned, her eyes as sharp as ever. I stared at her for a moment, wanting to ask her whether she actually had messaged him.

‘You know, it sounds fun, if you need any help?’

I held my tongue, needing the assistance. ‘Really? Yes please, I would really appreciate that.’

‘I will help you. Bring your stuff here though, I can’t close up yet.’



I did just that, hurrying back to my mother's for clay and paint. I was excited about the prospect of making things with Sofia, watching her create. I was desperate to talk to her too. The thought of an afternoon with Sofia was as attractive as a holiday.

I was only gone for around an hour, which I was quite impressed with, considering a lot of my things were still in bin bags, lining the borrowed room at my mother's house. Once I arrived back to the charity shop Sofia's mood had chilled slightly, no doubt as she had cursed herself for agreeing to help me so easily.

'You have to do most of the work yourself, it isn't me with the exhibition.' She slumped over the counter and sighed. 'I liked the book mystery more. Have you given up on that?'

I shook my head, 'No. But didn't you tell me to?'

She rolled her eyes dramatically and said nothing. I couldn't gauge her sulks.

We estimated that it would take about one hour and twenty minutes to make the sculptures we needed, minus any painting, but in actual fact, we were still sat holding and moulding four hours later. Sofia had locked up the shop, and we had moved into the centre of it. We weren't speaking about anything that wasn't to do with the exhibition, as though we had made a strange agreement about this, but had Radio 4 on in the background to cure any awkward silences between us.

'I'm getting pretty tired, Erin. I might head off soon and lock up properly.'

I placed the last of the sculptures in front of me, and smiled. They weren't painted yet, but they looked good, all different but similar. I was pleased.

'Well, I've just got to paint them now anyway, and do the website. We've got a lot done. I couldn't have done it without you.'

‘It was nice to see you for a bit.’

I laughed and began to gather the spare clay from the carpet, ‘Just for a bit?’

Sofia nodded and said nothing, staring at the sculptures in silence.

‘Should you paint them, do you think? I mean...are people going to want to eat in a café in front of a clay vagina?’

‘It’s art.’

‘Yes. It’s also a café, and a vagina. Did you tell Paul what you were going to bring in?’

I nodded slowly. ‘Yes, abstracts.’

She laughed and picked one up, staring at it hard. ‘Well, you could paint them all one colour, and then it really is abstract, and anybody who is offended by them can be told that they have a dirty mind.’

‘Alright, maybe. But then, maybe not. It does mean that you’re staring at a vagina while you eat your lunch. If you’re offended...’

I was unsure of the end of sentence, so I stopped. Sofia nodded at me sternly.

‘If you’re offended, you’re an asshole.’

## Chapter 24

My first sexual experience was when I was too young. An older boy that would play down the road occasionally came round with his parents for tea with my mother. We played in the garden for a while, and at some point, when we were out of sight of the house, the boy asked me remove my underwear. I was six years old at the time, and he was ten. In retrospect, this means that he should have known better, but I had no frame of reference for this, and had learnt even at that young age, that a male has power. I did what he asked, and I stayed silent as he pushed me down onto my back and ran his hand over my genitals. He began to kiss my stomach, which was, unusually, the moment that I knew something was wrong. While I wasn't aware that what was in my knickers was private and mine alone, I knew that kissing wasn't something I should be involved in. I understood that nobody should touch my tummy. I told him that I needed to go back into the house, and stood up awkwardly, picking up my underwear. I ran back to my room, where I put my knickers back on. I didn't tell anybody, embarrassed to have taken part, and felt as though I should have known better. They still came over for tea, but I would avoid the boy after that, shrugging when he asked if I wanted to play.

I sat back and stared at the words. The thought of someone else reading this made me feel physically sick, ashamed, as though I was sharing something that I shouldn't. I shook my head. Wasn't this the point? If I never told anybody these things, they may as well have not happened. It would just be a moment in time, forgotten by everyone except me. It would only have had an impact on my own life, and the same situations would continue to have an impact on women everywhere.

## Chapter 25

I stood before The Espresso Gallery's door, carefully holding a box underneath my arm. I could see two people talking in front of a large display of pastries, and I recognised one as being the man that I had spoken to the day before. He was suddenly younger, and my stomach flipped beneath me. I knocked, quietly.

'Erin, hi, come on in.'

He was pleased to see me in a business-like, hurried way, and I responded by apologising for being late, although I knew I was nothing like it.

'You're not at all. This is Mike, it's his art that we have on the walls this week. It's good for you to both meet actually, I hope that you both feel that your artwork complements each other's. Mike, Erin. Erin has brought some sculptures for the tables.'

Mike raised his eyebrows at me and smiled politely, nodding at the box beneath my arm. I murmured a 'Hello' and placed it carefully onto the bar.

'So, I'm looking forward to seeing these. Let's take a look!'

I felt as though my heart was beating faster than I could bear, but I pulled the cardboard lid until it gave way beneath my hand. The two men stepped forward to take a look inside, and I slowly picked one of the sculptures from the mass. I placed it onto bar in silence, and stepped back. Automatically, both men stepped back also, almost in time with the other.

'That is...is that? The sculpture?'

I moved it slightly, as though the angle made the difference.

'Well,' I began, 'It's an abstract.' I shook my head briskly, cursing my cowardice, 'It's an abstract.' I repeated, 'They are all different.'

I stayed looking at the sculpture as I spoke and then sighed softly, giving myself up to the risk of baring all. There was a silence as we all stared at the vagina in front of us. 'And in that sense, I mean that they are all different versions of abstract...art.'

I turned to face the two men and worked hard at making no expression at all. Paul didn't look at me, but stared at the sculpture, then turned to Mike and raised his hands.

'I don't want you to worry, I'm not going to...'

Mike shook his head and turned his lips into a downwards smile, expressing without words that it was no issue, that he understood what Paul was saying. Paul turned to me and seemed to take a couple of seconds to focus in on me.

'Erin, I can't display these. You must see why. I mean, this is a family café. We have brunch here, you know?'

Mike turned from the conversation and stepped away to busy himself with something that I imagined to be non-existent and vital. I took another look at the sculpture, and then back to Paul, whose shrinking eyes gave him away to be a mix of mildly irritated and very uncomfortable.

'This is art, Paul.'

He sucked air into his lungs between his teeth, 'Yes, Erin. I know. But it isn't exactly what you said it was going to be, is it? Why didn't you tell me exactly what you had before today?'

I sighed and tried to focus, briefly catching the eye of the other artist, Mike. He smiled sympathetically at me.

'My website wasn't up and running yet. That's the truth of it. And honestly, I would have thought that this would be fine, being a family establishment. You do know how families are created?'

Paul began to laugh and clapped his hands loudly, once. I flinched as he did it, surprised at the noise.

‘Can’t do it Erin. That’s it, end of discussion.’

I watched his face shut down and stepped forward to engage him, to stop him from turning off completely, ‘So just to be clear, you only do ‘Café Art’ here?’

Mike whistled a long slow note in the background, and began to clear away some tools that lay on a table in front of one of his paintings.

‘Alright, let’s not do this. We do family friendly art. Look at Mike’s stuff.’

I didn’t, maintaining my gaze on Paul instead, ‘I don’t need to look at it, to know what sort of art you display here.’ I turned and picked my sculpture up, placing it carefully back into the box that held the other fifteen pieces of myself. I closed the lid with purpose, and began to make my way to the door.

‘Erin, if you ever want to display something a little less explicit, you’re welcome back.’

I nodded, and turned as I stepped out, ‘Real art takes courage to make, and courage to display.’ I took a deep breath, and walked back to my mother’s carefully and quickly. I was grateful that she wasn’t there when I pushed open the door. I called out to double check. No reply came. Stepping into the hallway, I closed the door hard behind me, quietly sobbing. I sank to the dusty floor, my back against the door, and cried into my knees. The material of my trousers soaked within seconds. I tried with every squeak to be quieter still, the effort of trying making the tears flow harder.

What agonies we go through to stop anxiety creeping through our bodies, spreading up our skin like a rash, taking over our thoughts. With each effort comes that extra bit of pain, the stabbing in your gut, the twist of your intestines as you try to work out whether

you have the time to make it to the bathroom. I rolled over onto my side and held my stomach with my hand, pushing and squeezing to try to relieve any pain that I could. It didn't help. My body rippled with shock, I felt each and every nerve tense and release, my head squeezing into a point above my brain. I felt malleable. I was nothing, lying there, a thing without a future and with a sorry past. I was no talent, I was a poor wreck of a woman, a lack of inspiration. How could I have been so rash? I breathed in deeply and held my breath, trying to practice a technique that I had read about previously. Breathe in for four seconds. Hold your breath for seven seconds. Breathe out for eight seconds. Repeat. I couldn't breathe out for the seconds that I was supposed to, spluttering as I tried, feeling my chest rise with the effort. I gave in, I ruined my count. A failure at breathing also, the thing that is supposed to be innate within humankind. Even rats knew how to breathe. My stomach sent another cry through my body and I let out a soft moan. As a child it was the same. My mother would take me to the doctors often, begging for laxatives. These would work in fits and bursts, at inconvenient moments, and we would be forced back to beg for suppositories, for relief was not always the best thing.

'The stomach is linked to the brain, she needs to learn to relax.'

My mother would turn to me with confusion and plead before the doctor, trying to show that she was doing her best, 'What do you have to be stressed about, darling?'

What indeed. The description from my teachers that I was a serious child didn't begin to explain the issue. I was serious, for what was there to be jovial about? Life was a serious matter. School was a battlefield of relationships, of trying to fit in and bowing down to social expectations. Never say what you think, never hurt anybody else's feelings. If you say something that somebody else doesn't like, you'll eat lunch alone. The others will know that you are to be avoided. You'll spend the long summer months playing in your garden,



alone. No one will come round for tea. Your mother will worry. You will worry about her worries. Together you will ruin the year, a twisted mess of anxiety.

Sometimes I would do everything right, I would tell the popular girl that she looked good when she asked, I would choose the right side in an argument about something trivial. Occasionally I managed to stay on the right side of a friendship group that kicked out a member for speaking their mind. I learned from those moments, I knew not to pick my battles and to keep my voice low, my head nodding in agreement with the others. On one such day, I was secretly feeling the relief of making it through the morning without risking the wrath of a classmate, gratefully holding onto the toilet roll firmly. But I had, without knowing it yet, made an error.

Lunchtime came and I sat with my friendship group, ready to eat. They all had money to buy lunch daily, a thing that my mother would never allow. We had home packed lunches, she tutted at the thought of spending two pounds a day on chips. She had asked me, the night before, what my favourite sandwich filling was.

‘Banana and butter,’ I grinned. It was the sandwich that I had in the summer months when I was off school, and my mother loved it too. It was something that we did together. She leaned into me and smiled, and I caught a brief whiff of coconut perfume.

‘That is an excellent choice. I think I’ll join you.’

I sat with my lunch before me, carefully packed into one of my mother’s Tupperware boxes. The other girls giggled and talked over their chips, and I thought nothing as I opened the lid and began to peel back the foil that covered my sandwich.

‘Peeeyeww! Ugh, what is that smell?’

‘Stinks like old shit.’

‘Gross!’

It took me a moment to realise that they were talking about my lunch. I stared at the same plate of chips that they had all chosen, confused at the reaction to a sandwich.

‘It’s just a banana sandwich.’

The ringleader of the group began to laugh, and wrinkled her small nose up, waving her hand before her face. ‘Yeah, and how long have you had it? Seriously, Erin, that is not normal.’

The other girls joined in, giggling and copying the motion. I stared at my sandwich, at the way the banana had squashed the bread slightly, moistening it, the way that I liked. I saw my mother’s face, carefully making it for me, buttering the bread and slicing the banana. My stomach groaned automatically, and I placed my hand over it.

‘Was that a fart?’ The ringleader grinned. I shook my head in silence, but to nothing, and watched as the girls fell about.

‘Erin, if you’re going to eat that I’m going to have to move.’

They all nodded in agreement, appalled faces watching my decision. I took the sandwich out of the box, and stood, making my way to the bin. I threw it away. I sat and stared at their chips, as they ate and talked and smothered their innards with tomato ketchup. I thought only of my mother, enjoying her lunch and her kindness at making me mine. I felt terrible guilt, and it made a home in the bottom of my stomach, filling it with pain and tense nerves.

When I got home that evening I became obsessed with the idea that my mother would ask about my lunch, and each moment that she didn’t stretched into an eternity. When she tucked me into bed that night I still couldn’t bring myself to come clean. I took a deep breath, ‘Lunch was so great today, but I think that banana sandwiches should just be for holidays.’

She paused and watched me carefully for a moment, placing her hand on my cheek.

‘Well, if that’s what you want.’

I slept uneasily with the lie beside me, my stomach pulsating in my tortured stillness.

## Chapter 26

When Mark and I had first moved in together and the idea of being a carer hadn't yet occurred to me, I decided to follow my passion for coffee to a small but popular coffee shop over Tower Bridge, called South Borough. It was sandwiched between two shops, and there wasn't a lot there in terms of things to see.

We have a regular clientele, including a handsome man, hair slicked back across his scalp, dressed in a pinstripe suit, who comes in daily.

He's a lawyer, with an air of success about him. It's more than that, it is such self confidence that to be around him makes you feel as important. But there is also something else in his eyes that I notice. Something slightly off, and in my head, I call him Patrick Bateman. The similarities seem obvious. I'm as polite as I can be. He regales me with stories of expensive items that he has bought and he is interested, for some reason, in my life. He has coffee one day, with a colleague, and as I put down two coffees in front of the suited men, he moves a sugar bowl out of the way. It falls to the floor, spraying sugar, everywhere.

'Oh. Just give me a moment, I'll get a dustpan and brush.'

I do this, and then come back, and get onto my knees to clean up the sugar. There is no other way of doing it. The men are talking about work, and I am not listening, until Patrick Bateman says my name. I look up.

'It's quite sexy, isn't it? You on your knees cleaning up my mess while I sit here having a meeting.'

I stare at him, knowing that my face is turning crimson. His colleague sniggers to himself. No words will come out of my mouth, though I'm shouting at myself to say something, to say anything. I think about the job, the money. I think about my home, about rent. Is it worth giving up all of this for a moment of satisfaction? I cannot do anything. So I say nothing. I turn my attention back to the sugar, and I clean as quickly as I can so that I can leave. The men, in their expensive suits, turn back to their work. What satisfaction they have, everybody on their knees before them.

Another man, small and round like a cartoon Father Christmas, comes in daily as well. My manager calls all men 'Boss' and they love it. It delights them.

'Boss, what can I get you?'

They are instantly purring in response, and it is clever, in a way, of my manager to put himself instantly below them. It guarantees them a satisfactory visit, before they have even ordered.

This Boss likes it especially, and he gives me a nickname too, though I don't speak to him unless I have to. My special nickname is 'Girl'. He uses it in many different situations, but the worst is 'Good girl.' He calls me this when I give him his order. To my disgust, he even took my hand once and squeezed it, telling me in surprise that my hands were freezing.

'Did you call me a 'Good girl' again?'

Shock runs across his face, so what?

'Yes. What's up? It's a compliment.'

I feel rage within my chest, 'No, it isn't.'

'Why?'

'Because this is my job, and I work hard and I'm good at it. I'm not here to serve you, I'm not doing you a favour. I get paid to work here because I'm good at my job. Do you understand?'

He shrugs and rolls his eyes at me. Another silly girl, the thought is written across his face.

In the bathroom I spit up bile.

There's a self-employed publisher, who works from home. He is tall and slim, and reaching what would be retirement age if he were not self-employed. He is the sort of customer who joins you on your break, without asking if you mind. The sort of person who speaks to you when you are reading, as though you are not busy. Of all the crimes, these are not big ones, but

one particular day, he tries to cross the invisible yet very real line that takes you to the kitchen, and behind the counter. The area that is just for staff. I am cleaning the counters and trying to close up the café for the night. It is later than I want it to be, and dark outside.

'Where are you going?' I ask in a jokey way. I don't want to start an argument so close to the end of work. He grins at me, and I notice the bobbles on his sweater and as he comes closer, the scent of dust. He smells musty, mouldy, as though a meadow has rotted into mud.

'I thought I'd come back here and give you a kiss.'

I pause, trying to understand the situation. Is he joking? Does it matter?

'Please go back behind the counter, now.'

He laughs and does so, holding up his hands in mock surrender. I watch him carefully.

'Oh, it's just my sense of humour'

'Right. I don't find it very funny.'

He leans across the area that I have just wiped down, his hands on the damp surface, leaving prints. 'I will make your bone marrow freeze.'

With this comment between us, he leaves.

Half of working in hospitality is about cleaning. Half is about people skills. There is a small section of time dedicated to making coffee.

There is a new girl, she has been working for about a week. She is a little slow, but I put it down to learning.

'How are you getting on?' I ask her.

'Fine, everyone is really nice.'

'That's great. If you ever have any questions, feel free to ask.'

She nods, 'Well, you seem quite busy a lot of the time. I don't really want to bother you.'

I smile and pause for a moment, 'There's always something to do, that's why. But you can still ask me stuff.'

She watches me and shrugs non-committedly, 'You can be quite intimidating, a bit scary.'

This is not the first time that I have heard this. Throughout school it was endless, people yelling at me to smile, not to take things so seriously. I was even given the nickname 'Smiler' by the school's rugby team. They would shout 'Here comes Smiler!' when I walked past. They would ask if there was anything that could possibly make me smile, in the whole world of exciting things. The answer was, of course, yes. Yes, there are many things that make me smile, but interestingly, shouting at me in public is not one of them. Serious is a way that I have always been described, even by Mark on occasion. My own grandfather once said that the day I walked up to him and shook his hand was the day that he knew he'd made it. He meant our relationship, that he had conquered my grim little face. Occasionally, I would tell people that I



was happy, in response to 'Cheer up' and 'Don't take life so seriously'. Those clichés are irritating when people you know say them to you. Worse than this though, is the man in the street, and in my experience, it is always a man or a group of men.

'Smile.'

'Smile darling, it might never happen.'

What can you say to these things? Every time it happens, I want to turn around and say, very calmly, 'But I am happy, I just don't walk around smiling. I don't think anybody does.' Or perhaps, 'You don't know what is happening in my life right now. You don't know that I haven't just had terrible news. Do you think that saying that to someone really helps in any way?'

These people won't care what you have to say, and if you respond, they will jeer at you, and humiliate you. It is a normal part of being a woman, I think. Being yelled at in the street, being told that you are too serious, that you should smile and be gentle and kind, and, of course, that if you are good at your job and take it seriously, that you are scary.

I turned to the new girl and smiled in a helpless way. I knew it was helpless, because I felt it. At a loss for words. There are only so many times that you can be called scary, or too firm, when you are just being focused and normal.

'Listen, I'm not scary. I'm busy, I'm serious about working hard, and if it ever seems that I am being scary or

intimidating, it's because I am trying to do a great job. There isn't much I can do to stop you from thinking that about me,' I shrugged, 'If you could clean the toilets for me though, that would be great, because I'd really like to get out of here on time tonight.'

Her eyes widened slightly and she nodded, walking away. She thinks I'm a bitch, I thought. What do I think of her though? I think she's being sexist, but I think that she is too young to realise. I carried on wiping the shelf but with a little more force, my skin prickling with irritation.

'If I were a man,' I said aloud, to nobody. I didn't finish the sentence, because I already knew the conclusion. If I were a man, she would tell me that I was great at my job, good at managing people, and fantastic at delegation.

I underlined the word 'fantastic', and then paused, wishing that I hadn't. My collection of writing was growing bigger. I scanned the pages, and wondered, was it actually helping? Was I letting it go or reliving these moments? It felt like reliving. My eyes began to sting with tiredness and I closed them, leaning over the pages before me.

## Chapter 27

I was sick. It wasn't something that could be measured by thermometers or treated with paracetamol. It was different and all too familiar. I lay in my borrowed bed at my mother's house, blankets wrapped around me, watching the bedroom door. I could hear her coming up the stairs with a tray, the clinking of cutlery comforting me. I could have been a child again, taking time off school. She appeared in the doorway and wandered in, holding the tray before her with concentration. I sat up and smoothed out the sheets, taking it from her. It was beans on toast, cheese layering the beans, melted into them and sprinkled with pepper. Next to it sat a large mug of hot chocolate, the milk already creating a skin. My comfort meal. I smiled at her.

'Exactly what I wanted. How do you always know?'

She patted my hand and nodded, 'You're my daughter. I remember what you need at certain times, that's all. How are you feeling?'

I picked up the hot chocolate and breathed in the heat, closing my eyes. How did I feel? I felt terrible. My anxiety was coming to me in flashes. There were moments when I would rise above it, feeling for a fleeting moment that it didn't matter, that I was going to be alright. And then, I would plunge back into familiar niggles about my behaviour while I was with Mark, to the physical pain that I dealt with as a child. My stomach was constantly seizing and pulsing, my chest tightening.

'I don't feel great.'

'No. It's a shock to the system, that's all it is. Well, not all. You will start to feel better soon. Each day will get easier. Do you miss him?'

Did I? It was the change, I suppose, my mother was right. My life had gone from certain to something else, and though it had been my choice, it was still a surprise to me. And I had cheated on Mark, which he didn't know about. I had cheated and I couldn't work out if I even felt guilty about it, really. I was regretful but also calm about it. I know that people don't cheat unless something is wrong in a relationship. I had waited for the relief to come, I was steadying myself for the rush of joy that I was single. It wasn't arriving as quickly as I had expected.

'I don't know.'

My mother checked her watch and nodded toward the food, 'Hurry up, before it goes cold. Listen, I'm working from home today but I know that that's not something that you can do, is it? Won't you be late for work Erin?'

I shook my head, 'I don't think I'm going to go in.'

Her eyes narrowed, 'Have you told them?'

I picked up my phone and checked the screen. Nothing. I shrugged, 'I've been trying to get someone to cover my shift, but I haven't had any takers yet.'

'How long have you got?'

'About an hour. I can't go in.'

My mother leaned toward me and took my hand, 'Do you remember when you were young, and felt too anxious to go to school? What was it that we realised?'

I stared at my hot chocolate and sighed. I could feel tears threatening to burst, I was suddenly a child, clutching my mother, begging not to be sent back. 'The more time you have off, the worse it gets.'

She nodded and patted me, 'If you don't go in today you'll feel relief for about an hour, but when tomorrow comes, or whenever you're due back, you'll feel ten times worse

for having this time off. Eat up your beans, and then get dressed. You'll feel better for it, my love.'

I took a sip of chocolate and wrinkled my nose. I knew it was true.

Once I was up I wandered downstairs. My mother was sitting at her laptop, typing seriously, glasses resting on the bridge of her nose. She glanced up as I came in, softening.

'There now. You look great.'

I knew that I didn't. I had looked in the mirror and was surprised at what I had seen, my face pale, even after I'd painted it with foundation, and my hair lank even though it was clean. I raised my eyebrows and nodded. It was intended to mock but she took it seriously, and so I changed my expression slightly to match what she had thought.

'Off you pop then, sweetheart. You'll be fine.'

My manager welcomed me at my locker at work, eyes flashing. I was late, by ten minutes. This meant that every visit would be running ten minutes behind. Her hair was coiffed on top of her head, as though she were taking fashion advice from Edwardian ladies. She wore the polo shirt that we all wore, the care company logo emblazoned on the chest, but hers was always pressed and ironed. Mine was never this way. She looked stern, serious, but as I got closer to her, her expression changed to one of concern.

'Erin, is everything alright?'

I smiled, trying. 'Yes.'

'Are you ill?'

I started to say no, but felt my eyes begin to sting. It was always this way. You could hold it in until somebody asked how you were doing, and at that moment it would all come flooding out of you, a mess. I took a sharp breath in and lifted a hand to my eyes, pushing just beneath them, as though this might make a difference. I was confused, it felt as though I was having a delayed reaction to the split. Suddenly, everything had become very real. My manager reached out and placed her hand on my shoulder.

‘What’s happened?’

‘My...fiancé and I have broken up. I’m back at home, living with my mom. It’s just quite a big change, that’s all. But I’m fine, honestly.’

She painted a sad smile onto her face and glanced momentarily at my hair.

‘Erin, come on into my office for a minute. We have things to discuss.’

I held onto my bag and followed her down the corridor. Once we arrived she pushed open the door and signalled that I should go in, ahead of her. I sat before the desk, and watched her try and lean comfortably on it, clearly working hard to remain open and understanding in her body language.

‘Shouldn’t I be going? I don’t want to keep anybody waiting for too long.’

She shook her head, ‘I appreciate that Erin, I do. When you were a little late I asked one of the girls to do your shifts today. Here’s the issue, and I want to be as delicate as I can be here.’ She waited for a moment, watching me, and I realised that she expected a response. I nodded.

‘Um...yes.’

‘Great. Here is the issue. What we do here is our very best to make our patients feel happy, comfortable, and most importantly, safe when we go into their homes.’

She paused again, waiting for me to nod. I did so.

‘Part of the way that we do this, is with our warm personalities. We’re enthusiastic, empathetic and excited to chat with our patients.’

I nodded again, fighting an urge to say ‘The Three E’s’. This wasn’t something that was policy, or if it was I had never been taught it. It was as though she was reading from an invisible mid-air manual. Her eyes kept focusing just above my head, and then between my eyes. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but it felt as though I may be on the brink of losing my job. Why that might be, I had no idea.

‘Right, I just want to say –’

She held her hand up and shook her head at me, frowning slightly, ‘Erin, I haven’t quite finished. Another part of being a great guest in someone’s house, and carer, might I add, is that we need to look healthy and capable. At the moment, you’re going through some difficult stuff. I know what it’s like and I totally understand how tough it really is.’

She took a moment to lean forward and pat me on the knee, gently. She gave me her best ‘empathetic carer’ smile and nodded.

‘Please try not to take this personally, but at the moment, you don’t represent what we do in the best possible way. You don’t look like your usual self, Erin. You look unwell, and, if I’m honest, a little too unkempt for work.’

Was I really going to lose my job for not having brushed my hair?

‘I can go home and change if you want.’

She raised her hands to her face in mock surprise and shook her head, ‘No, I just think it might be for the best if you have about a month off to sort yourself out. The doctor won’t sign you off for something like this usually, but I don’t know how I could be expected to send you out to work, knowing that you’re not going to be able to perform to the best of your ability.’

I considered what I was being offered here. Was this a holiday? I hadn't actually taken a holiday from work all year. 'Can I just...so is this paid?'

'Well, Erin, to be honest with you, I am asking you to take your holiday. The year is almost up, we need everybody to take their contracted holidays and there doesn't seem to be a better time than now, for you.'

'Oh. And today? What about my shifts?'

'I was going to ask you to take today as a holiday for being late.' She fixed me with a serious, and slightly terrifying stare. I paused, unsure of whether or not I was about to be told off. 'Now Erin, legally, we can tell you when to take your holiday, as long as we give you notice. As you were late today, we really had no choice but to cover your shift. So, consider this your days' notice. Okay?'

I nodded and stared at her for a moment, confused by the way in which she had managed this meeting. She was concerned about everyone taking their holiday, not about whether or not I was actually unhappy. I thought about saying something, but I couldn't help but think that the best thing to do may actually be to go back to my mother's and climb into bed.

'Okay. I don't really know what to say.'

'Don't feel the need to say anything. I think a break would do you good. You should look at last minute holidays? You could get ready for Christmas, get ahead of all of those Christmas shoppers? You'll feel much better after a couple of weeks away from here!'

'You're probably right.'

'So, onto the important stuff. We've had Olive reassessed, and she's going to need extra care. Her daughter and I have had a discussion about it as well, she's going to have somebody in three times a day now.'



‘That sounds like it would be for the best.’

‘Yes. Well, thank you Erin. I’ll see you soon.’

I stood up and made my way out of the door, closing it carefully behind me. I felt relieved. I was happy to take a pay cut for a few weeks to be able to rest.

## Chapter 28

My mother listened to my story when I got home, and tapped her nails on the counter the whole time. It kept putting me off the rhythm of the story. Eventually she sighed.

‘Well, at least you have some time off to think about things.’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that the best thing, do you think? Time off to think about things?’

I didn’t know what was best at all. I wanted to go and see Sofia, to talk to her, but I felt like I had begged for a day off school and finally got my way. As though I should act sick and stay in bed, even when I was starting to feel a little better.

‘Am I allowed out?’

My mother frowned, ‘What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know. It feels a little bit like I’m skiving I guess. And now I’m back home too...don’t you think it’s like the old days?’

She smiled, ‘Yes, a little. I quite like it really, it’s nice to have you back for a bit. I wish that it was under better circumstances, of course.’

‘Quite? Thanks very much!’

‘Well, you know what I mean. Anyway, you’re not skiving, you’re on holiday. And yes, you are allowed out. You’re not a child anymore Erin.’

I grinned and got my phone out, sending Sofia a quick text.

*I have some time off work. Can I see you?*

My mother began to tap her fingers on the table again, and I watched her for a moment.

‘Could you stop that?’

‘No. It’s my house.’

My phone buzzed and bleeped loudly.

‘And while you’re in my house, put that thing on silent. I can’t bear it.’

I checked the screen.

*Lucky you. Yes, you can see me. I’m not going anywhere. Come over.*

‘Alright, I am going out.’

She stopped tapping for a moment and narrowed her eyes, ‘Who are you going out with?’

‘A friend.’

‘Oh. I know that look Erin.’

I turned to leave. As I walked toward the door she called after me.

‘Watch yourself there, sweetheart. Nothing is as cruel as dating somebody for rebound sex.’

A shiver ran across my body, the type that you can only get when your mother has said the word ‘sex’ to you. I turned my head slightly, ‘Don’t do that please, don’t talk to me about things like that.’

‘You’re the one doing it.’

‘I never told you that.’ I left as quickly as I could.

## Chapter 29

All of my school friends went to university around the country. I didn't have that initial desire to go, and as I considered it and spent some years working, and then met Mark, the price of studying rose from one thousand pounds to three and then nine. As it did so I watched the option slide away from me. I saw my friends having a great time in photographs, and I wanted to be a part of that fun. I went to visit Lauren, who was studying in Bath.

I was excited, I packed for a big night out, making sure that I had with me my favourite dress. Green with pink rope as the straps, it got compliments wherever I took it. It was loose enough that I could eat a big meal and not feel uncomfortable in it. We went out, as planned, to a club in the centre of Bath, called Moles. It reminded me of places back home as soon as I arrived, it was underground, a little dingy. Lauren told me that once she had found ants in her drink, but it was nice and cheap and that I'd like it. I already knew I would, Lauren's friends were fun and bright like her, and I was excited to be out of London. As we sat in the bar above the club, I let myself pretend for a while that I was at university here too, sat among my friends. I thought back to my long term boyfriend, jealous of the people around me, of their student loans, of their freedom.

We played drinking games that I didn't know the rules to, and Lauren's friends were generous with their conversation, not minding that I was a little shy. They were interested, passionate. I admired them.

After a few rounds and a couple of hours, we walked down to the club. The doorway was a small cove, and I stepped into it last as everyone walked in single file through the small door. There was a door to my left also, that people would occasionally appear in. Lauren was ahead of me, paying for us both to get in, her friends already inside and her attention taken. A young woman stepped out of the left hand door and glanced at me before walking on the street, a man close behind her. He looked at me, and before I could register his face at all, shoved me against the wall and pushed his hand up my skirt, sliding it into my underwear. I pushed him hard.

'Get off me!'

He grinned in the darkness, 'I would.'

The woman looked over her shoulder and tutted at him, signalling that he should follow her, unaware of what had just happened. Lauren turned to look at me, she too oblivious to what had only been a couple of seconds of my life. I felt sick. The man was on the opposite side of the road, sharing a cigarette with the woman. He was just standing there as though he hadn't assaulted me. Lauren came out of the door.

'Come on Erin, come and get a drink,' She grabbed me by the hand.

'That guy, over the road, just shoved his hand into my pants.'

She paused and stared at me, 'What?'

'He's just there! He's just standing there!'

A bouncer came out of the door and smiled briefly at Lauren and me. I stared at him for a moment, and then pointed at the man across the street.

'He just assaulted me. He just walked out of this club, and assaulted me right here.'

The bouncer looked from me to the man, and back again.

'Right, the issue is, he's not in the club. I can't do anything unless he's in the actual club.'

I stared at him in disbelief, 'But he's there. He's about ten steps away. He did it in the doorway of your club, and now he's standing over there.'

'There's nothing I can do, what can I do? Unless you want me to call the police.'

I looked at Lauren, at the expression on her face. She was watching the promise of a fun night out slip away through her fingertips. I thought about asking the bouncer to call the police, of having to wait for them to arrive, of giving a statement, and the possibility of the man walking away within the time it took for all of this to happen. Lauren gave me a sad smile and squeezed my hand.

'Well? Do you want to call the police?'

I shook my head slowly and glanced back to the man, who was telling the woman a joke and laughing as he did so. I could hear blood in my ears, pumping, loudly. We walked into the club and Lauren told me to try to forget about it. I couldn't. Twice a barman asked me what was up, and I couldn't respond with the actual truth. I just drank as much as I could, trying to numb the rage clawing at my insides. I should have done something, I have should have held onto him and shouted for a bouncer. I should have screamed, and I should have kneed him in his bollocks. I should have gone across the street and dragged him back over, forcing him to talk to the police.

I had done none of that. I ended the night crying in a toilet cubicle, for all the things that I should have done.

## Chapter 30

We sat in Sofia's bedroom, side by side on the bed. She had invited me round, but when I arrived she was clearly in a strange mood. I felt like I was sitting awkwardly, unable to relax, unsure of her next move. She hadn't asked me about The Espresso Gallery, and I hadn't offered her the information. I imagined that she had found out anyway, and I was too embarrassed to say anything.

'I'm bored Erin.' Sofia fell back onto the bed and stretched her arms above her head, 'Let's go out.'

I looked out of the window and watched the rain fall. I didn't want to go out. Sofia rolled onto her side and poked me in the ribs.

'Don't be so dull. Let's go to a gay club. Have you ever even been? You know, you're gay now. You should go.'

I laughed and pushed her hand away. That's how it seemed to Sofia, and I knew it. I was gay now. The end. I thought of discussing this further with her, but instead just let it go. I didn't want to debate or discuss, I just wanted to have a calm, normal evening with her.

'Alright.'

Sofia grinned widely and jumped up, grabbing the yellow dress that used to belong to her from the end of the bed. She has asked me to bring it round, saying that she wanted to try it on again. 'Wear this.'

She threw it at me, and I looked at it for a moment before pulling it over my head. Sofia paid no attention to my bare skin, instead playing with her hair in a mirror, excited at the prospect of doing something else. I thought for a second of Mark, who would wrap his arms around me every time I got undressed. Mark, who loved the sight of my bare skin.



Sofia thought that she was a fantastic dancer. I could tell, and she wasn't bad, but she thought that she was much better than she was. She threw her head around, hair covering her face, eyes closed, too many times for me to count. I watched her, uncertain of my role. I tried to dance too, but I was aware of my limbs, feeling like a giant lumbering around the room. Sofia seemed to think that everybody was watching her. Perhaps they were, I certainly was. Every now and then she would grab my arm and drag me to the bar, making eyes at the women waiting to be served.

