

'NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST' (NOVEL) AND VIOLENT WOMEN:
REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE VIOLENCE IN MURIEL SPARK'S 'THE DRIVER'S
SEAT', VIRGINIE DESPENTES'S 'BAISE-MOI', GILLIAN FLYNN'S 'GONE GIRL',
AND C.S. BARNES'S 'NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST'

by

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ABSTRACT

Never Forget Your First presents the story of Gillian – a young woman who, from a young age, expresses an attraction to violence. Following an encounter with her father – in the course of which he suffers a fatal injury – Gillian begins her journey towards her first murder. *Never Forget Your First* aims to illustrate how contemporary authors can deviate from narrative norms in regard to representing female violence. Complementary to this, the critical portion of this thesis, *Violent Women: Representations of Female Violence in Muriel Spark's 'The Driver's Seat', Virginie Despentes's 'Baise-Moi', Gillian Flynn's 'Gone Girl', and C.S. Barnes's 'Never Forget Your First'*, discusses how depictions of female violence in fiction remain heavily gendered. Through an analysis of three novels – Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970), Virginie Despentes's *Baise-Moi*, trans. by Bruce Benderson (1993), and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) – this essay aims to highlight that even innovative narratives of female violence remain, to some extent, governed by gendered expectations. This analysis also draws on feminist theory, above all on Betty Friedan's and Judith Butler's work. The critical essay highlights problems with the gendered representation of violence in fiction and calls for a revision of literary tropes governing the representation of violence.

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Never Forget Your First

A Note from the Narrator

When I was eight years and six months old I squeezed the life out of our family cat. My mother told me that it wasn't my fault. Poppy was old, and it certainly wasn't anything that I had done. I don't think she understood what I was trying to tell her.

To begin with it was a passing thought, a curiosity I only pursued due to the absence of company. By ten years and two months of age, my father had become so preoccupied with beating my mother – and my mother so preoccupied with covering her bruises with make-up – that they barely noticed what their little girl was occupying herself with. In fact, the behaviour went so unnoticed that I managed to convince myself that it was quite normal; that working out the amount of weed-killer required to annihilate a catalogue of household animals was a perfectly acceptable pastime for any above-average-intelligence pre-adolescent. Regrettably, despite my desire to normalise it, my growing intelligence hindered my adoption of that belief with any real conviction. The first time my mother picked a pungent carcass – it was a swallow, or some other bird of a similar size – from my windowsill and deposited it in the outside rubbish bin, I knew that I was crossing some lines.

'I just found it,' I had told her. 'I wondered how long it would take to change.'

Decompose, I meant, and I think she knew. But nothing more was ever said on the matter. That was my first real mistake. Although, the fish in the freezer incident was a childish error on my part, too, but we'll come to that later.

When fully-fledged adolescence arrived, the household in which I lived had transformed into your average miserable family. Miserable because alcohol is a depressant,

not a mood-lifter – a reality that my father insisted on testing and verifying for himself on a daily basis. Everyone in our local Accident and Emergency Department was on a first name basis with my mother by the time I was eleven years and eight months old. Through my ritualistic attendance of the hospital’s Visiting Hour to see her, they soon came to be on a first name basis with me too.

For a while it was convenient to believe that my mother was just clumsy; that doors, floors, and other miscellaneous items around the house were somehow conspiring against her. However, when a boy at my secondary school asked an allegedly innocent question about my father’s behaviour towards my mother – ‘Like, does your dad do it a lot or...?’ – I discovered that not everyone was capable of ignoring it as well as me. A nervous laugh moved in a Mexican wave around the classroom, and then I thumped the boy in the face. A bloody mess escaped from his nose as he dabbed away tears. I was thoroughly impressed. My mother, less so.

We don’t use violence, it doesn’t fix problems, she had said.

‘So why does Dad do it?’

We didn’t talk for a week after that. She broke her vow of silence, just once, to inform me that my father was cleaning out the fish pond. She muttered something about dead fish and contaminated water and then turned back to the task at hand: ironing my father’s best white shirt ahead of his evening with friends. I asked if the water smelled like bleach but she didn’t answer.

I can’t remember whether it was her silence or something else altogether, but that week I heard everything for the first time. It seemed my ears had become attuned to the sounds of my father’s after-hours activities. And apparently once you tune into that frequency, you can never turn it off.

Their strength as a parental unit was never stronger than when they were trying to hide the injuries, and the quiet apologies that followed them. But there were still times when they couldn't manage the façade; my father's guilt never seemed to last long. One morning stands out in particular, when their antics from the previous evening had left my mother's right hand entirely useless. This was something my father regretted when his breakfast was served fifteen minutes late. Each offer of assistance from me was greeted by, 'She can manage'. Losing patience, he squashed my fifth offer of help. The grip of his fingers around my wrist was quickly followed by a twist, and then a grinding sensation.

'You get that bloody hand off her.'

It was my mother's first and only intervention.

That evening I felt the front leg of a stray cat crack inside my hand. I realised then that his angle hadn't been right at all, not if he'd wanted to break a bone.

On reflection it could be considered a perverse achievement that we lived like this for so long. But times change and I, as most children do, eventually had to depart for greener pastures.

The beatings worsened after I left for university. My mother never told me, explicitly, but she never really needed to. My early video-chats with her soon disintegrated into half-video, half-darkness; while my face was suspended in the corner of my laptop screen, the space that hers should occupy remained black. Given that she never mentioned it, I assumed that I wasn't expected to either. With this home-life situation a secondary concern now, my main problem became how to correctly perform an autopsy on a pig – a primary concern for most biology students at university, and one that I took to with disproportionate excitement. In this new setting though, the animal-based experiments that I had so frequently performed at home became something worth sharing – with a room full of people no less – all of whom

were up to their elbows in entrails themselves.

My fellow students would animate carcasses – using one hand to manipulate the mouth of a long-dead animal while providing an amusing voice-over for the creature – and smuggle organs into each other’s work spaces in a manner that I found refreshing, encouraging even. The interactions with these new associates helped me to grow and explore myself in a way that I was told I should at university. One classmate – Angela Straven – even shared her experiences with formaldehyde and methanol over two bottles of wine and a girls’ night, and from this the preservation of my experiments was born and the subsequent storage of them as well. It all went a long way towards normalising my behaviour, although it’s possible that that wasn’t a good thing.

On an irregular basis I was lured away from my student life of beans on toast, animal dissections, and Friends re-runs. My mother was always pleased, or relieved, to have me home, while my father often greeted me with notable lack of interest – that is, of course, on the few occasions when he felt moved enough to greet me at all. If nothing else these visits home reminded me of precisely why I had abandoned the house and its misfit occupants in the first place, so perhaps, in that sense, they served a purpose.

Our family history may make for a surprising read, I suppose, for anyone viewing it from an external angle. We managed, though. It was our very own version of normality. The most surprising element, in fact, is not the abuse and the subsequent damage that it caused at all. The most surprising thing, I think, is that one of us didn’t die sooner.