'What would you like to drink?' She looked around as she asked, glancing momentarily at my face to make it clear that she was directing the question at me.

'Just a gin and tonic, thanks.'

I followed her gaze to see a girl with short cropped hair behind me, like the pixie from Sofia's past. She clearly had a type, into which I didn't fit.

'Sofia.'

Her eyes snapped back to mine, 'Erin.'

'You're checking out a lot of other women, it's making me feel a bit weird.'

She looked at me steadily for a moment and frowned slightly. 'Um...you know we haven't had any sort of chats about being exclusive, have we?'

I shook my head and paused for a moment, 'I didn't think it needed to be said.'

Sofia snorted gently and widened her eyes, 'Come on, Erin.'

With that, she ordered our drinks and paid. She said nothing more to me about it, and made her way to the dancefloor once more, expecting me to follow. To my dismay, I did exactly that.

## Chapter 31

Sofia wasn't exactly new to London, but, far from South Africa, she liked to play at being a tourist. The day after our night in the club we stood at Liverpool Street station together. She stared at the tube map, tugging my sleeve, a habit that she had begun.

'You haven't taken me anywhere fascinating.'

I glanced at her, waited until she caught my eye, and tutted, 'You've lived here for years, don't be ridiculous. Anyway, you haven't taken me anywhere fascinating either.'

She let go of my sleeve and grabbed onto my hand instead, smiling slowly at me.

'I actually have something planned for you. Where are we? Liverpool Street. It's only through Spitalfields.'

We left quickly and she walked me to the venue, talking to me about nothing much. We arrived at a warehouse on Brick Lane with a graffiti covered door. It was the sort of place that you wouldn't have guessed was an actual venue, unless you knew. She turned to me and smiled softly, and I noticed her beauty. Linked to her mood, her expression changed the entire way that she seemed to me. She stepped through the door, and I followed her down a corridor. At the end, Sofia held open another door for me and nodded. I stepped in, faced with a group of people, all sitting before easels. They glanced round at me, none of them smiling; Sofia said hello to a few people and introduced me quietly. I shook a couple of hands, and felt nervous, as though it were my first day at work. One man in particular shook my hand with enthusiasm, and nodded at Sofia as he did so.

'Welcome, Erin. I run these classes. Are you modelling today? I'll split the group in two, we don't often have new models these days.' He smiled apologetically at Sofia.

I stopped still for a moment, knowing that I looked terrified. Sofia placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, then smiled at the man.

‘Erin is always up for trying something new, I’m sure that she would be delighted to model for everyone today. Erin?’

I stared at her. Was I actually going to do this? Before I could answer either way, the man clasped his hands together in glee.

‘Great stuff, there are robes over there.’ He wandered off to talk to somebody else and I stared at the other people in the room, counting them silently. The scent of paint filled my nostrils as Sofia leant in toward me.

‘Best not to count them eh? Erin, they’re artists. So be their muse.’

I followed her and went behind a screen to undress, pulling the robe around me. My stomach gurgled and beat beneath me, and I placed a hand over it, trying to silence the noise. The robe was covered in paint and I wondered when it had last been washed. I took a long breath, prayed not to have cramp for standing still so long, and walked from the screen to the front of the class. Nobody paid me any attention, instead readying their supplies. With a last glance around at their faces I looked into the distance and shed my robe. I felt it fall around my feet. I shed my skin. They didn’t look at my eyes, or watch my expressions too closely. As I watched them consider my shape and body I realised that they were not judging me. They were seeing me for something else, something entirely different. I was just the subject of their art. I felt a freedom come from the ability to stand naked in front of them. I closed my eyes for the remainder.

Afterwards, we sat in a pub by the venue, somewhere that I thought was quickly going to turn into our regular haunt. She grinned at me, eyes bright.

'I wasn't sure if you'd do it, I really wasn't!'

'Yeah, well. I didn't know what was happening, and then I thought that it might actually be worse to leave.'

She pouted and reached over the table to pat my hand, 'I'm proud of you pudding.'

'Pudding? I don't want that to be a pet name.'

She shrugged, changing the subject, 'Erin, where are you going to live? You can't stay at your mother's house.'

'It's only been a few days,' I lied. My life had become the break between Christmas and New Year, a mish mash of days, all following the unknown.

'More like a few weeks.'

I played with a spoon in front of me, putting all of my attention onto that instead, 'I'll find somewhere. I'll look today. It's not a big issue. Anyway, it'll be good to have some space. Alone time.'

Sofia nodded and leant back in her chair, grinning at me like a Cheshire cat.

'Erin.'

I stared at her face for a moment, trying to work out how she'd said my name. She hadn't. The voice was his, it was Mark's. He said it again and I turned to see him standing beside the table, awkwardly dropping a hip to seem relaxed.

'Mark. Hello.'

Sofia's eyes widened and she smiled broadly. Her eyes shone with the prospect of an awkward encounter.

'This is Sofia'

'Hi.' He reached out a hand to shake hers, and she smirked in reply.

‘Oh don’t be so formal, I’m sure we can squeeze another onto the table, can’t we Erin?’

I found myself nodding so as not to make Mark feel worse than he already must. He went off to find a chair, to join us for an uncomfortable coffee.

‘The only thing that could make this worse is if my father were to join us too,’ I hissed at Sofia.

She laughed and grabbed my hand, ‘You don’t get on with your dad? Well.’

‘It isn’t that...’

Mark joined us with a stool and sat down. He had a drink in a takeaway cup, and I guessed at what could be inside.

‘It’s tea,’ he said, smiling briefly, answering my unspoken question.

‘How have you been?’ I asked, pretending that Sofia wasn’t sitting before me on the edge of her chair, sucking in her cheeks and inspecting Mark.

‘Up and down.’

The honesty of his answer shocked me slightly. I answered with a quiet ‘Yes’ and took a drink. Sofia pushed her feet off the ground and tipped her chair back to look at his shoes. I raised my eyebrows at her as some sort of warning, which she ignored. For some reason, with the both of them there, I felt more confident around Sofia. Suddenly I was the glue, the only one that they both knew, however well. I felt as though I could say anything, really, to either of them.

‘So, how do you two know each other?’ Mark asked.

I stared at him with confusion. He knew who Sofia was, I had talked about her when we were together. He ignored my stare, focusing on Sofia instead.

‘Erin comes into my shop. We just got chatting, you know. Erin’s just that sort of person, isn’t she?’

Mark gave a snort of irritated amusement. My confidence dipped. Sofia seemed suddenly annoyed also, and I felt the toe of her shoe hit the table in a succession of beats.

‘Erin is that sort of person, whether you know it or not.’

‘I wasn’t saying she wasn’t.’

‘Good. And how do you two know each other?’

‘Sofia, come on.’ I scolded her and she laughed gently, as she pretended to zip up her lips and throw away an invisible key. It made me smile, despite myself.

‘I’ll just pop to the toilet,’ she stood and walked away, and I found myself automatically watching her walk. She squeezed between two tables and whispered apologies to the other customers, who then seemed to watch her walk away as well. Her high-waisted jeans clung to her hips and dipped back, pulling taut over her behind. I felt a strange mixture of envy and something else. It wasn’t desire, it couldn’t be said to be so strong. It was a longing to touch. I wanted to feel the way that it felt to be her, the way that it felt to feel the deep curve of her back. I turned my attention back to Mark, who’d been watching me instead of Sofia.

‘She’s opinionated.’

‘She’s barely that.’

Mark picked up his cup and drank, ‘She’s a friend for the ‘New Erin’, isn’t she?’

‘I don’t know what that means.’ I said those words aloud, although really, I knew what he meant. And he was right. Sofia was a friend for the new me, although I wasn’t entirely sure who that person was yet.

‘And how are you, New Erin?’

Mark's eyes seemed to have shrunk in the time that we'd been apart. Not only were they smaller, but they were shallower, and narrowed with every word he said.

'I'm fine. Work's fine. I've had a nice day today.'

'With Sofia?'

As though the mention of her name brought her back to life, Sofia suddenly arrived at the table again. She'd brushed her hair and applied bright red lipstick, and before sitting she pulled her chair around to sit closer to me.

'I took Erin to a fascinating place.'

Mark raised his eyebrows and took a sip of his drink. I shifted uncomfortably on my chair.

'And Mark, what have you been doing today?'

He shook his head nonchalantly, 'I've been drawing a bit, and then I came here for tea.'

'Drawing?' I asked him, in surprise. Sofia glanced at me briefly, and fear bubbled inside my stomach. He couldn't have been there, could he? And art? He'd never mentioned it in the five years that we'd been together.

'Yes.'

'Oh, wonderful. Do you have anything to show us? Erin didn't say you were an artist.'

'I didn't know,' I offered, hopelessly.

'I don't have anything with me, no. I've been to a life art class.'

'Oh yes, at the college? I pose for those sometimes. It's a great way of making money, and you feel so good about yourself. I love seeing the various ways people perceive me.'

I glanced sideways at her, and she widened her eyes.

‘You should try it Erin,’ she teased.

I shrugged, looking back to Mark.

‘That’s not really Erin’s thing, she’s more of an artist than a model,’ Mark said with a hint of tenderness, and I felt a sadness breeze past me.

‘Where did you say you did the life drawing, Mark?’

Sofia interrupted me, ‘Would you ever try it Mark?’

He shook his head.

‘Erin and I have a little project as well, we’re trying to deliver a book back to its original owner. It’s has a name and 1934 written inside, isn’t that something?’

Mark raised his eyebrows in pretend interest and nodded.

‘Erin stole it from my charity shop! I soon sussed her out though.’ She grinned at me and winked, and I felt myself flush with embarrassment.

Mark looked at me with uncertainty, ‘Alright.’

‘So...where did you say you did the life drawing?’ I asked again.

Mark frowned, ‘Sofia was right, at the college up the road.’

I nodded, flushed with relief, and then awkwardly made an excuse that we had to leave, for which he seemed as grateful as I was. Sofia shook his hand with a firm smile, and I patted him on the shoulder with hesitation. As we left, I turned to see if he was watching us go, but he wasn’t, and to my surprise, I mourned it slightly.

As we stepped outside, Sofia gasped with laughter, and clutched her stomach in a dramatic way. She pulled me away from the pub window and shook her head, pretending to wipe a tear from beneath her eye, ‘Can you imagine if he was there? Your face!’

‘It would have been...terrible.’



She slapped my shoulder and rolled her eyes, 'Oh don't be so dramatic. It would have been fine. I must say, I was quite surprised.'

'By what?'

'I don't know. You could do better, that's all. Well,' she leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, 'at least you've upgraded now, pudding.'

## Chapter 32

True to my word I started looking for a room. I took the first one that I found in the East, in Bow. I didn't mind where I went, as long as it was mine. I didn't mind the odd party, the sound of cheering and clinking rising up through the floorboards, muffled only by the threadbare carpet. I didn't mind the sound of lovers from above, of sighs and creaks and whispers. I was starting to enjoy feeling alone among company.

The room was bright, with one large window and a sloping window seat beneath it, which became the selling point. As the landlady showed me around, slowly walking me to each corner of the room, I became fixated on that window. I could see myself sitting there, coffee in hand, watching the world go by. The landlady eventually followed my gaze and told me that they could have curtains put up, if I desired. I shook my head in reply, and imagined having a futon at an angle that meant I could see the stars as I fell asleep.

The rest of the room faded into insignificance as I handed over the deposit, and only came back to life when I began to move my few belongings in. The corners and walls that I'd ignored were dusty and made me sneeze, the walls blotchy with faded Blu Tack stains, a curse from the previous tenant. That afternoon, I found an old artist's mannequin in a charity shop bin, and bought it for one pound. I hurried home and set it up on my window ledge, and with an old scrap book and a single pencil drew the mannequin in as many positions as I could. I shaded carefully, using the sun as it poured through the window onto wooden limbs. I left the faces blank, as with my own mannequin. When finished, I put my drawings up around the room, covering each blotch with my artwork. I placed the mannequin on a table beneath them, arms stretched, displaying the work proudly.

When I awoke the next morning, I had a moment of surprise, of not recognising my surroundings. I looked around the room. The air was cool, the sun already hiding behind buildings. I remembered briefly a moment earlier in the day, when I had opened my eyes to a stream of sunlight bursting through the window. I should get up, I had thought, get up and get a coffee. Go round some bookshops. Live my life. I buried my head into the now cold pillow and sighed. The day had already turned into nothing, a wasted moment. Loneliness swept over me. If Mark were here, we would have dressed when the sun was brightest. We would have laughed in the bedroom, unwrapped from the sheets, untouched by the cold. He would have carried me into the shower, where we would kiss and he'd stretch my arms upwards, letting soap fall from up high to create a pool by my feet. We'd have felt suddenly desperate to be outside, hurrying to dress, rushing to see the sun for real. And now...I reached for my phone and picked it up. There was nothing on the screen. I had expected something from Sofia, from Amber...from anyone. I shook my head briskly. My own room was a fresh start. I needed to embrace it.

I walked to the coffee shop nearest to my house, or rather, to my room. My new home was a short bus journey up the road from my mother's house, on Bow Road. I knew the area well, which was of comfort to me. The coffee shop was large, a chain, and I ordered from a surly barista and waited for my drink. I much preferred the surly to the friendly. I admired her honesty, her refusal to bow to the customer relationship. Why should she be happy serving me coffee? I imagined her life as I watched her work. Imagined her own days off, her private routines. I wondered which coffee shop she found to be a haven, whether or not she could relax there, whether they knew her by name or by drink.

I found a seat by the book swap and ran my fingers across the spines, holding a mouthful of coffee as I did so. I didn't want to read autobiographies of comedians, or love stories. I pulled a few off the shelf and ran a judgemental eye over them. There were too many covers displaying women in huge dresses standing in rural America, longing and painful expressions on their faces. Beneath the pile that I held in my hands lay another book though, smaller, with sharp edges and a bright yellow cover. A woman sat astride another, bare breasts and a mask over her eyes. I placed the other books on the shelf and swallowed my coffee. The title caught my eye: *She Dominates All*. I opened the book in the middle, and flicked slowly through the pages. It was a sort of graphic novel, filled with tall women bearing whips, canes, anger. Men spoke to them as though they were fools, they beat them in return. I winced at a few, sharp stilettos used with such violence but in a way, I liked it. I admired their sheer physical strength. But the more I looked, the more uncomfortable I felt. Did the fact that it was written by a man change the content of the book? I viewed those tiny outfits, the exposed skin, beating shame into misogynistic stereotypes of men. There was an underlying sexual presence on the pages, as though this author's fantasy had been intertwined with the ink. I pored over the book, I couldn't stop gazing upon the thick thighs and the twisted agony of the men's faces. The serious expressions on the women were fascinating, straight, poker faces, nothing out of the ordinary, performing a duty. No sign of enjoyment. Giving what was deserved. The café noise melted from my ears. I felt entirely involved within this strange world of gender reversal.

'Excuse me.'

I looked up to see who I assumed to be the manager of the café. He wore an apron, like the rest of them, but a shirt, top button loose. He motioned to the book that lay in my hands, 'If you want to keep reading that, you'll have to buy it I'm afraid.'

I frowned at him in reply, and glanced at the other books on the shelves, 'Are these for sale? I'm confused, I thought this was a book swap.'

He nodded, 'It is. It isn't a library though, we can't have people taking up spaces for hours on end reading! No offence. I'm sure you understand.'

Automatically the corners of my lips turned down and I felt myself shrug, 'I bought a coffee.'

He stared at the table in front of me. The table that I realised was now empty. It must have been cleared while I read. I followed his gaze and sighed, 'Fine. How much is this book?'

He sucked the air through his teeth, playing for time as he decided upon a figure, head moving from side to side, 'I'm sure we can agree on a pound.'

I imagined taking my boot off and smacking him over the head with it, blood trickling down onto the polished wooden floor. I'd shove the pound deep into his ear and watch him whimper. Instead, I produced the pound from my pocket.

'You should read this book.' I told him, smiling sharply, 'It's an interesting world.'

On my walk home I imagined all of the things I could do to the manager, all the different ways that the conversation could have gone. I could have taken the book, not a word, with my head held high. I could have lied, and said that actually, I'd already swapped a book for this one, it was the one about Paris, and how about he check his facts before he come to me and demand money.

Somewhere in between these thoughts of conversation, the air grew colder, and I began to think about very different scenarios. I could've said nothing, and sat quietly,

reading the book until closing time. The lights would dim and he would storm over, angrily pointing out that he needed to lock the doors. I'd ignore him and his rage, and he would take me by the shoulders and shake me, demanding that I leave. I would let him. He'd grab my cheeks with one hand, force me to look at him.

'Are you listening to me? Can you hear me?'

I'd stare him in the eye, no reply, the book forgotten on my lap. And then, a change in the atmosphere. He'd leave one hand grasping at my face, forcing me to look at him, but the other, would creep up my thigh. Still, I wouldn't move.

By the time I got home, even my tights were damp. I went straight to my room, bypassing the awkward hellos with the other tenants. I closed my eyes and pushed my hands into my underwear, surprised myself at the wetness below. I pushed my fingers up into myself and leaned my head back, closing my eyes.

I thought back to that same scenario and pushed them deeper, my hand an extension of his own. The way that he might press, as though punishing me for disobeying him. Trying not to move a muscle on my face. My fantasy moved into the present. As he unzipped and pulled me from the chair, I hit the floor, hard. He flung the book away from me, and I made no move to save it. I felt my tights and underwear being pulled away from me, left to linger beside my knees. He pushed my legs apart and entered me, eyes fixed on mine, no kissing, no affection. I pushed my fingers harder inside of me and felt the familiar wave of pleasure and agony. The pleasure all mine, the agony the guilt of the thoughts that overcame me. Sighing, I opened my eyes and pulled my hand from within my underwear. My fingers felt tacky, and I gazed down at them. Blood covered them. I sat up quickly. It was smeared beneath me, a mess of shame. My body angry with the things that turned me on, a punishment of my own making.

## Chapter 33

'I've suffered from anxiety for as long as I can remember. I take responsibility for everything, that's the only way that I can describe it. Each time somebody feels pain, I immediately think that it's to do with me. I rack my brain trying to work out what it was that I did to cause it, what movement I made, whether I accidentally rolled my eyes or forgot to offer tea or...anything. Perhaps I am under developed. An undeveloped brain. Is it right that small children think that they are the sole cause of happiness and all other emotions? They watch their parents laugh and think it must be them. Their parents shout, and it must be them causing it. My father left my mother when I was small. My bullet of a mother, I decided, couldn't cope. Even at that young age, I took it upon myself to save her. Poor, poor mother, languishing in numbness. I would save her. I didn't try to become my father. You couldn't pay me to be that man, I was not his daughter, something that I still feel today. I look like him, and at times my mother would tell me this. I would get angry, and she'd point out a glare that matched his. But I am not my father. I will never be him.

I heard that he chose a new family. They weren't entirely his, but they were nothing to do with us, either. My mother told me this, through anger. She slammed a vase down onto the kitchen table, bitterly spitting out the words, and I watched as the bottom of the long crockery sphere cracked.

'We don't need him.'

These words were repeated often by her, and then by me. That was our motto, we should have written it down and framed it. Through the act of him leaving, I became her outlet. She said things to me that you should never say to a child, she spoke of their sex life, of his terrible behaviour. The time that he left for ten days without word, left her alone to

care for me. The pause at their wedding, before he said, 'I will'. The anxiety that he gave her.

Like mother, like daughter. She passed it down to me a stomach gutting heirloom. Every time she cried, I'd rally around her like a cheerleader, desperately putting things in her way to take her mind off the situation. This went on for years. As an adult, I can see that she probably had some serious problems that no child playing 'the glad game' could fix. As an adult, I see her once a week, and I work at saying nothing real, and hearing nothing real. As soon as I met Mark, I strapped my happy relationship armour on, delighted that I might be, after all, a normal human being with a functioning emotional system.

The problem with armour is that it rusts if you don't take care of it. That's a cheesy metaphor, but it's true. If you lock those things away, all those experiences and awkward conversations, they will come back to haunt you. They flash into your brain at the strangest times. You could be having a shower of a morning, reach for the conditioner, and then be knocked sideways by the once murmured suggestion that you might not even be related to your father.'

I reached my hand up and rubbed my forehead, a sudden pain appearing above my eyes. It matched the pain that was beginning to gurgle in my stomach. Dawn cocked her head to one side, nodding at me to continue. I shifted in my seat, hoping that a rearrangement of limbs may help. What was I talking about? Being related to my father. God forbid I am, god forbid I'm not.

'That same day, when I cried, my mother took me into her arms and said, 'It's better the devil you know.' Parents should be given books on what not to say to children. A couple of times I tried to talk to Mark about it. One time in particular, I accidentally spilled my childhood sadness out of my mouth and all over his parents' dining table. The subject was



changed so quickly that it left me spinning in humiliation. I regretted saying a single word, and I said as much, after we got home.

‘If somebody hasn’t heard your stories before, it can be shocking Erin, that’s all.’

I felt much worse, as though I was desensitised to a whole situation. And for what it’s worth, I know that people have had it worse. I remind myself of that daily. But don’t I have permission to feel bad? We all have different stresses and emotional problems and ways of dealing with life. Some of us are better equipped than others. I feel responsible for my mother’s happiness, and now I ignore her sadness.’

Dawn watched me steadily and nodded. She checked her notes.

‘Why would you think that Mark’s family wouldn’t want to hear about your father?’

I stared down at my hands, and noticed that I had begun to pick the skin off my right thumb. It bled slightly. ‘I don’t know. They did ask, I didn’t just begin to talk. I also thought that I’d been with Mark a while, and that they should know more about me. As soon as I took a breath his mother started to talk about the garden. I felt so embarrassed. I felt judged and humiliated, for things that I personally have never even done. I am still talking about my father leaving and the things that my mother said to me when I was young. I am an adult, and these things are still coming up. Why can’t I just get over it?’

I began to cry, despite myself. Not real sobbing, just tears, falling down each cheek and blurring Dawn’s face. She handed me a tissue, and crossed her legs slowly.

‘What did Mark say when you told him this?’

‘As I said, he didn’t really understand. He thought that they felt uncomfortable. But I felt uncomfortable too. In reality, they made the situation much worse. They shouldn’t have asked if they didn’t want to know. They probably don’t want their son marrying into some emotionally needy single parent family. But Mark said nothing to them at the time, or he

didn't even realise that I was cut off and embarrassed. He said nothing in the evening when I cried myself to sleep, though he held me, and I can't expect everybody to understand what I'm feeling.'

'There is an example of you taking responsibility for Mark's parent's actions. They interrupted you, but you have justified that by making yourself responsible. What if they did the wrong thing? What if they were rude to you and there is no justification?'

I nodded. Perhaps she was right. 'And so what then?'

'Try not to carry this around with you. People can be rude sometimes. You and Mark aren't together anymore and there is no reason that you should ever see his parents again.'

'I can't see a way to just being able to forget something that upsets me.'

'Who are you really upset with in this situation?'

'Them. I'm upset with them for making me feel like shit. I'm upset with Mark for not doing anything or understanding why, and I'm upset with myself for taking it so personally and going into such detail about my parent's relationship in the first place. I'm mad at them too, for making my childhood such an emotional battlefield. Well, maybe I can't blame my father for that. At least he really left. He didn't dip back in every few months and take me to McDonalds. A man of his word in some ways.'

'Divorces and parents leaving can be very tough on children, and it isn't easy to get over those issues. It'll take time, but you're aware of them, and that is the start of the battle.'

'I don't want a battle though. I'm constantly having battles.'

'With yourself?'

'With everyone. Yes, with myself. With Mark, with Sofia.'

'Who is Sofia?'

'Sofia is a new...friend. I've slept with her. She makes feel wonderful and moronic at the same time.'

'How does she make you feel that way?'

'She makes me feel wonderful because there are times that she makes me feel like an intelligent and beautiful woman. She makes me feel creative, that I could do anything I set my mind to. I could be that person that I want to be. She also makes fun of me, and treats my decision to leave Mark as the best thing that I've ever done, as though meeting him was the start of my downfall.'

'Does she know Mark?'

'They've met. It was a pretty awkward meeting. I don't know if Mark knew exactly what was going on, but he certainly didn't like her. She didn't like him because she thinks he's uptight, and that he's held me back.'

'Held you back from what?'

'I don't know. From travelling, maybe. I think I said I that once. But Sofia can hate Mark if she likes, I don't care. She's been winding me up recently. She can be very difficult.'

'Do you see Sofia a lot?'

'Yes, I see her enough. It was a quick thing...I met her, I was still with Mark. I'm really not like that.'

'Like what?'

'I don't sleep around. I'm not like that.'

'Do you think that there is something wrong with that?'

'Maybe. I read somewhere once that every time you sleep with somebody you leave a part of yourself with them. If that's true, then recently I've been spreading myself a little thin.'

‘Why do you think that is?’

‘I could go into all of the things that I’m supposed to say...that I miss being held. Is that even true though? I don’t think I’ve fallen in love. There is no point in being held at night if it’s not by somebody that you truly love. I mean, otherwise it’s just irritating isn’t it? Those nights that I was far too hot in Sofia’s bed and she’d turn over and throw her arm over me...I hated those nights.’

‘What if Mark had done the same?’

‘I would’ve felt a little less extreme about the situation, perhaps. I would’ve gently moved his arm, not cursed him under my breath. But Mark and I...we knew each other properly. There was no unknown. Or at least, no unknown that I knew of. Do you remember that speech that Rumsfeld gave? Unknown unknowns. I did not know, consciously, that I wanted to sleep with women while I was with Mark, until I met – well. But you know, finding somebody attractive, proper heart beating, butterflies in stomach attraction, is a rare thing. I don’t think it’s as common as the movies tell us. How many men can I honestly say that I’ve met and fancied straight away? Not many. Mark was one of them, sure. To date, perhaps I’ve now met more women that I fancy straight away. Maybe I am opening up to the idea of fancying somebody new. I don’t think it’s down to gender, it’s down to your mind-set and the person that you’re in front of. For whatever reason, I’ve been more interested in women recently. The thought of sleeping with a man is less exciting now.’

‘Why?’

‘Why would it be exciting? I feel like I’ve done that. I don’t know. Is that the way that you should feel after sex with a man, or should it be a more consistent desire? To get over my break up I’ve found a new piece of myself. She is she. I am a woman, and I am more

attracted to women. I am suddenly overwhelmed at the sight of a cunt. Are you one of those people that hates that word?’

Dawn’s eyes widened slightly and she pursed her lips, unsure of what to say. ‘This is a safe space, and you can say what you like here.’

‘Okay. I love that word. That’s new for me. All of those people that say they are mightily offended by that word are just repeating what somebody else has said. I believe that. I used to do that too. But not now. A cunt is a good thing, it’s a great thing.’

‘That word still has the ability to shock people, perhaps that’s why you enjoy it?’

‘Germaine Greer said that. She said that it was one of the last shocking words we have. And maybe you’re right, saying it makes me feel free. It makes me feel good. The same way I feel when I see one. Free. The freedom to say it and the freedom to be it, to want one. All of that stuff.’

Dawn nodded and looked to the side of my head. I’d noticed a clock there when I’d walked in, and thought that it was clever to place it there, so that you wouldn’t have to do a great display of looking at your watch when your hour was up.

‘Our time has come.’

She laughed and nodded, and then stood to shake my hand. ‘Do you feel that today has been useful Erin?’

‘I feel like I’ve summarised my problem areas quite well, if that’s what you mean.’

‘That’s fine. We’ll see each other next week.’

She held open her door and I left her office, feeling drained. I thought about some of the things that I’d said and felt my face flush automatically. Automatic embarrassment is my reward for honesty.

It was cold and I was tired, and after the discussion that we'd had I was a little afraid of the dim streets and dark corners leading up to the tube station, worried that I might be spoken to, or worse. I pulled my jacket around my face and tucked my hair into it, beginning to walk a little faster but with purpose, dropping a hip as I did so. I was trying, in vain, to walk like a man. I was unsure exactly how effective my impression was, but as I reached Mile End and hurried home, finally faced with my front door, I was grateful to get inside.

More darkness welcomed me. At these times I missed living with another, the warm glow of light behind curtains. It was for this reason that I loved those tiny candle holders that portrayed houses and villages. The type your grandmother might have in her house, that are only lit at Christmas. Seeing that warm glow behind minute porcelain warms my heart.

I switched on the light and the storage heater that sat beneath my large window, and pulled the curtain across. The room was a mess, my sketches falling off all of the walls but one, my artist's mannequin on its side, limbs twisted. I picked it up and straightened it out so that it was standing tall, and placed it on my bedside table. As an afterthought, I picked it back up, and hastily pushed it into a drawer. I then pulled all of the sketches from the walls and placed them under my bed. The room was cold, and so I got beneath the covers of my duvet, and wrapped myself in them, closing my eyes. I thought of Amber and Laura, wondering if they ever discussed me. I imagined them talking about me right then and there. Laura was upset and didn't hide her contempt for me, but Amber stood up for me and said that I needed guidance. I didn't need guidance, I shook my head automatically, as though I was there, as though it was real. They kissed each other goodnight and slept on separate sides of the bed. I imagined that Amber thought of me. Wondering whether I got home safe. She thought of me walking down the dark road alone, walking slowly, unaware

of my surroundings. A man passes me, and pauses slightly to see my face. He smiles and stops me, saying something inaudible. I shake my head in response, and keep walking. He follows me at a short distance, of which I am aware but pay no attention. I continue on, until I get to my building, push the key in the door, at which point he pushes me against it, running his hand between my legs. I do nothing. I let him. I let go of the key, leaving it there. With one hand he unlocks the door, guiding me to the hallway. I have flashes of a face, it's Mark, it's a stranger. I can't figure that bit out. I let him kiss my neck, pushing me against the wall. I can hear the television on in the flat downstairs, their front door by my left shoulder. He tugs my underwear to one side and picks me up, pulling my legs around him. I feel him inside me, and he shoves my back into the wall with each movement. Perhaps Amber doesn't think of me at all. I roll onto my front. I sleep, and I dream nothing, or I know not what I dream.

## Chapter 34

I woke up desperate to speak to my mother, with an overwhelming urge to see her. I dressed quickly and made my way to her house immediately, half running to the bus stop. When I arrived, out of breath, I knocked loudly. She wasn't in. I felt about in my bag for spare keys, grateful that I kept some, and unlocked the house and helped myself to a cup of tea. I thought that I would wait for her, but before I knew it my tea was cold on her bedside table, and I was rifling through her drawers, until I hit upon a journal. I knew that she kept this. When I was about ten years old I found it and read it. I remembered snippets, mostly about my father and how awful he was, how difficult she found being a single mother, how she regretted settling down with the wrong man. All of the things that were written down were spilled out to me at some point or another, after too many gins. I flicked it open to the last page. There were many years missing from it, years where she obviously had nothing that she was desperate to talk about. The last page though was written yesterday, according to the scribbled date. She talked of nothing really, of needing to buy more shampoo and not having enough paper to write lists on. I flicked back a few pages, until my eye caught my name.

Erin doesn't seem to be speaking to Mark yet, which upsets me. I can't understand it really. She's young to get married, I do understand that, but she and Mark have always seemed so solid. Far more solid than me and 'He who shall not be named' were. I dread the thought that I've put my relationship anxieties onto her. My own mother told me nothing



at all, so I tried having an open house of discussion while she was growing up. I hope that she sees that.

You bring up your children as best you can. That's why you have them. My own mother was a stern woman, she could freeze the air in a room as soon as she entered...but with me, she was different. I loved to see other people react to her. The local butcher adding a little extra to her order each week, for the same price. When she was nice to somebody it was as though they were the only person in the room, compliments rained from the sky, she soothed and softened every fret that you might have. But when she was angry that clear sky soon turned into blackened clouds. It was best to stay on her good side, as that same butcher learned one day when he sold her some meat that was mostly fat. She never turned on me though, not once. That was for father. He was a father of his generation, he behaved as his father had behaved before him. Strict and distant, cold and serious.

I wanted something similar for Erin. Not my father's and my relationship, no, but the way me and my mother were. Thick as thieves, secrets between us, family and friends all rolled into one. You can't force that kind of relationship, it has to be a natural progression.

Between Erin and I that never quite happened. I blame her father, for leaving us in the cold and forcing me to become both of us. I had to do it all, I had to be the provider, the carer, the loving mother. I had to scold and coax and instil

morals. I always wanted her to have a sister to play with. She was so terrible at playing alone. It's not that I wanted another child, and with who, anyway? I just needed her to have somebody else, someone else to be with. And maybe that's just one of the reasons our relationship wasn't mine and my mother's. I was full of the guilt of marrying her father. I chose badly, that's the thing that nobody ever admits to when a man leaves the family. You have a choice, you do. If I could have my time again I would run tests on him, I'd try and catch him out. I'd ask around, is he trustworthy? The sort of man that would get up the middle of the night to soothe a crying baby? Or is he the sort of person that might leave you to it, night after night, day after day, eventually leaving you both to it entirely. If he is that sort of man, well I don't want anything to do with him.

And so it turned out to be. Erin was a Daddy's girl, that's what made it worse. When she fell, she went directly to him. All children pick one parent at a young age, who knows how they decide which is to be the magic healer of all wounds? It wasn't me. When he left, that took her some getting used to. She'd hurt herself or upset herself and would hesitate each time, looking for her father. That hesitation killed me. It was as though she thought that I was incapable of looking after her, when I'd actually been the only one doing it all along. Even now it angers me, the memory. Eventually she snapped out of it, or she realised what I had known long

before, that he was never coming back into her life. He never even sent birthday cards. I envied the women who had been through divorces, whose estranged husbands came round to pick up the kids for a twenty minute trip to McDonalds. They all stood around together in the playground, gassing.

'Twenty minutes! Oh you're lucky, one time mine came round and took him out for ten!'

How I longed for the same. Just those ten minutes alone, that was all I wanted. No, needed. I needed that.

When she really left though, when she was nineteen, it was different. I was desperate for her to stay. I never said so, I would never be the sort of mother that did that. You can't live through your children, you have to let them leave. Those first few nights I slept in her bed, trying to wean myself off the company of my little girl. It was tougher than when he left, her father, but tougher still as I had nobody to take care of but myself.

We had our little rituals, she would come and see me every now and then, for dinner. Then, when she lived with Mark, he would come round as well. He was fine, really, but I was mildly worried that she was getting involved with him too fast. Too deep. I was afraid that they'd have a child, I really was. I tried to talk to her about it once, but she brushed me off with exclamations and blushing. I just didn't want her to repeat history, I wanted her to run the checks. Just ask around, see what kind of man he is. Do this before

you give your life to him, because once gone, you cannot get it back without a fight.

I heard the front door close and hastily shut the book and pushed it back into the drawer, sitting down on her bed. She walked in.

‘Hello, I didn’t expect to see you today!’

I said nothing in reply, but felt an almost overwhelming sob rise in my throat. She walked around the bed and put her arm around me, silently. I sat and cried, and she sat and held me. She didn’t ask why I was crying and I didn’t, or couldn’t, tell her. It was because I did miss the security of Mark. Because I hated the thought that Sofia had any control over me. Because I didn’t know my father. Because my mother thought she had messed up trying to do the opposite of what her parents did to her. Because I didn’t know what day it was anymore.

## Chapter 35

At ten years old, my fantasies altered. They began to involve ambition. I would imagine being successful, powerful, and admired. As I lay on my back, with my fingers inside me, I would imagine making something of my life. Applause. Lying there, somehow, I began to think of the Army as the way forward.

A squaddie, front line. That word is exactly what I want. Front, at the head of the team. Women aren't allowed on the front line, but I don't know this. I am ten, I know that I am female, and I know to some extent what this means. I know that I am not allowed to take my top off in the summer sun, like half of the children are. I know that some girls at school have started to wear children's bras, and I am envious, but I do not know why.

The Army though, why that? I sign up to a young person's Army magazine. They send me a video, VHS, and I watch it, intrigued. There are no women in it, not really. I watch the men, running, jumping, hiding. They hold guns, they look powerful and serious. I want to be one of them even more.

It's after school, and I am allowed to go to the local shopping centre with a friend. He's a boy called Harry. I notice that he's a boy, and I can't say that we are friends entirely, because I can't stop noticing his gender. It makes me nervous. I don't know how to act.

In the centre, outside a coffee shop, is an Army stall. There are two men, dressed in camouflage, handing out leaflets and grinning at anyone who will make eye contact. I turn to my friend, who I am not really sure of.

'I want to be in the Army. Let's go talk to him.'

He shrugs, and follows.

I bound up to the camouflage and smile widely.

'I want to be in the Army.'

'You do? And do you know what you would like to do in the Army?'

'Yes,' I'm certain, of course, 'I want to be a squaddie.'

He laughs, his teeth straight and yellow inside his mouth. I feel my body tingle with embarrassment.

'Well, you can't do that. You'd have to eat about fifty chocolate bars a day to do that. You could be on the phones though.'

I pause, and look at him. I don't want to do that. I tell him so.

'It's alright, working on the phones.'

With that, he turns his attention to Harry, 'Are you interested in being in the Army, son?'

Harry shrugs.

'You could be a squaddie. You could do anything. Here, take this brochure.'

I watch Harry reach out his hand and distractedly take the paper, folding it immediately. The soldier's attention is

entirely on him, as he talks about the great opportunities available. My eyes start to sting and I feel as though everybody in the centre is staring at me. I feel like I'm stupid, like I've asked something that I should be aware of already. I am humiliated, and my dream dissipates before me, a life of answering phones laid out ahead of me.

As I finished the sentence I pictured myself in the army, now. It didn't seem like it would suit me anymore, it didn't feel like my dream job. Being shouted at, being given a gun and the chance to take a life? That wasn't 'New Erin', as Mark would say.

## Chapter 36

Sofia invited me over to her house after I had seen my mother, and I sat on her bed, watching her. She pulled me toward her and kissed my forehead, cupping my face in her hands.

‘If you kiss somebody on the forehead, it means you care about them.’

I nodded. A rush of blood ran through my arms and to my fingertips, and I reached for a length of her hair and twirled it in my hand. We sat in her room, lazily wasting the day.

‘You don’t have to tell me that you’ve turned gay, Erin.’

I pushed air out of my nose and rolled my eyes at her.

‘Although, maybe if you went to prison, you’d realise you were gay.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know, I read it somewhere. Supposedly a high number of women sleep with other women when they’re in prison. They have husbands, they go to prison, leave with girlfriends.’ She smiled and leant forward, kissing me gently on the lips. Her eyes remained open. I stared back into them as they closed in on me, merging together into one.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I told her, shrugging. I leant back against the headboard of her bed and watched her steadily. She sucked her cheeks together and grinned, her eyes flashing at me.

‘Don’t I? Sweet Erin, don’t I know?’

I prickled. I hated that she presumed my sweetness, when inside I felt anything but. She looked into my face and chose innocence, without asking what other qualities I had. A sweet woman was something that I would never call myself, and those that called me it, did it to rile me or out of ignorance. I said nothing.



She rolled over onto her back, her eyes on mine the whole time. I watched her clothes tighten around her stomach as the bed sheets pulled on them, and felt my own stomach lurch. She followed my gaze and smiled, arching her back against the duvet, and then turned onto her front and lay with her chin in her hands, eyes smiling.

‘Of course, some of us don’t have to go to prison to know...like you.’

‘You didn’t go to prison Sofia.’

‘You don’t know everything about me. How long have we been ‘friends’ anyway? Not so long. What are you doing with this book thing Erin? And when do I get to read your story? I want weekly updates please.’

‘Fine,’ I forced a smile at her, ‘You went to prison. It’s not a book anyway. I shouldn’t have mentioned it. You don’t get to read anything.’

‘Fine. Tell me about London.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Tell me about London. I’m new here.’ She widened her eyes and blinked quickly, feigning innocence.

‘Why don’t you tell me about South Africa?’

She rolled her eyes and dropped her hands forward, dropping her face onto the duvet, ‘No.’ The word came out muffled.

‘Why not?’

She put her head up and began to crawl towards me, panther like, her t shirt sculpting around her shoulder blades with each movement she made. I pulled my knees up to my chest as a barrier, and she faked being affronted. She reached up to my knees and pushed them apart, leaving me vulnerable. Before she pushed her lips onto mine once more

I saw an expression that I wasn't familiar with. She nodded, ever so slightly, before digging her nails into my back and pulling me into her.

The next morning, we sat opposite each other at Sofia's kitchen table. There were plates piled in the sink, some starting to build their own fungus that gave off the scent of freshly cut grass. It was strangely alluring. Sofia leaned toward me and pushed a notepad across the table between us.

'I want to hear your stories. The ones you mentioned before.'

I looked at the notepad with interest, what did she mean by pushing this over to me? It wasn't as though I'd been writing in there.

'What's this for?' I asked, ignoring what she had just said.

She smiled softly, causing lines to ripple across her cheeks as though she were a body of water that I'd disturbed with a stone.

'You've gone through a big change. When I left South Africa, and I came here, at first it was exciting. I was leaving behind a world that I had grown tired of, the same faces, the same job, all of it. I was so excited! I'd created a life here already in my mind. When I'd been here about a week that life had quickly changed into a reality. The tiny cobbled streets of my imagination that had been filled with people desperate to be my friend, were empty. And, to be honest, there weren't that many of them anyway. I was embarrassed to admit it. I had no friends. My family and friends would call from home and ask how it was going, and I'd lie. I'd tell them I was popular, and that things were great. Anyway. I stayed. It took a lot of determination, because I wanted to run away.'

She breathed in deeply and closed her eyes. I was about to speak, when they snapped open again, causing me to jolt a little in surprise.

‘When I met my ex-girlfriend, I was lost. I hadn’t started working yet, I didn’t know what I was doing with my life. I’m not going to say anything dramatic, like ‘She saved me’, but, well, she helped me. She gave me a notebook and told me to write down all the things that I wanted to be, whatever they were. I still have what I wrote down that day, and that’s how I decided that I’d be happiest working for a charity. So what about you?’

She pushed the notebook toward me again and fished around in her pocket, then handed me a pen, the end scuffed and marked where she’d chewed the plastic. I stared at the paper and bit the inside of my cheek.

‘I’m not sure I know what to write.’

‘Of course you do.’

I felt as though I were in class at school, being asked a question that I couldn’t answer. I took a breath. ‘Honestly, Sofia, I’ve just become-’ I caught myself before I said single, ‘I mean I’ve just taken a break from the couple that I’ve been a part of for a long time.’

‘Yes. What’s your point?’

‘My point is that I don’t know what to write at the moment!’

‘That’s why we’re doing this, Erin. Write something down, stop being a wimp.’

‘Alright.’ I stared at the piece of paper, and carefully wrote down the word *Woman*.

She leaned over and read it upside down, and nodded, as though confirming that I had done it right. ‘So what do you mean by that?’

I stared at the word, the curve of the W, towering over the O, and noticed that I had written the A in a capital, though it was the penultimate letter of the word.

‘I mean that I’m Woman. I want to be more than I’ve been before. I don’t want to be held back anymore.’

Sofia breathed out slowly, and made a hum of acknowledgment under her breath.

‘Did Mark hold you back, do you think?’

I thought about what I had told Dawn, about Sofia disliking Mark. I was right. ‘I don’t think he meant to, no. At first, when we met, I had to convince myself to be normal around him. Keep having chats with myself, telling myself to just be me. As time moved on, I began to see that I was finally relaxing. I could say what I wanted, I wasn’t vetting my thoughts any more. I do that, around other people sometimes. I check to see if I could offend, and I even change what I’m saying mid-sentence based on the other person’s expressions. Isn’t that bizarre?’

‘Well, no one wants be rude.’

‘No, of course not, but it’s not being rude to say what you think, is it?’

‘No, it’s not. So, under the umbrella of ‘Woman’ – saying what you think?’

I smiled and nodded, ‘Yes. It’s more than that. When I was with Mark, I did eventually start to settle into our relationship; I don’t want it to sound like I was never happy, because I was, for a long time. But I was a different Erin, I wasn’t myself, not really.’

‘We’re all different to different people, Erin. I act differently around you than I would someone else. That’s just life. Do you want to know something?’

I drew a line beneath *Woman* and nodded.

‘I wrote the same thing on my list.’

## Chapter 37

Sofia must have grown bored of me, because within a day, she disappeared entirely from my life. She stopped calling, she stopped texting, she stopped being at work in the charity shop. I didn't go in, I barely had the guts to walk past, but when I finally steeled myself to shuffle by the front door, I saw that it was either the teenage boy or an elderly woman behind the counter. Both lone volunteers. I didn't venture further.

I texted her, at first asking her how her day had been, or enquiring about what she was up to for dinner, but once she didn't text back at all, I started to worry. I knew that she'd be fine, for some reason this seemed obvious to me. We neither of us used Facebook or Twitter so I couldn't track her movements that way, and for this I was grateful, because I was certain that if I could have, I would have far too much. At first, I checked my phone compulsively. Had she got in touch yet? But no, each time my phone beeped it would be my mother, or the cinema, or something other than Sofia. The vibration would spread to my stomach.

After a week I gave up. I hadn't texted her in a few days, but I stopped checking my phone too. I started to consider her a lost cause, a lost friend, a lost lover. A week may not seem a long time, but I felt as though she had left me on purpose. At the least, I found it too rude for a friendship, at the most, that I had been dumped unceremoniously. I folded up the dress that I had bought from her and put it carefully at the back of my wardrobe. After this, I steeled myself to take *Little Women* back to the charity shop, irritated with her for giving up on me so quickly. I dressed in the large coat again, and hid it beneath my jacket. The older woman sat behind the till, reading a thriller, and tutting occasionally at what I imagined must be an unrealistic storyline. She didn't look up as I passed, just murmured hello. I

noded in response and stood in front of the books for a while, the betrayal waiting beneath my jacket, pinching my skin. I took a deep breath and pulled it out suddenly, shoving it into a free space.

A week of no contact for me may as well have been a year. I was at a loss, and moved through East London as a ghost, both desperate to be seen and wanting to hide away. I thought it cruel and stupid, and I repeated to myself that Mark would never have ignored me in such a way. This did little to help my lover's ego.

## Chapter 38

After I returned the book, I felt more without Sofia than ever. Was I almost without friends entirely? Was it my fault, that I had neglected everyone?

I went to my mother's. I was desperate to see her, to speak to her about cheating on Mark, lying about it. I felt convinced that she would forgive me and then I would feel better within myself. She opened the door in her pyjamas, it was not yet six at night. I exclaimed when I saw her, and she took my hand and patted it in an absent minded way.

'I've not been feeling well today, Erin, it's nothing to get upset about.'

I followed her through to her bedroom and she climbed into her bed, pulling the covers up about her chin. The smell in there was stale, of sickness and damp, of a body that hadn't moved much.

'Can I open up the windows?'

She shrugged, and so I did so, wafting them a little to get some air blowing in and out. She watched me. 'What's wrong then?'

I turned and sat on the bed, shaking my head. 'Why do you suspect that something is wrong?'

'When do you come and visit me when everything is fine, dear?'

I thought about this and laughed awkwardly. It was true, though I hated to admit it.

'Nothing. What's wrong with you?'

She turned her hands over and looked at them for a moment, and sighed, 'I used to have such beautiful hands. Really something. Pianist's hands. Now look at them. Ancient.'

I took one of them with my own and squeezed it. 'They aren't ancient.'

'They aren't young.'

‘Well, no. But youth isn’t everything.’

She laughed and shook her head at my comment, ‘To some people, it is.’

Her eyes went a little cloudy and I watched her curiously.

‘To who?’

She sighed and shifted about beneath her blanket and then rolled her eyes. ‘Erin, you never met him, but I’ve been in a relationship for the past two years.’

I was shocked, confused, and most of all, hurt that my mother had never thought to tell me about something so important in her life. It occurred to me that she must have had to change her usual plans when I moved in, to keep her lover secret.

‘So what happened?’

She took her hand back and put it beneath the covers again. ‘What do you think happened? He left me.’

I looked at her. She was my mother, beautiful and strong. She had brought me up alone, she had tried to protect me from any nonsense to do with lovers and partners, she had stopped me from believing that my father being there would have helped us in any way at all. Here she was, fallen. I didn’t have any memories of her being this way when my father left, staying in bed and inspecting herself for signs of ageing. But, she was younger then.

‘Why did he leave?’

She gave me a sad smile. ‘It’s a cliché, I’m afraid. He left me for a younger woman.’

‘Well then he didn’t deserve you, surely.’ I gave her a small hug, but it was barely reciprocated. She patted my shoulders with staccato like movements.

‘He did, I think. He wasn’t the first man since your father, you know. There have been others. They all leave at some point. You’re just lucky that...’ She stopped talking and



shook her head in a small movement, as though instantly regretting the start of her sentence. I nodded to her, urging her to continue.

‘You’re lucky that you had the foresight to leave Mark, I was going to say. But that’s cruel, isn’t it?’

‘Well...slightly I suppose. I just didn’t think that I was supposed to marry him right now, that’s all. It wasn’t anything about leaving him before he left me. That just isn’t how all relationships go...but you know that, don’t you? If I know that, you must know that.’

She nodded sadly, a single tear falling down her cheek. To see your mother cry is a rare thing as a child, all done behind closed doors, not for your eyes. As an adult that rarity becomes a reality. She is a human being. She is like you, but she has wisdom in areas that you don’t. And she cries like you as well, bottom lip trembling and shoulders shaking. It is in those times that you feel like her mother, sorry and frustrated, willing her to snap out of it and wishing that you could comfort her all at once.

‘What was his name?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘No. It doesn’t. Why haven’t I met any of these men, then?’

‘It didn’t seem appropriate. You’re my daughter. And you seemed so affected by your father leaving us. I didn’t want to set you up for a fall.’

‘But you know I’m an adult, right? You can introduce me to one of your partners and I won’t call him ‘Dad’ or expect him to pick me up from school?’

She rolled her eyes at me and nodded. I grinned.

‘If I ever meet anyone again, which I don’t intend on doing, I will introduce you. Perhaps. Anyway. Have you spoken to Mark recently?’

‘No. I did something a bit dumb, I think.’

All ears, my mother sat up in her bed and smoothed out her duvet, waiting for a story.

I wanted to tell her about Mark, about how I had cheated on him, about the guilt that came in waves but how it was terrible that I didn't feel as guilty as I was sure I should have. I began, and then stopped myself, changing my sentence at the first word.

'I...stole a book. From a charity shop.'

I told her about the name in the front, and wanting a project, needing to do a good deed. When I'd finished, I pulled myself onto the bed entirely, facing her with legs crossed, waiting for her to make it all better, as a mother does.

She shook her head, her eyes widened, 'Why on earth would you do that?'

'Well, it wasn't something that I intended to do, I just thought that it might be a nice thing...'

'But you understand the nature of donating something to charity, yes?'

I nodded.

'So you understand that somebody gives something away that they no longer want or need, and that they don't expect for it arrive back on their doorstep a year later?'

Again, I nodded, my chest tightening slightly.

'Well then I don't understand why you would steal from a charity shop to try and return this item. I really don't. Did I ever say to you, don't steal from a charity shop? Did I?'

Colour rose through her cheeks and she pushed herself up a little taller. I was amazed at how much better she was looking, it seemed that all she needed to do was some mothering.

'You didn't ever say that to me, no. But I honestly thought that I was helping.'

'I don't know what to say. I really don't.'

I picked at a thread that was coming from my sock and tried to focus all my attention on it. Avoid the situation in which you are being told off, this was something that I'd been trying to do my whole life.

'I gave it back.'

'Did you apologise?'

'Yes. I don't know.'

My mother shook her head and rubbed her face with her hands, 'I feel like we're back to your childhood. It's like the time you wrote that love letter to that girl in your class, pretending that it was from a boy in another class, do you remember that? That was a cruel, childish thing to do. At the time I was shocked at your cruelty, though they say that girls can be the meanest...I thought I'd brought you up to be different, that's all. Supportive of other people.'

'I honestly thought that I was being supportive. I am supportive of other women, by the way, but thanks for that. And I was young then, yes. I thought that it would make her happy, that letter. I didn't think that she'd be embarrassed by it.'

I looked up to my mother to see her watching me with a disappointed expression.

'She was mortified. Don't you remember? Her mother said that she didn't come to school for a week.'

I did remember. Sarah Jones. She had beautiful long ginger hair, right down to her waist. I knew that she was self-conscious about her hair, because she'd told me one day in the changing rooms before PE. They called her carrot head. She'd cried. One boy in particular was the problem...I couldn't remember his name now. He was 'popular', in the way that some people are lucky enough to be at school, meaning that actually no one really likes them and that they somehow wandered into a strange place and grew an amazing

reputation overnight. It was never a kind reputation, never one of fun or friendliness. It was always one of fear. They had the power to turn somebody against you, for whatever reason. They were like mini dictators, in each year group, stalking the corridors. They were always conventional looking and hated you if you weren't quite the same. This one boy had launched some sort of vendetta against Sarah, and in my haste I'd written a letter from him to her. I'd always hated that whole 'If he pulls your hair it means he fancies you' idea, but I was at a loss as to how to actually help the situation. Why I thought that this might work, I had no idea, but I was eleven, I was just a child. And apparently, not very socially adept. The letter said something along the lines of:

I have always admired your beauty, and your hair is part of the reason that you're so lovely. You remind me of a lion, which is a good thing.

I signed his name at the bottom, somewhat shakily, trying to imitate a boy's writing. I left it in her bag. The problem with this was that she knew almost immediately that the letter wasn't real. In fact, she didn't suspect me at first, she suspected one of the boy's friends, but she certainly knew that it wasn't the real deal. She went to the class teacher, who was young and inexperienced, and who for some reason ended up reading it out to the class, in a misguided attempt to discover the culprit. The lion part especially got a lot of laughs, and Sarah left hastily, not to return for a week. I was racked with guilt. I couldn't believe my stupidity. I said nothing to the teacher when she demanded to know the culprit, but I said something to my mother that night instead, expecting, for some reason, a lighter sentence. None came. I was marched round to Sarah's house to apologise, along with sweets, an apology card, and a shamed mother. Through my sobs I tried to explain my good intentions, but when they could be made out through the high pitched shrieks they fell on

deaf ears. Sarah watched me in silence the entire time. Not a word was spoken by her, and not a word was ever said to me again.

I was grounded. Groundings in my house were not usual. I wasn't allowed out, I wasn't allowed to use the phone, I wasn't allowed to watch the television or even be near one that happened to be switched on, and I wasn't allowed to listen to the radio. It was debatable whether or not I was allowed to read fiction, but I did, sometimes hiding stories inside a school text book. The worst thing about that week wasn't the guilt, or the other children at school hissing at me for my cruelty, something that everybody seemed certain about. It was the way my mother looked at me. For that whole week, and maybe a bit more, her eyes would go stern and cold when she spoke to me, and I often caught her staring at me and sighing. The disappointment of my mother was more than I could bear.

'Listen, I'll go and apologise. Do you want to come with me or something?'

She laughed and shook her head, 'No, you're an adult.'

I nodded in response, and she began to fold down the corners of the quilt carefully, making sure that the edges of the pattern that covered it lined up.

'Are you going to be okay about your break up?'

'Of course I am,' she snapped. I was almost scolded for asking this, and then she softened slightly.

'Of course. I don't think that I was built to be with another person, you know. I don't think that I was meant to be part of a team. But why should I be? You seem to be doing okay. Are you seeing anybody?'

I pondered this question for a moment, 'Not really.'

'But sort of.'

'Yes, I suppose. Sort of,' But no, not really, I thought to myself.

She didn't ask me any questions, just smiled and ran her fingertips over the bags beneath her eyes, 'Right, that's enough for one day.' And with that, she got up, making her way to the bathroom.

'I'm getting up now, Erin. Stick around if you feel like it.'

I heard the shower come on from the next room and lay back onto her bed. The sweet scent of the outdoors wafted into the room and I breathed it in, noticing that the stale smell had almost gone, or perhaps that I was just used to it by now. The ceiling had a large crack down the centre, and I was reminded momentarily of Sofia's bedroom, with a matching crack through the ceiling. I pulled myself up and made some tea, and then logged onto to my mother's computer. The noises of her getting ready echoed through the house, and comforted me.

Eventually my mother came to join me, to drink tea and stare at the screen. She was clean and fresh, and had made up her face. She looked almost entirely better and I realised how good she was at masking her pain. All those times when I was a child and had assumed that my mother was fine and well, dealing with single motherhood excellently, were excellent use of a motherly mask. I watched her in silent admiration. She was a warrior.

## Chapter 39

I couldn't explain why, but walking away from my mother's toward Bethnal Green tube station, I called Mark. He answered within two rings, no 'I'm too busy' coolness for him.

'Yes?'

'Mark, hi, it's Erin.'

'Oh, hi.'

I thought for a moment about why he mightn't know that it was me calling. There was no reason. In the age of the mobile phone, anybody that answers a call with a question is saving face. I persevered.

'How are you?'

'Fine, Erin. You?'

'I'm okay. Bit tired, but, okay.'

'Great. Is there a reason you're calling me?'

I thought about it. Saying 'Because I just wanted to speak to somebody that loves me and I feel alone.' was not a good reason, though it was my main one.

'I just wanted to talk to you.'

There was a pause on the line, a dog barked somewhere in the distance.

'I don't know what to say to that.'

'Okay. We used to be great at talking, remember?'

'Jesus Erin, are you kidding me?'

The phone call was not going as well as I'd hoped. Although, what I had hoped for I was unsure of. 'I'm sorry. I just wanted to say hey.'

Mark took a deep breath on the other end of the phone and swore so quietly under his breath, that I wondered if he'd done it at all.

'Hi, Erin, nice to talk to you.'

He put the phone down. I couldn't blame him. My heart sank a little. Almost immediately my phone began to ring, and I answered it without looking at the caller ID.

'Mark, hi.'

'...Erin.'

Sofia's voice reached my ear and I closed my eyes. The irony of the unchecked mobile screen.

'Sofia? Where have you been?'

'I went to visit my parents, how are you?'

I felt a rage rise up from my stomach to my neck at the thought of all that wasted energy peering around corners and worrying about bumping into her. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Did I have to? Really?'

'Sofia, one minute everything was fine, and the next you just disappeared!'

'Bloody hell. Fine. Dear Erin, please forgive me.'

I shook my head silently. A man walking the other way down the street fixed his gaze on my breasts. As we passed each other he caught my eye.

'Hey buddy, fuck you.'

'Excuse me?' Sofia screeched down the phone.

'Not you. Fine. Coffee?'



When I got to the chain café, near my room, Sofia was already sitting there, halfway down a hot chocolate. Just seeing her made my stomach convulse. I felt so angry, and so unsure about whether that anger was justified, that I didn't know what to say at all. I sat down with a bump and Sofia smiled strangely at me, as though she didn't know what to say either.

'You don't look good Erin, are you okay?'

'I'm just worried about my mother, it doesn't matter. Do I really look that bad?' I automatically raised a hand to my hair to try and smooth it down.

'No. You just looked tired and angry. I'm sorry that I've pissed you off. I didn't tell any of my friends I was going. I honestly didn't think I had to keep you up to date on everything that I'm up to.'

The use of the word 'friend' stung slightly and I sighed heavily in response.

'Are you actually this mad at me? I'm really surprised.'

She'd lost a little weight and her cheekbones stood out more than before. She'd cut her hair short again, and it rested on those cheekbones sharply. She wore a stripy shirt and jeans. I watched as she dipped a spoon into her hot chocolate and brought it back up to her mouth to drink. I felt the urge to tell her that she didn't look French.

'I guess if we're just friends, you don't need to tell me what you're up to. Maybe I got carried away with 'us'.

She didn't look surprised at this, and just nodded. 'I think maybe you did.'

'Is that why you went away?' The words came out my mouth as soon as it occurred to me.

'...No, Erin. Not everything is to do with you. My mom isn't very well.'

I reached across the small table and held Sofia's hand, 'I'm really sorry.'

She brushed me off gently, a small shake of the head, 'I don't want your pity, Erin. What did you get up to last night then?'

'It isn't pity. I didn't do anything.'

She nodded and tried to tuck her hair behind her ear, but it swung back onto her cheek. She must have felt it was too short for her, I thought.

'Have you been seeing Mark again, because you called me Mark on the phone earlier? Although, why you wouldn't know it was me...I mean, I rang your mobile so it was obviously me.'

'I didn't look Sofia, honestly, we've just had the briefest of chats.'

'Where did you go last night?' Sofia leaned forward, fingers weaved beneath her chin, and leant on her elbows. She fixed me with a long cold stare.

'Bloody hell. Why do you keep asking that?'

She nodded and widened her eyes, grinning. I felt confused at her jealousy over nothing.

'Did you have fun?' Her eyes flashed.

'Doing nothing? It was fine.'

'Good stuff. So, you don't have work today?'

I shook my head. My 'holiday' still in full swing.

'And what are you planning on doing with your evening, Erin?'

'Well, Sofia,' I paused so that she'd realise I was saying her name in the same odd way that she'd said mine, 'I'm planning on having a shower.'

Her eyes flicked from mine, to my neck, and back again. I watched her carefully. She drank from her cup, and then put it to the side of the table, leaning further forward, 'I heard something about you.'

I rolled my eyes, 'What does that mean?'

'Someone saw you leaving a club, and you were not alone.' She grinned at me as though she had worked out my 'Big secret'. 'A club I go to often, that's all.'

'If we're just friends, what's the problem here?'

She snorted in derision and leaned back in her chair. We sat in silence for a moment, glaring at one another. I felt furious that she'd even turned up, let alone investigated me. She rolled her eyes and gestured with her hand for me to hurry up.

'What?'

'So, who was it? Who's the lucky fuck?'

'Are you going to get angry about something that happened before we got together?'

She laughed in reply, and her mirth stung my pride.

'Yes, fine. I did leave a club with someone...with two people actually.'

She winced at my confession, 'Honestly, Erin, if you're about to tell me that you experienced some spit roasting fantasy of yours between two burly and idiotic men, and that one tried to stick his dick up your ass by mistake, I'm going to have to pass.'

I frowned at her, confused. She knew that it was a gay club. What was she talking about? 'It was with two women. They're a couple.'

'Well!' Sofia began to stand up and suddenly avoided eye contact with me. She grabbed her bag from the floor and pushed it onto her shoulder haphazardly, causing the cardigan she was wearing to lift up slightly, revealing her stomach. I reached my hand out to her and touched her wrist gently, and she pulled her gaze back onto mine.

‘Sofia, this is honestly nothing to do with you, is it? Is this why you haven’t got in touch with me? I really thought that everything was fine. This was before we even...anything happened with us.’

‘That doesn’t mean that everything is fine, Erin, don’t be so naive.’ She turned and marched away, and I automatically followed her out of the café. Once we were outside she turned to me again.

‘I want to hear about it.’

I shook my head in response.

‘I do, Erin, I want to hear about it. I want you to tell me about it. Come back to mine.’

I looked at her face. She was very serious, but there was something else in her eyes that I just couldn’t read. She started to walk away, and then after a few steps turned and looked at me expectantly.

‘Fine, we’ll go to your place.’

The order was such that I didn’t feel that I could disobey it. I followed her home, a few steps behind her the whole time, in silence. I went over the night’s events in my head, trying to work out the best way to say certain things, wondering whether I should describe the beauty of Amber at all, or wait for Sofia to wheedle it out of me, inch by inch.

Sofia took a stroll around the room, which didn’t take her long, commenting on the various items she found there. Eventually she sat at the window seat and smiled at me.

‘Why don’t you have any art on the walls? Isn’t that something that you do?’

I looked at the walls and the slightly shiny patches where the Blu Tack had been and nodded, feeling mildly embarrassed that I’d even bothered to take them down.

‘Yes, it’s something that I do...or at least I used to do, maybe I haven’t done it in a while.’

Sofia shivered slightly and rubbed her arms. ‘Bloody hell Erin, it’s cold in here. How do you cope? Isn’t there a radiator?’

I shook my head and motioned to the storage heating. Sofia laughed, stating that they were useless. Her mood had switched to jovial very quickly, and it made me nervous. I nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed. Sofia watched me for a moment, and then moved toward me, taking a place next to me. She reached across and took my hand.

‘Those girls that you had that night with...’ Sofia seemed to be trying to find the right words, and I watched her, heart beating faster. She smiled, ‘What if we went on a double date?’

I pulled a face automatically, frowning and sucking in my cheeks. She sighed. I knew that Sofia could not possibly just want to see me because she missed my company.

‘I honestly don’t know why you would ask me that.’

‘Wow, what an odd reaction. I just thought it might be fun, no big deal,’ she said, as she dropped my hand and raised her eyebrows in mock surprise.

‘I’m not crazy, Sofia.’

‘What are you talking about? Did I say that you were?’

‘Well, I don’t appreciate being made to feel like my reaction just then was unusual. It wasn’t. Why on earth would you want to double date with two women that I’d slept with?’

Sofia sighed and fell back onto the bed so that she was lying down, legs swinging to and fro. She raised her arms above her head so that her stomach showed, her high-waisted jeans covering half of her belly button. ‘Well, Erin, you and I haven’t hooked up in a while. Maybe I thought that we might all get on.’

Sofia scratched the skin beneath her left breast, causing her shirt to ride up a little further. I tried to pay no attention to this.

‘I don’t know if that would actually be fun for anyone.’

‘It would be fun for me.’ Sofia grinned and pulled back the covers of my bed and got in, kicking her shoes off and nudging them out until they hit the floorboards with a loud thud. She nestled down until the duvet was up to her chin, and pretended to purr. ‘Get in and warm me up Erin, your room is far too fucking cold.’

I joined Sofia in bed, reluctantly. I wanted to kick her out, really, but I’d also been longing for somebody to be in my bed and warm me up these last few nights. The cold in my room seemed to creep into my bed, and I awoke most mornings with frost on the inside of the window pane. Her skin was freezing, and we both held each other, fully clothed and shivering. I had missed her, I had thought of her for the whole time that she had ignored me. Now, my arms wrapped around her stomach, her hair covering my pillow case, I wasn’t sure how I felt. It was as though she had poured cold water over me.

‘I hope I haven’t upset you, Erin.’

She had upset me, but I just watched her. I was trying to work out exactly what it was that had upset me. I knew that she wanted to, or a step further, did sleep with other people. It had been clear to me for a while that our relationship was not the exclusive type that I was used to. I wasn’t upset that she wanted me to be involved in some sort of orgy, for that didn’t surprise me at all. Sofia liked to experiment with her sexual nature, and I too enjoyed that. Perhaps I might have even been interested in it myself. It was that she wanted it to be with Amber and Laura that bothered me. I felt that she’d seen something that I had, a memory that she wasn’t involved with, and that she wanted to take it away from me. I turned onto my side and she did the same, creating the big spoon and wrapping her arms

around my waist. I heard her breathing get slower and steadier. I wasn't tired. I thought back to when I first met her and the way that she'd reacted to meeting Mark in the coffee shop. She'd been awkward, rude and made him seem as though he was the opposite to her, and in some ways, me. She'd spoken to me about art and how he didn't understand that side of me, without even asking him what he really thought about it. For some reason, trapped in the newly single and slightly terrified mind-set that I was in, I'd just accepted it. I took a breath in and loosened her grip on my waist slightly. I'd known Mark for a long time, many years, and I let a stranger make me think that he was a bit of an idiot. She hadn't made me see that we wouldn't work together, because I'd done that myself, but she'd made me think he was somebody different to the person I knew him to be. Did she? Was I blaming her for the feelings that I had toward Mark, the guilt that I'd cut him from my life to focus on myself? I groaned automatically. Sofia didn't wake beside me. I didn't know what to think of her. I felt certain that if I actually let her meet Amber and Laura that she'd push in and make me feel tiny, asking personal questions about the evening that we'd spent together, almost certain that it hadn't happened the way that I'd described.

Eventually I fell asleep with Sofia's arms around me, warm for the first time in days. In the morning she woke up and remarked again how cold the room was, and how she didn't want to get up. She then asked me if I wanted to meet her parents, who were travelling over to see her soon. I said nothing in reply, she had thrown me. Perhaps she thought we were something after all. Does someone ask you to meet their parents if they don't care?

After Sofia left, I pulled the pictures that I had taken down from the walls out from under the bed and stared at them. I didn't need to put them away, this was my home, this could be anything that I wanted it to be. Carefully, I pulled the Blu Tack back off the wall, trying hard not to encourage pieces of plaster and paint to fall with them. With each picture I replaced them in their previous positions. I thought about Sofia. She had turned over in the middle of the night, and faced me, waking me up with her stare.

'Did you know, that sometimes I lie?'

I watched her blearily, unsure of what to say. I shook my head and closed my eyes, tiredness still overwhelming me.

'One time I was standing at a bus stop in the rain, beside a woman with an umbrella. In reality, this is the end of the story, I got wet and then she got on the bus when it arrived, and the woman and I didn't speak. But somewhere between this moment of silence, and the journey to work, I created a new story. The woman had offered me the umbrella, inviting me to stand underneath it with her. I had almost accepted when the woman turned to me and said, 'I'm offering this to you because I'm a Christian.'

Shocked, I replied, 'I won't accept then because you felt the need to mention it. You know people can act morally without having religion to thank, and they can offer a stranger a slice of kindness without having to mention Christianity at all.'

I was really proud of this speech, and then, when I was retelling it to a colleague I actually noticed that I did believe that it had really happened. Where does a lie end and the truth begin? Do you think that's insane?'

I kept my eyes closed and shook my head into the pillow once more, pulling the duvet up around my cheeks. 'Everyone lies, Sofia. Go back to sleep.'

'But Erin, that's not the point of the story.'



I opened my eyes for a moment, and looked at her face, lit by the moonlight that seeped into the room.

‘I believed my own lie.’

## Chapter 40

I met with Sofia again that evening, accepting her invitation to go for a drink. We met in Fika, the bar that we'd been to before, and she already had a glass of elderberry wine waiting for me. As I approached the table she stood and kissed me on the cheek. I was surprised by her public display of affection, but I accepted it, and sat.

'Thanks for the wine.'

She laughed, 'It's okay, I haven't paid yet, I only ordered it.'

I frowned in reply and took a sip.

'You know, I wanted to meet with you to talk about what I asked you yesterday.'

'Go on...'