Chapter One

We were dropped back into the dysfunctional dynamics of family life at the end of my second year of university, when I reluctantly returned home for the summer months. A complication with contracts – thanks to my would-be housemates – meant that keeping away for the holidays was not an option this year. On the afternoon of my arrival, my mother's arm was already tucked away in a sling which disappeared after a day or two; I had just escaped an outburst. Beyond that everything was average, unchanged. After my first evening in my own bed, my first morning was made up of dead air between my father and me; I made tea in the kitchen as he tried to read his morning paper. He tutted, shuffled the pages. Something was irking him but I didn't want to ask what. He left the house without saying a word and that's when my mother appeared; bright-eyed and unexpectedly chirpy, she set about making breakfast with an unnecessary smile on her face. My deadpan expression – somewhere between amused and bemused – felt misfit.

'Are you okay, love?' my mother asked, back to me, buttering toast.

'Of course,' I lied. I wasn't okay but I was unsure of why.

We shared a quiet breakfast of toast and too-strong tea while my mother inquired about my plans for the day – I had none – and I toyed with the idea of asking what hers were. It had never crossed my mind to find out what my mother did all day; how she filled the time, what a normal Tuesday might be. Tuesdays, though, were cleaning days, as I later discovered.

'Will the Hoover disturb you?'

My head was firmly wedged inside JG Ballard's *Crash*.

‘Gillian?’ She sounded nervous; how she must sound when she talks to my father in similar circumstances, I thought.

‘Sorry?’

‘The Hoover.’

‘Oh.’ I shook my head. ‘That’s fine, it won’t disturb me.’

After this my Stepford mother reappeared to clean corners of the house that had long been forgotten, and were now only inspected by her.

‘There are some places the Hoover just can’t reach,’ she said, scrubbing away.

I couldn’t offer a complementary response and so I opted for a subject change. ‘What time will Dad be home?’

My mother was on her knees, angled in such a way that I could only see her backside rising and dipping intermittently, and an elbow jutting out in a determined beat as she rubbed at something in the corner of the living room.

‘The shop closes at half-past five now, so he should be home by six because Tuesday isn’t a pub night. I don’t know when dinner will be though,’ she added, as though preempting my next query. It felt as though she had given me more information than I needed, as though providing me with tips for surviving Tuesdays. Would I get these every day? My mother was right about the timing. At six on the dot, my father wandered into the house and stuck his head into the kitchen, delivering an awkward kiss to my mother and a stare of disapproval to me. He smelt of raw meat; the odour of butcher that I had come to exclusively associate with him.

This clockwork running of the house appeared common practice for them. They – we – even ate dinner together.

‘Could you pass the salt?’ I asked anyone.

‘You don’t need salt,’ my father replied.

Nevertheless my mother passed the shaker; my father passed her a disapproving look.

Tuesdays may have been cleaning days but in my first four days of being at home, cleaning was all I saw my mother do. It appeared as a compulsion to her, as if something important depended on clean corners and properly swept floors. Late one Friday afternoon – when the house was a clinical level of clean after a week of bleach and buffing – my mother wandered upstairs and through my open doorway. The time had come; we were going to have a chat.

She found me lying on my bed – another unchanged element of the house; it was still single, still pink – poring over the pages of a book with feigned concentration.

‘Do you have a minute, love?’

‘What do you need?’

‘I just thought we could have a little chat.’

I shook away the beginnings of a frown. ‘About?’

‘Oh, anything.’ She edged closer to my bed, making the journey in small movements, as if hoping that I wouldn’t see how close she now was. ‘How’s university going?’

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. 2004. Jim Carrey. ‘Constantly talking isn’t necessarily communicating.’

We discussed university, we discussed my plans for the summer – again, I had none – and we skirted around the issue of how I felt about being home. Disgruntled, mostly, but that wasn’t a feeling that I shared with my mother. Instead I told her it was a change, and I would adapt, as would Dad. She hadn’t mentioned my father at all during the conversation but I knew that was the direction in which we would eventually steer things.

‘He doesn’t mind you being here,’ she said, responding to something that I hadn’t asked.

‘No?’

‘No.’

‘Geraldine!’

My mother’s shoulders bunched up as if trying to shield her from something.

‘Dinner!’

It wasn’t a question so much as a command. My mother shot me a look – an almost-grimace that cocked her mouth up at one side. With a shrug she stood and paced to my doorway, asking on the way:

‘What would you like for dinner, love?’

‘I don’t care.’

I don’t mind, I should have said.

‘Woman!’ My father launched the word up the stairs like a small grenade; the sound was guttural, aggressive. My mother again flinched at the sound before flashing an uncomfortable smile and moving from the doorway.

The quiet that followed this incident was deceptive. When I ventured downstairs and into the kitchen a short while later, I discovered, resting in the corner of the room, there was a complete dinner slumped on top of a ruined plate that had been cracked into five neat pieces. In the opposing corner there stood my mother, trying to settle a tremor as she soaked her hand beneath the cold tap. Despite seeing everything, I couldn’t make it all fit.

‘Is he having dinner with us?’

‘It was too hot. I should have warned him.’

The Wizard of Oz. 1939. Judy Garland. ‘There’s no place like home.’

My mother pulled out a chair opposite me but, after a second of deliberation, sat hesitantly on the one next to me instead, as if her first choice was too suggestive of confrontation. With a damp cloth tucked around her injured hand, she was left no other option but to use only the edge of her fork to chip away at her dinner. It was unexpectedly satisfying to see her struggle.

While my mother tentatively chewed a series of half-mouthfuls, I fell into rearranging my dinner into different patterns across my plate. She eventually noticed.

‘Is there something wrong with your food?’

‘No, there’s something wrong with my family.’

Something flitted over her face: was it disappointment? Surprise? Discomfort?

‘Can I speak openly?’ I knew this was the proper way to introduce a potentially difficult conversation. I’d heard it said on television.

‘I thought you already were.’ Her tone was blunt; it didn’t fit her at all. But then it softened. ‘We hardly have secrets here, love, you can say what you like.’

A problem that I had often experienced was an inability to devote an appropriate amount of consideration to a thought before voicing it. Too little and the thought was clumsy, misshapen; too much and it was clinical, accusatory. Despite having a loose idea of what I wanted to say, there wasn’t quite enough time to format it, which is perhaps why it emerged as an emotional blunt force trauma:

‘Why didn’t you ever try to leave?’

My mother dropped her fork and it bounced off her dinner plate, making for a dramatic gesture. I remained silent, stern, perhaps even parental.

‘Do we have to have this conversation, Gillian?’

In my experience it was considered bad form to answer a question with a question, but

it didn't seem appropriate to highlight this. Nor did it seem appropriate to suggest that the reason we were having this conversation was because the issue had never been addressed before, and there was only so much extracurricular reading I could do around the so-called battered-woman syndrome before my curiosity called for first hand research.

'It hasn't always been like this, and you know it,' she started. 'He tries, harder than you know, and he's always,' she hesitated. 'He's always sorry, Gillian.'

People are quick to apologise when they're caught doing something wrong. It's a common human habit. They're sorry, and when it happens again they're sorrier still, and when it happens again –

'We were a good couple once, Gillian.'

She took a long pause then. I wondered whether she was trying the sentence on for size, to see if she could somehow make it fit.

'What changed?' I asked.