'About the foursome. I was just doing that to get a rise out of you Erin. I know that it's childish and stupid and all of that stuff, but you irritated me. When we first met you treated me like a little experiment, and the minute I take time off from being your 'Gay Project', you get angry with me.'

I shook my head, 'You were never a project Sofia, and you do know that. I cannot believe that you really think that. And you stopped talking to me. What was I supposed to think?'

She leant backward in her chair and sighed, tracing the edge of her glass with a finger. She looked genuinely upset, which shocked me.

'I don't think that we're meant to be together,' I said, softly.

Her eyes flickered upward and she studied my face for a moment. 'No one has ever said that to me before. I am sorry that I ignored you for that bit of time. I am. I honestly thought that it might make you like me more, which I can see now is stupid.'

‘Why would that happen?’

‘Because absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?’

I smiled and shook my head.

‘Erin, I haven’t felt the way that I feel for you for anybody before. I mean that.’

Her face was sincere but I still struggled to believe her.

‘I don’t know what you want me to say.’

She reached out and took my hand, squeezing it slightly, ‘I want you to say that you want to give it another go.’

I didn’t. I didn’t say so and I didn’t want to either. I moved my hand from under hers and took another sip of wine. If I had had the capacity to do so I would have drained the glass. I shook my head at her and put the glass down slowly in front of me, sighing.

‘I have to go Sofia. I don’t want us to be a couple. You’re right, sometimes absence makes the heart grow fonder, that’s true. But you know, that’s only in a trusting relationship where the other person makes an effort to contact their other half. I texted you and called you, and nothing. It’s not an easy time for me, and above anything, I thought that you were my friend. That’s the sort of thing that I can’t get over. Somebody else might have found that charming about you, but I just found it irritating. It means that you expect me to wait for you, to hang on your every word and be delirious with joy when you come back. Instead it just damaged us. It damaged the trust that I had in you. You are not the easiest person to get along with, Sofia.’

Her body language changed entirely and she fell back against the chair and rolled her eyes at me. ‘Oh whatever Erin, go.’

I almost stopped to ask her if we could be friends, or if there was any way that she might be able to move on from this conversation, but something stopped me. Seeing her

there, slumped and pouting, changed the way that I saw her almost entirely. She seemed like a child, angry for not getting her own way. She was none of the things that I was looking for in a partner. She wasn't empathetic, patient or kind. I was almost certain that if we got together it would only be a matter of time before she disappeared again, without any means of my contacting her. I didn't want to live with such uncertainty. I reached into my bag and put down some money, roughly counting to six pounds, which was what I imagined the wine might cost. I left.

Once outside I turned around briefly, to see her pulling my wine over to her side of the table. I momentarily thought that perhaps I'd been too honest with her, loading her with the burden of the demise of trust between us. But it was true wasn't it? Even though I hadn't thought that we might be together forever, I did trust her to be there for me. The way that Mark was. I began to walk down the road, the wind blowing through my hair and biting the tops of my ears with sharp cold teeth. I couldn't make it work with somebody like Mark, who was so trustworthy and predictable that it bored me, and I couldn't make it work with somebody like Sofia, who was so involved in her own life and thoughts that she had no space for anybody else. I sighed. And so what about Amber? Amber who already had a girlfriend and was in love. Were these my only options for a future of happiness? Surely not.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Sofia's name flashed up on the screen, and I clicked into the message that had just arrived. It said three small words that filled me with a great sadness, the loss of a friend:

*Delete my number.*

## Chapter 41

I have often thought about leaving London, though I have never had the money, time, thought process or planning to do it. I want to be close to my mother, and in some ways, our family history. We are all from London, she has told me many times, our ancestors have walked the same streets that we have. I like that thought. My mother's house is tall and well maintained, sitting on the corner of Bethnal Green Road. She owns all of it, though next door on both sides has been split into flats. She was brought up down the road, in Bow. I was brought up in the house that she lives in now. She would take me on walks, occasionally, through Bow, to show me all the places that she went to as a child. We would walk past the large town houses, pointing out the different things that people chose to have in their gardens. There was one house in particular, with a large golden horse statue, rearing outside the front door. I always looked at this with interest, who lived there? How come the horse had never been stolen? It seemed like prime material for somebody to take, so that they could tell the hilarious story of how they ended up with a golden horse in their living room.

We would often stand at the gates of St Clements' Hospital, and peer in, standing on our tiptoes. There seemed nothing as creepy and fascinating as an abandoned mental hospital, and my mother would take me to the library sometimes, to show me how to research its history. We would find information about how many beds they had throughout the years, how the number rose and fell. We read about the hospital in the war, being bombed and the west wing destroyed, from the status of workhouse to hospital and more. None of the stories were personal ones though, and that's what I wanted. I wanted to read about the lives of the people in there, how they had ended up inside, in one of the

dwindling beds. The front gate was painted in colourful and bright reds and greens, and didn't seem to age in the way the rest of the building had. I asked my mother why they might repaint that bit only, and she shrugged, telling me that they didn't want Mile End to fall into disrepair. Occasionally, when we walked past, we would see lights on in a downstairs room. At first, I would rush to the gates, hoping that somebody might let us in to explore, but they were always locked, no matter how many lights lit up the hospital.

'Those people are there to watch the building, to make sure that nothing happens to it.'

I pushed the gates again, and they clanged loudly. I looked to my mother to see her wince slightly at the noise, perhaps worrying about being caught so close to trespassing.

'What could happen?'

'Well, I don't know Erin. Any number of things. You find the place so interesting, perhaps if you were older and thought to climb the gates, you might get in. And then what if you tripped on an old piece of wood, and hurt yourself? They could get in trouble for that, when really it would be your fault, because you weren't supposed to be in there in the first place.'

'Imagine having that job, walking the building alone, watching all of the rooms. How scary that would be.'

'Yes, it would be scary for you and me. But we like to imagine all of the things that once were in the building, all of the people and their different personalities. We like company. Some people will just see it as an empty building. They don't mind being alone so much. It could be their ideal job.'

I thought of these people, surprised. Who would choose to be alone in that way, night after night? I felt sad for them, and for a while, begged my mother to let me leave

cakes at the front of the gates. She always refused, telling me that they would never get collected, that no one would eat a cake found on the street no matter how good the intention.

‘Not in London.’ She would say, again and again, ‘You don’t eat cakes off the street in London.’

‘Well, where do you?’

She paused, and thought for a moment, ‘Maybe Cornwall.’

## Chapter 42

Dawn was off sick. They had a replacement, they hadn't cancelled. I also hadn't been informed of this until I had arrived. I was uncertain, to say the least, and I watched the new counsellor with trepidation. He grinned. He was younger than I, he must have been, and there was no avoiding the fact that he was handsome. He wasn't attractive to me but he was obviously striking, well put together, groomed. I wondered how he'd been given his own office so young, what breaks he hadn't taken in order to get here, to get to the stage where he was allowed to listen to my problems.

'How has your week been?'

An open question. He wanted me to begin slowly, then to delve dramatically into my life, baring all. I couldn't imagine telling this stranger, this man that I could feasibly have stood in front of in the cafeteria queue at school, anything about my life or myself.

'It's been fine, thank you.'

He smiled and nodded, checking my notes. I glanced at my bag, I had packed the writing again, wondering if we were going to read it today. Did I even want it to be read? Surely the exercise was partly for the writing element.

'I'm glad to meet with you today. I know that you've been meeting with my colleague but I hope that we can have a successful hour. Is there anything that you would like to talk about?'

I thought about it. No, not really. I had suddenly forgotten all of the reasons that I might go to see a counsellor. He grinned at me inately and I felt how awkwardly I was sitting. We were as bad as each other, clearly baffled at the social situation we found ourselves in. Perhaps this was how he felt all the time. Was I ageist? Sexist?



'I'm sorry, I just don't think –'

He nodded encouragingly, clearly delighted that I was talking to him at all.

'That today works for me.'

Crestfallen.

'Why is that, Erin?'

'Well, it's no offence to you, really, but I'm used to my usual counsellor. She knows my history and that's all really.'

'I have your notes here. We could just talk for an hour if you'd be willing? It'd be a shame to waste, really.'

I nodded slowly, feeling as though I was making him feel worse by the second.

'I'm sorry, I wasn't sure it was working for me anyway. I have to go.'

I stood up and shook his hand, awkwardly, trying to avoid the expression on his face. I couldn't say what I wanted to, that I wanted him to be female and older than me, someone that had been through similar experiences, because what did that mean about my own personality? Was age really this important to me? Or was it merely experience, that I linked age with wisdom?

## Chapter 43

Alone that evening in my room, I got out my clay and began to sculpt again. It had been difficult to think about, the café rejection, and I had done an excellent job of ignoring it and pretending that it had never happened. This was not uncommon for me. I had also done this when thinking about my betrayal. Cheating on Mark and destroying our relationship, our engagement, was something that I had pushed to the back of my mind. Slowly, it began to crawl its way back to the forefront. He didn't even know that I had been with another person while I was with him. He definitely didn't know that it was a woman. Or rather, women. But there were lots of things that he didn't know about me. Things that even living with me couldn't teach him. He didn't understand why I felt so humiliated when men said things to me, in the street, in a restaurant, in a club. On the occasion that someone had grabbed me in a bar, and I had turned around and said, 'How would you feel if some fat, sweaty fuck grabbed your ass?' he had told me that I was over-reacting. He told me that I had embarrassed him, and I almost apologised for my behaviour, until I caught myself doing it.

And, he didn't understand why making a clay vagina might be freeing, for me. Why I might have a body that needed reclaiming, even though I had told him about my various experiences with men. He didn't understand that to have a vagina, a place in your body that other things can go into, was something to discuss. That I felt it was different from having a penis, different from having the power of a sword between your legs. A sword that meant that you were always in control. Mark couldn't understand that having a space between your legs was the opposite of this. That when men watched you in the street, you felt as though they were waiting to fill your space. The difference of having someone inside you,

within the very being that you are. The relinquishment of control that you had to give up to sleep with a man. So when we came to make the clay vaginas together, to him it was not a symbol or a catalyst for discussion. It was a bit of blue, a bit naughty, the kind of funny and sexy thing his girlfriend might make. He too, had not expected me to show them to the public.

I stared at the clay and began to push into it, spreading the centre across my fingers, making lips. The cold mud began to warm beneath my hands and I held it closer to me, trying to share that warmth. I thought of Mark, of our differences. Sofia too, was not like me, but at least she could understand how it felt. I was creating clay vaginas alone, in my room, for hours. Eventually, I had six. I lined them up before me and placed a hand on each, one at a time. What would I do with them? I couldn't display them unless I had my own exhibition space. That cost money. I doubted that I could get somewhere free, because who would be willing to put these in their space for no money at all? I lay back, and moved each vagina so that it was surrounding my head, as a halo. Who would care whether I displayed them or not? Even the man that owned the café would eventually forget, or it would be an amusing anecdote to tell his friends over dinner. I was under no pressure but my own to do something with them. If I were a man, would it be different for me now? Would I be lying among clay penis sculptures, certain that they would become something different, because I had grown up knowing that my own penis meant I was special? If a man, born as a success for having a penis, creates more penises, he must know that those penises too are destined for success. I am working from within a whole different mind-set. I rolled onto my front and sighed, poking one of the sculptures until it began to tilt. I, and other women like me, are living in a different space entirely. I blew out a breath of hot air onto the sculpture that I was poking. It did nothing.

## Chapter 44

I stared at my calendar and tried to work out the date that I had broken up with Mark. How long had it been? How long had I been living here? The day was bright and hinted at warmth, shining through the large window. If I had been a cat I would have spent my day on the window ledge, curled up beneath the rays. As it was, I found myself with even less to do. I mentally scrolled through my friends. I had seen nobody recently, I had seen no old friends, no new. I realised with uncomfortable surprise that I had cut myself off from my group of friends, in the worst way possible. Through lack of attention. There had been no arguments, no conscious unfriending. I sat down heavily and sighed. What about them? Why hadn't I heard from my nearest and dearest? The people who had come to my engagement party, and delighted in my joy. I scrolled down my phone and pushed call on the one person who had seen my fear on that day, Sasha. She answered after a few rings.

'Well, well!'

'Hello.'

'It's been a while, Erin. I'm surprised to hear from you.'

'I know it's been a while, where have you been?'

There was a silence on the other end of the line, and I felt smug momentarily, for calling her bluff. There is no friendship without two people making the effort.

'Interesting. Well, honestly, I've not heard great things about you recently.'

My smugness lifted. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that I heard Mark saw you in a coffee shop, and you kind of treated him like crap. I mean, it doesn't sound like the Erin I know. I haven't heard from you, no one has. What, have you got yourself new friends?'

I snorted derisively, 'No, I haven't. Break ups are hard, but I have never been rude to Mark. And anyway, aren't you supposed to be my friend?'

'I don't know. Yes, we met first, we went to school together. But you know I'm Mark's friend too, right? And what's more, I haven't been having the easiest time of it either. Which you would know, if you had called me.'

'Okay, so maybe we're both to blame a little, no?'

There was a silence on the other end of the phone, and a murmur of agreement.

'So, can we meet up Sasha? I'd like to see you.'

'Alright. So give me your address.'

She came round within the hour, and I was giddy at having some company in my room. I cleaned the dust and grime away from the inside of the window, I shook my duvet out. I tried, in vain, to warm the room up as best I could. When I opened the door to her she gave me a small hug, tight for a moment, a quick release. I invited her in excitedly.

'Sit down, talk to me! What's been going on?'

She laughed and sat on my bed, and I sat before her, on the floor. We stared at each other for a moment, and she sighed, 'Well, I lost my job. I don't know. It's been tough, getting back out there. That's what they say, get back out there, put on a suit, you'll feel better! But I don't feel great.'

I shook my head, 'No, having a job is more about the recognition than the money. You need someone to tell you that you're doing okay in life.'

She shrugged.

'They're always looking for carers at my place you know? They might force you to have a holiday at random though.'

Sasha's nose wrinkled up and she shook her head, 'I couldn't do that, I don't have that...quality. You have to deal with...stuff, right?'

'What, help people go to the toilet and stuff? Of course. But you know, you're thinking of it all wrong. It's about protecting a person's dignity. We were all young once.'

'Sure. We still are.'

Her eyes scanned the room for a moment and she raised her eyebrows, 'Well, it's not exactly homely, is it?'

I laughed, 'It's cold, I know. In the summer you'll be desperate to come inside.'

She nodded, and looked at me for a moment, 'This is awkward, but I feel like you're waiting to ask me about Mark, and pretending that you're not. You can, you know, if you just want to get that bit out of the way.'

I was a little taken aback, had it crossed my mind? Now that she'd said it I felt like it was all I could do not to ask. 'Alright. How is he?'

'He's well, Erin. You know he's with somebody else now. And they're...well, I don't want you to be upset, but she's moved in with him. She's nice, you know. You'd like her.'

I shook my head automatically, 'What an odd thing to say, how do you know I'd like her?'

'Well, because she's sweet, you know? I've gotten to know her.'

'Oh, so you go round and see them both now, do you?'

Sasha nodded and smiled apologetically. I tried to imagine this girl that had slipped so seamlessly into my place, my life, the space next to my fiancé. My choice, I silently repeated to myself. Sasha leaned forward and took my hands in hers. She glanced for a moment at the sketches I had pinned back to the wall.

'Did you do those?'

I nodded, trying not to feel angry with her for spending time with my replacement.

‘They’re good Erin. So you’re getting into art?’

Another nod. She squeezed my hands and let go.

‘How did that come about?’

I glanced at the sketches, and thought about the list that I made with Sofia. ‘I was thinking of all the things that I wanted to be. Woman, artist...you know. I just sketched, I haven’t done anything recently.’ I thought about the sculptures, and wondered why I hadn’t said anything about them.

‘Well you should. I mean it. Erin, for as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been talking about something being missing from your life. You seem a little lost.’

I stood up and made my way to the small kitchen area in my room, my space away from the shared kitchen of the house. Really, it was just a sink, with a kettle plugged in and a mini fridge. It was enough for tea, and that was all I needed. I flicked the kettle on and listened to the electric surge through it for a moment.

‘Don’t think that I’m lost, Sasha. Maybe I’ve just changed a little from the woman that you knew, no? I’ve had a few adventures since I last saw you.’

‘Alright, I didn’t mean to sound condescending.’

I threw a couple of tea bags into a pot and tapped my fingers on the sink. She was right, really. While I was thinking Sasha shrieked quietly from the bed, and I turned to see her check her phone.

‘I’ve got an interview! It’s tomorrow. Would you mind if I shoot off? I just, I need to prepare. And buy new black tights.’

I laughed, and shook my head, pouring the boiling water over the teabags anyway. I didn't mind, not really. She kissed me brightly on the cheek and made her way out, and I checked the time. A fifteen minute visit. Not bad.



## Chapter 45

I went to Mark's house, or what was formally our house, straight afterwards. I wanted to say something to him, to tell him that I was sorry for the way that I had behaved. I was terrified that he might think that I left for a reason that he didn't understand. I couldn't find it in myself to be completely honest with him, but I had to say something. Sasha's words haunted me, that I had been cruel when we met in the coffee shop, that I wasn't good to him. I rang his doorbell, staring at the door that I had once called my own. It felt odd to ring a doorbell to be let into my own home. I saw his shadow come toward me through the glass. He paused just before he opened it, and I felt a lurch of fear that he might recognise me before he saw me completely.

The look on his face told me that he had. He didn't smile, just raised his eyebrows.

'Erin.'

'Yes, can I come in?'

He breathed out slowly and stepped to one side, gesturing for me to pass him. He closed the door behind me and stood, silent, watching me. I had a strange urge to laugh, or make myself at home, to act as though nothing had ever happened.

'Well?'

'Can we go sit down or something?' I asked, more certain now than ever that I was his least favourite person.

He walked into the kitchen and pulled out a chair. It was one of the old ones that his mother had given us when we'd moved in. I took off my coat, lest he think that I wasn't staying, and sat with it rolled up on my lap. He sat at the opposite end of the table, clearly feeling safer with wood in between us.

'I wanted to make sure that you knew what had happened between us.'

His eyes narrowed, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, I hate the thought of you thinking that I'm a bad person, or that I left without reason.'

'Right.'

Silence. I wasn't sure if the 'Right' was his agreement that I was, in fact, a bad person who had left without reason.

'I left because of me, and not because of you. It was nothing that you did. As soon as we became engaged I foresaw my whole life, as though it was laid out for me already. I felt like I had no choices, apart from what dish we might serve at our wedding. I mean, you must agree that we were no longer being ourselves.'

'I honestly do not know why you are telling me this.'

'Because it's important to say these things aloud. I don't want you thinking something else for the rest of your life.'

Silence filled the room once more. He widened his eyes and smiled distractedly.

'Don't you have anything to say to me, Mark?'

'Yes. I hear that you're seeing someone, is that right?'

I shook my head.

'Alright. I've started seeing somebody though, and I don't really want you showing up at my door unannounced.'

My heart contracted in my chest, and I noticed the sensation with surprise. Strange that you can feel jealousy over a situation that you have chosen to leave. 'I just wanted to clear the air.'

'Fine.'

We sat for a moment longer, and then I stood, holding my coat awkwardly in my hands. He stood also, and walked in front of me to the door. The house was warm and my skin tingled with appreciation of it, the warmth that I left behind. We stood before each other and I moved forward to kiss him on the cheek. He flinched slightly but didn't move, letting me.

'Best of luck with everything, Erin.'

I nodded and said nothing, letting him open the door for me, and stepping out.

I got the bus back to my cold, damp room, and kept my coat on as I climbed into bed. The blanket that covered me was so chilled that it felt wet and I closed my eyes and tried to encourage my skin to remember the warmth of Mark's house. I had chosen the cold over the warmth for my own sake. It was because I was happier alone.

## Chapter 46

For the next two days, counted only by how many times I had drawn the curtains because of the darkness, I stayed inside my room and thought about the things that Mark had said. I read, collecting together a list of books that I had long wanted to read, and I painted, for the first time in a while. I felt calmer about the last few months. I wasn't worried about Mark or Sofia, I relished being selfish and doing only what I wanted to do. Was this the answer to happiness? Freedom to create without the strain of a relationship?

Eventually, when I was ready to see people again, I sent a text to Amber, asking if she would come and meet me for a coffee. She agreed, inviting me over to her house instead. I was nervous, for a few reasons. I was worried that Laura wouldn't want me there. Amber seemed more willing to make a friendship with me. I went, all the same, around midday. The lightness of the sky made me feel as though nothing bad could happen.

Both Amber and Laura opened the door together, and Amber hugged me hard when they invited me in. Laura stayed back a little, shaking my hand instead. I thought this a little odd, as though we were at a business meeting, but I shook her hand back all the same. They invited me to sit down at the kitchen table. Hard chairs. Again, I noticed the difference from the last time I was here. They sat opposite me, together. I smiled briefly before asking about their days.

'Oh we're fine. We spent the weekend in best way – just being together.' Laura smiled at me, her eyes sharp. I nodded. Amber rolled her eyes and looked at me intently.

'Oh but how are you, Erin? When I received your message I thought something may be wrong?'

'Oh God,' Laura cut in, 'You're not pregnant are you?'

She laughed loudly for a moment.

‘No. I don’t know, I just thought it might be nice to see you...both.’

Laura laughed again and reached across the table to pat my arm. ‘Just a joke, dear. Well, I haven’t seen you since that night, have I? I don’t often come home to news of one night stands joining us for coffee!’

Amber nudged her and frowned deeply, shaking her head, ‘Laura my love, come on. Erin is a friend. And you saw her the other week.’

Laura grinned, ‘Oh! The hand holding at the traffic lights. Now I remember.’

I watched her with interest. I did think that I was a friend of Amber’s, especially after the drink that we had and all that we had shared. Laura on the other hand was quite right, for her this was strange. I tried to change the subject.

‘I just wanted to see you both. I thought you might be interested to know that I’ve been doing some research, and I’ve decided that a relationship with yourself is as valuable as one with another person.’

Laura raised her eyebrows, and Amber shot a look across to her, as if to warn her. She shot one back.

‘I am right here, your secret looks to each other are not as secret as you think they are.’

Amber laughed, ‘Well, what on earth do you mean by ‘research’?’

Laura nodded emphatically, ‘That was my question. Do you mean...masturbating?’

She grinned, and I started to laugh too, despite myself.

‘Sort of. I just think that it’s a relationship that isn’t readily talked about that often. I mean, shouldn’t it be celebrated? That you’re with yourself, you are capable of making yourself sexually satisfied?’

‘Well,’ Amber began, ‘Yes. It isn’t something that is usually talked about, no, but that does not mean that it can’t be, I suppose. But are you going to be the one to make it a discussable subject or...what is the point of this? Are you never going to be with someone again, is that what you are saying?’

I smiled, and gave a half nod, ‘I suppose that is what I’m saying, really. As much as you two have made a vow or agreement to be together, I’m making one to be alone. I won’t cheat on myself or deny myself, perhaps I shall just be in an open relationship with myself.’

Laura stood up and put the kettle on, saying nothing. I watched her for a moment. Amber coughed under her breath and mouthed to me, ‘Are you okay?’

I nodded quickly. I was fine, although I did feel that the strange welcome had meant that I’d poured my heart out just for a reason for me to be sitting at their kitchen table. If Laura and her polite hostility hadn’t been there perhaps we would be having a different version of the same conversation. I smiled awkwardly. Laura turned from the kettle.

‘So you are still going to sleep with people then?’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe. If I want. It’s just not going to be a life goal, that’s all. It’s not my goal to be with somebody, it’s my goal to be happy. I can do that alone. I have that capacity.’

She turned back around and pulled three cups from a shelf. Amber smiled and patted my hand, ‘I’m glad that you are happy, then, Erin. I think it is a good thing to decide. I suppose usually I might say something like, ‘Oh well, Laura and I were lucky to find each other’, but maybe it is not to do with luck. Maybe it’s a decision that we made. I mean, true love, they would have you believe that it’s just a walk in the park. But we work hard every day at our relationship.’

Laura placed the cups of tea down onto the table, spilling one a little, and made a noise of agreement. I took a tea and watched Amber do the same. Laura sat down opposite me again.

‘Well then. In other news, we are now exclusive.’

I looked between their faces with mild surprise, ‘That’s great.’

‘Well,’ Laura interjected, ‘It’s something. And it’s not that we don’t trust each other anymore. I just don’t want to share her. We’re getting married.’

It was a lot of information to take in at one time, and Laura was saying it like a list of reasons why I shouldn’t be there. Or at least, perhaps I was insecure enough in their environment to take it that way. I clasped my hands together in what I hoped passed for delight, and stood up to give them awkward kisses on the cheek. Laura stayed seated for this, but Amber stood up and hugged me and laughed.

‘We are! I am just so excited.’

I asked them about their plans for the day and drank my tea as I listened, increasingly becoming aware that I may as well have not been in the room, for their excitement and love was all encompassing, and their relationship was filling the space in its entirety. After hearing a list of the flowers that they would consider I drained the rest of my cup and said my goodbyes, even managing to get a hug from Laura. I said that I would see them soon, and Amber asked me to text her my address. I knew then that I would never receive an invitation to the wedding and that I would never see her again. I didn’t text her my address, and I didn’t hear from her requesting it either. Perhaps you lose your single friends when you get married, and the resolutely single friends that are married to themselves get dropped almost immediately when you have both slept with them.

## Chapter 47

I went to work that afternoon. My manager had left a message on my phone asking me to come in early for a meeting. I was worried, a little nervous. I ran through all of the things that this could mean, but came up short.

She was waiting for me in her office, and I gingerly knocked on the door.

‘Enter.’

I pushed it open and stepped in, smiling at her.

‘Look at you!’ she exclaimed as I walked in.

‘Oh...hello.’

She motioned that I should take a seat and so I did. She was sitting behind her large desk, a wall of hair towering over her face.

‘You look much better, Erin. Ready to start work again? Are you feeling prepared and rested?’

I felt like a child. ‘Yes, thank you.’

She batted the air with a hand in a ‘Not to worry’ way, as though she had done something real that I was thanking her for.

‘And did you go on holiday somewhere hot?’

I shook my head.

‘That’s a shame. I’m going to Spain next week. Of course, it won’t be hot now, not in this season, but it’s still nice to have a break.’

‘Oh? Yes.’

‘Hmm. Anyway. I have something that I need to talk to you about, before you start your shift.’



The wait, again. I nodded, confirming that she could continue.

‘It’s about Olive. I’m afraid to say that she died a week ago, and so you won’t be required to work that last hour as yet. But we’ll find somebody to fill that hour as soon as we can.’

I stopped for a moment, my heart plummeting to the bottom of my chest. I placed a hand across it. ‘That’s awful. How did it happen?’

‘We’re not entirely sure, I don’t think. Not yet anyway. Her daughter hasn’t really been in touch apart from to let us know that the funeral is tomorrow. You’re not expected to go, it’s not part of the job.’

I thought for a moment. It seemed obvious. ‘I would like to go. I liked Olive a lot, we had some good conversations.’

She smiled and leant forward, nodding, ‘Yes, I had a few people that I connected with when I went out on visits. You become attached, you find things in common. You learn though, quickly enough, that it’s not always best to do that. It makes it harder, you know.’ A pause. ‘You’ll get there.’

‘I don’t think I want to get there.’

‘It’ll happen automatically, you won’t even realise.’ She turned her attention to a pile of paperwork, and began to read the top piece. I watched her for a moment, before realising that it was her signal for me to leave. I sat forward in my chair.

‘Where is the funeral? What are the details?’

She didn’t raise her eyes, ‘Oh. It’s at Bow Church. Three in the afternoon I think. It’ll only be half an hour.’

I nodded and stood, leaving her to her paperwork. I thought about Olive, in her chair, focused on the television. I wondered, briefly, where she might be now. The thought of her

lounge without her in it, silence running through the house was painful. I took a deep breath.

## Chapter 48

The news of Olive's death made me want a drink, so I headed to the pub that sat on the corner. I had never been in there, it looked too local for an actual local person, and I was nervous. But, it was also the early evening and I was in need of some sort of company. Even the company of people I didn't know and wouldn't speak to would do. I pulled on a large hoodie, and as an afterthought, carefully placed one of my sculptures into the pocket. I wasn't sure what I had done it for, but it gave me a boost, a little sense of confidence. I left the cool air of the room and stepped outside, where it was colder still. The light from the pub could be seen from my front door step, and I smiled. It was almost like something from a Christmas book, the lights in the distance, the promise of warmth and company, of ale and cheer. It was light for the cold and lonely. I walked toward it, hopeful.

It was local, I was right about that. As I walked in everyone seemed to pause for a breath, and then continued talking to each other. I focused on the bar and walked over, to a man who raised his eyebrows instead of asking what I wanted. I ordered a glass of red wine. I'd panicked, and it wasn't what I wanted, but now it was too late and the wine was already being poured.

'Three fifty.'

I paid up. It was cheap, and it tasted cheap. I picked up the glass and took a look around the bar, spotting an empty corner table. I walked over quickly, and sat. The table was sticky and the chair covered in ancient material, dusty beige flowers outlined in burgundy. It quickly occurred to me that I should have brought a book with me, a barrier. I took my phone out and scrolled through the contacts, but I didn't want to talk to anybody that I knew. I hovered for a moment over Amber's name, but locked my phone quickly and

put it down. Olive flashed into my mind, and I wished that I were seeing her tomorrow, that I could have the chance to say goodbye. I took another sip of my wine, and tried not to grimace at the taste of it. As I did so, a man at the next table caught my eye. He must have been about forty years old. He grinned and raised his glass.

‘You waiting for someone love?’

I shook my head, widening my eyes at the use of the word ‘Love’.

‘Just fancied a drink did you? Can’t blame you, I’m here most nights myself. Nice to get out of the house isn’t it my darling.’

I felt my heart beat hard in my chest. I was fighting a battle in my head that I often fought, when ‘Well meaning’ older men used language that they shouldn’t when talking to you. There were two sides to this argument. One side said, ‘They are just trying to be friendly, they have never had anybody correct them before and they do not, and will not, understand why you are angry with them.’ This was the school of thought that Mark had belonged to. The other school of thought was, ‘You don’t like it when strangers, male or female, call you ‘love’, ‘darling’, ‘sweetheart’, or anything similar. This is because it is patronising, condescending, and familiar. It automatically puts you in a place beneath this person, and if no one ever corrects them then they will do it forever.’

For younger men, I had no problem telling them that I didn’t like the language they were using. In fact, once at a bar I told a man that I wasn’t his darling, and that he shouldn’t refer to me that way. His response had been shocking.

‘You won’t be saying that when I’m on my knees, face to face with your hot beaver.’

I watched him for a moment, and then tapped his friend on the shoulder, ‘Do you know what your friend just said to me?’

He looked from me to the man who had called me darling and referred to my genitals as a beaver, and shook his head. I repeated what he had said. He widened his eyes and looked at his friend in surprise, and I was grateful for this response.

‘Mate, that is...weird. Why would you say that to someone you don’t know?’

His friend shook his head and I watched a shade of pink spread from his neck to his face.

‘I don’t know. I feel pretty embarrassed now.’

Still, I said nothing to the man at the table beside me, as I couldn’t make up my mind which decision would be best.

‘You could crack a smile you know, are you not very talkative eh, lovely?’

‘I can be.’

‘Oh, hang on,’ He put his glass down and looked around the empty table, a mock surprised expression painted onto his face. ‘She speaks!’

I automatically rolled my eyes and forced a smile, as I took a large gulp of wine, trying to speed up the process of being there. I was torn, it was warm in the pub and there was alcohol, but I had clearly chosen the wrong table to sit at.

‘So what do you do sweetheart?’

Another chance to tell him to fuck off. Once again, I didn’t, ‘I’m a carer.’

He nodded and dipped his head forward, showing me that he approved. ‘That’s a bold job, you’ve got to be a certain type of person to do that job. Actually, you’ve got to be a woman really, caring by nature.’

I breathed out slowly, ‘I don’t think all women are caring by nature, just because they happen to be women. Do you?’

‘Well, I see what you’re saying, you obviously get the few that aren’t, but yes, I’d say it’s a female characteristic.’

I took another gulp, I was starting to enjoy the wine as the effects began to hit me, ‘I know a lot of male carers that do a great job.’

‘Each to their own my dear.’

We sat in silence for a moment, and he grinned at me again, ‘Can I get you another drink my love?’

It was time. ‘No, thank you. And please, stop calling me your love, darling, whatever. I don’t like that at all.’

His eyes went from playful to narrow and he leaned back in his chair and scoffed loudly. The barman glanced over and caught my eye for a moment, before moving on.

‘Here we bloody go. A feminist are you?’

I smiled in recognition that someone had had this conversation with him previously. I almost felt gleeful about it, twinned with someone that I had never met and never would meet. I nodded.

‘It really winds me up, you using the same issues that have already been dealt with, that my own grandmother helped deal with, and dragging them into this day and age. They aren’t issues any more, what is it that you don’t have?’

‘Do you mean equality wise? Equal pay, equal rights, equal respect. But I do thank your grandmother for the vote, don’t get me wrong.’

He shook his head and pursed his lips, ‘If you ask me you’re whining about nothing. Women are treated equally to men now, they just want to be better than men. That’s what the issue is. You can’t even hold open a door for a woman any more, you get called a sexist pig.’

I laughed, 'If you get called a sexist pig, I don't think it's because you've held a door open for somebody. Someone must have spoken to you about the way you talk to women, no?'

'If I call someone 'Love' it's affectionate, it's polite. I was brought up to be a gentleman.'

'But you're not being a gentleman by calling me words like that, you're being patronising and offensive. If a man called you 'Love', how would that make you feel?'

He let a short sharp burst of air escape from his lips, 'I'd have words with him. But that's a different story.'

I shook my head, 'I don't think it is. The way that you would feel, is the way that I feel when you call me those things. Threatened, patronised, uncomfortable. But how could you possibly understand that? You haven't had to deal with this your whole life. You haven't had someone at every turn talk to your gender before they talk to you as a human being with a personality.'

He blew his cheeks out and shook his head, and then drained his pint, 'You're not very polite.'

With that, he stood up and walked over to the bar, stumbling slightly. I watched him for a moment, and then drained my drink also, wondering momentarily if he would come back to sit at the table beside me if I decided to stay. I glanced at him again. He was talking to the barman about ales, noisily comparing them. I stood up and began to make my way out, pushing my hands deep into my pocket. I felt it, and remembered. My clay vagina. I turned back from the door and walked back over to his table, and placed it carefully in front of his chair. I walked back to the door, and paused there, hiding slightly behind a pillar, watching him weave from the bar and back to the table, spilling a little of his drink on the

way. He paused as he reached it, and then put his pint down and leaned in a little closer to get a better look.

‘What the bloody hell is that then?’

The barman walked over and collected my empty glass.

‘Looks like a cunt to me boss.’

The man picked it up and looked at it a little closer. ‘Blimey, I think you’re right.’

I smiled, and left quickly. Perhaps he wouldn’t forget our conversation as quickly as he had his last. I stood for a moment outside the pub and put my hands on my hips, spreading my feet so that they were the same width apart as my shoulders. I had reclaimed that space. I held my power pose for a few seconds longer, and continued to walk home.



## Chapter 49

Dawn was back, and I was relieved. I hadn't told her that didn't stick around to talk to the substitute, and she didn't mention it either, though I was certain she knew.