'Why is this something we need to talk about?'

'I can always go in there and ask him.'

'He'd beat you black and blue if you did.'

'I'd end up killing him if he tried.'

The answer startled the both of us.

'Don't talk like that, Gillian.'

'Like what?'

'Like violence can fix problems, because it bloody can't.'

'No, violence just creates problems, doesn't it?' I matched her tone, pushing harder than I had during adolescence. She knew what I was asking her; I knew she wouldn't answer.

'Am I the reason you didn't leave?' I considered this a calculated risk. Statistically speaking, I

was probably one of several reasons why she hadn't left, but whatever detained her in the house now, it certainly wasn't me. And I couldn't believe that my father's intermittent apologies were a good enough reason for her to stay either.

'Gillian, love, no, of course it wasn't anything to do with you. All of this started long before we'd even decided to have you.' I nodded: she hadn't answered my question. 'Gillian, what is it that you really want to know?'

'Why you're here. Why you don't leave now.'

'This is just life, love. The only way one of us will leave now is in a box.'

And at that she returned to the remainder of her dinner.

Inside the sanctuary of my bedroom I perched on my bed and assessed my surroundings. The room hadn't changed in as long as I could remember. The same pink paint, picked out by my mother, occupied the majority of the wall space, bar the occasional stretches of scab where my younger self had sought to peel away the colour. Now, as a twenty-two-year-old woman, I was still confined to a child's bedroom, sleeping on a bed that was dressed up in a duvet cover I hardly even recognised. Opposite the bed there was a desk, the top space of which was dominated by a television so old that there was still a cuboid attached to the back of it.

I allowed myself an indulgent dip into my experiments box. On my return home I'd stashed it inside my wardrobe but the time had arrived now for me to fall back on it; between you and me, I was surprised that I'd lasted so long. Through the slightly open folds of cardboard I could see a circular, stained-silver lid, but I couldn't decipher which jar it belonged to. With my eyes shut, I wrapped my fingers around the first container that they landed on. The liquid shifted noisily as I retrieved the jar. And there it was, as luck would have it: the rat. The first of my keepsakes.

Before moving home the contents of the box had reserved shelf space opposite my bed at university, where I could keep an eye on them. Lined up from the oldest – and therefore the favourite – to the most recent, there was a time when I said goodnight to each of them in turn before going to sleep. Claire – a fellow lover of animals and their anatomies who I encountered during my first year – had once gone to the effort of naming them all.

‘Where did you even get them from, Gillian?’ she asked one night, throwing a jar of small organs between her hands with such an enthusiasm that they created something akin to a rattle.

‘I sort of put them together myself.’

We hadn’t spoken since, although she did throw me the occasional glance, laden with judgment, when our paths crossed on campus. My first real lesson from university was censorship.

Now, turning the container this way and that, I struggled to get the head and the body alongside each other in such a way that I could admire both. It had been four years but it looked much the same as when I had first dropped both sections into the solution; although its eyes stared back a little duller than they used to. It was once just water, but the rat and I had moved along in preservation techniques since then. The cut had been clumsy, jagged, rushed; I remembered my analysis of it particularly well. But I suppose everyone remembers their first.

This quick pull on the memory wasn’t as satisfying as a fresh experience but it was the best remedy I could get that evening. I stared into its eyes and lost myself there, until:

‘Gillian, I have to -’

My mother entered the room without my even realising it. The jar slipped from between my fingers as she spoke; I pulled in a mouthful of air, as if filling my lungs would

soften the floor. The glass itself collided with the rug rather than the wood, creating a dull thud. She reached; I reached. Her hand grabbed the container before mine was even close. She couldn't help but study the specimen then. The frown over her forehead was soon ironed away and replaced with wide eyes.

'I'm interrupting you. I, ah, I'm sorry –'

She settled the jar on the bed as she spoke, as if the duvet might be too hard a surface for it. She stepped back then, three small steps, before speaking again, as if the distance had given her the necessary space to continue.

'I'm going out now. For the beer. I, would you like to come with me, or...?'

I wondered how that sentence could possibly finish:

Or would you prefer to stay here?

Spend some time with your father?

Play around with your dead things?

'I'll stay here. I'll keep an eye on him while you're away, shall I? Make sure he doesn't dehydrate, or choke on a ring pull?'

'Oh, Gillian, it's best to just keep out of his way,' she whispered, like she was telling me something that I didn't already know. 'I'll hardly be any time at all, and, well, I wouldn't want there to be any trouble.'

From my bedroom window I watched, waited. The front door slammed, the car engine coughed itself awake, and twenty seconds later I heard heavy footfalls, slowly increasing in volume. My father had just reached the top of the stairs when I pulled my bedroom door closed behind me. His bloodshot eyes tipped back in his head when he saw me, and I wondered who else he had been expecting to find up here. In the seconds of surveillance that followed, I saw that his shirt was mis-buttoned, his belt only half-held together by its buckle,

and the bottle of lager in his right hand was half-empty – half-full, depending on your perspective.

‘You’re a little undressed, Dad.’

‘For what? Slobbering about my own house?’

I didn’t correct him. If slobbering was his primary concern then he was well-dressed for the occasion.

‘You’re the one who should be getting dressed up. Hitting the town, like a normal kid,’ he said, leaning heavily on the word ‘normal’, punctuating the sentence with a rough laugh.

‘Nothing about this house is normal.’

There was every chance, I thought, that he either wouldn’t hear or wouldn’t properly process what I had said. But when his face snapped towards me with a deadpan expression, I knew that neither of those possibilities had come to fruition.

‘Nothing about this house is normal?’ he repeated, squinting, inspecting the appraisal. He appeared offended by the assessment. Taking an additional step away from the stairs, he, by default, moved closer to me.

From downstairs I could catch fragments of something. It was Thursday; we had eaten dinner nearly an hour ago, so it must have been either Coronation Street or Eastenders. I had lost track of the timetable since moving away. Over-dramatised bursts of ‘You’re not my mother’ and ‘And what a relief that is’ infiltrated our tension. Apparently my father and I were not the only individuals on the cusp of a family squabble.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked, as if I had been the one to approach him. I glanced down and assessed myself; I didn’t appear to be doing anything. ‘Don’t get smart with me,’ he said, pre-empting. ‘You waltz in here, like you own the place. Eating our food, using our

lives. Putting thoughts in your mother's head.'

My mouth twitched into a smirk that I didn't even try to suppress.

'Don't you bloody grin.' He paused to swig from his bottle before lowering it back down; it was his first sip since this encounter had started. When he spoke again his voice was level, controlled. 'I'll get you out of here again before you know it,' he said with a newfound measure of confidence, as though there were a master-plan sitting behind the threat. 'And if you put ideas in her head about leaving, I'll get rid of that problem as well.'

Feelings and their titles often evaded me entirely but there was something – a tug, somewhere in my innards – when he said that.

'Get rid of the problem? Is that me, or her?'

'Think I'll pop her under the patio; chop her up in the shop?' At least I knew which one of us he was referring to now. But the good humour, the obvious enjoyment that went into the retort, was perturbing. He seemed proud. 'Hey, let's bond, kiddo. We can cut her up and feed her to those hungry strays that you've been picking off over the years; it's about time we gave something back to them.'