She smiled at me. 'Erin, how have you been?'

I thought of the night before and smiled. 'A bit angry, but I'm okay.'

'What have you been angry about?'

'I got into a...discussion, I suppose, with a man in a pub last night. He kept calling me love, darling, et cetera. I told him off a bit, he argued back. He was entirely unsympathetic though. But, I know that the feeling I get when someone calls me a name like 'sweetheart' is entirely justified. I'm sure that you understand that, as a woman?'

'We're here to talk about you Erin, I couldn't comment on it myself.'

I stared at her for a moment, wanting her to join the discussion, join the debate. Of course she had the same issues, how could she not? I'm not sure that I could have refrained from joining in. The ethics of the counselling world must be very strict.

'Okay. Well, being told to smile, all of that stuff. One of my patients had just...died. I mean a friend. I don't know. He told me to smile, and that's just awful. He doesn't know what's happening in my life. I mean Olive had just died.'

'I'm very sorry to hear that Erin.'

'Aside from that, the casual sexism, I think I found a way to combat it, that's all.'

She raised her eyebrows and smiled expectantly.

'I make clay vaginas.'

Her eyebrows changed shape but remained high on her forehead.

'The man that I argued with last night, he was just sexist and rude. I get it all the time, it feels that way. My whole life, I've been aware of my gender, and there's nothing that I can do about that. What's more, there is nothing that I want to do about it, I'm a woman, I identify as such and I'm not ashamed. But I hate the way that I am treated. Things are different for us, I know that you know that, even if you aren't allowed to agree or discuss it. And I'm lucky. I know that a lot of women have it much worse than me, and that too is an issue so much bigger than any of mine. Sometimes, when men speak to me, I just feel like they don't see a human being. If I'm walking down the road, and a man stops to say something to me, I feel like a game. Like some sort of sex robot, something to hack, something fun to do. All those online videos of women walking down the street. I watched one the other day and a guy was saying to a woman 'Nice titties.' She couldn't do anything about it, what could she do? You either turn around and say something, ask them to stop, tell them how disgusting it is to be spoken to that way, and risk anything from worse verbal abuse to getting raped and killed. Or, you say nothing, and you feel terrible about yourself, you question what you wear the next time you leave the house, and the man goes away thinking that it's okay to talk to women like that because you said nothing. There's really no option available. You're just a toy, to be used. Even men that you love, who would never speak to you or another woman in that way, don't really understand it. They can react with you, seeing it happen and agreeing that it's no good, but what are they really feeling? I was with Mark once, on holiday, sitting outside a café. Both of us were drinking milkshakes and it was boiling hot, almost unbearable. I was wearing shorts and a t shirt. Two men walked past and one stopped, and kissed his teeth at me, winking. Mark didn't even notice that it had happened, and he was sitting right beside me. He was blind to it. If it's something that you don't have to deal with on a day to day basis, you are blind to it. You don't understand it

and you don't see it. I stared at him, in disbelief, 'Did you see what just happened?' When I told him, he didn't have the same reaction as me. He was angry, but it seemed to be over something else. He took a long, angry draw from his straw and I asked him what he was mad about, personally.

'You're my girlfriend, I don't want other men looking at you that way.'

He wasn't angry because somebody had disrespected me, because they had objectified me or ruined a lovely experience, he was upset because I belonged to him, and someone had threatened to take his toy. I never said that to him, but I never forgot it. Clearly, I have never forgotten it.'

I sat back in my chair and stared out of the window for a moment. Dawn shifted in her seat, bringing my attention back to her, and frowned slightly.

'So, explain to me your way of combating this with your clay vaginas?'

I continued, 'I started thinking...if we are living in this space, a space that is filled with everything that we have to deal with, from the abuse to the pay gap, having to keep our heads down for fear of worse, having to put up with being called bitchy and bossy when we strive for more, is there actually a way to reclaim that space as our own? If we are forced to live in this space, we have to make it ours, don't we? Or I at least, have to try to make it mine.'

She leaned forward in her chair, and nodded. 'And the vaginas?'

'Well, yes, there you go. That's my way of reclamation. When that man spoke to me in that way, in the bar, I waited until he got up to get another drink before I left. I didn't want him to think that I was leaving on his account. Then I realised that I had one of the clay vaginas in my pocket, so I walked up to his table and put it down, in front of his chair. I made that space mine again, by putting that there. I gave the space a gender. It was no longer his,

he wasn't a part of it anymore. As much as he would never be able to understand what it is like to be a woman, to live in this space beneath men, now his table in the pub has been taken from him, and while he may never understand that, I do. And that's what matters, isn't it? I have been forced into this space by men and society, and so in response, I will take back the spaces that have been taken from me.'

She leant back in her seat and crossed her legs, smiling. I saw her eyes flick from my face to the clock behind me, and back again. A delicate movement, but not as subtle as she must have hoped. I understood that our time was up, and nodded. She held her hand up, as though she knew that I was about to get up and leave, the teacher pausing the student when the bell had already rung.

'How is your writing going, Erin, are you working on the memories that we discussed?'

I nodded nervously. The sheets of writing sat in my bag by my feet, resting against my calf. They had grown, and though the bag was big enough to conceal them, I suddenly felt as though they were obviously there, displayed for her to see. I wasn't sure that I was ready to show them to her. My stomach beat again beneath me, and I placed my hand over it as subtly as I could trying to silence any noise that might emanate from it. She smiled.

'We can go through those another time, if you like. Whenever you are comfortable.'

I nodded. 'Alright.'

'It's been a very interesting discussion today, Erin. How do you feel it's gone?'

'Yes, it's been fine. It hasn't been easy, for a while, dealing with the break up and everything involved in that. People and comments and all of that stuff, break ups don't seem to be as easy as they should be. Dealing with paying your half of the electric bill. All of it. But yes, I feel like I've been treading water for a long time, trying to find out what I can

do. I've needed a project, I've needed more than that. A way to deal with everything. I think that I may have found it.'

Her smile in response was genuine, and I found myself copying it. I reached for my bag and stood up, shaking her hand as I left.

## Chapter 50

I didn't delete Sofia's number. It was a dramatic request that fit her personality perfectly, but I wasn't prepared to give up on our friendship just yet. She was a pain, selfish and difficult and strange at times, but I had a rush of affection for her occasionally, that I couldn't quite put to the back of my mind. It had been a couple of weeks, but I still thought of her, and now that I felt better, that I had decided to be alone, I wanted her friendship. I sat back on my bed, and drafted a message to her, and then deleted it. I did this a couple of times, but couldn't hit send.

'Stupid,' I muttered to myself. I hit the green call button and then pressed speaker phone and waited for a moment.

'What?'

Her voice filled the room, irritated. My stomach squeezed inside me and I placed a hand over it, trying to calm it.

'Hi.'

'What do you want?'

'Alright, I just wanted to say hello. Is that okay?'

'Didn't I tell you to delete my number?'

I laughed, 'Yes, but you don't get to tell me what to do.'

'Do you miss me, is that what this is about?'

'Sometimes. You?'

'Sometimes.'

‘So we should go for a coffee or something, there’s no point in pretending that each other no longer exist is there? Anyway. Didn’t you ask me to meet your parents once? That never happened but I would still be open to it, if you needed a buffer.’

She laughed and then whispered down the phone, her whisper louder than her normal speaking voice, ‘They are actually in the next room...now. They arrived a few days ago. I had to take them to the Tower of London. They have ravens there, chained to the grounds!’

‘Yes, I know. If they leave the monarchy will fall, but by forcing them to stay...well it’s a point to be made isn’t it? Why are you whispering?’

A pause.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Listen, I’m sorry that we fell out. It wasn’t really a proper argument, how could it be? I think that we are good friends, or at least, we should try to be. I know that you may not agree with me but I think that we have a lot of stuff in common.’

There was silence on the end of the phone. Then, a whisper, ‘You hurt my feelings.’

‘You hurt mine.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘That’s fine.’

I heard a voice in the background, calling Sofia ‘Darling’ and she sighed.

‘I have to go.’

The line went dead before I could say goodbye but I felt a little better. I didn’t want to fall out with anybody. I didn’t want to push people away from me.

## Chapter 51

I arrived at Bow Church wearing the only outfit that I had that seemed appropriate, a knee length black dress that I kept exclusively for interviews, with a mac over the top. It was drizzly, and I had no black coats, which was something that I spent time worrying about earlier. Eventually I realised that it didn't really matter, the fact that I was there at all was enough. As I walked down the path that ran down the centre of the cemetery, I looked up to the clock that sat in the middle of the spire. It was five minutes to three. Other mourners were gathered around the entrance, shaking hands. As I neared a rush of nerves hit my legs, and they tingled.

'Should be here about now shouldn't they? Maybe they hit traffic.'

I smiled awkwardly at the statement, realising with surprise that it was aimed toward me. The elderly man speaking watched me, waiting patiently.

'Yes, I suppose they must have.'

'When don't you hit traffic eh?'

I shrugged, smiling.

He straightened his black tie awkwardly, 'So how did you know Olive?'

'I was her carer.'

'Were you really? I'm surprised she needed one. Getting old is no joke, you know.'

'No...How did you know Olive?' I winced at my use of the past tense.

'I worked with her husband. Lovely couple they were. I'm ashamed to say that once he died we lost touch a little, Olive and I.'

'It happens I'm afraid.'

He nodded and looked over my shoulder, 'Here they are.'



We stepped aside for the hearse, and it trundled awkwardly down the path that was too small for a large car. Behind it came a woman, who looked around sixty years old, dressed in a tight black suit and heels. She walked quickly, occasionally having to slow down and pause behind the vehicle in front. As it stopped in front of the church, she looked up and nodded at us, the small gathering that were waiting.

She quickly shook hands with a few people, mouthing thank you, before entering the building. I waited for a moment, unsure of my place, and hung back until everyone had entered before me. I took a seat on the last pew, feeling a chill in the air, the stone floor creeping up the thin soles of my shoes to the back of my calves. There was nobody else on my row. The music began, classical, a song that I didn't recognise, and we stood, turning to watch Olive be brought down the centre of the nave. I thought of her inside that box, wearing her best suit. Who had been her carer while I was off work? What had they talked about? I fought the fear that she may have thought that I had abandoned her entirely, feeling tears sting the back of my eyes at the realisation.

Once the coffin was placed at the front of the church, Olive's daughter stood up and was helped to the lectern. She stared at us for a moment, and then looked down at a piece of paper, hands quivering.

'I'm not really sure what to say, except that I'll miss my mum, Olive. Thank you for coming here today. She would have loved it, seeing all of you. It's a shame that we always say this, but I wish we could have done this when she was alive, really. She's gone to be with my dad now. I know they will be very happy to see each other again.' She nodded, and stepped down quickly and quietly. She didn't cry, and I was impressed by this. It was strange that you felt impressed when somebody didn't give way to their emotions, as though letting

them out was a problem. I watched the back of her head for the rest of the ceremony, noticing that she didn't stray from staring ahead.

The vicar spoke quickly as well, talking about the times that Olive had joined his congregation and how he had always found her to be polite and helpful, as though this explained her personality in a satisfactory way. I couldn't help but be a little disappointed, for Olive's sake. If this were my funeral I would want a little more emotion. At the end of his talk Olive's daughter stood up again, and turned to us, with an uncomfortable nod.

'If anybody wants to say anything about Mum, please go ahead.'

I knew immediately that I was going to, though my legs felt weak at the thought of it. I breathed in deeply and waited for somebody else to get up, but they didn't. I stood and walked quickly to the front, pausing at the lectern, unsure whether or not to continue. The vicar nodded and held a hand out to help me, which I took. I stared out for a moment at the faces of strangers in the crowd, and began, unsure of what I was actually going to say.

'I've known Olive for about a year...' I stopped, noticing the present tense, and wondered whether or not to correct it. I looked at the daughter, who watched me with interest. 'I'm her carer. We shared many cups of tea and good conversations. Olive always remembered things about me, and asked me about my life, and I think that's part of what makes her so special. She noticed things and asked you about them, and in that way she showed that she cared. And I cared too, about Olive. She talked to me about her life with Walter, and it was always a two way conversation. I'll miss our time together.'

I paused, staring into the faces of strangers, and sighed, struggling to find the words from within me. 'Olive was my last visit of the day, and it's no exaggeration to say that she always ended my day with a laugh. She was warm, she was funny. She was a woman who knew how to look positively at life. She was independent...and I wish she was still here.'

I felt my throat tighten and knew that I was about to cry. Instead I nodded at the room, and stepped down, smiling awkwardly at the daughter as I did so. She didn't smile back. I walked to the end of the church, and retook my seat, noticing that I was shaking slightly. I hated public speaking. I took deep breaths to calm my nerves, to quiet the sob that was threatening to rise, and as nobody else stood up to speak, listened to the music that began to play as people started to file out.

Outside I stood for a while and looked at the flowers, reading the cards for Olive and other loved ones. The notes were touching, heartfelt, and I regretted not having brought some with me myself. In that moment I felt selfish, self-absorbed. Olive deserved more from me.

'You were my mother's carer?'

I turned to see the daughter, shivering slightly in the drizzle. I nodded. 'Yes, Erin.'

I held out my hand and she shook it.

'I'm surprised to see you here, do you visit all of your patient's funerals?'

'I had a connection with Olive, we got on well. She helped me.'

'Oh. I don't know how I feel really. I feel a bit jealous, if that makes sense.'

I watched her, unsure of what to say, her honesty surprising me. 'What are you jealous of?'

'Well, I should have been the one having cups of tea with her, shouldn't I? I mean, we had a tough relationship. But I should have worked harder at maintaining it. Did she talk about me?'

I thought about it, specifically Olive's comment about the glue factory. I wasn't sure how to say it, and I paused searching for words. 'Well, I was only with her for an hour a day and she-'

'It's okay, she didn't mention me. I understand.'

We both looked down at the flowers and tried to fill the silence with feigned interest in them.

'She didn't really want children, you know. I don't think she did. She thought that marriage was what you did, and society forced her to have the kids but...she didn't really want any of that. I don't know what she really wanted.'

'I don't know-'

'Did she talk to you about that? Not wanting children?'

I shook my head, 'She talked to me about wanting to work when she was married, but it not being appropriate.'

'Yes. They used to talk about that a lot. My dad was a great guy, but he was traditional. It was a different time.'

I nodded.

'What did she say about him?'

I felt uncomfortable, as though I were somehow betraying Olive's trust. I could mention the gin and problems, being locked into the same cupboard. I smiled, 'She talked fondly of him.'

'Oh. Anything else?'

I frowned slightly, wanting her to realise that the situation was awkward. She was either completely unaware of it or she just didn't care. 'Not that I can think of.'

'Erin...right? I don't want you to feel like I am interrogating you, but I doubt that we will see each other again, and I need to know these things. So if she said anything about my family at all, I would like to know.'

I thought of the conversation that we had had about Olive's marriage, about how bored she had been. I shook my head apologetically. 'I do understand, but there's really nothing to tell.'

She stared at me, and then reached inside her jacket, pulling out a business card.

'If you remember anything at all, however insignificant you think it may be, I would like to know.'

I nodded, taking it from her, feeling as though I was involved in a murder trial. She stared at me for a moment, and shook her head, 'I've run out of time.'

I smiled sadly in response, I knew what she meant. I watched her as she turned and stalked away, heels dragging and clipping on stones.

## Chapter 52

I lay in bed thinking over what the daughter had said to me, and couldn't think of any information that I could offer her. I sighed and rolled over, thinking of her heels on the stone floor. My room was cold again, though I had a heater focused on the bed.

Occasionally it would start to smell like burning plastic, so I would get out and switch it off, shivering in the air beneath jumpers and layers. I pulled the quilt around me and closed my eyes, covering my mouth.

I was a child, small again, walking down the road to my house, my mother's house. I automatically pulled at the bottom of my skirt, and looked down, seeing that it was tartan. I watched my steps and knew instantly where I was, what time it was, and what was about to happen.

'Hey sweetheart, you got a boyfriend?'

I turned my head to see a man in a van beside me, slowing down to follow my steps. His hair was sticky with sweat, a white stained t shirt stretching over his beer belly. He grinned.

'Yes.'

'How long have you been together?'

A sickness rose from my stomach to my throat, and I stared at him, 'Six months.'

'You want another one?'

I took a deep breath and stopped, turning to him. His eyes ran over my body and I looked down, realising with surprise that I was no longer wearing any clothes. My naked body stood before him, in the street, though it was suddenly my own, the body of a woman and not a child. The hair surrounding my labia was long and dark, and I glanced at it, and

then back at the man. I was dreaming, I realised in a flash. I stepped toward the van and pulled open the door, grabbing hold of the man's shirt behind his neck. He didn't move, laughing as he had before, when I was a child. But I was no longer a child, and I was not going to let this man threaten me in the way that he had before. I used my other hand and stepped up in to the vehicle, using all my strength to pull him out. Eventually he gave way, falling, brushing past me to hit the ground. He laughed still, and turned over, and I climbed down and stood over him, one foot on either side of his body.

'Do you think that it's a good idea to follow children down the road asking them if they want a boyfriend? Do you think that a fat fuck like you should date children? Do you think that because I'm female I deserve it, that there's nothing wrong with it, that it wouldn't be something that would affect my adult life?'

He grinned and I sucked bile from my throat, collecting it in my mouth, and knelt down so that I was closer to his face. 'Is that what you fucking think?'

I let it fall out of my mouth and land on his forehead, sliding down onto his nose. I felt something in my right hand, and turned to look. It was cold and smooth, a clay vagina. I felt the weight in my hand and looked back to him, bringing it down onto his face, smashing it across his nose. I watched the blood spread down his skin and mix with my spit, the laughter stopping.

I jolted awake, suddenly, the sound of my heart in my ears. My phone vibrated beside me and I took a sharp breath in, answering it blearily. There was no response, I pulled the phone back and focused on it, staring at the screen. It was an alarm, not a call. My heart continued to beat wildly within me.

I put the phone down and lay back onto the pillow, closing my eyes again. I felt a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment. I thought of that man and I wondered what I

could have done differently, as a child, to stop that situation. I could have taken note of his licence plate. Children would be able to do that now, to whip out their phones and take a quick photo. But then, I didn't have a mobile phone. No one my age did. I pulled back the covers and dressed quickly in front of the heater, trying to get as close to the warmth as possible. On my way out I picked up a vagina and a piece of chalk, and put both in my pocket, buttoning up my coat to the top of my neck.



## Chapter 53

I caught the bus to my mother's house, up Roman Road onto Bethnal Green, thankful that the bus was fairly empty and that there was a seat that I could take. The day was dark and I watched people hurry down the street in suits, umbrellas poised above their heads. As we passed a few greasy spoons I caught sight of older couples, sharing pots of tea. I smiled.

At my stop I got off, and stepped into the gloom. It was on these days that I knew most people hated London, but if you weren't caught up in rush hour, it was okay. I quite liked it, I enjoyed the dark days as much as the sunny ones. I made me think of Dickens, as though I was living my life inside a novel set in smoggy London.

I walked to my mother's, and then passed it, carrying on up the street. After about ten minutes, I looked around me. I was almost certain that this was the space. I knelt down and pulled out the chalk, carefully drawing a circle about the width of my hand span onto the concrete. It started to blur in the rain a little, and I traced over it again.

'What are you doing, some Derren Brown shit?'

I glanced up at a teenage boy, who was walking past. I shook my head and he shrugged at me.

'Shit art mate.'

He carried on walking and I breathed out audibly. You can't do anything in London without people watching. I went over the circle one last time, and pocketed the chalk, pulling out the clay vagina. I placed it facing the road, inside the circle.

I stood up and stepped back for a moment, staring at it. My feet apart, my hands on my hips and my head held up, I tilted my chin toward the grey sky.

'Erin?'

I looked down slightly, to see my mother, carrying shopping bags.

‘Are you alright dear?’

I dropped my hands from my hips. ‘Yes. I was just coming to see you.’

‘Oh that’s nice.’ She paused and looked down at my feet, where the vagina sat.

‘What’s that?’

‘What do you think it is?’

‘Well it looks like a...vagina. Is it?’

‘Yes. I made it.’

‘It’s very good. Lifelike. Why is it in the street?’

I paused for a moment. I had never told my mother about the man in the van, and standing in the street in the rain didn’t seem like it was the best place to do it.

‘Shall we go to your house, have a drink?’

She looked from the vagina to me. ‘Yes, okay. Are you going to leave that there?’

I nodded.

‘Alright. Let’s go.’

I sat at the kitchen table and watched my mother put away her shopping, noticing the individual items that she had started to buy. One glass wine bottles, small pots of readymade rice and curry. I felt sad looking at them, though I knew that the fact that I bought full bottles of wine and drank them all to myself was worse. Both of us living alone so close seemed almost bizarre, but the alternative was to be an adult, living at home. Eventually she finished and turned to me.

‘Do you want a glass of wine?’

I nodded, and she brought over a single bottle and glass for me, and then one for herself.

‘We could have had a big bottle, you know.’

‘Yes, but then there’s the drinking too much worry isn’t there? If there’s a full bottle of wine we’ll just get drunk.’

‘Sounds great.’

She smiled, removing the lid and glugging her wine into the glass. ‘So, daughter, why are you making clay vaginas and leaving them on the Bethnal Green Road?’

I laughed, pouring my wine also, ‘Well, that’s two different questions really. I started making clay vaginas because it felt natural to do that. I just started doing it one day, it was as though my gender was coming from my fingertips and turning the clay female.’

‘You know about Judy Chicago right?’

I nodded, ‘Yes. But you know, I didn’t before I started making them. But it’s not a surprise that I might create similar sculptures without being aware of it, has society changed that much?’

She took a sip of wine and shrugged. ‘Since I was your age? Not as much as we may want, but I think it has changed somewhat. I might not see it as much now, because as a young woman, nobody takes you seriously. I know that from experience. I know what it’s like to walk down the street and get whistled at, and when I was young, you couldn’t go into the cinema without a man trying to touch you up. It’s true. We were warned about it often. My mother taught me to quietly and quickly move to another seat. You didn’t say anything because it wasn’t unusual. Today, you have more of a right to say no, and I hope I taught you that.’

‘Do you still get yelled at in the street?’

She laughed and shook her head, 'No. And let me tell you, all of the women that I have heard say that they miss that? What nonsense. If they miss that, then I feel sorry for them. I felt relief when I saw my first wrinkles, I was grateful. But, I still get interrupted in meetings at work, by men my junior in all ways. Younger than me, people that I manage. If you're not careful, they can get promoted above you because they believe that they have the right to interrupt you and so they will. Women aren't brought up thinking that it's okay to do that. If you do it, you're a bitch, you're ballsy. There, you see? You are either spoken of as an animal or you're given male genitals to explain away your ambition. Men are just ambitious, go getters, striving for that promotion. It hasn't been easy getting ahead in my career, and age doesn't change that. But no, I don't get yelled at in the street anymore. It's a delight.'

The rain came down harder outside the window and I watched it, thinking about my chalk outline blurring beneath it.

'I'll tell you what though, younger women have started calling me 'Love' and 'Sweetheart'. That's a weird thing to get used to. I complained the other day, in a café, the woman serving me called me 'Darling' about five times while she was taking money for my coffee. She must have been your age. I couldn't help but wonder what she saw when she looked at me, a lost old woman?'

'You're not old. You're middle aged. Women do that to me as well, I don't really understand why. I find it infuriating, it's patronising, but it doesn't hold the same threat for me as when a man does it.'

She took a glug of wine, and I heard it in her throat, 'It pisses me off.'

'Forced familiarity.'

'Yes. But talk to me about your vaginas. What a sentence to say!'

I laughed. 'I started creating them as a way to explore my gender I suppose. I haven't always spoken to you about my experiences of being a woman. I'm not even sure that I was aware of how different things are until I left school. I don't remember learning anything about women in school, not really. You do a couple of classes on the suffragette movement, but it's not really spoken about as anything but a part of history. It's like 'problem solved'. You don't read anything by women in English Literature, you get the choice between Of Mice and Men and Lord of the Flies. And Shakespeare. Obviously. I really think that it is no wonder that girls leave school being unsure of themselves. What has their gender done? Won the vote? Is that all we can claim? They go on to be afraid of speaking up in meetings, as you say, because they don't know it is appropriate to do that. I've been feeling so frustrated. The thought of marrying Mark and taking his name and being a wife, it seemed so inevitable, it was as though my future was millions of women's histories and I couldn't see past what was waiting for me. It just felt like being a wife. And obviously, Mark wasn't right for me, because I'm sure that many people are happily married without feeling that way. So I began to make the clay vaginas one night, and even if I wasn't sure why at the time, I am now. I was trying to reclaim my gender, to make it mine. To start again, in a way.'

'You did this while you were with Mark?'

I nodded, 'Some, yes. He tried to help once.'

My mother laughed and shook her head. 'That defeats the point, surely?'

I smiled at the memory of it, 'Well, I didn't mind so much. I was happy to have him try to help. I wanted help really, and I thought that he might...get it, perhaps.'

'And?'

'He tried to make a penis.'

We both exploded with laughter at the thought of this, though at the time and in moments since it has never occurred to me as funny. My mother leant over her wine and wiped underneath her eye, though I could see no tears.

‘I just love the thought of you both sitting and watching telly, making clay genitals. If I had a photograph of it I’d frame it.’

I laughed, and then sighed slowly, ‘I shouldn’t think he’ll be up for making clay vaginas with me again, or even talking to me.’

She smiled sadly, and nodded, ‘Yes. So why on the Bethnal Green Road then?’

‘I’ve never told you this. I suppose that I never really thought I would. When I was younger, a child really, a man followed me in a van up that road, asking me if I wanted him to be my boyfriend, wanted to be with him...things like that. I ran home, as fast as I could. I was terrified.’

My mother pushed her glass away from her and pursed her lips together. ‘I wish you had told me when it happened, Erin.’

‘How could I? I honestly thought that it was somehow my fault. I was wearing that tartan skirt, the short one that we got from the market. I really thought that I had brought it on myself.’

She shook her head and looked so sad, that I fought the urge to hug her.

‘Did I bring you up to think that? Tell me honestly, did I?’

‘No,’ I took her hand across the table, and held it firmly, ‘No, you didn’t. But the rest of the world also brings you up, doesn’t it? Society tells you what is right and wrong, and I put on that skirt that day and felt like a woman, for the first time in my life. I wasn’t a woman. I went out wearing it for ten minutes, and in those ten minutes I was treated like a

woman. I felt like I had brought that on myself, but I didn't realise at that age that just because you're a woman it doesn't mean that you deserve that.'

She watched me and sighed, shaking her head.

'So,' I continued, 'I'm using the vaginas' as a way to reclaim my space.'

'Fantastic. I have a few to reclaim myself. And you know, of course Mark didn't understand what you were doing and wasn't able to help you. He has no reference for it, he has no idea what it's like to be a woman.'

'I know.'

She stood up and moved to my side of the table, putting her arms around me and holding me close to her chest. I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent that I knew from childhood, feeling protected by her.

'I'm sorry that you went through that, my love.'

She held me a little longer, and then pushed me away to arm's length, looking down at me. I saw that her eyes had a glossy sheen over them, as though she may cry.

'You don't have any other stories to tell me?'

I thought of the boy up the road, touching my genitals in the garden when I was six years old. I shook my head. She drew me back in for another hug.

## Chapter 54

I got home quickly, the weather meant that the bus was quiet and it seemed like there was nobody on the street. It was about ten at night, and I watched the deserted roads out of the window become small floods. I wasn't tired. As I reached the building where the room that I called home resided, and trudged up the staircase, I realised that my night didn't have to be over. I opened the door of my room, and stepped into the coldness. A couple of hours without the heater on and my damp clothes and hair made it colder, and I quickly flicked it on and took my clothes off in front of it, fighting the urge to dry them over the hot air. I dried my hair with a towel and put on the largest, warmest jumper that I could find. It was one of Mark's old ones that I had used when we were together for cosy nights in. It had fleece on the inside and was like wearing a blanket. For a while I had kept it because it reminded me of him. It still had his scent, and I would bury my face in it when I felt lonely. Now though, I had washed it many times, and his smell had left the fabric. I pulled off my wet jeans and pulled on some dry ones, changing my water logged ballet bumps for heavy boots with a solid sole. I stood in front of the mirror and tied my hair into a bun on top of my head so that it wouldn't spread dampness over my shoulders anymore. I was already starting to feel warmer. The vaginas sat on the beautiful window seat, the reason that I had rented the room. I thought for a moment, counting silently in my head, and then reached for two, one purple, one yellow.

I put on a heavy raincoat and put one into each pocket, raised my hood, and on second thoughts, left the heater on while I locked up the room. I tried to step quietly down the staircase, but my boots weren't made for a light step. I clanged my way down holding my breath, until eventually I was outside again, in the rain, though much better prepared for



it. I had two stops to make. I began to walk toward Mile End tube station, which would take me about ten minutes. I kept my hood over my face, passing groups of teenage boys on bicycles, weaving in and out of the road between cars and laughing loudly. I was afraid, but did my best to hide it, walking as quickly as possible, hands clutching the vaginas as I stepped. They were a comfort. I only heard one shout as I passed them.

‘Nice coat mate!’

I looked down at my coat as I walked, it was oversized and black, covering my shape completely. I realised with interest that they couldn’t tell that I was a woman. They said nothing else and I didn’t turn to look, though felt worried for a while that they might be behind me. Once I reached Mile End, I turned to see nobody in my shadow. I thundered down the concrete steps, welcoming the warm wind that greeted me at the bottom. The tube station was empty, and the train came quickly and I found a carriage that meant I could be all alone. I still wore my hood up, pleased with my anonymity, excited at being unrecognisable for an evening. The next stop was the one I wanted, Bethnal Green station. I stood up and stepped off the train, making my way up the curved staircase and pausing for a moment to look at the plaque that remembered those who died in the Bethnal Green shelter in 1943. I always stopped to look at this when I got off at this tube station. I knew that if I were in such a tragedy, I would want somebody to do the same for me.

My mother’s house was only across the busy road, which was quieter in the rain and dark. I quickly stepped across it without waiting for the go ahead from a light, and made my way up her front garden, to her front door. There were no lights on, nothing that seemed to be hidden by curtains. I tried to open the door as quietly as I could, using my spare key. It creaked slightly as I did so and I fought the urge to say ‘Sshhh’ to it, as though that would make a difference. I trod as lightly as I could through her hallway, to the kitchen, and

eventually the back door. Beside it she had lined up three small empty bottles of the wine that we had drunk earlier, and I noticed with surprise she had drunk another alone once I had left. The backdoor key was already in the lock, and I turned it and stepped out into the darkness. Without the traffic and street lamps, the back garden looked very different to the front. I had to steel myself for a moment, trying to be brave against the garden I would never have gone up alone in the dark when I was a child. Being at your mother's house can take you back to childhood instantly. The garden was rectangular, with large trees in the middle, making a barrier so that you couldn't see the end from the house. I began to walk toward them, trying to keep my eyes focused, ignoring the strange shapes that surrounded me. I heard sirens in the background, and felt a little comforted; they told me that I was still in London. As I arrived at the tall trees that reached into the dark clouded sky, I stepped past them. There it was, the concrete area of my childhood garden that had been the location of the moment of my first sexual experience. I walked toward it, and knelt down in the wet, closing my eyes for a moment, remembering the boy from the up the road, feeling his mouth on my stomach. I opened them again and shook my head. The chalk wouldn't stay, there was no point in circling it here. I pulled out the vagina and placed it squarely in the middle of the space. I took a deep breath in and closed my eyes. This was no longer a space where something confusing and painful had happened to me. It was something else now. It was a part of my childhood garden again, a piece that I had reclaimed for myself as a woman. I opened my eyes and smiled at the concrete. I had finally moved on.

I crept back down the garden, through my mother's house and carefully locked the front door again, tiptoeing away in case she woke up to hear steps. When I got past the gate I

checked my phone. It was almost eleven, I had to be fast getting to the next place before it closed.

I ran across the road and back down the steps at Bethnal Green tube station, hearing the train arriving as I was still hurrying down. Eventually I reached the doors just as they were about to close and jumped on, almost falling into the seats as it lurched forward.

‘Shit.’

‘Erin?’

I paused for a moment. I knew that voice. I turned to see Mark and a woman that I didn’t recognise, sitting on the seats opposite me, holding hands.

‘Hi!’

Mark looked at me with surprise, his eyes wide. I sat down and caught a glimpse of myself in the window opposite. My hood was still up, and mascara had dripped from my eyes in the rain, spreading onto my cheeks.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded enthusiastically, smiling.

‘This is...Erin. Erin, this is Sarah.’

I gave a half-hearted wave and smiled even wider, knowing that the pause when introducing me meant that he wasn’t certain he wanted to admit that he had been engaged to someone in this state. Sarah’s face almost crumbled with relief before me, and I laughed nervously.

‘I got caught in the rain.’

‘Nice to meet you, Erin.’

‘You too. Where are you off to then?’ I tried my best to look at them both as I was talking, trying to force normality into the situation.

'We're just heading to Sarah's parent's house.'

'Oh? Will they still be awake?'

Sarah grinned, 'My sister has just gone into labour! She's having a home birth.' She squeezed Mark's hand and they both wrinkled their noses in excitement.

'Gosh. Good luck to her, then.'

The train slowed down and I stood up, making sure that my hood was still up around my head. I nodded to both of them, noticing with irritation that Mark looked mildly concerned for me.

'This is my stop. Nice to see you. Have a great...birth.'

'Goodbye Erin,' Mark smiled sadly at me.

'It was lovely meeting you, Erin.'

The doors opened quickly and I gratefully stepped off, hearing Sarah behind me just before they closed again.

'She seems sweet.'

I rolled my eyes as I walked away. I could do without that.

The escalator was still open and running, and I stood behind a sloppily kissing couple. They were taking up both sides of the step, and if I didn't have to do something at the top that meant I'd rather they weren't there, I would have told them off. As we reached the top I could see that they weren't going to step off, and imagined them falling onto the floor, unaware.

'Sorry to interrupt, but...'

The man turned to look at me and tutted, 'Alright, we're getting off.'

'Yeah I can see that. You're at the end of the escalator though.'

‘Very funny.’

They stepped off and I waited for a moment, checking that there was nobody coming up or round the corner. When I was satisfied, I knelt down and drew my chalk circle on the floor, and then placed the remaining vagina in the centre of it. I stood up and looked at it, adopting my power pose once more. I would not be scared from a tube station by a man who wouldn’t take no for an answer. This was my space. This was a space for woman.

## Chapter 55

‘You’re late,’ Sofia answered the door and rolled her eyes at me, leaving it open and walking down her corridor.

‘Yes, I was at my Mothers,’ I followed her, sighing. I wouldn’t have bothered coming at all if I had known that she would be in this mood. I walked into the living room, to see a middle aged, smartly dressed couple sitting on the sofa, clutching mugs of tea. It was getting late, I was surprised that they were still awake.

‘Oh...hello.’

Sofia grinned at me, her mood suddenly turning from sour to delightful. I was increasingly aware that my hair was dripping onto the carpet, wet from the rain.

‘This is Erin.’

I gave a small wave, unsure of what to do.

‘These are my parents, Sally and Geoff.’

‘Hello Erin, nice to meet you,’ Sofia’s father stretched out a hand and I stepped forward to shake it, and then smiled at her mother, who indicated her tea and nodded.

‘Raining out, is it?’

I smiled, ‘Yes. I bet the weather is better in South Africa?’

They both nodded. Sofia’s mother looked at Sofia sternly and hissed, ‘Get your friend a towel, she’s soaking wet!’

Sofia walked out of the room, glancing at me and frowning as though I had said it myself.

Her father sat forward slightly, ‘I would apologise for my daughter but –’

'You won't.' Her mother finished the sentence for him. He nodded and sat back again.

'So you and Sofia are good friends?'

I smiled awkwardly. I supposed that we were. 'Yes.'

'And she tells me that you are a carer?'

I nodded again.

'A bold career.'

'A very bold career,' Sofia's father agreed.

I removed my wet coat and sat down on a chair opposite them, placing it carefully on the arm beside me. They both watched me do this with interest.

'Is it?'

Her father nodded and her mother took a sip of tea, 'Oh yes, to be a carer you have to...care, don't you? It says a lot about a person. Of course, Sofia runs that charity shop and well, we can see why you are friends. You both have that caring element, that nature of empathy.'

I smiled. Sofia came back in with a towel and passed it to me. I pulled it over my shoulders, unsure of the correct etiquette for the late night damp parent meeting situation that I found myself in.

'So!' Her father grinned, 'Has Sofia told you her news?'

I glanced at Sofia who widened her eyes at me, and smiled slowly and apologetically.

'She's coming home with us!'

'To South Africa?'

'Yes,' Sofia answered carefully.

'Great. For how long?'

There was a pause in the room, as though time had stopped momentarily. Her mother leaned forward slightly and nodded at me, as though she thought I already knew.

‘Well, for good, dear.’

‘Oh...’ I looked at Sofia, feeling the damp from my hair spread from the towel to my shoulders. Sofia looked around the room.

‘In the next few days really, I need to start packing up this stuff.’

‘When did you decide this?’

‘I don’t-’

Her mother held up her hand to silence her and smiled broadly, ‘It’s always been Sofia’s plan, hasn’t she talked about it? She’s got a life waiting for her in South Africa, a job, everything.’

‘Oh.’

Sofia frowned. ‘Will you come and help me get some drinks, Erin?’

‘Alright.’

We stood up and walked into her kitchen, and I waited for her to speak.

‘I’m sorry Erin, this must be a pretty weird visit. I should have told you sooner, but I didn’t really know how.’

I nodded and leant against her fridge, seeing that she had already begun to pack away the plates into boxes. ‘It’s alright. It’s your life. It is a surprise, I won’t lie to you.’

‘I decided when we had that falling out. I sort of thought, if we could make it work, then I would stay. But, you seemed so certain that it wasn’t to be. I made the decision pretty quickly after that.’

We looked at each other for a beat too long, and I shook my head. ‘Sofia, please don’t put that immense amount of pressure on me.’



She frowned, 'I'm not.'

'Yes you are. You're basically saying that it's up to me, but if you stayed just for me, don't you think that our whole friendship would crumble under the pressure?'

'I'm not staying, Erin. Not at all.'

I nodded, and folded my arms. I wasn't going to let her emotionally blackmail me.

'And what about your job, the shop?'

'So what about it? They'll find another manager. Maybe you should do it.'

I shrugged, 'I'll think about it. Well, Sofia, I'll miss you. I will. It's late, I'm cold, you've got your parents in the next room listening to our conversation...I'm going to head off. Can I see you before you go?'

She smiled sadly and nodded, and then held out her arms. I moved toward her and hugged her, feeling the towel fall from my shoulders onto the floor. We stood in the kitchen, hugging each other for a while, unaware of the parents that spoke in hushed tones in the living room. I knew, somehow, that really I wouldn't see Sofia again, that she didn't intend to contact me to say goodbye. I felt that the day that she was leaving had been muddled slightly, that she would go without saying anything else.

'I'm not afraid of leaving,' she said into my hair, more for her benefit than for mine, 'But I will miss everything that I have here.'

Rubbing her back with my hand I pulled away, so that we were standing face to face. I looked at her bright green eyes and pinned back red hair, her sharp cheekbones. We leaned in and kissed each other, firm with closed mouths. A goodbye kiss. She pulled back afterward and leant her forehead against mine.

'I have something you might find interesting.'

She walked over to the fridge and pulled a newspaper from the top. Beneath it sat the book, *Little Women*. She picked it up, visibly heavy, and brought it down to her chest. She smiled at me. 'You didn't do it then,'

I shook my head, and sighed, 'I couldn't find anything. Or at least, life got on top of me. Other things got in the way.'

She smiled and pushed the book into me, 'I'll do it then.'

'From South Africa?'

'No. Now. It belongs to you, Erin. Open it.'

I opened the leather bound front cover to see that she had written my name beneath Rose Sanderson's, and today's date. She stared at it.

'It'll fade though, that writing. Pencil. Maybe one day someone will try and return it to you again.'

I smiled at her gesture, and reached my hand out, squeezing her on the shoulder. We said nothing.

'That story, about you? What was that?'

I shrugged. 'Something to impress you? I don't know. I see a counsellor. It's something that she asked me to do. Get rid of all the...crap.'

'You see someone?'

I nodded, and she raised her eyebrows slowly, her expression a mixture of surprise and sorrow.

'I see someone. I did, anyway. They,' she gestured to the wall, meaning her parents behind it, 'Pay for it.'

The book felt heavy in my arms and I nodded again, 'The unexamined life is not worth living, right?'

She stared at me, a beat too long. 'I have no idea.'

I went into the living room and picked up my wet coat, and shook her parents' hands before I left. Her mother leaned into me conspiratorially, and held my hand for a moment too long. 'Thank you for looking after Sofia. She struggles to make friends, always has.'

I shook my head, and let go of her hand. Sofia walked me to the front door, and I stepped into the darkness and the rain, holding my coat over my head.

'Goodbye Sofia.'

She gave a small wave, and I turned and walked away from her front door. After about ten steps I turned around, to look back. She was not standing there as I had expected, she had shut the front door behind me. I felt a sadness fill my body in ripples and turned back into the rain, quickening my step so that I could get home faster. I wondered if she was watching me from a window. I hoped so, I needed to pretend that she was for my own sake.

## Chapter 56

I woke up the next morning, and it felt early. The sun was shining through the window, between the curtains that I had forgotten to close. It fell on my face and warmed it, and I pushed back the covers letting it cover my shoulders. It was the warmest that I had felt in days. I checked my phone, it was quarter past eight. Not so early, then. I lay back and logged onto my emails, and with surprise noticed that the first one was from Sofia. I clicked into it, and read the only line in it,

*Here's an odd thing, a friend just sent me this (see attachment), and just wrote 'Yes!' It makes me happy. I'll miss you.*

Intrigued, I clicked onto the attachment. It was the Liverpool Street station clay vagina, still circled in chalk. I grinned. It couldn't possibly still be there, not now, after rush hour had hit. I clicked reply.

*This makes me happy too. Best of luck with everything Sofia.*

I knew that this sign off was a way of underlining the friendship, and before I sent it, I considered it for a moment. Should I put something softer, keep the airways of our relationship clear for more? I decided against it, clicking send. It disappeared through the air, back to Sofia, who I imagined read it, shrugged, and turned back to packing.

I saved the photograph of the vagina onto my phone, a little reminder of my night, and got up, pulling on jeans and the jumper that I had worn before, now dry. I looked in the mirror. I should shower, my hair was fluffy and kinked from where I had slept with it damp, and I tried to tame it for a while, before tying it up again. I had two more visits to make

before my project was complete. I stretched my hands up toward the sky and closed my eyes, rolling my shoulders and arms back. I thought about Mark, and wondered if he was still up, pacing about a living room somewhere, waiting for a birth, or if he was holding the baby with Sarah, both of them wrinkling their noses at each other and smiling widely, silently pretending that it was their own. I found myself smiling at the thought. I wasn't sure that I even wanted children. For the first time, I knew that I had done exactly the right thing in breaking off our engagement, in cancelling our life together. If I had stayed, I wouldn't have just been lying to myself, but denying him the life that he had imagined for himself.

I stared at the two remaining clay vaginas that sat on my window ledge, the copy of *Little Women* sat next to them. My copy. Sofia had found the book back in the shop, but hadn't mentioned it. Why not? She knew she was leaving. Maybe I should have given her something. Our confessions that we both saw somebody interested me. I saw a counsellor, but that was free. Did she see a psychiatrist? Why did her parents have to pay? I played back some of our conversations, her confidence that dipped and swelled before me. Her knack for lying.

I walked over to the vaginas. One was the first that I had ever made, and matched my skin colour. It was delicately moulded, showing the care that I had taken with my first experimentation. The second was larger and purple, the lips reaching toward the sky. It was more abstract, and was made later when I was ready to expand my collection. I carefully placed one in each pocket, and put my coat on over the top, making my way out of the door.

The first journey that I had to make was as familiar to me as the route to my mother's house. I took the heaving tube to London Bridge, and walked past the dungeons, smiling

politely at the men and women covered in blood, beckoning me in. I followed the queue around the corner, walking quickly through a small park. There were a group of women there, exercising in the cold sunshine. I was impressed with their motivation, and envious that they had the desire to get up early to work out. I realised for a second how I must look next to them, just out of bed, but I shook my head hard to banish the thought. I knew nothing of their personal lives, I refused to compare myself to anyone again. I walked quicker, through the park, and onto the Tower Bridge road. There it was, the coffee shop that I had gotten up at five in the morning for, every day of the week. I smiled in spite of myself, wondering who might be there that I recognised. As I pushed open the door, I realised that nobody was there that I knew at all. The barista glanced up at me, giving a brief smile that dropped as quickly as it had arrived. I wondered if he had put 'Friendly customer service' down on his CV when applying for the role. I arrived at the counter and smiled widely.

'Hi, can I have a flat white please?'

He nodded, and turned to the coffee machine in silence.

'Are you having a good day?' I looked around, seeing that he was alone.

'Someone called in sick, so I'm on my own. I'm not happy about it.'

'Oh. At least you can play whatever music you like.'

'I suppose so. I like death metal though. It's not really the right setting.'

I laughed, and he glanced at me while frothing the milk, and gave a weak smile.

'I used to work here, you know.'

'Oh yeah? You want to help me out?'

I shook my head, and took out my purse, 'No thanks, I'm just here for a coffee.'

'Shame.'

He poured the milk carefully into the cup and placed it on a saucer in front of me.

‘You used to work here, don’t worry about it. You can have it on the house.’

I paused, the rules about that had been strict when I worked there. But then, I no longer had to deal with that. I took the cost of the coffee out of my purse and dropped the coins into the tip jar, in case it made a difference later on. The barista watched me, and then raised his eyebrows and shrugged. I took my coffee and chose a seat in the only place that was slightly hidden from the counter, right beside it. The barista could see my head, but not my body, table, or coffee. I sat for a while, listening to the barista tap his fingers on the counter. I watched him playing with his phone, his full attention on a game. My body tingled with mild irritation. If I were working here still, I would have asked him to re-stock anything, to put his phone away. But, I didn’t, and I needed his attention to be somewhere else. I pulled the purple vagina from my pocket, and placed it in front of my coffee. I drew no chalk outline, I wasn’t going to deface the café’s property. I closed my eyes and thought about the men that cooed over me as I gave them their order, the patting of hands and murmurings of ‘Good girl’. This was no longer their domain.

I drank my coffee quickly, and stood up, thanking the distracted barista. He nodded at me, silent. As I walked out, he called after me.

‘Hey! You forgot your...thing...’

I shook my head, stepping outside, ‘No, I didn’t.’

I walked hurriedly down the road to London Bridge, and paused when I got there. My writing was still in my bag, some of it handwritten, some of it typed, all of it waiting for something. What was I waiting for exactly? There must have been a reason that Dawn hadn’t asked me to share it with her. Maybe I hadn’t put myself out there enough, hadn’t

offered it up to her in the right way. I leaned against the cast iron railings and stared at the water below. I pulled out the wedge of paper and held it in my hands, balancing it on the edge of the barriers.

‘Don’t even think about it.’

I turned to see a policewoman, raising her eyebrows at me.

‘Think about what?’

‘Are you going to drop that in the river?’

I laughed, I wasn’t even sure that I was. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, just don’t. It’s littering, after all. The fact that it’s water doesn’t make a difference.’

I pulled the wedge back toward my chest and held it tight. It was, after all, the terrible memories of things that had really happened. Would throwing them over the edge change the fact that those moments took place? Would it make me feel any better? I smiled at the policewoman and dipped my head forward, ‘I’m not going to throw them anywhere. Honestly. I’m going to go away, and type them up. I’m going to share them. They might help someone.’

She shrugged in response, ‘Do whatever you like.’



## Chapter 57

My last stop was the one that I felt the most anxiety about. If there were people there, it would be difficult, and I began to worry on the bus ride over. The bus was busy, mostly with suits, all stood clumped together, trying not to crease their material. All of them had headphones in, all the same type but varying in colours. I watched them, interested. A man stood beside me, listening to music so loud that I could hear it pumping from his ears. It sounded like dance music, and I glanced at him, intrigued at the person that listens to dance music in the morning. He caught me looking at him, and winked. I rolled my eyes and turned them to the front. I should have known better than that.

As the bus reached my stop I began to panic. What if there were somebody there? What would be my excuse for being there? I stood up and squeezed passed the pinstripes, stepping into the cool air. The sky had begun to change from bright to darker, and rain was starting to threaten. I walked quickly, down the street and round the corner, and stopped when I saw it, at the end of the row of terraced houses. There was no car in the driveway, and I let out a sigh, feeling braver. I began to take steps toward the house, noticing how good the garden looked for the time of year. It was being well cared for. I walked with purpose, and turned once I got to the driveway, arriving at the door. I glanced at the windows, but there didn't seem to be any life inside at all. I knelt down, and placed the vagina facing the door, smiling. I stood up and quickly left, back up the driveway, onto the safety of the street. I breathed out audibly, and suddenly stopped, hearing the front door.

'Erin?'

I turned to see Mark, standing before the vagina, looking at me. He took a step forward, and knocked it, noticing that it was by his feet. He stooped to pick it up, and looked at it in his hand, his face breaking out into a smile.

‘Did you leave this here?’

I nodded, placing a hand over my chest, suddenly aware that I was wearing the same clothes as the night before. He looked up at me, and then back at the vagina, laughing, ‘It’s funny, I was thinking about these the other night.’

‘You were?’

He nodded, and I saw that he was happier to see me than he had been before. ‘Yes. Isn’t that odd?’

I took a step toward him. Had he forgiven me? ‘You seem happy to see me, Mark. I’m sort of surprised!’

He grinned at me, ‘I have some news. Sarah’s pregnant.’

‘Oh wow, congratulations!’ The words had come out sounding entirely genuine, and I noticed with pleasure, that they were. I walked toward him and held my hand out, offering it to him. He took it, and squeezed it gently.

‘You were right, you know. We weren’t being ourselves at the end. I didn’t want to acknowledge it, but I think that it’s true.’

‘Let Sarah know that I’m really pleased for you. I really am.’

He nodded, and looked back to the clay vagina he was holding, letting out a small laugh, ‘Thank you for dropping this off Erin. I don’t know exactly why you did, but for me it’s a good memory of what was a great relationship.’

I found myself nodding to him, ‘I wanted to change this space. I don’t want this to be somewhere that has bad memories, somewhere that I can’t...be.’

He shook his head, 'And it isn't. Even if we don't talk, we can still be friends right? If that's what this means, that's okay with me.' He stepped forward into the garden, and knelt down, making a space in the dirt. He placed the clay vagina in middle of the flowerbed, and stood up, dusting off his hands. 'There.'

'What will Sarah think of that?'

He looked at it again and shrugged, 'I have no idea.'

I smiled, 'I'll see you.'

I walked back up the road, and heard the front door click. I breathed in deeply, closing my eyes as I stepped. I was in control of my space.

The End

## A Contribution to the Narrative of Women's Literature: Themes from The Second Space - The Assumption of Autobiographical Writing and the Label of Women's Fiction

### **Chapter 1 – Seizing *The Second Space*; Common Themes within Women's Writing, Refuting the Assumption that Women's Work is Autobiographical**

'The truth is that even the publishing industry and the media are convinced of this commonplace; both tend to shut women who write away in a literary gynaeceum.'

(Flood, *Elena Ferrante Pours Scorn on Speculation She Could be a Man*)

'It's yours. Seize your space.'

(Brookes, *Margaret Atwood: 'I have a big following among the biogeeks'*)

'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) is the concept that women exist within a different space in a patriarchal society to men. It is the idea that women have a 'different perspective' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) on life, due to the way that they are responded to in society. To differentiate between the novel and the concept within this study, the title of the novel will be shown in italics. The concept of 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) is derived from a discussion between Siri Hustvedt, Katharina Grosse and Nicola Graef entitled *Women in the Arts*:

'There is an advantage to being in a shadow world...because you can get to know the second space...We grow up with it, we know it inside out, but we know it from a different perspective. We know it from a perspective that men don't know it from, and minorities know it from this perspective as well.'

(Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15, *Me Collectors Room*)

This notion resonated with me as a woman and writer, and encompassed the subject matter of my novel. The conversation was also relevant to this work as it was between female creatives. My aim is to contribute to the knowledge of women's writing and the creative process by acknowledging the existence and value of 'The Second Space' (Grosse,

10:40 – 11:15), and refuting the assumption that fiction written by women is ‘thinly disguised autobiographical writing’ (Gray). The source of this investigation is an awareness that female authors’ novels are often categorised under the term women’s fiction due to common themes within their work. Further research confirmed that women’s writing is also often assumed to be autobiographical. As a female author I am increasingly aware of the way in which my work may be received due to my gender, and this research felt vital to my career as a writer.

The investigation into the labels ‘autobiographical’ and ‘women’s fiction’ takes place within the concept of ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15), and this is primarily the focus of this study. Due to the potential breadth of discussion that ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) theory could involve, the concept of ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) could form the basis for a further study. Research has been concentrated on the following two areas:

- i. A demonstration that while there may be an ‘incorporation of reality into fiction’ (Ibsen, 7) being a female author inspired by reality does not automatically mean that a novel is autobiographical, discussing female only themes.
- ii. A comparison of common themes written about by myself and other female authors, featuring female protagonists experiencing life within a patriarchal society. These authors are writing from ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) and are contributing women’s narrative to literature.

## i. Selected Research Sources

I have considered reviews and articles of both male and female authors' work to draw comparisons between the two and the way in which they are received. I have compared my own novel and themes to three main creative texts; Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment* (2005), Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1982), and Miranda July's *The First Bad Man* (2015). These texts all focus on stories of a female protagonist and her journey through a situation. They address similar themes to my own work: the relationships between women, the way women are treated in society, and overall a way of coping with being treated differently as a result of gender. I have also considered other works of fiction by female authors, such as *How to be Both* (2015) by Ali Smith, and *The Millstone* (1968) by Margaret Drabble, which are relevant to this study as they feature strong female protagonists. However, these novels do not form part of this study.

Other texts that supported this study are articles and interviews from *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Monthly*, *Jezebel*, *The Paris Review*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Telegraph*, *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Writer's Digest*. These publications interview authors I have considered, such as Elena Ferrante, and are relevant for this reason. This list is not exhaustive, and there are also online articles and blog entries from contemporary authors which I have taken into account. These sources reflect the current trends and issues for women in the literary world, and are a good representation of the way women's fiction is received. They include the opinions of female authors, such as Randy Susan Meyers, who have written articles about the subjects under discussion. Feminist critical texts, including Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) are used to clarify the issues of a patriarchal society. Greer has been

chosen as validation for Firestone's theories as she is a better known and still current feminist. While I am aware of other relevant feminist academics, such as Hélène Cixous, it is Firestone who enabled me to develop *The Second Space* as I considered her theories on the nuclear family.

Cixous's feminist literary theory, *écriture féminine* (*Penguin Reference Dictionary*, 1999), focuses on gender differences in language, and more specifically, French language. 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) concept covers a woman's perception of the world. Therefore, this study discusses 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) as a whole, investigating common themes within 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15), including, but not limited to, language. While Cixous's theory opens an interesting avenue for further study, and in particular an investigation into the language of 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15), it would not directly contribute to this paper.

Critical texts on writing, such as Carla Kaplan's *The Erotic's of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (1996), Sean Burke's *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* (1995), Micaela Maftai's *The Fiction of Autobiography* (2013), and Margaret Atwood's *On Writers and Writing* (2002) are used to further discussion and understanding of the creative writing process. My research has included writers such as Kristine Ibsen, author of *The Other Mirror: Women's Narrative in Mexico* (1997), who have written about women's narrative and the way in which it has been received, reference will be made to the relevant passages.

## ii. Writing Erin

The core ideas in Shulamith Firestone's feminist manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex*, was key to formulating elements of the plot for my novel *The Second Space*. Firestone believed that the nuclear family was responsible for a patriarchal society. Her work focused on the tyranny of the family for women, and her ideas about the nuclear family and pansexuality strengthened the plot point that I developed for the story, such as Erin's family background as an only child, being brought up without a father, and her discovery of her pansexual identity. Part of Firestone's dialectic is the observation that children, as well as women, are also persecuted and oppressed but neither this, nor Firestone's feminist utopia, will form part of this study. The points that she raises and observations that she makes within her manifesto are as relevant today as when the book was written (1970), and the idea of the nuclear family creating a patriarchal hierarchy is a valid argument supported by Greer ('Obviously any woman who thinks in the simplest terms of liberating herself to enjoy life and create expression for her own potential cannot accept such a role' (Greer, 261)).

While writing and planning the novel I read other works of fiction by women, featuring female protagonists. I discovered writers such as Margaret Drabble, who inspired my female characters with her strong female voices. My overview of the novel at the start of writing was clear; I wanted to create a piece of fiction with elements of realism, and a female character as the protagonist. The novel, at the time titled *Green Waters*, a name derived from the meaning of the name Erin, was to be a shared journey between the protagonist and myself. From the start of the novel I intended the writing process and development of Erin's character to mirror my own life, and in this sense, her journey of self-



identity was to be my own. Because of this, some of the writing is derived from real experience. However, *The Second Space* is a fictional novel, and though parts of the story draw inspiration from reality, it is not autobiographical.

A quarter of the way through the novel I began to see the plotline less clearly than I had originally. I decided to create a male character, an elderly hoarder called John, with whom Erin would discover and come to share stories. While John was an interesting character to write, his and Erin's stories merged awkwardly, and peer review on the first draft encouraged me to remove him from the story. This did not happen until the third draft of the novel, when I too began to see the benefit of removing his plotline. I believe that peer review is a useful tool for a writer, but one also has to consider one's own approach to the novel that one has created.

The first critical research idea that I explored was based around Erin's sexual fantasies. I was interested in the 'male gaze' (Mulvey) and the idea of feminist pornography as art. This interest and research led me to create my own artwork. I began to create clay vaginas, as Erin does. This began organically, as it does for Erin, and so demonstrated an element of realism within the novel. It was through their creation and discussion of them with peers that I discovered Judy Chicago. I took a research trip to the Brooklyn Museum, New York, to view *The Dinner Party*, Chicago's feminist artwork. I also read her autobiography, *Through the Flower*, in which she details the issues that she faced as a female artist. This caused me to question the position of female writers in the literary world. Through my research into literature and art, I was led to Siri Hustvedt's novel *The Blazing World*, and ultimately to the discussion that gave me the final title for my novel, between Hustvedt and Katharina Grosse entitled *Women in the Arts*.

The more research I did the clearer my novel became. The realisation of the title of *The Second Space* was a pivotal moment for both the novel and my research, as it helped me to realise not only the story that I ultimately wanted to tell, but gave me the ability to see and acknowledge the space that I, as a female author and woman, am living in. The more evidence that I gathered for my study the angrier I became at the patriarchal society in which I would be attempting to have my work published. This helped me to realise the necessity and value of a feminist novel and a wider acknowledgment of 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15). I intend that this study lead to this acknowledgment.

When writing *The Second Space* my intention was to create a realistic portrayal of a woman living in a patriarchal society in the Western world. I wanted it to be an unflinching portrayal of the everyday occurrence of sexism and sexual harassment. My aim was to create a life recognisable to other women, and to show the reality of surviving in 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15).

While reading other novels featuring female protagonists I noticed the common themes between my novel and theirs. I realised that these were not specific to female authors, and upon further research saw the difference in response to these works written by women and those written by men. The suggestion that women's work on these common themes was autobiographical came up repeatedly, and though my own work was inspired by moments of reality, I had written a fictional novel. I realised that were my novel to be published, it could automatically be classified as women's fiction due to my gender, and regarded as autobiographical. This bias led to the study and discussion that forms my critical thesis.

As a female author I am aware that my creative journey will differ from my male peers, but I want to be able to write and to have my work acknowledged as a contribution

to the literary landscape without the necessity for a pseudonym or consideration for concealing my gender. The themes that I choose to write about should advance the narrative of women's lives, and not be labelled as women's fiction, and thus devalued, due to my gender.

## **Chapter 2 – Gender and the Literary World: Women’s Fiction and Autobiographical**

### **Writing**

‘It’s hard to ignore the sheer volume of thinly disguised autobiographical writing from women on small-scale domestic themes such as motherhood, boyfriend troubles and tiny family dramas. These writers appear to have forgotten the fundamental imperative of fiction writing. It’s called making stuff up.’ (Gray)

The suggestion that women’s writing is autobiographical, due to ‘small-scale domestic themes’ (Gray) is one that female authors have often faced, as evidenced by this study. Implying, as Gray’s quote above does, that the ‘tiny family dramas’ of a woman’s life are not only ‘small-scale’ but that a female writer has no ability to make ‘things up’, is not just insulting and patronising to women as a whole, but incorrect and reductive to the advancement of women’s writing in literature. Gray’s quote is included in this study as she is an author and judge of the Orange Prize Longlist, and therefore one of the people responsible for allowing women’s writing into the main domain of the literary world. As a female writer, she is ironically one of the people who might experience the negative implications of her article in *The Guardian*, that women’s writing is devalued as result of these themes. By comparing common themes in my own novel, *The Second Space*, and three other novels by women, my argument is that while there are common themes within women’s writing, these should not be labelled as ‘women’s subjects’ (Goldstein, 8:37). The themes to be discussed are of creative and literary value, and should not be assumed to be autobiographical due to the gender of the author.

My primary literary source is Elena Ferrante and her novel *The Days of Abandonment*. This is not only because of the main themes that flow throughout the book and their relation to

*The Second Space*, but also because Ferrante has remained elusive as an author, and yet has still had to face questions regarding her gender and assumptions that her work is autobiographical. Ferrante is Italian, and she is living in a Western patriarchal society, therefore is relevant to this study.

### i. The Assumption of Autobiographical Writing

‘Women’s literature is often assumed to be autobiographical, an accusation that has frequently been a pretext for the exclusion of their work from the canon.’ (Ibsen, 7)

It is my premise that as women are writing from ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15), a space not usually acknowledged by the male dominated literary world, their writing is ‘assumed to be autobiographical’ (Ibsen, 7). Women’s writing being ‘assumed to be autobiographical’ (Ibsen, 7) is, as suggested by Gray, related to the themes that are common within their work, such as domesticity. As an author of a novel discussing female identity, I do not want my work to be automatically excluded from the literary world based on either my gender, or the themes within my writing. It is important that my work is received fairly by readers and critics, and not sidelined automatically.

‘While the male newcomer is anxiously striving after originality as so to claim his canonical place, the female author perceives that very tradition as being constructed precisely in terms of her exclusion.’ (Burke, 146)

The suggestion is that the tradition of the literary canon has the potential to be viewed by female authors as an exclusive construct, implying that women have more to consider when writing. Where a man can focus on the ‘originality’ (Burke, 146) of his work alone, the female author has to consider issues such as acceptance into the literary world, the possibility of having to write under a pseudonym, and even the assumption that their work is autobiographical due to the themes that the author has chosen to write about.

Established authors, such as Margaret Atwood, still face criticism and the speculation that their work is autobiographical late in their careers, as in this paper by Katarína Labudová, an academic specialising in Atwood:

'*Cat's Eye* can be read as a 'retrospective' of Atwood's earlier works employing autobiographical features, e.g. *Surfacing*, which takes a form of a first person narration of a female artist with autobiographical references to Atwood's childhood and especially to the same parent and brother figures as in *Cat's Eye*.'

(Labudová)

By using a 'first person narration of a female artist' (Labudová), Atwood's work is here assumed to be autobiographical due to the similarity between herself, a female author, and the narrator of her fiction. Links between this and any supposed 'references' (Labudová) to her childhood are then easy to presume, whether or not Atwood is in fact using her childhood or family as autobiographical material. Atwood does use locations that she knows well as the setting for her fiction, and this lends an authenticity to her writing, as in this example from her novel *Cat's Eye*:

'The old emptiness of Toronto is gone. Now it's chock full: Toronto's bloating itself to death, that much is clear...Every building I pass down here among the warehouses seems to cry Renovate me! Renovate me!...I hit the corner of King and Spadina, walk north. This used to be where you came to get wholesale clothing, and it still is; but the old Jewish delis are disappearing, replaced by Chinese emporia, wicker furniture, cutwork tablecloths, bamboo wind chimes.' (49)

Atwood's narrative describes Toronto as a setting not only with general place markers, such as street names, but also with a sense of history and how the area has changed in recent times. Robert Potts, Managing Editor of the Times Literary Supplement and a member of the literary world, lingers on this, as though it demonstrates the idea that female authors are assumed to write fiction autobiographically:

'In Atwood's novels, topography is rendered with absolute fidelity: Toronto is the location for several of them, and, apart from an early draft of her first novel - where she invented the Canadian locations - when no one seemed to take Canadian-based fiction seriously, the roads, ravines and bridges are all identifiable. She has said: 'The places in my novels are

often real. The people and the experiences are imaginary,' though this is, arguably, a trifle disingenuous.'  
(Potts)

Potts says no more about this. He neither refers to the fact that he has described Atwood's explanation as 'disingenuous' (Potts), nor supports it with any other statements or examples. It is what it is, the assumption that even though Atwood is an internationally acclaimed bestselling author, her writing must be drawn from her own life experiences as opposed to a work of fiction. This small statement, added onto the end of Atwood's own description of her methodology is an example of the way that female authors' work can be reviewed.

The location for *The Second Space* is East London, and primarily, Bow. Having lived in Bow, I know the streets that surround the area, and more importantly, the atmosphere. The section in which Erin puts her hood up and gets mistaken for a man while walking the streets is directly influenced by the feeling that I experienced on occasion in this area (*The Second Space*, 269). I do not believe that this makes the writing, or naming it as fiction, 'disingenuous' (Potts).

Ferrante is a prime example of a female author who faces questioning about her personal life. She has never been seen, spoken to, or accessed by anybody but a select few at her Italian publishers. Nobody knows her real name, and she has answered few questions via letter and email, preferring to stay within the shadows of the modern literary world. As with Atwood, Ferrante uses knowledge of location in her fiction. Naples is a common location in her novels and short stories, and in the brief interview questions that Ferrante has responded to, she has confirmed that she knows Naples well and has lived there:

'I write what I know but I nurse this material in a disorderly way—I can only extract the story, invent it, if it appears blurred. For that reason,



almost all of my books, even if they unfold today or are set in different cities, have Neapolitan roots.'

(Schappel)

Ferrante here discusses 'honest writing' (Schappel), and admits that her experiences of the location of Naples has an effect on her work. By writing what she knows, she draws, as Atwood does, and I have, from her own experience of location. However, to recognise that Ferrante's writing comes from genuine roots of experience is not to say that her work is autobiographical.

One of the themes that Gray has devalued as 'small-scale' 'thinly disguised autobiographical writing' is motherhood. Ferrante herself has said that:

'The roles of daughters and mothers are central to my books; sometimes I think I haven't written about anything else.'  
(Donadio)

In addition, women play a big role in her fiction, discussing themes of heartache at the expectations of gender, and at the heart of all of her writing, self-identity. Ferrante's novels, though often focusing on the theme of motherhood and relationships between women, tell very different stories, and should not be assumed to be autobiographical due to the themes she has chosen. Despite the mystery surrounding Ferrante, she still faces the questions that other female authors face:

'It's difficult to separate the phenomenon of Ferrante's self-presentation from the work itself, especially because she appears to play, self-consciously, teasingly, with the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'invented'. Not unlike Karl Ove Knausgaard's, her novels explore the murky territory between fiction and non-fiction. Similarities between her characters and what we know of her life lead critics to speak of Ferrante's work as if it were mainly autobiographical; one noted that the narrator of her vaunted Neapolitan series – a novelist named Elena Greco who grew up in Naples – is presumably the author's avatar. The similarities certainly abound: in *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga is a married 38-year-old who relinquished her dreams of being a

writer to be a mother and wife (might this be why Ferrante published her first book relatively late?).’

(O’Rourke)

It could be surmised that Ferrante’s choice of themes and female protagonists lead to the assumption that her work is autobiographical. In the majority of the interviews and articles I have researched, whether her work is autobiographical is a main feature and theme when discussing her writing. For example, in this discussion between James Wood, literary critic and author, and Ann Goldstein, Ferrante’s translator for her novels, Wood says the following:

‘We know very little about her...she thinks the book speaks for itself and she has done everything that she can do, which is to write it. She believes that to make oneself available for publicity is essentially to sell oneself alongside the book and I think alongside those very principled reasons there is perhaps the more acute fact of the texts themselves, which are very personal. I don’t mean that they’re autobiographical, but they deal with subjects like divorce, child abuse, not wanting children, motherhood and so on.’

(Wood, 5:05 – 5:45. *Anonymous and Painfully Honest*)

Wood acknowledges the themes that Ferrante deals with, subjects that her translator, Ann Goldstein, describes as ‘women’s subjects’ (Goldstein, 8:37) within the same discussion. Such a classification leads critics such as Gray to the belief that these subjects are of little value. It is impossible to say whether Ferrante’s work is autobiographical, and the public, including press and her readers, are therefore left to speculate about the author herself. Despite the quote above, Wood does allude to the fact that Ferrante’s work is autobiographical in his article for *The New Yorker*:

‘As soon as you read her fiction, Ferrante’s restraint seems wisely self-protective. Her novels are intensely, violently personal, and because of this they seem to dangle bristling key chains of confession before the unsuspecting reader.’

(Wood, *Women on the Verge*)

Karl Ove Knausgaard, a male author celebrated for his work *My Struggle*, and Ferrante's writing has been compared, as both are considered to be novels, are written around the same time, and have what critics and readers believe to be autobiographical elements. Author Judith Shulevitz says of them:

'Knausgaard writes autobiographical novels. Ferrante writes novels about autobiography. Knausgaard sometimes also writes about writing autobiography, because he writes about everything. He divulges every thought, every detail of his life story, without fear of consequences. But Ferrante is craftier. She withholds the one thing we'd need in order to determine whether her stories are factual: her identity.'