He extended an arm out to the banister behind him, leaning back against it triumphantly.

'We've all got our bad habits, kid.' He was smug now, chasing the words with another mouthful of alcohol. 'Not so different after all, eh?'

I needed to speak. But nothing was coming out. I couldn't rationalise how we had arrived here; what had made my father so hungry for this, what had made him part with his ammunition so readily.

'You were a mistake, you know?' he started again. 'A rotten mistake that your mother refused to take care of. Didn't agree with abortion, didn't think we could get rid; I reckoned

we could, though. Reckoned a good hiding was what she needed.’

If I was pushed, really pushed, to isolate the moment when I lost control, it would be then.

Fact: studies have shown that women are slower to experience rage than men.

He moved forwards and, driven by biological instinct alone, I retreated. There was something simultaneously familiar yet alien about the way he padded towards me; a semi-tranquillised bear determined to catch its prey. As he made good progress at closing the distance between us, I saw his jaw tighten, eyes twitch, fists clench.

Lazily, he threw a balled hand in my direction.

‘Eventually your mother will know what a mistake you were. She’ll see she doesn’t need you; see that I love her enough.’

He punctuated his speech by throwing clenched fists towards me, although they somehow seemed designed to miss. We paced about on the landing, both light-footed with eyes fixed on the other.

Fact: the home is a much more dangerous environment than anywhere else for those living with domestic violence.

Almost out of nowhere a palm collided with my cheek. My teeth clamped down on the inside of my mouth and my saliva became metallic.

‘I thought I’d ease you in,’ he said, a laugh disturbing his speech. ‘You’re hardly as experienced as your mum.’

And then I pushed him; heard the misplaced, unsteady foot falls of a heavyweight drunk tipped off balance, with open hands clambering for something to hold on to.

Fact: while very few women do resort to violence, when they do so it is usually as a response to violence that they have already received from a partner or parent.

He landed awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs. A foot away from his head there lay the beer bottle he had been holding; the glass had split into large chunks that were now doused in lager, trying to make an escape from the scene.

Before I had even started down the stairs I knew that he was still breathing. He must have been, otherwise the whole thing would have been too easy, too simple, too straightforward. Women everywhere would have murdered their unmentionable men had it been this easy.

Fact: it is not a foregone conclusion that someone will die from a broken neck, but it is easier to break the human neck when the muscles around it are relaxed.

The rise and fall of his chest gave the impression of sleep.

It's not uncommon to hear of a household suffering from domestic violence. Nor is it uncommon to find the female members of the household striking back – and that doesn't exclusively refer to the wife either, thankfully. The legal system will throw around 'manslaughter' and 'cumulative rage', perhaps even 'cumulative terror' depending on how much the occasion calls for it. Assuming, that is, that the whole thing isn't just a terrible accident in the home, and from my father's angle it may well have been.

I sat four steps above him. He had been unconscious for some thirty-something seconds. I couldn't risk him waking up, or my mother coming home, before I'd finished.

Fact: females are inclined towards strangulation. A ligature mark alone is not definitive evidence of this method. And with a soft enough ligature, there will be no mark left behind at all.

Chapter Two

I lost twelve minutes just looking at him, eyes unblinking, waiting for something like a punch line. At some point, although I couldn't tell you when exactly, his eyes opened. I repositioned myself on the stairs, four steps above him again, and noticed that the eyes had settled on me with impressive accuracy. The body lay at a peculiar angle, which I thought would be convincing in line with a fall at least, but simultaneously the whole scene looked staged. Like a red-band poster for the latest home invasion thriller.

I could half-hear the critics:

'This latest image release from Thompson offers an interesting commentary on contemporary society. The alpha male, murdered in what appears to be his own home; doesn't bode well, does it?'

And then they'd all laugh.

I laughed.

The noise sounded alien.

His eyes had died with a hint of disapproval in them. I couldn't maintain contact with them and so allowed my own eyes to rest somewhere beneath his, like an embarrassed child caught doing something that they shouldn't have done. Kicking their sibling, stealing a cookie, killing something. I was waiting for my reprimand; waiting for him to wake up; for him to tell me just how much I'd fucked up this time.

I laughed again, accidentally, like a belch that I couldn't hold in.

'Have you really died then?'

This scenario had been constructed and re-imagined repeatedly. And in amongst the idle planning from my childhood, my adult-self had researched, hard, and catered to all options – accidental death, or perhaps manslaughter, pleaded down to self-defence.

I swallowed another laugh.

(Why couldn't I stop laughing?)

I flicked through a bank of reactions, trying to find something appropriate.

Crying was a possibility.

Some sort of hysteria, catatonia, even.

Shock.

(Was this shock?)

An emotional breakdown of a non-specific nature. That's what people did when someone died, you could see it everywhere: Casualty, Four Weddings and a Funeral, the lifestyle section of your average women's magazine.

There was an emotional fallout that was noticeably lacking from the experience, though. And I don't just mean the one that I should have been feeling, but rather the one that I always felt. A feeling of fulfilment; a loosening of the stomach muscles and a drop of the shoulders as though taking a deep exhale. There was usually – something. On the surface it seemed like another thing to blame my father for: he hadn't even managed to die in a satisfactory manner. The counterargument, though: I hadn't even managed to kill him properly. I waited – hoped – for some recognition, for my brain to catch up with what my hands had just done, but – as though my nerve endings were miscommunicating the actions – nothing connected, nothing stirred. I waited for my limbic system, the hippocampus, the amygdala, the latter of which should have some part to play given the possibility of incarceration now. I inhaled deeply, feeding my thalamus, but before the neurotransmitters

could fire:

‘Oh God, Gillian, what have you done?’

‘Gillian?’

‘Gillian, what happened here?’

‘Did you do this, Gillian?’

I felt concerned that she might wear my name out, in the same way that certain words stop looking like words when you write them too many times. But I didn’t say that; I didn’t say anything.

My mother kicked her way through the collection of carrier bags that had landed around her. She dropped to the floor with a thud heavy enough to damage her knees. She slid herself closer towards us and sat, wedged between my father and the base of the stairs, unsure of who to turn to; unsure of which one of us needed her. I didn’t realise, until her fingers landed around my wrist, that she was shaking. What had happened? What had I done? How could this have happened, she’d hardly been gone any time at all? Why wouldn’t I answer?

‘Gillian!’

I began to hate the sound of my own name.

‘Did it really happen, mum?’

It was tactical, right down to the ‘mum’ strategically tagged on at the end. And when she wrapped her arms around my neck and shoulders, leaving me grimacing with the taste of ripe affection in my mouth, I realised it was a tactic worth relying on again in the future.

‘We’ll fix this, baby, we’ll fix this.’

She had never before and has never since referred to me as ‘baby’.

I wanted to know what we were going to do, how exactly we were going to fix things – how far a mother would go to protect her child. But she didn’t explain. Instead, she bought

herself three minutes of thinking time. We stayed in an unfamiliar embrace. My head rested on her shoulder at an uncomfortable angle, and I felt her fingers stroke at the back of my hair as we rocked. She cooed the occasional, ‘Ssssh,’ as we moved, as if I were an infant again.