(Shulevitz)

By withholding her identity Ferrante is giving herself the opportunity to live a normal life while being an internationally celebrated author, but is she giving herself the chance to have her work viewed fairly? By using a female name, she could be said to be automatically being consigned to that 'literary gynaeceum' (Flood) before she has even had a chance to be reviewed. Knausgaard says of his work:

'I don't feel like I'm conforming to one particular genre. I don't write essays, but I also don't write fiction. I like my writing falling a little between genres.'

(Farsethas)

Knausgaard's *My Struggle* has been described as an autobiographical piece of work, even though he himself believes to be writing 'between genres' (Farsethas). While his work is generally accepted to be autobiographical, as is Ferrante's and other authors, is there a difference in the way in which male and female authors suspected autobiographical work is reviewed? Author Ceridwen Dovey discusses the feedback that female author Helen Garner received when calling her work a novel, in comparison to Knausgaard:

'But they are not novels,' Dessaix wrote in his review of *The Spare Room*... 'They are all of them fine works of art and innovative

explorations of literary approaches to nonfiction, every one of them an outstanding example of stylish reportage, but none of them is a novel. So why does Helen Garner at the very least collude in having them called novels?’

Dessaix also notes the persistent criticism of Garner’s fiction that has dogged her from the very beginning of her career: ‘random jottings, they seemed to be saying, about emotional entanglements in dreary suburbs with the odd thought about the meaning of life thrown in don’t make you a *writer*’. So why, I wonder, when Knausgaard publishes random jottings about emotional entanglements in dreary suburbs with the odd thought about the meaning of life, is he not howled down for colluding in calling it a novel?’

(Dovey)

What Dovey highlights is the dramatic difference between reactions to two works that are described in the same way by their authors. When Knausgaard writes no further than ‘Approximately fifteen meters around the house and garden. I just write about the things I see in front of me.’ (Farsethas) his work is described as ‘A book about banality, domesticity, and everydayness, but those aren’t its main subjects. At heart, it’s a book about fear.’ (Rothman). A female author such as Ferrante however, who also writes about everyday life and domesticity, is assumed to be writing autobiographically about ‘women’s subjects’ (Goldstein, 8:37).

This chapter has demonstrated the alienation of female authors through their decision to include common themes, such as domesticity, in their fiction. Writing from ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15) means that women’s writing is not acknowledged in the same way as a man’s, as evidenced by the difference between Knausgaard’s reviews and Garner and Ferrante’s. Writing fiction from ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15) carries with it the risk of it being assumed to be autobiographical, specifically writing about ‘women’s subjects’ (Goldstein, 8:37).

## ii. Women's Fiction

The term women's fiction is so broad that it covers many genres. Despite this, women's fiction as a label is used to describe novels by women, especially featuring a female protagonist. Whatever the genre of writing chosen by a female author, the label could be said to cover all authors writing from 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15). By categorising a female author's writing in terms of her gender, therefore suggesting that all they have to share is being a woman, are women losing readers? This is a notion that Randy Susan Meyers, female author, suggests in her article for the Huffington Post '*Women's Fiction?*' '*Men's Fiction?*' '*Human Fiction?*'? *What does it mean?*':

'The prejudice is clear, but there is also a practical problem here. If women's fiction is a marketing device, it's confusing as thus. Label a novel 'women's fiction' is the message 'not for men'? By carving and dicing books into thin-as-lox slices, women writers lose readership.'  
(Meyers)

Despite the 'prejudice' (Meyers) being clear, it still happens regularly to female authors. As defined by women's fiction literary agency owner Scott Eagan for *Writers Digest*, a website that displays information for aspiring authors and current writers:

'In women's fiction, is there no happily-ever-after? Does this mean there is no romance? No. Women's fiction is about something much more. I have always tried to define this genre as a story that shows the female journey. The goal and the intent of this genre is to be able to relate to the character and understand her own life. We want to know what it is to be a woman. Like romance, this can occur in any time period, but the goal is still the same – to understand the female psyche. The story can be multicultural, like Amy Tan, or historical, like Philippa Gregory. It really doesn't matter other than making the heroine the central focus of the story. It may be contemporary.  
I often think about these stories as the type women will sit around and talk about. The stories that allow women to say, 'Hey, I've gone through that.'  
(Eagan)

There is an irony to Eagan, as a male, defining women's fiction. There is nothing wrong with stating that a piece of fiction describes a 'female journey' (Eagan), and the themes within my own work and the others I mention could be said to do this. In labelling these pieces of work, described by Eagan as 'historical' or 'multicultural' as women's fiction, he is reductively grouping multiple genres of books written by women under an umbrella term, and therefore doing these works a disservice. Eagan says that he wants to know 'what it's like to be a woman' but likewise, that women's fiction is the type of writing that he can imagine women 'sit around and talk about' (Eagan). The only thing missing from this is the term 'girl talk' (Kaplan, 93). Carla Kaplan, Author of *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*, describes the term:

'We can be considered guilty of self-talk merely by addressing others like ourselves, by being caught in such devalued discourses as "girl talk" or "gossip", by being caught in a "hen party" of supposed meaninglessness.' (13)

The idea of 'girl talk' (Kaplan, 13) elaborates on Eagan's definition of women's fiction, by suggesting that as it is literature that women would 'sit around and talk about' (Eagan), its literary value is diminished. The word 'meaninglessness' (Kaplan, 13) is important, as it highlights the response that themes such as the following can initiate:

'*Jane Eyre*, like all good girl talk, covers a wide range of issues: psychological self-division...ambivalences about passion and sexuality, anger over the suppression of female desire and ambition, the difficulties of self-assertion (the autobiographical project itself)...reconstituted family, communal identity, changes in class and financial status, martyrdom, sexual liberation, adventure, social service, career (educational or artist, of course), chastity, marriage, domesticity, and motherhood.' (93)

Here Kaplan outlines some of the themes that Eagan suggests are part of the genre women's fiction. Some of these are the subjects that will be discussed in this study, showing that even novels that have been accepted as canonical pieces of work, such as

*Jane Eyre*, can be devalued due to the gender of its author. These are themes that fictionalise universal issues, and should be acknowledged as such. By labelling a novel women's fiction one furthers the assumption that the work has no meaning or worth, classifying it as 'girl talk' (Kaplan, 13), something that Gray encourages as calling themes such as motherhood 'small-scale'. Author Cheryl Strayed highlights the issue for *The New York Times*:

'Writing by women is often interpreted as smaller, more particular and personal, and presumed to speak specifically to other women, while writing by men is often perceived to be broadly commenting upon social structures, institutions and experiences that are universally relevant and resonant to us all. This phenomenon is exaggerated when women write about domestic themes, because notions of domesticity and femaleness are so entangled that many presume it's the only thing women can write about — that indeed all literary writing by women is a single-gender genre the Nobel Prize-winner V. S. Naipaul described as "all this feminine tosh."'

(Strayed)

Strayed demonstrates the issues that women face when writing, particularly about 'domestic themes' (Strayed), highlighting the imbalance in the response to their work. In stark contrast, authors such as John Updike and Philip Roth, members of the literary canon and chosen for this comparison for this reason, write about relationships, emotions and domesticity, but their work is seen as both 'original and universal' (Akbar). As author Kate Mosse states:

'There is a sense of the domestic becoming an area of literary concern. Yet when men write about domesticity, it's seen as great literature. When women do it, it's seen as women's issues.'

(Mosse Qtd by Akbar)

The gender imbalance here is an example of why women are less likely to have their work accepted as a canonical piece of writing. On the BBC Radio Four book show 'A Good

*Read'*, selected as a source due to its discussions between current authors, Harriett Gilbert is faced with author John O'Farrell making a joke about women writing about making tea when reviewing a book by Marilynne Robinson, and men writing about war. To this she responds:

'I don't think that this can be held up as a male/female writing thing, because the Norwegian writer Karl Knausgaard writes precisely about whether to make camomile tea or peppermint tea or whatever at far greater length than Marilynne Robinson.'  
(*A Good Read*, 26:45 – 27:02)

A quote from Knausgaard's *My Struggle* confirms this:

'The grease that had collected in a thick yellowish-white layer at the bottom of the frying pan appeared to have melted and solidified countless times, the saucepans in the cupboard bore scum marks around the top from boiling fish and there were bits of overcooked potato stuck to the bottom. Otherwise the kitchen wasn't dirty, a cleaner came twice a week, but it was run-down.'  
(Knausgaard, 249)

This demonstrates that women and men are not consigned to writing about specific themes, but that when men do write about such themes they are not given the label of women's fiction.

When Ferrante was asked if she faced anxiety being a female writer, and whether she had to work harder than a male writer just to create work that isn't 'dismissed as being 'for women'' (Ferri) she responded, in *The Paris Review*:

'I wouldn't recognise myself without women's struggles, women's nonfiction, women's literature—they made me an adult. My experience as a novelist, both published and unpublished, culminated, after twenty years, in the attempt to relate, in a writing that was appropriate, my sex and its difference. But if we have to cultivate *our* narrative tradition, as women, that doesn't mean we should renounce the entire stock of techniques we have behind us. We have to show that we can construct worlds that are not only as wide and powerful and rich as those constructed by men but more so. We have to be well equipped, we have to dig deep into our difference, using advanced tools. Above all,



we have to insist on the greatest freedom. Writers should be concerned only with narrating what they know and feel—beautiful, ugly, or contradictory—without succumbing to ideological conformity or blind adherence to a canon.'

(Ferri)

Ferrante encourages women to write from 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15), acknowledging that her writing and self-identity were shaped by the total of women's experiences. She argues that we should 'dig deep into our difference' (Ferri) suggesting that it is because we are women that we can make a positive impact on the literary world. By digging 'deep into our difference' (Ferri) female authors should be celebrated for writing about such themes as domesticity and motherhood. Without women creating realistic protagonists and using their experience to build a fictionalised world that speaks to readers, a 'narrative tradition' (Ferri) for women may never be created.

In writing *The Second Space*, I was concerned that Erin's journey might be disregarded as the musings of a young woman, as opposed to the accounts of a woman striving to understand her gender, and what being female means for her life. One of the 'advanced tools' (Ferri) I use is my own, and my knowledge of my peers', experiences of being female in a patriarchal society. Erin and I, as the author, would not exist in the same way without 'women's struggles, women's nonfiction, women's literature' (Ferri). Female authors have a unique voice that is as different to a man's as our experiences in life. By writing Erin and contributing to the narrative of female authors through history, I attempted to 'relate...my sex and its difference.' (Ferri).

In this chapter I have highlighted some important issues that women face as authors, and the differences that they encounter when being reviewed. I have shown the assumptions that they are writing women's fiction, in which their common themes of

motherhood and domesticity are presumed to be autobiographical. It is my assertion that they are writing from 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15).

### **Chapter 3 – Common Themes between *The Second Space* and Three Novels**

My purpose in comparing three creative texts to *The Second Space* and discussing common themes within them is to suggest that it is not that these themes are necessarily ‘women’s subjects’ (Goldstein, 8:37), or that by having similar themes running throughout they are autobiographical, but in writing what you know as an author, themes such as sexism, gender and domesticity will be common in women’s writing. This is not to substantiate the notion that women’s fiction exists but rather to eliminate it. These three books, as well as my own novel, tell very different stories despite common themes. Rather, these themes may be common within these novels because the main characters are subject to a life within ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15). Firestone’s argument that sexism would not exist without the nuclear family and her observations of a patriarchal society, are reflected in the common themes of these selected texts. The texts selected for comparison purposes are Elena Ferrante’s *The Days of Abandonment*, Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, and Miranda July’s *The First Bad Man*.

Central to the three chosen texts is *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante. The reader watches as Olga, the protagonist, loses sight of who she is, and struggles with daily tasks, mourning the loss of the life that she had planned for herself. As she learns to cope she begins to write, as she had previously, before she had become entrapped in the daily drudgery of domesticity:

‘I saw the cover again in every detail. My French teacher had assigned it when I had told her too impetuously, with ingenious passion, that I wanted to be a writer. It was 1978, more than twenty years earlier. ‘Read this,’ she had said to me, and diligently I had read it. But when I gave her back the volume, I made an arrogant statement: these women are stupid. Cultured women, in comfortable circumstances, they broke like knick-knacks in the hands of their straying men.’  
(Ferrante, 20/21)

In *The Second Space* Erin removes herself from a life of domesticity early on, and as she continues her journey of self-realisation, begins to sculpt. This journey is similar to Olga's, who, trapped in a life of domestic chores for a selfish husband, can only write again once she is free from these strains. Themes of sexism and the relationships between women are present in these novels, enabling comparisons to be drawn between the two.

The second text to be used is *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood. This book follows the story of Joan Foster, a woman who breaks away from her poisonous mother, writing under a pseudonym to publish romantic novels for money. Eventually she marries and has a novel published under her own name, which is assumed by her husband and everyone else to be an autobiographical account of her marriage. She begins to receive threatening notes and disturbing parcels, and eventually fakes her own death to escape, leaving behind her husband and life. The links between this novel and the discussion in this essay are clear, the protagonist is put under pressure due to what she has written, and even the person closest to her, her husband, believes that her work is autobiographical:

'Mrs Foster, would you say you are a happily married woman?'  
 'Oh yes,' I said. 'I've been married for years.'  
 'Well, that's strange. Because I've read your book, and to me it seemed very angry. It seemed like a very angry book. If I were your husband, I'm not sure I'd like it. What do you think about that?'  
 'It's not about my *marriage*,' I said earnestly. The young man smirked.  
 'Oh, it's not,' He said. 'Then perhaps you'll tell us what inspired you to write it.'  
 (Atwood, 237)

This novel is useful because not only are there links to be drawn between *Lady Oracle* and *The Second Space* in terms of themes, but Joan, the character from Atwood's novel, experiences the same treatment of her writing as has been discussed so far in this essay. Her gender plays a big part in the way that it is received.

The third text is *The First Bad Man* by Miranda July. This is the tale of Cheryl, a middle-aged woman living alone. A younger woman moves into her apartment, relatively uninvited, and takes over her way of life. They begin to fight, physically, and Cheryl becomes mesmerized by the woman, Clee, fantasising about having sex with her as a man. This novel deals with the idea of sexual fantasies in a realistic way, as author Miranda July describes:

‘In a way, my very first idea was a character that could have all these experiences, that could have sex with a woman, could imagine having sex with a woman as a man, but without any of the words that we use, without even the word gender,’ Miranda said. ‘Creating a character like that that was plausible, that had prose and rules that she stuck to, was the joy of writing the book. It was a way for me to be much more honest than I would have been if I was creating a story closely huge [sic] to my own personal history.’  
(Bendix)

There are comparisons to be drawn between this and *The Second Space*, in which the protagonist Erin fantasises sexually about men exerting their power over her, though in real life, this is what she is fighting to overcome. *The First Bad Man* discusses the difference between fantasy and reality:

‘Or maybe Kirsten, being real, outweighed my hordes of imaginary men. Mostly I was too busy for guilt; there was almost no time that I wasn’t rubbing myself. The postman delivered a box and before I could open it Clee had to unzip his government-issued pants; I helped him push his little nub into her. The penises were getting more abstract and unlikely—I couldn’t rein them in.’  
(July, 118)

*The Second Space* is closest in themes to *The Days of Abandonment*, as it follows Erin who, like Olga, is struggling to come to terms with the life that she has chosen. Though it is a different life, as Erin rejects domesticity at the start of the novel, whereas Olga struggles to come to terms with being alone within it, they both eventually work toward being able to cope with themselves and their lives. My creative text has elements of *Lady Oracle*, as this

too follows a young woman as she discovers herself, trying to carve out a space within a male driven society. There are similarities between *The First Bad Man* and *The Second Space* not only in the fantasies, but also within the relationships between women, exploring sexuality and friendship.

### ***i. Sexism and Sexual Harassment***

One of the main themes within *The Second Space* is that of sexism. This is a common theme throughout the selected novels, as the protagonists live in a Western patriarchal society.

Firestone discusses sexual harassment and women's responses:

'These men feel that the woman...is to blame for not being 'friendly'. Because it makes them uncomfortable to know that the woman...is grumbling, the oppressed groups must also appear to like their oppression – smiling and simpering though they may feel like hell inside.' (80/81)

Here she acknowledges that the woman, though the victim in this scenario, is also responsible for ensuring that the oppressor feels comfortable, by being 'friendly' (Firestone, 80/81). Though written in 1970, this is still relevant today, as shown in the selected novels.

The protagonists in the novels are all living in different areas (Italy, Canada, America and England), and are of different ages, but it is gender that unites them, and therefore they all have to deal with a 'sex class system' (Firestone, 10). The protagonists in these novels therefore develop different coping strategies for surviving within this society.

A revealing moment in *The Days of Abandonment* is when the main character Olga calls on some workers to fit a new lock for her:

'What could they read in me? That I hadn't slept with a man for almost three months?...Was that why those two men kept speaking to me, laughing, of keys, of keyholes, of locks? I should have armoured myself, made myself inscrutable. I became more and more nervous. As they hammered energetically and smoked without asking permission and spread through the house a maddening smell of sweat, I didn't know what to do...The older one in particular started up again with his vulgarly allusive language, maybe he just wanted to be witty...Almost unconsciously - it was the throat blowing air against the vocal cords - I answered him laughing, with even heavier allusions, and, realizing that I had surprised them both, I didn't wait for them to reply but piled it on, so foul-mouthed that the two looked at one another, perplexed, gave a

slight smile, left the beer half drunk, and began to work more quickly.'  
(Ferrante, 60)

'Eventually the men called me. They had finished...  
With renewed impudence he philosophized:  
'Locks become habituated. They have to recognise the hand of their  
master.'  
(Ferrante, 61)

From a woman's point of view there is an underlying tension that shows a fear of being alone with the men while being single. Ferrante's use of the word 'master' (61) is important here, as to 'master' (61) the lock, is to dominate it, adding to the threat that Olga feels. The choice of word 'master' (Ferrante, 61) suggests that Olga is not the person who can control the lock, despite being the only adult in the house. Within this chapter Olga discusses how friendly she used to be to anybody who came to the door previously, that having a husband gave her the confidence to let strangers into her house. In *The Second Space*, as Erin tries with the men who approach her (*The Second Space*, 48), the husband is a kind of protection used to enable a gender treated as second class to behave as they wish without threat. Of course, this does not work and possibly has no effect on the men in either story, but the idea of it is valid; to be protected from men, a woman must use the same language as a man. In this section, Olga uses the same language that the men use 'almost unconsciously' (Ferrante, 60), as though trying to bring herself to the same level as them, to demand respect. They begin to work quicker after this, perhaps because they have found their respect, or more likely, because they are surprised by the act and wish to leave, threatened by their idea of an unfeminine woman, a woman who does not act in a way felt acceptable in a patriarchal society.

In *The Second Space* Erin is a victim of abuse and harassment from a young age because of her gender, and is haunted by the way that she has been, and is continued to be,



treated by men. An example of this is in the first chapter, when she recalls a moment in childhood (*The Second Space*, 5). Erin is followed by a man in a van, who asks her if she would like another boyfriend. This moment in her life, though perhaps only minutes long, stays with her for the threat and unfairness of the situation. It her first experience of dressing as, and being treated like, a woman. She does not only fear this, but, as does Olga, uses a lie about being in a relationship with a man as a protection against this stranger, realising early on that her own words may not be enough to save her. The instinct to use a man as protection shows that even women collude in the idea that they need a man to be able to function in a patriarchal society.

Sexism is part of a mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Oracle*. Joan Foster struggles with her weight as a child. Her mother is a difficult woman, who leaves diet books on her pillow, and bribes her daughter with too small dresses, asking her to fit into them. Left to bring up Joan alone until she is older, she tells her of the different types of men ('Nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you.' (Atwood, 69)), and brings her up both scolding her for not being beautiful and talking of being abandoned by her husband, Joan's father. The reality of this upbringing means that Joan struggles against the image of who she should be, and eats as a way of getting back at her mother, though this does not make her happy. The idea of children needing to distance themselves from their mothers is something that Firestone discusses in her feminist manifesto. If the life of the woman is to be purely the victim of a patriarchal society, the children see that they have to distance themselves from their mothers in order to survive. For the son, this is simple:

'He is asked to make a transition from the state of the powerless, women and children, to the state of the potentially powerful, son (ego

extension) of his father. Most children aren't fools. *They* don't plan to be stuck with the lousy limited lives of women.'

(Firestone, 47)

In this way we can understand how a patriarchal society can continue, with the male being allowed to distance himself from the mother, forging his own life of freedom. However, for the daughter who tries to do the same, the reaction and result is different, says Firestone:

'She becomes a tomboy – and is flattered to be called one. This obstinacy in the face of an unpalatable reality may even succeed. For a time. Until puberty perhaps. Then she is really stuck. She can no longer deny her sex: it is confirmed by lustful males all around her. This is when she often develops a female identification, with a vengeance.'

(Firestone, 49)

The female identification is, in this sense, synonymous with sexism in a patriarchal society. The daughter has attempted to do as the male has, but has been pushed back into her role as a female by the 'lustful males' (Firestone, 49) that surround her. Certainly, Joan's mother in *Lady Oracle* sees this as the goal. Joan's mother is sexist in that she is trying to squeeze her daughter into the mould of a beautiful young woman, as though this is the only thing that she could possibly be to be successful and loved. Greer furthers this belief when she says, 'It is easy to pretend that wolf-whistles are gestures of genuine appreciation and that compliments are genuine praise, which they are not.' (300). Joan's way of combating this sexism from her mother, is to eat:

'By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body.'

(Atwood, 69)

Joan's mother, in her despair, sends her to a psychiatrist:

'I like being fat,' I told him, and burst into tears. He sat looking at me with the tips of his fingers together, smiling benevolently but with a trace of disgust as I gasped and puffed.  
'Don't you want to get married?' he asked when I had subsided.'  
(Atwood, 83)

The idea that the goal of a woman's life is marriage is an old, and very gender specific notion. As Atwood says in her autobiography *On Writers and Writing* 'Ordinary women were supposed to get married, but not women artists.' (73)

The life ambition of being married, and the idea that one should be thin in order to find a husband, is clearly a dangerous ideal to have at any age and for either gender. This could lead to various issues, from an unhappy marriage or partnership, to an unrealistic image of an ideal life, or an eating disorder resulting from the pressure to lose weight to find a husband. This links directly to Firestone's theory of the nuclear family being restrictive to women in a patriarchal society, and the feminine ideals that women are faced with in order to be a part of this.

Firestone acknowledges women's oppression through the idea that women are worshipped, which again, distances them from humanity:

'To be worshipped is not freedom. For worship still takes place in someone else's head, and that head belongs to man. Thus throughout history, in all stages and types of culture, women have been oppressed due to their biological functions.' (66/67)

Sexual harassment, and worship, is a common theme in *The Second Space*, and one that Erin deals with throughout. She discusses the threat that even the words 'Good Morning' hold from a man in the street. Greer also discusses this in *The Female Eunuch*:

'A certain kind of man whispers obscenities to women passing on the street and laughs at their humiliation and confusion which he construes as evidence that they are guilty of the secret bestial desires that he has

touched upon. More often women do not catch the muttered message but the tone of voice and the leer are unmistakable.' (282/283)

This is experienced by Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*. It is when Joan loses weight that she finds herself in a different world altogether:

'I'd never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety. I wasn't whistled at or pinched on elevators, I was never followed down lonely streets...so when I shrank to normal size I had none of these fears, and I had to develop them artificially...When the hands appeared I couldn't cope with them. They took me by surprise. Men didn't make passes at fat girls, so I had no experience, and I was acutely uncomfortable. The hands didn't frighten or arouse me, they simply made me aware that I didn't know what to do. So I would gaze out of the window at the pitch-black landscape, while deft fingers crept up my thigh.'  
(Atwood, 140/141)

Joan, though unprepared to deal with the assault that is launched upon her, understands the inbuilt fears that women have because of their place in a patriarchal society. This is expressed through Firestone's earlier quote on the subject of worship. If a woman is worshipped because of her biological functions only, and struggles from a young age to be heard, it follows that she is likely to be fearful of men. In *The Second Space*, Erin is worshipped by her fiancé, Mark. He goes from being her partner to almost idolizing her, and constantly ensuring her comfort. It can seem as though Erin is being unfair to Mark when he attempts to be chivalrous, but it is Erin's way of displaying that she does not wish to be worshipped, and by extension, conquered by anyone, including her fiancé.

From street harassment to being physically touched in public, the space that women occupy in society is altogether different from the one that men occupy, as evidenced by website '*Stop Street Harassment*' statistics:

'In 2016, ActionAid conducted a survey on street harassment in a number of countries. They found that 79% of women living in cities in

India, 86% in Thailand, and 89% in Brazil have been subjected to harassment or violence in public, as had 75% of women in London, UK.' (Stop Street Harassment)

Erin and Joan are both protagonists who exist within a patriarchal society, and therefore have to deal with street harassment. In the *Lady Oracle* quote above, Joan describes fears common to women for which they develop different survival strategies. In *The Second Space* Erin discusses this with her mother, to which her mother responds (*The Second Space*, 263).

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's survival strategy is to ignore the harassment. When she is first touched on the thigh she simply moves and gets off the bus. She does not talk about this with her assailant. In *The Second Space* Erin tries to overcome her innate reservation of challenging her oppressor. It was important to Erin that she did not stand by and let men get away with assault, with this accepted sexism. However, even when Erin does contest this and tries to fight, she finds that she is faced with barriers (*The Second Space*, 154).

The impact of not being able to do anything in this situation haunts Erin. She is marred by not only the security guard's inability to help, but also by expectations of her as a woman. She is determined not to be seen as 'smiling and simpering' (Firestone, 81), but to defend herself against assault. The inference is that as she has not been technically harmed she should forget all about the incident, and get on with her night out and her life. The significant mental impact that this can have on a woman is shown, that she should not just be left with fear, guilt and regret for not having been able to do anything, and for having no power in the situation. By extension, Firestone's theory that the man would not give up his tyranny over women proves to be Erin's experience, as when she approached the bouncer for help he would not extend his protection to her, choosing instead to protect the male character.

Writing about Erin and her experiences of sexism in a patriarchal society was not unlike Erin's process of reliving these moments through her letters for the counsellor. The process of writing about sexual harassment and sexism came naturally to me, as, being a female living in a patriarchal society, I have witnessed and been exposed to sexism throughout my life. Both Erin and I could be said to have used writing as a way of expelling the memories of living in a patriarchal society, as discussed by Maftai in *The Fiction of Autobiography*:

'The writing process can also serve as a farewell to the original experience, a willing release of one's story.'  
(131)

It is possible that the other female authors under discussion are also using their personal knowledge of being a woman in a patriarchal society in order to create a piece of fiction that deals with these issues. Does this then lead to the assumption that a female author is writing autobiographically, or are we using fiction to better understand the way that we are treated as women?

'More useful to us as human beings are stories that can make sense of the world around us, rather than mirrors which exclusively reflect it.'  
(Maftai, 141)

Using the female experience of living in a patriarchal society as inspiration for fiction which represents 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) provides no evidence that the writing is autobiographical. Instead of using a mirror to 'exclusively reflect' (Maftai, 141) any experience that I may have had and naming it as Erin's, I was instead creating Erin's experience in an attempt to help her, the character, make sense of her situation. By using writing to do this, both Erin and I enabled ourselves to 'release' (Maftai, 131) the story, adding to a work of fiction. The theme of sexism and sexual harassment is a common theme in these novels, and could be considered among those that are labelled as 'women's

subjects' (Goldstein, 8:37). Discussing these issues within fiction is vital, as demonstrating a reality that is faced every day by women, is a way of sharing an issue and creating a realistic portrayal of a woman's life.

**ii. Marriage, Partnership and Domesticity**

Firestone sees the nuclear and biological family as 'an inherently unequal power distribution.' (9) with the man, the husband and father, having the highest status. She continues:

'Though man is increasingly capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to want to give this tyranny up.'  
(Firestone, 10)

Could this be the reason that the goal of marriage is so prevalent, seen as the final aim for woman, but not necessarily man? In a culture driven by men, to keep the ideal of marriage present would be to continue the 'biological conditions' (Firestone, 10) that preserve his position. Greer furthers this argument, when she says:

'Marriage is based upon this filial relationship of a wife who takes her husband's name, has her tax declared on his return, lives in a house owned by him and goes about in public as his companion wearing his ring on her finger at all times.' (261)

In *The Second Space* Erin begins the novel engaged, and questions the reality of marriage, asking herself what is expected of her after she has worked toward this ideal (*The Second Space*, 11). Despite the fact that this notion is no longer prevalent in modern society, derived from a time when women were expected to move from their father's house to their husband's, was the reality of this actually so long ago? Olive, an elderly woman for whom Erin cares, discusses marriage with Erin and the issues that she faced when she was young (*The Second Space*, 53).

In 2014 female novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a woman who understands the restrictions female authors face in their careers, discussed this in her 'Ted Talks' online video '*We Should All Be Feminists*';



‘Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important.’ (14:07 – 14:17)

Adichie discusses the pressures that women are under in a patriarchal society, and highlights the striking differences in language when describing an unmarried woman and an unmarried man. The belief that a woman should take a man’s name when marrying is exactly the idea of ‘ownership rather than the language of partnership’ (Adichie, 15:32 – 15:36). Firestone also discusses the language of marriage and family:

‘The term family was first used by the Romans to denote a social unit the head of which ruled over wife, children, and slaves - under Roman law he was invested with the rights of life and death over them all; famulus means domestic slave, and familia is the total number of slaves belonging to one man.’ (67)

Firestone’s quote suggests even further that a wife is not just the property of a man and husband, but a slave. In *The Second Space* Erin considers language, and decides that partners should share their names (*The Second Space*, 21). This issue is clearly not shared by Erin’s fiancé, Mark, as he refuses to take her name or even to discuss the subject. By saying he would ‘never live it down’, he is referring to the idea of being emasculated by his wife. Mark is confirming, through his behaviour, his perception that to share Erin’s name would show him as weak. Erin feels this issue is paramount to her marriage, that she would be enslaved by taking her partner’s name, and Firestone’s explanation of the term ‘family’ (67), leads us to see that there is an implication of ownership in marriage here. Partnership is also a concern in *The Days of Abandonment*:

‘Only two years earlier I had told him I wanted to go back to having a schedule of my own, work that would get me out of the house for a few hours. I had found a job in a small publishing company, I was interested in it, but he had urged me to forget it...So I returned to taking care of the house, the children, Mario, as if to say to myself that at this point I deserved nothing else.’

(Ferrante, 21/22)

Olga raises a family with Mario, sacrificing her dreams and compromising her individual life, only to be abandoned by her husband and given ultimate responsibility for the children, to take care of them alone. Mario is then free to do as he likes, and visit when he likes, despite always having had the power in the relationship, and having enjoyed complete freedom at home. This highlights the extreme sexism within the novel, the fact that Olga is left with these responsibilities because of her gender. Firestone discusses this idea, that the wife supports the husband in everything, but receives little in return:

‘A woman, still part of an underclass, must now, in order to gain the indispensable male patronage and protection, play a desperate game, hunting down bored males while yet appearing cool. And even once she is married, any overlap of roles generally takes place on the wife’s side, not on the husband’s: the ‘cherish and protect’ clause is the first thing forgotten – while the wife has gained the privilege of going to work to ‘help out’, even of putting her husband through school. More than ever she shoulders the brunt of the marriage, not only emotionally, but now also in its more practical aspects. She has simply added his job to hers.’  
(199/200)

This is exactly the life that Olga leads, she works hard to help her husband study, and improve his career, and so when he leaves, she is left with nothing but the children, and he is left with freedom and prospects. This is the unplanned life that Erin fears is laid out for her in *The Second Space*, of domesticity and compromise.

As a young woman, assumed to be a little older because of her weight, Joan (*Lady Oracle*) receives a proposal from a relative stranger in her part time job:

‘I will give you babies,’ he said, ‘lots of babies, I see you like the babies. You are a good girl. Then, when we have enough money, we go and visit my country. You will like.’  
‘But,’ I said, ‘I’m not the same religion as you.’

He waved his hand. 'You will change.'  
 When I first visited Terremoto it was more obvious what he saw in me: I  
 was the shape of a wife already, I was the shape it took most women  
 several years to become.'  
 (Atwood, 100/101)

This highlights the issues that Joan faces. She has a mother whom she rebels against, who bullies her constantly for not being slim. In her rebellion, she gains weight, and by doing this, turns herself into what a man sees as a wifely figure. She is not herself in either of these scenarios, she is instead a replica of a woman, not thin enough to be beautiful, but large enough to be homely. Her mother is trying to force Joan to conform to patriarchal expectations of women's bodies. Through her shape Joan is, in her own way, fighting for equality and for freedom from the patriarchal world. Her external homely shape reflects her inner misery, as Greer suggests:

'Nagging, overweight and premature aging are the outward signs of misery, and they are so diffuse among women in our society that they do not excite remark.' (307)

Greer is here suggesting that women are so unhappy as housewives that they are becoming unwell. Their illness is the result of marriage, an agreement that is based upon, according to Firestone, an exchange of services:

'He agrees to support his wife in return for her services: housekeeping, sex, and reproduction.' (44)

This exchange is seen as normal for both Joan's suitor, and to some extent, Joan, as her first reaction is that she cannot marry him due to his religion. So used to living in a patriarchal society, Joan does not initially recognise the deal that is being offered to her as she is used to living within a male culture and set of expectations.

In *The First Bad Man* the protagonist Cheryl visits a counsellor to try to understand the relationship that she finds herself in with the antagonist Clee. However, the counsellor, a woman, is having an affair with a doctor, originally her patient, who only visits the surgery a couple of months a year. During this time, despite being a qualified therapist herself, the counsellor becomes his receptionist as part of a submissive game:

'Is Dr. Broyard married?'  
 She became very still. 'He is married. He has a wife and family in Amsterdam.'  
 'But your relationship with him is...?'  
 'Three days a year I take on a submissive role. It's a game we like to play, an immensely satisfying adult game.'  
 (July, 63)

The counsellor, Ruth-Anne, later organises a rebirthing session for Cheryl with Dr. Broyard, and Cheryl overhears a very different side to the relationship that she has painted for her:

'Dr. Broyard sighed. 'This never really works out,' he said. It sounded like he was unwrapping a candy. Now something was clacking around in his mouth. 'For one reason or another.'  
 'Rebirthing?'  
 'Just- these things you cook up so you can see me when I'm with my family.'  
 Ruth-Anne was silent. No one said anything for a long time; he started biting the candy.  
 'Is she even coming, or was this your plan, that we would stand in the hallway together and – what? Fuck? Is that what you want? Or you just want to blow me? Hump my leg like a dog?'  
 (July, 149/150)

The difference between these two quotes is distressing. The way that Ruth-Anne clearly wishes to be viewed, the relationship that she planned to have and that she still believes that she is having, versus the reality of the relationship. As the reader and Cheryl witness this discussion, it becomes clear that Ruth-Anne lowered her status, (as confirmed by Firestone's earlier point that 'A woman...must now...play a desperate game, hunting

down bored males while yet appearing cool' (199)) in order to attract a man who was initially her own patient. Despite trying to change the power balance and clearly, as the conversation in the hallway suggests, continuing to do so, this, which initially attracted a married man, has now become a bore for him. Perhaps it is the accessibility of Ruth-Anne that Dr. Broyard finds boring, his boredom clarified by his sighs and his chewing on candy during what is a highly upsetting conversation for the other party. This relationship and power struggle is what changes the reader's view of Ruth-Anne, almost throwing into question her qualifications to be a therapist, as the reader might question how a person who gives advice professionally can let herself be treated in such a manner. This is a prime example of a male/female relationship in a patriarchal society: the man is dominant while the woman struggles to gain power, even willing to forfeit her own status in order to please the man and give herself the opportunity to be treated as an equal in a relationship. In this instance, Ruth-Anne is existing within 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) in society, an entirely different locus to the one which Dr. Broyard inhabits.

With the theme of partnership, comes the inevitable theme of domesticity. As evidenced in academic Clare Lyonette's publication *'Sharing the load? Partners' relative earnings and the division of domestic labour'*, there is still a division of labour within domestic households:

'Men have increased the amount of domestic work they do (Kan et al., 2011) and spend more time with their children than before (Coltrane, 2009). These changes may in part be due to the increased time pressures on working women, but may also reflect substantial changes in attitudes to gender roles. Evidence from the US and the UK suggests, however, that women continue to do more domestic work than men (Bianchi et al., 2000; Kan et al., 2011).'

Firestone agrees with this, and suggests that an exchange of services is offered to women, as in her previously mentioned quote:

‘He agrees to support his wife in return for her services: housekeeping, sex, and reproduction.’ (44)

Firestone’s solution to the expectation that women in the household should deal with the domestic chores is that there should be equality in all areas, including this one:

‘Chores: As for housework: the larger family-sized group (twelve to fifteen people) would be more practical – the waste and repetition of the duplicate nuclear family unit would be avoided, e.g., as in shopping or cooking for three or four people, without the loss of intimacy of the larger communal experiment. In the interim, any housework would have to be rotated equitably; but eventually cybernation would take care of most domestic chores.’ (210)

While perhaps an ideal of communal living, the theory that housework and domestic chores should be rotated equitably between members of families is certainly valid. In *The Second Space* the threat of domesticity is present, but it is one which Erin escapes. It was important to me when writing *The Second Space* that Erin avoid domesticity to free her from the life that Firestone predicts for a woman within the nuclear family. Erin does not keep a tidy house, she does not talk of domesticity or focus efforts onto it. In fact, the only time that she tries to have an impact on her domesticity in her relationship with Mark, is when she first moves into his house (*The Second Space*, 13).

Erin, having moved in with Mark, finds that the space is entirely his. She feels that she cannot join in, that though welcome she is unable to make her stamp on the home. She begins to sculpt, at the time not knowing why, but ultimately to change the space back into her own. The exchange of services (Firestone, 44) here has not been realised. Though Erin escapes domestic life early on, Olga, from *The Days of Abandonment*, often faces the struggle of domesticity, even in order to build up her husband’s career:

‘I had put aside my own aspirations to go along with his. At every crisis of despair I had set aside my own crisis to comfort him. I had disappeared into his minutes, into his hours, so that he could concentrate. I had taken care of the house, I had taken care of the

meals, I had taken care of the children, I had taken care of all the boring details of everyday life, while he stubbornly climbed the ladder up from our unprivileged beginnings.’  
(Ferrante, 63)

Olga sacrifices herself for her husband, showing again their complete lack of partnership, and talks of disappearing into his time (Ferrante, 63). She focuses on all of the things that are essential in his life, such as eating and washing, caring for the children, in order to take these worries away from him so that he may concentrate on his life outside the household, despite the fact that she has already compromised a career for herself at his suggestion. Olga also uses the motions of cleaning and cooking to try and bring herself back together, as though trying to remind herself what it is that she is there for:

‘I said to myself that if I devoted myself immediately to the usual domestic activities I would be better off. Do the laundry. Separate the white clothes from the dark. Start the washing machine. I had only to quiet the view inside, the thoughts. They got mixed up, they crowded in on one another, shreds of words and images, buzzing frantically, like a swarm of wasps, they gave to my gestures a brute capacity to do harm.’  
(Ferrante, 93)

This strategy clearly does not work for Olga, as her mind gives way to the thoughts that she is struggling with. To suggest that this example of domesticity is ‘small-scale’ (Gray) is misinformed. It is through these acts that Olga has come to identify herself, as the wife and care-giver, no matter the expense on her mental health or own life. It is exactly the theme of domesticity that gives *The Days of Abandonment* a haunting quality, the tale of a woman trapped in a house, in a life. These themes create vital fiction and representations of female protagonists, and are not ‘thinly disguised autobiographical writing’ (Gray).

In *Lady Oracle* Joan marries only to find that her husband expects her to take the traditional role of wife, and to take over the domestic chore of cooking:

‘I was always running out of the staples such as butter or salt and making flying trips to the corner store, and there were never enough

clean dishes, since I hated washing them; but Arthur didn't like eating in restaurants. He seemed to prefer my inedible food...I seldom wept over these failures, as to me they were not failures but successes, they were secret triumphs over the notion of food itself. I wanted to prove that I didn't really care about it.'

(Atwood, 209)

The assumption that Joan even knows how to cook is one that Joan almost finds amusing, experimenting with cooking and enjoying the failures of her attempts, as if to demonstrate that it is not her natural role. Arthur does not help with any of these chores, simply enjoying them as they are done around him, however badly, in what he perceives to be his traditional role as husband. He has successfully offered the exchange of services here, and it is almost as though this equals his goal of head of the family, however badly the services of domesticity are carried out. But Joan does not accept her designated role, the last line of this quote suggesting that her inability to carry out domestic tasks is a protest.

In *The First Bad Man*, the protagonist Cheryl begins the novel living alone. She is single and has her own apartment, and deals with the drudgery of domesticity in an interesting way, being free to create boundaries as she likes, without the weight of the provider or hierarchical family structure surrounding her:

'Like a rich person, I live with a full time servant who keeps everything in order – and because the servant is me, there's no invasion of privacy. At its best, my system gives me a smoother living experience. My days become dreamlike, no edges anywhere, none of the snags and snafus that life is famous for. After days and days alone it gets silky to a point where I can't even feel myself anymore, it's as if I don't exist.'

(July, 22)

Like Erin, Cheryl has escaped domesticity by living alone. In fact, she has gone one step further than this, by creating a system that almost lets her switch off the part of her brain that deals with the responsibility for domestic chores, leaving her to live a life that is 'dreamlike' and 'silky' (July, 22). It is as though her life as a woman, without the



expectations that she should deal with the tasks that have become so synonymous with gender, has become almost magical. That too, is the life that Erin strives for in *The Second Space*, a magical existence without the confines that society places on her gender, without Firestone's deal of domesticity (Firestone, 44) in return for protection.

By removing Erin from a life of domesticity I wanted to offer her an escape from the nuclear family and expectations of a wife, and a life lived alone, in happiness. The process of writing Erin's break away from Mark, and the life that she saw planned for her, through relationships with women to the final decision to be alone, is something that I view to be a shared experience between myself as author, and the character. Creating Erin meant that I had the ultimate decision of where her life should go, however, the story would not be believable had I not taken into account Erin's personality and personal choices that she might make on her journey. While not directly autobiographical, it is inspired by the oppression of women within the nuclear family and Firestone's theory. The nuclear family, and the themes discussed in this chapter are common in these novels written by women, because the authors recognise the results of patriarchy and have the ability to give this insight to their female characters.

### iii. **Mental Health**

The theme of mental health is one that is common to the novels within this study. Firestone blames mental health issues on the pressures placed on women through the nuclear family:

‘Women, biologically distinguished from men, are culturally distinguished from ‘human’. Nature produced the fundamental inequality – half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them – which was later consolidated, institutionalized, in the interests of men. Reproduction of the species cost women dearly, not only emotionally, psychologically, culturally but even in strictly material (physical) terms: before recent methods of contraception, continuous childbirth led to constant ‘female trouble’, early ageing, and death.’  
(184)

Here Firestone suggests that as women are separated from the title of ‘human’ (184), and given the immense responsibility of caring for families, which we have learnt (in Firestone’s theory), also include men (even though the women may be caring for them in the role of wife instead of mother), this has led to emotional, psychological and cultural issues for women. As with the previously discussed language of ownership in marriage, it is the language used to describe women that leads to suspicions of mental health issues:

‘We have noted how those few women directly creating culture have gravitated to disciplines within the Aesthetic mode. There is a good reason for this: the aesthetic response corresponds with ‘female’ behaviour. The same terminology can be applied to either: subjective, intuitive, introverted, wishful, dreamy or fantastic, concerned with the subconscious (the *id*), emotional, even temperamental (hysterical).’  
(Firestone, 157)

Firestone is discussing why the ‘few women’ (157) creating culture are attracted to the ‘aesthetic’ (157) side of it, for example, poetry, or music. However, it is the language that she says can be assigned that is interesting here. The sentence ‘emotional, even temperamental (hysterical)’ (Firestone, 157) highlights the type of language used regarding a woman’s emotions. While both man and woman could be said to be anxious, the term

'hysterical' (Firestone, 157) is used primarily for women, suggesting a total loss of control and self. Perhaps then, the language that is used to describe women, as well as the pressures put on them to survive in a patriarchal society, contributes to the discussion of the mental health of female protagonists.

Greer shows that women who are a part of the nuclear family have turned to medical help:

'Mr Michael Ryman, a psychiatric worker with the drug-addiction unit at All-Saints Hospital, Birmingham, reported that he had watched for eleven years while increasing numbers of housewives (he did not supply figures) trailed into the clinic to be weaned off high dosages of barbiturates, tranquillizers and stimulants. He admitted that their success rate with these cases was particularly small...He spoke of women using sleeping pills 'because they cannot sleep or face the sexual advances of a too-ardent husband'...who 'swallow anti-depressant capsules to help them through their dull and dreary day'.' (310/311)

It is not just women who are part of a nuclear family who suffer, as with Erin from *The Second Space*, and Cheryl from *The First Bad Man* who both chose a life outside the nuclear family. Greer comments on this:

'Of course, single women do not escape female misery, because of the terrific pressure to marry as a measure of feminine success. They dawdle and dream in their dead end jobs, overtly miserable, because they are publicly considered to be.' (316)

Mental health, in some form or another, is featured in all of these texts. In *The Second Space* Erin suffers from anxiety, and has done from an early age. Erin's anxiety is something that she is used to, and occurs throughout the novel as she experiences changes and relives memories. The anxiety that she suffers displays itself in physical effects; stomach pains, the uneven skin that has healed badly on her hands (*The Second Space*, 131). In the novel Erin sees a counsellor and also has a panic attack, referring back to her childhood where her anxiety began. These experiences are both fictional and inspired by reality:

‘Despite the overall appearance of memoir and autobiography being one of a return to the past, or even bringing past events into light, they are actually newly created accounts, whose transformation from mental image to written text completes the process of change into a new form. The events within memoirs and autobiographies are new both for reader and the writer.’

(Maftei, 127)

Writing about Erin’s anxiety, though inspired by my own experiences, is not something that I would describe as autobiographical. This is because the novel is a ‘newly created account’ (Maftei, 127). Erin is an entirely different person to myself, in a different life and facing varied situations. It could not be said that both character and author are the same as they share an element of their lives, only that inspiration is found in experience, as it is for Atwood and Ferrante in their experiences of location and a patriarchal society.

Suffering from mental distress due to change is a dominant theme in *The Days of Abandonment*. Olga, when left by her husband, has serious problems trying to cope with daily life. Firestone’s theory is that the pressure of a nuclear family creates psychological issues for women, and when Olga is suddenly left without the hierarchical figure in her family, she loses her identity. This climaxes when she is faced with being trapped inside her apartment with her two children. Greer can help us elaborate on this situation:

‘The housewives’ life is not real: it is anachronistic and thwarting: women have been exposed to too many other kinds of life to revert to four walls and people two foot high without strain.’ (312)

Faced with this reality Olga begins to suffer from serious mental health problems. As time goes on and the situation becomes worse, the reader is no longer able to see the difference between Olga’s reality, and the thoughts that she is having:

‘What an idiot, I should absolutely not have spoken to her. A dialogue, in fact. As if I were writing my book and had in my head phantom people, characters. But I wasn’t writing, nor was I under my mother’s table telling myself the story of the *poverella*. I was talking to myself.’

(Ferrante, 114/115)

In this scene Olga is hallucinating, seeing a woman from her childhood who was left by her husband, whom she has been afraid of becoming. At this point the reader cannot see where reality lies, and Olga struggles to maintain a grip of her duty of care for her children. We see the desperation of Olga's character, and how ill equipped she is to deal with the children alone. The assumption that she should be left with them because of her gender seems unfair, as her husband goes off to have a life, and leaves his family to fall apart without support. He has broken the terms of their unspoken agreement, Firestone's exchange of services (44), and has left free to live without the pressures that Olga has always faced:

'I was an obsolete wife, a cast-off body, my illness is only female life that has outlived its usefulness.' (Ferrante, 110)

She is trapped by her life, quite literally, and in order to have some sort of escape her mind keeps flittering to different times and memories, as a way to give her a break from her reality. This can be linked directly to Firestone's theory on the pressures caused by the nuclear family, that it has the potential to trap women within it. The anxiety and mental issues that Olga faces are indicative of a life lived for somebody else, as demonstrated by Firestone's theory, suggesting that the woman in a family is a slave (Firestone, 67), producing children, and swapping her services for a life of protection and supposed normality (Firestone, 44). However, despite having the tropes of 'women's subjects' (Goldstein, 8:37) and therefore being included in Gray's accusation that female writers have 'forgotten the fundamental imperative of fiction writing' (Gray), this is a fictionalised account of Olga's life, resulting in a rich narrative about a female protagonist.

In *The First Bad Man*, Cheryl has a physical reaction to a mental issue, in the form of a globus (the feeling of having a lump in one's throat):

'The usual treatment is psychotherapy'  
 'I know.' I didn't explain that I was single. Therapy is for couples. So is Christmas. So is camping. So is beach camping.'  
 (July, 3)

Cheryl's globus reappears throughout the novel, and the symptoms of this only lessen when she begins physically to fight, and eventually to fall in love with, a younger woman who comes to live with her, Clee. However, though we could derive from this that perhaps Cheryl has been marred by her single status and suggest that it is significant that once Cheryl finds love her globus begins to get better, in reality, other issues begin to arise. She merely replaces her globus with images of having sex with Clee as various men. This is not the first time that Cheryl has had mental issues of this kind:

'Something like this had happened to me once before. When I was nine a well-meaning uncle sent me a birthday card...When I opened the card it flew out, gripping my brain with merciless talons: 'Birds of a feather flock together.' It couldn't be said just once, only repeated and repeated and repeated. Birdsofafeatherflocktogether, Birdsofafeatherflocktogether...I wondered how I would live a full and normal life, how I would get married, have kids, hold a job with this handicap. I was under this spell, on and off, for a full year.'  
 (July, 120/121)

Cheryl is haunted by this phrase, and can only break the spell of this by creating a new phrase. The last part of this quote is indicative of the pressures on a woman in a patriarchal society to join a nuclear family environment, as Cheryl wonders as a child how she will marry and have children, and therefore live a 'normal life' (July, 121).

This is similar to both Erin (*The Second Space*) and Olga (*The Days of Abandonment*), as they too are haunted by memories and have to create ways to break the 'spell' (July, 121). The former, by the men who have followed her through life, catcalling and assaulting

her. She attempts to break the series of memories in various ways, by visiting a counsellor, and by claiming back the spaces that have been taken from her. The latter, by the memory of the 'poverella' (Ferrante, 115), the desperate woman that she is struggling not to become, that same woman trapped inside the hierarchal family and then left alone suddenly, and her attempts to banish these thoughts by physical and painful jolts back into reality.

This leads to the question, is it only living in a patriarchal society that drives these female characters to mental instability, or is there another reason for an author to engage their characters in mental illness?

'There is a childish outspokenness in illness,' according to Woolf; it is 'the great confessional' where 'things are said, truths blurted out' that would remain silent in our healthier, more guarded states.'  
(V Woolf Qtd Maftai, 126)

Another reason these novels share this common theme is that it enables their female characters to depart from the expectations of adulthood, or from withholding emotion to seem more in control. It gives them the opportunity to be outspoken and to display their fury at being oppressed, without fear of judgement.

In this theme female protagonists are reflecting the truth of a woman living in a patriarchal society. The ability to mirror a woman's existence and create the narrative of women's history in fiction is to add more to the literary landscape than 'tiny family dramas' (Gray).

#### iv. *Relationships between Women*

Building a 'narrative tradition' (Ferri) for women will predictably include relationships between women as a common theme. Relationships between women, those of mother and daughter, sister, friend and partner are constants for women in society. Under Firestone's theory, it could be surmised that any break from the nuclear family could be said to be relief, or even necessary. Relationships between women are represented in all of these novels. They are essential elements of the female characters, enabling them to share similar experiences, and understand themselves through others who occupy the same environment. Firestone interprets Freud in her feminist manifesto, discussing how the daughter distances herself from the mother in order to try and gain some of the power she sees that her father has. Firestone says:

'Without specific direction, she could fool herself a long time that she will not end up like her mother. This is why she is so encouraged to play with dolls, to 'play house', to be pretty and attractive. It is hoped that she will not be one of those to fight off her role till the last minute.' (50)

At least one of the mothers in the selected novels does echo this behaviour (Joan's mother from *Lady Oracle*). However, perhaps the relationship between mother and daughter is a common theme because of the oppression they share?

A significant female relationship in *The Days of Abandonment* is the relationship between Olga and her daughter, Ilara. Continuing the mother and daughter theme, Olga is struggling throughout the novel to bring her children up alone. There is a scene in which Ilara wears her mother's make up:

'I opened the door of the bathroom and, avoiding the mirror, dragged the child over to the bathtub that was full to the brim. With one hand I held Ilaria by the head and immersed her in the water, while with the other I rubbed her face energetically. Reality, reality, without rouge. I



needed this, for now, if I wanted to save myself, save my children, the dog. To insist, that is, on assigning myself the job of saviour.’  
(Ferrante, 121/122)

This is one of the most tender moments between the mother and daughter in this book, as Olga tries to bring her child back to the one she recognises by washing the make-up off her face. Though she does this roughly, causing Ilara to react badly, she mentions that it makes her feel like crying, and it is as if the only way that Olga can recognise her daughter is through this mildly aggressive act. Olga also washes off the make-up that she herself had spent a long time applying earlier. She realises at this point that the children need her, the normal her, as much as she needs her daughter to be the normal Ilara. Viewed through Firestone’s theory, Ilara is going against the norm and is attempting to be like her mother, in the absence of their father, perhaps imagining that her mother is now the one in control and therefore the person to emulate. It is as though Olga is almost determined that her daughter should not dress herself up as she has, that she should not slip into the same life of domesticity, of being ‘pretty and attractive’ (Firestone, 50) to ‘hunt bored males’ (Firestone, 199) with the ultimate goal of marriage.

The main relationship between women in *Lady Oracle* is between Joan and her mother. This relationship is so complex that it has given Joan an eating disorder, as she overeats as a mechanism to cope with her mother, using her body as a weapon against her. We learn more of Joan’s mother as she describes the photographs around her mother’s house:

‘She was an attractive woman, even into her late thirties, she had kept her figure, she had been popular in her youth. In her photograph album there were snapshots of her in party dresses and bathing suits, with various young men, her looking at the camera, the young men looking at her...After that some photos of my mother alone, which my father must have taken. Then nothing but me, drooling on rugs, eating stuffed

animals or fists; my father had gone off to the war, leaving her pregnant, with nobody to take pictures of her.'  
(Atwood, 68)

The photographs Joan describes tell her mother's story. In her first job, she meets a man and marries him, only to be left alone to care for a child. This is similar to the situation that Olga is in, and also the situation that Erin's mother finds herself in. These three women are abandoned by their partners, the fathers of their children, and though for perhaps different reasons, the result is the same. It is heartbreak and mental issues that are derived from being left to deal with what is assumed to be the women's duty.

In *The First Bad Man* there is also a mother and child theme, however, this one is a little more unusual. Cheryl, while not being a biological mother herself, feels a connection to other women's babies. She is searching for a particular child, and thinks she sees elements of him in other children. She calls the baby that she is searching for Kubelko Bondy:

'I held my throat and leaned forward to get a look, but her hair blocked its face so there was no way to tell if it was one of the babies I think of as mine. Not mine biologically, just...familiar. I call those ones Kubelko Bondy. It only takes a second to check; half the time I don't even know I'm doing it until I'm already done.'  
(July, 8)

Cheryl eventually finds her baby through her relationship with Clee. Clee has a baby with whom Cheryl connects, and ultimately becomes the child's mother. This is a variation on the usual mother-child relationship, that a bond can be created and a stranger could be one's child if one loves it enough. Motherhood is a strong theme within this novel. Cheryl has always been a mother, from the young age of nine, even though she never actually gives birth. She takes on the role of mother, while Clee could be said to take on the role of the father. Cheryl takes responsibility for the child, and stays while Clee flees. The option to leave is there for the father in all of these fictional stories, but the mother always stays.

The main relationships Erin has in *The Second Space* are with women. She has significant relationships with Sofia, with whom she has a sexual relationship; her mother, who supports her through her break up; Olive, for whom she cares, and two women who are in a relationship, who help her to realise her identity. These two women, Amber and Laura, each have a different relationship with Erin, and it is Amber with whom she has the closest connection (*The Second Space*, 108).

This is a powerful relationship for Erin. It is not just a friendship: it is Amber who helps Erin understand the fundamental part of who she is, giving her the opportunity to have a conversation that she has never felt comfortable having before. Amber is the woman who could almost act as Erin's mentor, helping her to realise her full potential in a gay relationship. Her talk of identity is not just important for Erin, it is an essential discussion that drives Erin's personal journey, helping her to build her future and ultimately be the person she wants to be. It is Amber to whom Erin talks when she eventually decides to be alone, and to forge a life as an individual and not as part of a couple.

Another significant relationship for Erin is with her mother. In one instance, Erin reads her mother's diary while she is alone in the house, and the reader finds out about their relationship from the mother's point of view (*The Second Space*, 180).

Writing Erin's relationships with women was essential to the story of her journey of self-realisation and identification. Erin needed other women to talk to, to share her experiences with. From Sofia to her mother, to the counsellor, Erin's character responds better to women as she feels that they share the space they live in, something that hinders her relationships with men. Creating female relationships for Erin was essential, as it enabled her to speak with those in a similar environment within society:

'Felman...argues that women's writing is unable to be autobiographical in the same way as men's because women have been 'Trained to see [them]selves as objects and to be positioned as the Other' (Felman 1993, 14). This reliance means, for Felman, that a woman's writing of her own life cannot exist in the same way as it might for a man, who would have a developed (existing) sense of self as an individual.' (Maftei, 28)

These quotes support the concept of 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15).

The writing of self is different for a female author writing a female protagonist as they are writing from within 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15). By using other female characters with whom the protagonist can interact, they are giving the characters the opportunity to be more than an 'object' (Maftei, 28) or 'other' (Maftei, 28). I enabled Erin to realise her identity fully as an individual by giving her women with whom she can interact. For this reason, the theme of female relationships is vital to *The Second Space*, enriching the narrative. The theme of relationships helps to disprove the idea that women writing about subjects such as 'motherhood' (Gray) are writing 'thinly disguised' (Gray) autobiographies. Instead, writing about these subjects enables authors to give their female characters an identity and journey, providing them with women who will see them as more than 'other' (Maftei, 28). These are more than 'small-scale domestic themes' (Gray), they are fictionalised accounts of oppression that could engage a like-minded reader, or enable the male reader to better appreciate a patriarchal society from a woman's point of view, 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15). Classifying these themes as women's fiction could dissuade male readership from approaching these texts.

## v. *Sexual Fantasy*

Sexual fantasy is the final theme in this study. Sexuality is discussed throughout *The Second Space*, including the idea of pansexuality (with which Erin identifies). Firestone discusses pansexuality:

‘The end goal of the feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of the male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. (A reversion to the unobstructed *pansexuality*)’ (11)

Firestone’s quote suggests she believes that to truly eradicate sexism and the nuclear family, ‘sex distinction itself’ (11) must be eradicated so that it no longer has a cultural significance. Whatever sexual fantasies the women in the four novels experience, there is an argument that they are directly related to the male culture that they live in. As Firestone states:

‘And there are even more complex layers to this question of authenticity: women have no means of coming to an understanding of what their experience is, or even that it is different from male experience. The tool for representing, for objectifying one’s experience in order to deal with it, culture, is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes.’ (141)

To summarise, how can a woman see her sexual experience clearly if it is, by default, created through the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey)? If we accept that women are writing from within an androcentric culture, it follows that their work may not be valued in the same way as a man’s writing, as they will be adopting a language for their work created by, and for, the male gender.

In *The Second Space* Erin fantasises at various stages in the narrative about being controlled by men, especially Mark, her ex fiancé (*The Second Space*, 98). Most of the time,

Erin's fantasies feature men exerting power over her, but this does not reflect her conscious life. They could be viewed as directly linking to living within a patriarchal society and male culture, as supported by Firestone's theory. This adds to the 'narrative tradition' (Ferri) of female protagonists, documenting the effects of living in front of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey), with only androcentric language to understand it.

In *The First Bad Man*, Cheryl fantasises about Clee throughout the narrative, but in her fantasies, behaves as the man in the relationship:

'A thin, nerdy lad I saw in Whole Foods: Clee followed him out to his car, begged him to let her hold his stiff member for one to two minutes. An Indian father who politely asked me directions with his shy wife in tow: Clee rubbed her puss all over his body and forced stiffness out of him, he was whining in ecstasy when his wife walked in. Too nervous to say anything, she waited silently until her husband creamed on Clee's jugs.'  
(July, 117)

Cheryl pretends to be a man in her fantasies, her main focus being a woman, Clee, suggesting that she is fantasising using male standards. The fact that these two women, Cheryl and Erin, who are both women in gay relationships with other women, fantasise either about men or as a man, is interesting. It links directly with Firestone's earlier quote, suggesting that culture is so 'saturated with male bias' (141) that these women are automatically creating straight sexual fantasies for themselves. The significant differences in genders, in the way that they are treated and reacted to, leads to, in Cheryl's case, having fantasies about being powerful in a relationship and, in Erin's case, being controlled by a man and being submissive. Erin fantasises about being dominated, and Cheryl about being the dominator. It could be said, as well as visiting the counsellor and reliving the experiences she has had previously with men by writing down her stories, that Erin is attempting to create mentally the reality of the threat that she feels from men, perhaps in an attempt to

eradicate the experience and gain control over it. Cheryl, on the other hand, attempts to gain power mentally in her relationship by pretending to be a man, and take control by attempting to exert male dominance.

During the process of writing Erin's sex scenes it was important for me to write boldly and clearly, and to limit language such as the following:

'This rhetoric of 'seduction,' 'captivation,' 'thrusting,' 'subjugation,' 'tumescence and detumescence' reveals the understanding of desire upon which their conception of narrative exchange is based as fundamentally male and heterosexual.'  
(Kaplan, 17)

The majority of Erin's sexual experiences are with women, and to describe these scenes with language derived from a 'male and heterosexual' (Kaplan, 17) culture would have been disingenuous. To write and share these scenes with peers was initially a challenge, however, it was important to me that Erin had these experiences as they moved her emotional journey forward, and enabled her to realise what it was that she wanted from life. As Erin overcomes any shyness sexually, I found that I overcame any fear of speaking plainly in a novel about sex. The night that Erin shares with Amber and Laura is a pivotal moment for her (*The Second Space*, 87). In these scenes I played with tenses and grammatical person, with the intention of drawing the readers into the present and changing their perspective on the scene. Erin feels as though she is outside her body when the characters first undress, confirmed by the use of the third person. It then switches back to first person but in present tense, to highlight Erin being drawn into the scene.

To contribute to the narrative of female writers is to contribute female sexual experiences through fiction into the literary landscape.

## **Chapter 4 - Conclusion**

The source of this investigation was an awareness that female authors' work is often categorised under the term women's fiction due to common themes within their work and further research confirmed that women's writing is also often assumed to be autobiographical. As a result their work can be taken less seriously by critics and they may be excluded from a large segment of the market. My purpose in writing this study was to contribute to the knowledge of women's writing and the creative process by acknowledging the existence and value of 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15) and refuting the assumption that fiction written by women is autobiographical. I concentrated on the following two areas of research:

- i. A demonstration that while there may be an 'incorporation of reality into fiction' (Ibsen, 7) being a female author inspired by reality does not automatically mean that a novel is autobiographical, discussing female only themes.
- ii. A comparison of common themes written about by myself and other female authors, featuring female protagonists experiencing life within a patriarchal society. These authors are writing from 'The Second Space' (Grosse, 10:40 – 11:15) and are contributing women's narrative to literature.



***i. The Assumption of Autobiographical Writing***

Within this section I discussed Atwood, Ferrante and my own writing, highlighting that we all use local knowledge of location in our fictional work. I demonstrated the difference between reviews of male and female authors' work, to conclude that the literary world is more likely to label women's writing as autobiographical.

I responded to Gray's accusation that women writing about certain themes meant that their work was 'thinly-disguised autobiographical writing' (Gray) by demonstrating that Atwood has stated that her work is fictional, and that without knowing Ferrante, it is impossible to say that her work is autobiographical. I have shown that these authors write works of fiction responding to the real lives of women and that being a female author inspired by reality does not automatically mean that a novel is autobiographical, rather that it is written from 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15).

## ii. Women's Fiction

Within this section I confirmed the meaning of the label women's fiction, and highlighted the issues arising from this. I demonstrated that women writing varying genres can be placed in this category, having a negative effect on readership.

These pieces of fiction are written for everyone. If it is women readers who relate to the lives of the characters it means that they recognise the position that these women are in, the pressures that they are put under, and the part that gender has to play in their tale; in short, they are viewing it from 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15). Through demonstrating the differences between male and female authors' reviews, and comparing the themes that Gray suggests are 'thinly disguised autobiographical writing', I have shown the gender imbalance that exists within the literary world. Great works of fiction written by women should be accepted as works of art and examples of an author's imagination in the same way as those written by men.

### iii. Common Themes between *The Second Space* and Three Novels

I examined the common themes through the theory of Firestone, supported by Greer, and the argument that the nuclear family has an effect on women in society, on their relationships, mental health, sexual fantasies and more. Through comparing Firestone's theory with the themes, I demonstrated that these subjects are not randomly chosen as 'women's subjects' (Goldstein, 8:37), and that women, and men, write about these subjects because they are valid representations of the society that they see around them. The women in these novels are second class citizens because of their gender, left with the responsibilities that are assumed to be a female's, abandoned by men and left to forge relationships with other women to heal themselves, and the impact of existing and surviving within this society inevitably causes some mental issues among them. These subjects cannot be covered by the blanket phrase women's fiction, as they investigate, each in their own way, the human condition. These issues are by no means limited to women, but if written about by women, it does not mean that they are not worthy of discussion, examination and further study as works of literature. As Firestone confirms:

'For writers wrote about what they saw: they described the cultural milieu around them. And in the milieu there was concern for the issues of feminism. The questions of the emancipation of women affected every woman, whether she developed through the new ideas or fought them desperately.' (40)

These common issues are faced by women in Western patriarchal society, regardless of location.

The detailing of the three novels in comparison to my novel *The Second Space*, and the common themes found within them, discussed the idea that women may write about their own oppression (in particular, as viewed through Firestone's nuclear family theory). A

female author might create a world for her character that mirrors society, and as demonstrated, a male writer may also do the same. Knausgaard, for example, has been discussed in this study, and his collective novels entitled *My Struggle* focus primarily on domesticity. His work however is not placed automatically under the term of women's fiction, but is instead viewed as a genuine contribution to the literary world. Viewing the common themes within the three chosen texts from Firestone's belief that life outside the confines of the nuclear family eradicates sexism raises a question for further study and research, 'If the nuclear family were abolished, would the themes of sexism, gender and domesticity also become extinct, and women's writing be judged without belonging to the term women's fiction?'

#### **iv. Writing *The Second Space***

This study is vital to me as a female author. Prior to writing this essay, I understood that my writing career would not be the same as my male peers. However, while inquiring deeply into this subject, I have seen that the topic is broader than I first expected. I would suggest further investigation into the exclusion of women from the literary canon, and to some extent, the literary world. There are many exemplary pieces of writing that female authors can offer the literary world, written about their own culture and identity, 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15). Gilbert and Gubar, authors of *Madwoman in the Attic*, a chapter of which Burke includes in his critical book *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* say the following:

'On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer's male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer.'

(Qtd in Burke, 157)

This quote makes an excellent point, and led me to question that, without women writers, who could express the true identity of half the world's population? It is important that women authors are recognised as contributing to culture on the same level as male authors. Their work should not be assumed to be autobiographical, or dismissed as 'feminine tosh' (Naipaul Qtd by Strayed) just because of their choice of subject matter or their gender.

The following is a quote that encompasses the need for this piece of work, and the essential ongoing study and argument into these common issues. This discussion is, again,

about author Marilynne Robinson, and her book *Housekeeping*, discussed on BBC Radio

Four's 'A Good Read', between presenter Harriett Gilbert and male author Joe Dunthorne:

‘Harriett: ‘You obviously read American fiction, have you not read Marilynne Robinson before?’

Joe: ‘No.’

Harriett: ‘Might I ask why not? Is it by any chance, this is a Pulitzer Prize winner, highly praised, is it anything to do with her being a woman?’

Joe (Laughing): ‘No, I’ve never even been recommended her before. I have no excuses except that I didn’t know what she was.’”

(*A Good Read*, 22:45 – 23:05)

This quote demonstrates the difficulty that women face when trying to access the literary world and the literary canon. The idea that a Pulitzer Prize winning female author is not recognised by her male peers, including the subtle dehumanisation of her in the phrase ‘I didn’t know what she was’ (*A Good Read*), as opposed to, ‘I didn’t know who she was’, is representative of the issues that have been discussed in this study.

By mirroring society in my novel *The Second Space*, I aim to have an impact on my reader. When I began writing it, I wanted to write a piece of fiction with a feminist slant. Firestone’s theory that sexism would not exist outside of the confines of a nuclear family has enabled me to develop the character of Erin, and understand the freedom that she is attempting to claim; a life outside the nuclear family and the perceived final goal of marriage. Her eventual decision to be alone is a step away from Firestone’s communal feminist utopia, and is instead an up to date suggestion of a feminist ideal – the ability to survive outside a patriarchal family dynamic. The research within this study has had an impact on my creative process in that it has not only inspired me to create a work focusing on women existing in ‘The Second Space’ (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15), but it has also enabled me to develop female characters and has given me a deeper understanding of their significance in the narrative of women’s writing. Any bias shown to female writers has encouraged me

to be bold with my fiction, and not to be reticent when writing scenes that narrate every part of a character's life, from sex to mental illness. It is these themes that demonstrate honesty about women's lives within 'The Second Space' (Grosse 10:40 – 11:15).

Novels can affect a reader, and readers can recognise themes about their own lives. Having an impact on a reader could be the aim for any writer, male or female, but it is not the gender of the author that should define this reaction. As celebrated author and playwright Alan Bennett states:

'The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.' (472)

It is time that gender was disregarded as a prerequisite for literary excellence.

**Critical Word Count: 20,161**

**Creative Word Count: 79,276**

**Total Word Count: 99,437**

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