I watched my father’s corpse over her shoulder.

At the end of those precious moments, she concluded: ‘We need to call the police.’

Yes, I thought, because that would fix things.

‘The police, and an ambulance, maybe an ambulance, I don’t know, I think it might be too late, too late for a -’ she fumbled, as if she’d forgotten the word. ‘It was an accident, it all happened just so quickly that I, Christ, we just need the police here.’ Another pause, this one a fraction longer. I heard her shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

‘How long do you think it will take? What should I do until then?’

My mother’s half of the conversation came tumbling out from the living room, disguised as white noise now. I couldn’t concentrate on her chatter; I was preoccupied with the body that was lying in front of me, its face now covered with a tea towel.

‘They’ll be here soon, love, not long to wait now.’

Her speech cut through my concentration. She hovered in the doorway as she spoke.

‘Gillian, love, do you think you can talk to me now? Explain what happened? I’m going to need to know. I’m going to need to know what I should tell them.’ She moved closer to me as she spoke and it occurred to me that she might be about to comfort me, although out of the two of us she was clearly the more agitated.

‘It was an accident,’ I started. I thought it was best to try this out on my mother first.

‘He lost his temper with me, I don’t even know why, I can’t think. I only pushed him away.’ I didn’t have to admit to it, no. But the best lies are inspired by true events. ‘I just pushed him. I

never thought, I just didn't think, and when I knew he'd fallen -' The further into the explanation I ventured, the more prominent a set of tears became. My mother shushed me – in that patronising yet maternal way – and pulled me close towards her.

‘I went out to get your father something to drink. You stayed upstairs and started to unpack your things. When I got home, he -’ she paused for thought. I pulled away to observe her. A crease had formed between the eyes and two teeth were now tugging on her bottom lip; thinking appeared to be a painful process.

‘When I got home he was angry. He said that I'd taken too long and he lost his temper with me, not with you. I was scared, you were in the house and I didn't want it - no, I didn't want you to be involved. So when he came towards me, to hit me, I pushed him away, and that's when he lost his balance.’ She paused again as she finished piecing together this re-imagining. ‘You heard raised voices and so you stayed out of the way, but when it went quiet that's when you came to see what had happened. Do you understand?’

One point for believability.

One point for feasibility.

Two points for effort.

I had never seen her so controlled.

I nodded in agreement, although I tried to appear tentative, before asking:

‘Why don't we just tell them the truth?’

It was a potentially dangerous question but still one that I had to ask. If I hadn't then it would have come to her at a later date, when this was all over and the shock had worn off. I had to ask it because at some point in the future it would occur to her that I hadn't thought telling the truth was even an option; it wasn't, of course, and it never had been, but my mother couldn't know that.

The door bell rang. Before she moved away from me she threw back:

‘Because I can’t lose the both of you.’

And for the briefest time I wondered how much of my explanation she believed.

‘Thank you for coming,’ I heard her say, presumably to the police officers waiting behind the door, hidden from my line of vision. It seemed a strange thing to say, given the circumstances. ‘It’s been, I can’t explain, it all just happened so fast and, God, I can’t believe this has happened at all -’ My mother’s new role: traumatised woman meets accidental murderer. ‘Okay, Miss, I need you to tell me, is there anyone else here?’

‘My daughter. My daughter, yes, just through there.’ She opened the door a little further and stepped to the side, allowing the officers a half-view of me, and regrettably an even clearer view of the body on the floor in our hallway.

My inappropriate laugh returned as I watched on, but lodged in my throat like a piece of popcorn determined to ruin the best scene of a film.

My mother delivered a comprehensive explanation for the mess that currently occupied the hall, stuttering intermittently throughout, as if that was somehow valid evidence of her shock and bereavement. The officers listened, although one occasionally shifted his attention to me, prompting my deliberately wide eyes to look right past him, which seemed a convincing expression to adopt at the time.

‘Mrs Thompson, we’re going to need to call this in, do you understand? A senior officer will need to come out to the house, and they will arrange for crime scene investigators to inspect things, and for a coroner to remove the -’ he wavered on his phrasing. ‘Your husband. Do you understand that?’

My mother nodded her confirmation, prompting the officer to continue.

‘Both yourself and your daughter will need to come down to the police station. You’ll

both need to answer some questions and make a statement. Do you understand that as well, Mrs Thompson?’

In response my mother spat out a blunt and confused: ‘No.’

A short silence followed this. One officer delivered a troubled look to the other.

‘What is that you don’t understand, Mrs Thompson?’

‘Why we have to go, why you need us both, why not just me.’

‘It’s procedure, Mrs Thompson, we have to do this.’

‘Yes, but why?’

‘Because someone has died,’ he explained, as if maybe she hadn’t realised.

Chapter Three

There was nothing particularly interesting or enlightening about the investigation or the inquest that followed. I thought it might be useful, that I might learn something beyond what textbooks had offered me. In reality it was a tense handful of weeks to acquittal; the first third of my summer was spent with my mother and I both watching each other, waiting for signs that the other was about to crack. From years of dipping in and out of journals I had developed a rough timeline for how my hypothetical trial would go, and, fortunately, my mother's own trial followed a similar format. An array of unfamiliar neighbours elbowed their way into the proceedings (they would eventually invade our home as well, brandishing deepest sympathies and unappetising meals), and were paraded through the courtroom, holding up their polished opinions like honourable medals. They fought both for and against us, almost alternately, until time was called on the proceedings. The prosecution ran out of words long before my mother's defence did. We were, after all, two women living in a violent household.

When the proceedings were finalised my mother didn't talk for four days. She had driven home in silence while I had made repeated phone calls regarding 'basic funeral packages'. However, after learning the outrageous costs associated with the whole thing, I gave some serious thought to the idea of boxing him up and burying him in the garden myself. The cardboard options offered by the likes of Compare the Casket were tempting, but I was unsure of the dimensions required for such a hole. Nor did I think I would be able to convince my mother that this was a fine idea.

‘We’ll pay whatever it takes to get rid of him,’ she said. That was her only input.

For two days after that their bedroom became her tomb. At meal times she would peer out of the door, casting a cautious glance along the hallway before taking a step into it. I felt perturbed; surely the only person she was at risk of running into was me. Before venturing into the kitchen – at meal times that she had silently set and I had reluctantly adhered to – she allowed herself five minutes in the hallway, scrubbing at stains on the floor that only she could see.

Macbeth. 1599/1603/1606 (I can never quite decide). Lady Macbeth. ‘Out, damned spot! Out, I say!’

And then she would retreat to her bedroom, clutching a meal that had grown cold during her cleaning.

‘I can heat that up again for you.’

‘You could eat that down here with me.’

‘We can even eat in silence, if that’s what you’d like.’

I had never been so accommodating before.

Alongside cooking, and a host of other household duties, the funeral arrangements made their way on to my to-do list. My mother didn’t handle these early stages of grief particularly well, which a number of strangers assured me was quite normal. There were many days when my main source of conversation was provided by Bethany from Co-Operative Funeral Care. The house was silent and unloved, particularly by comparison to the ritualistic cleaning that took place prior to all of this. However, when the day of the funeral arrived, my mother lapsed into a state of complete uselessness that left me mourning her silence. Although I did try to be sympathetic towards her plight.

I shouted a thirty minute warning ahead of leaving in the hope that this would be

ample time for her to navigate her way into the dress I had ironed and hung out for her. It wasn't. When I went upstairs I found her perched on the edge of her unmade bed clutching the cup of tea I had taken up forty-eight minutes earlier. The dry toast – to settle her stomach – sat on the bedside table, untouched. An old shirt of my father's fell loosely off her shoulders, as if she had made an effort at removing the garment but had admitted defeat two buttons in. There were stains scattered over the fabric and I wondered which one of them this mess belonged to.

I checked my watch. We needed to leave in ten minutes.

In silence I dressed her. I rolled one leg of her nude-coloured tights up to her knee, before bunching up the other leg and repeating the process. I tugged the fabric up her thighs as far as I could before nudging her, to indicate that now was the time to move. I stretched the fabric a comfortable amount to lift it entirely over her buttocks before pulling my fingers around the elasticised edges and snapping the waistband against her skin.

'Mum, you need to lift your arms above your head now.'

She followed the instruction unashamedly, while I held a breath of panic inside my mouth; this was the closest I had been to a bare person before. With her arms raised in the air, I lifted the shirt over her head – avoiding the intimacy of buttons – and quickly replaced the shirt with the dress. One arm at a time, I fed the fabric over her until the loose-fitting garment hung about her on the bed.

'When you stand up this will fall better, I think.'

'I'm not ready, though.'

I must have missed something. Something obvious and crucial that another girl could never possibly have missed.

'I can't do this, love.'

‘I don’t think you’re allowed to miss it. Or, are you? I don’t...’

‘Gillian, what if I tell someone?’

‘What if you tell someone what?’

‘What if I tell someone what really happened?’

It was the first time that night had been mentioned since the inquest.

‘What really happened, Mum?’

She shook her head and angled her face away from me. I knew she wouldn’t answer.

‘Have you told someone, Mum?’ I asked, trying a different tactic.

‘No, but I’m asking, what if. What if it just slips out?’

Then I would have to kill them too.

She used the mirror as a means of watching me, scared of staring me directly in the eye.

‘You’ll just have to make sure it doesn’t, won’t you?’

I smiled at her through the mirror and although she matched this with a smile in return, it was obvious that she didn’t mean it.

Throughout the day I kept my eyes on and around her; she had developed the look of an erratic woman on the verge of some sort of breakdown, which in many ways was appropriate for the occasion, but it still unsettled me. Her eyes refused to sit still, even when she was mid-conversation, and her mouth straddled the line between a smile and a grimace for much of the event. By the time the funeral itself was concluded, her cheeks were so reddened, and her hair sprang out with such an enthusiasm, that I wondered why I had gone to such lengths to make her look presentable before leaving the house.

At the wake – a party to celebrate the fact that the deceased was now six feet below ground level was perhaps the only part of the day’s events that I could lend my support to –

the room was packed full of people who I had never seen before in my life. I assumed that they were customers, drinking associates, neighbours who had recently developed an inappropriate interest in my family. They took it in turns approaching my mother and me, as if perhaps they had drawn up a rota beforehand. After the first chorus of ‘We were so sorry to hear the news’ and ‘If you need anything, you know where we are’ the condolences became generic and the faces became a blur. In amongst all of this I lost my mother though, and became plagued by relentless imaginings of her confessing our shared sin to whoever would listen.

I attempted to raise my line of vision over the mass of gravity-defying hair that had interrupted my eye-line.

‘Are you okay, my love?’

It was the favourite question of the day; the hot topic.

‘I’m fine, thank you, I just need to find my -’

‘How did you get on with that casserole?’

It transpired then that this woman – this stranger – had been one of many women to deposit food on our doorstep. Despite having no memory of having eaten her casserole specifically, I told her that the food had been well-received. She introduced herself as Anne Westburn from Number 34, and introduced the man-child, the overgrown Augustus Gloop slumped behind her, as her son, Timothy. The boy looked as unenthusiastic about attending my father’s funeral as I was.

‘I just want you to know that we are absolutely here for you, whatever you need, and your mother. Where is your mother? I’ve hardly had a glimpse of her what with this, well, this bustle of strangers,’ she said, applying a tone of distaste to her final words. When she stepped back to scan the room my mother appeared in my line of vision again, damp-eyed and mid-

conversation with a gentleman who looked horrified by whatever she had just said.

‘I’ll go and say a quick hello to her.’ Number 34 disappeared and joined the queue that was forming around the room.

Little did I know that there was a queue forming around me too. Drama-hungry women in their mid-forties onwards flocked to me while their husbands maintained a safe distance, unsure of how to approach the emotionally fragile twenty-something girl that they perceived me to be. Twenty-eight minutes later, when this attention had settled, I found my mother again, enthusiastically sobbing on the shoulder of Number 34.

‘He was, my husband, for God’s sake, it should have never, never have turned out, this way. This just wasn’t, it wasn’t ever, my plan.’ Her speech was staggered around sobs that showed no signs of dissipating. The words were mostly inaudible as they soon intertwined with shoulder-shuddering sobs, while my mother’s face became an image of the crying theatre mask. And the whole room, while trying to take sly glances in the direction of the grieving widow, willed her to continue.

Initially I had thought a small breakdown would be harmless; it may even add some authenticity to the event. However, as my mother’s exclamations continued, I soon realised that she was treading dangerously close to a confession.

‘He wasn’t happy, God knows, I wasn’t, happy, but this, this, I mean, how could this, make anyone happy?’ She spoke with the slurred incoherence of a drunk and I wondered whether perhaps she was.

‘Sssh, pet, you did what you had to do.’ Number 34 comforted her, blissfully ignorant. Before she could deliver a slice of lukewarm comfort, my mother unleashed another wave of emotion, wailing with a ferocity that I had previously only heard emerge from animals. I admit now that I had under-estimated the abusive bond shared between my parents during

their marriage; I had no idea that their heart strings had been so intertwined that this sudden pull would cause such an uncomfortable snap.

‘I’ve been with him, all my, life. All my life, I haven’t known anything different.’

I fought my way through the crowd and lowered myself into her eye line; there was a flicker of something - fear, discomfort. Whatever it was, I didn’t like it.

‘I’m sorry, Gillian, I’m so, sorry. I thought that I could, but I just can’t.’

The possibilities for her apology were endless but I nevertheless felt the need to stifle it.

‘Mum, you don’t have anything to apologise for. You’ve done so well today.’

Accompanied by occasional cooing and shushing that went some way towards steadying her sobs, I removed my mother’s tangled limbs from around Number 34 and placed her arms around my neck instead, steadily lifting her away from her seat as I stood. She moved with caution; a chimp changing handlers.

‘Gillian, is there anything that I can -’

I cut Number 34 off before she could finish.

‘Could you just explain to people? We’re grateful to them for coming and providing their support, but it’s been a taxing day and we thought it was perhaps best for us to slip away quietly.’

Star Trek. 1968. Leonard Nimoy. ‘Oh, yes, you humans have that emotional need to express gratitude.’

I quickly added: ‘Make sure you express our gratitude, won’t you?’

As we tumbled out of the door to the building my mother mumbled into my neck:

‘Where are we going now then?’

‘We’re going home.’

‘Why?’

A strand of saliva chased the question out of her mouth as her head dropped back against the passenger seat’s head rest. For the majority of the journey that followed she remained slumped with her head against the window, a smudge of make-up following her along the glass whenever she shifted. Her breathing was heavy, relaxed; for the final ten minutes of the journey I couldn’t decide whether she was even conscious. Then the wrench of the handbrake stirred her.

‘We’re home,’ she announced, as if perhaps I hadn’t noticed.

‘Do you think you might be drunk?’

The only experience I had had of drunken behaviour was that exhibited by my father, which seemed an inappropriate schema on which to base future incidents.

‘I’m just so tired, Gillian.’

Despite her alleged exhaustion, she wouldn’t let me help with her preparations for bed. Outside the door I waited until I could hear movement: a zip being pulled down, a drawer being opened. Downstairs now, waiting for bread to toast and milk to warm, I put three relatively low dosage Diazepam on a spoon before placing another spoon over the top and crushing them into a powder, which I stirred into the mug of warm milk.

Inside her bedroom I found her hunched over a wedding photograph that I had never seen. Black tears fell from her eyes and ran down the glass that protected their happy moment.

‘I made you something to settle your stomach.’

It perhaps wasn’t the right thing to say, but it was better than any alternatives I could construct at such short notice.

‘Gillian, what are we going to do?’

‘Right now I think you should eat something, and sleep.’

‘That’s not what I meant, love.’

‘No, I didn’t think that it was.’

She looked away from the frame and settled her eyes on the tray. I lifted the plate of toast and placed it on her night table, and then placed the mug of milk beside it, deliberately closer to her.

‘You should drink that while it’s warm. I don’t think it helps as much when it gets cold.’

And, as instructed, she drank the whole thing in five thirsty mouthfuls.

The too-large duvet bunched up around her, leaving her small and childlike beneath it. I strategically borrowed one of her favourite moves from my childhood and, after tucking the quilt in around her, I leaned forward and left a single kiss on her forehead. It felt strange for the both of us, I suspect. I turned off the light, pulled the door shut, and waited downstairs for a little over an hour.

When I was confident she was asleep, I left the house and walked to my usual spot.

Chapter Four

It was raining enough to be slightly cinematic. The moon was a convenient spotlight for him as he wandered towards me. This place had always been a popular area for his type. The worn wood of the park bench beneath me was growing more uncomfortable by the second but I couldn't move now; I knew that I'd grabbed his curiosity.

There was a jingle, like change in your pocket, as he clambered into the space next to me. I didn't make the first move despite being prepared to. Socio-cultural norms reminded me that as the woman I should wait for the male to make the initial contact. In my peripheral vision I could see that his eyes had settled on me, though. I counted down, setting deadlines only to immediately move them just before they were reached.

'If he hasn't done something by X time...'

I felt the outline of a skull nudge its way beneath my hand. His head was neatly cupped inside my left palm, as if the two extremities were made for each other. As a result of his determined nuzzling, my fingertips collided with a bright red band wrapped around his neck; faux-leather and sporting a small disc, the size and shape of a two-pound coin, it rattled beneath his padded chin. He was clearly well-fed, something that the majority of animal owners believe is synonymous with much-loved.

One side of the disc read: If found please call...

The other side had been branded with a name: Maurice.

'You don't look like a Maurice.'

He pulled away from me, lolling his head to one side in contempt, or confusion,

perhaps both. At this distance it became clear that behind the over-grown mop of black fur there were two brown button-like eyes, each iris sporting a collection of light-coloured flecks. As the rain persisted his fur became damp, ruffled, creating a severe edge to his appearance.

‘I’m Gillian.’

His head rolled from one side to the other, his eyes narrowed.

‘You don’t look like a Gillian,’ I could almost hear.

After this he reassumed his position; his head beneath my hand while the rest of him made efforts to creep closer towards me. I pressed my palm a little heavier against his brow while my fingers closed in tight enough to deliver something more than a squeeze. There came a low and satisfied rumble from somewhere inside his throat as I slowly released the pressure. I wasn’t sure how much, if at all, he had enjoyed the crush, but it certainly went in my favour that he didn’t stand up and leave.

‘I imagine that you feel quite lucky, Maurice. Of all the crazy people you could have stumbled across this evening. Do you know, a week ago I read a story in a newspaper about a cat being set on fire while it was still alive, somewhere quite near here actually. It’s disgraceful what some people will do to an animal.’

Eventually a self-stroking service was established. While my hand remained still on the roof of Maurice’s head, he intermittently shifted himself about beneath it, simulating the sensation of being petted. The rumbles emerged from his throat at six second intervals while his eyes half closed, forming a satisfied slant. For a second or two I envied what he must be feeling.

‘What’s it like, Maurice, to be so easily pleased?’

He threw his head backwards to regain control of my hand. He moved his body along the bench then, closing the small distance between us until my arm had encased him and his

small rib cage was pressed neatly against my own. I held my breath and waited to feel the intake and expulsion of his. They breathe differently, you see. At the higher end of our average breathing beats per minute we are just about level with the slowest breathing rates of lesser animals – cats, for example. I took short and necessary breaths every few seconds, trying to space them between Maurice’s own.

I felt him living, quietly, for one minute and twenty-three seconds.

‘I wonder how you ended up here, Maurice, with me. I wonder what it means that you did; if it means anything at all.’

I was disturbed by his vocal outburst, followed by my own:

‘I can’t let you go now.’

He tensed; I could feel his muscles shifting inside him. With an unexpected burst of energy he began to wriggle, pulling away from me as if his life depended on it. I pinned his abdominal area against my side with one hand holding his front legs steady; my other hand craned towards his neck. He persisted in throwing his head from one side to the other. My fingers fought through an excessive amount of damp fur before settling a grip around his throat. A small, surprised wheeze escaped from his open mouth as pressure fell on his windpipe.

I really wanted it now, and this was taking too long.

I needed to see him, properly, before I could do anything else. I left one hand secured around his neck as I tucked the other beneath his stomach, keeping them both steady in their respective positions as I held him out in front of me. Suspended in mid-air, his hind legs thrashed about faster than I’d thought they’d be capable of given his size; his claws took repeated swipes at my forearms, enough for him to draw blood but not enough to be a deterrent. The park was abandoned at this time of night, it always had been. The streetlights

that ran around the outer-edge of the entrance didn't do much to light the inside space. I knew that Maurice and I were safe here. But I couldn't chase away the image, inappropriate though it was, of someone wandering in and observing this perverse reimagining of *The Lion King*.

I took a final proud look into his eyes before I jerked his head backwards. And it stayed there. His head sat at an abnormal position against the top of his spine while the unsettling crack seemed to swell in the space around us. He reminded me of a well-worn doll missing a chunk of stuffing as I lowered the body down. The head hung off my leg with the consistency of excess fabric while the rest of him remained seated on my lap; the only sign of life now being the occasional ruffle of fur, prompted by the wind.

I picked through his coat, tracing the odd streaks of white and grey fur with my fingertips. Inhaling – one, two, three – and exhaling, I tried to keep hold of him for a second or two longer.

'I should say sorry.'

I held the body up to my face, rolled my nose through his smell, ran his fur along my lips, and listened for any last slips of life spilling out. As I stood up I continued to cradle him, supporting his head as you would with a newborn child. He looked as peaceful as I felt. I held him for a moment longer as the last of the tension slipped away from me. There was a lightness in my stomach that hadn't been there before, and I think I remember kissing him then. The same small and awkward kiss that I had, only three hours ago, left on my mother's forehead. And then I set him down on the bench; he lay on his side, legs out-stretched, relaxing after a long evening stroll.

'I really should say sorry.'

I could barely convince myself to move. I wondered who would find him, what they would do with him; would he be okay? He was too big to fit alongside the other specimens,

and I would struggle to find a jar to hold his frame. But despite knowing this, it still didn't feel right to leave him behind. I pinched his front right paw between my finger and thumb, feeling his rough pads, tarnished from years of wandering. I could have brought something with me – a scalpel, a small box – to take a piece of him away, but the opportunity had passed now. I had no choice but to leave him.

Crouching level with the seat, I leaned forward and planted another small kiss on his head. Then I walked away, wondering who might find him.

Chapter Five

You want to know what it's like. I can understand that, though; I wanted to know as well, I suppose. Ultimately it's like anything else that any one person does despite knowing that they shouldn't. But they do it all the same, because they're too familiar with the feeling that they'll experience afterwards.

Life is so heavy most of the time. You're struggling under the surface with a weight on you and what do you do? How do you find a way to breathe again? We're all dying to know the answer – and don't think that I haven't noticed the wonderful irony there – but, lacking any feasible explanations for life's largest dilemmas and questions, instead we simply guess. We assume things that will improve our little existence. And these assumptions, they then become our unashamed justifications for whatever condemnable behaviours we throw ourselves into. 'It makes life a little better,' we say, excusing our tendencies to cheat on our partners, over-eat unhealthy foods, smoke. It makes life a little better, and for the majority of us that is reason enough for anything.

Does any of this sound familiar? There must be must something – one mostly harmless little thing – that you allow yourself. That one cigarette at the end of the day; that eye contact with a colleague you hold for a beat too long?

'No human beings were harmed in the making of this bad habit,' we remind ourselves; a disclaimer to our misdemeanours. It's only a problem, you see, when people become aware of it, when people are hurt by it. That's when the masses will frown and judge – as though that has become the benchmark for human depravity. You've hurt another human being?

Well, that's a line! But it's a line that we love to see crossed, don't you think? There's nothing better than finding someone more evil than ourselves because those people really put things into perspective.

'I might be doing *this* but at least I'm not doing *that*. Besides, who is it even hurting?'

Oh, wait, you know who I'm really hurting now, don't you?

Playing the poor girl from the damaged home is difficult, especially now you know this much of the story. Maybe the reality is closer to the poor home from the damaged girl; maybe we'll never know which came first. There are – or at least there would be, if I discussed these issues openly and honestly with a medical practitioner – theories. In fact science could likely offer several feasible interpretations of and explanations for this situation. Sociopathy, psychopathy, narcissistic personality disorder (that last one seems unavoidable, really). Someone would find a textbook explanation of a power-hungry only-child whose inherent egotism interacted poorly with over-exposure to violence during my attachment-forming years. The abuse – my father's penchant for abuse – would play a part in their discussion. It may even be the hook of their discussion; I understand that abuse is often the first thing that they look for in these circumstances. They would find it and use it to great effect; I'm sure, because it's neat. It's a tidy explanation for every damaged and/or defective element of my personality and, once established, they have to offer little to no insight on me as an autonomous individual. What a bonus. We can explain it away with nature versus nurture discussions around the family home and parental values, and society can take something of a back seat. Although it will inevitably play its part as well, because doesn't it always these days?

We like to explain away the deranged logic of killing things as quickly and efficiently as we can. The people who do it, well, they're a biological anomaly; look at who they grew

up with; with a name like that I'd murder people too! Even though killing is one of the most human things about us, really. It's what we're built for. People will need to believe that I kill things because of biology/society/ daddy issues/ a horrendous combination of the three. It would be the last thought to cross the general population's mind – assuming it has a functioning one these days – that I do it because I want to, or because I need to. And it is a need, I think – deep-rooted, inherent, human. We lost our way somewhere along the evolutionary chain but this behaviour is normal. There was a time when all humans did was gut animals and rut; we're too politically correct for the former now, though, and far too liberal with the latter.

For my own curiosity then, tell me: what shocked you more, the cat with the broken neck or the patricide? Really take some time to consider that, and then tell me why I'm the only monster here.

Morally, you're right to believe that it's wrong. There's not a textbook or an essay in the world that would correct you – at least, not one that I can find. So yes, it is wrong – but it's also required. It's a compulsive cure as much as cheating, over-eating, smoking.

Q. Why does he cheat?

A. Because it feels good.

Q. Why does she smoke?

A. Because it calms her down.

Q. Why do I kill things?

A.

Well, picture this: it's been a long day. You come home and eat an inadvisable amount of something that will offend your arteries. You watch the news, which further compounds your ambiguous mood, and you make dinner. When walking from the kitchen to the dining room with your dinner, you spill a significant measurement of your accompanying beverage on the floor – and you cry. In the grand scheme of things – with a news report delivering word of another random stabbing in the background – this is an inconsequential incident and your emotional outpouring is disproportionate with the tragedy of a spilled drink. But my God, you cry. Like someone greeted with the threat of perpetual torment, until your eyelashes are crisp and your lungs have a debilitating stutter. Then you continue to cry, like the world is about to come to an end and for a moment, in between the third and fourth moment of crying, you quietly hope that it will. And when you run out of tears, your face is sore and your eyes are swollen, and your lips are resuming their usual lineation rather than the misshapen downturn they've held for the minutes prior to this, you are a visual mess, but you feel a hell of a lot better than you did half an hour ago.

Q. Why do I kill things?

A. See above.

That's the closest I can get to explaining it. It might not be close enough, I know. There's a decent chance that you will read that and still not understand, assuming that you even want to understand such behaviour. You might even still be curious about why, how, what it's like.

The kill is the cry and the afterburn is the deepest exhale, a shoulder-sagging sigh that leaves you empty, ready to be filled again by the world and your day to day struggles in it. There's

nothing quite as refreshing as breaking up life with your hands. But even after all of this, I'm still not sure that I'd recommend it.

You're probably safer with smoking.

Chapter Six

My mother had never been the questioning kind; perhaps that was due to years spent living with my untameable father. Perhaps that's also why, in his absence, she suddenly felt moved to ask all of the questions that her mind could muster.

Where are you going? Who with? How long do you think you'll be?

'You're going out again?'

My right hand was just a centimetre above the lock on the front door when my mother lassoed me. It was a difficult question to answer. I thought from my attire and from my angle towards the exit it was clear that yes, I was going out again, but it was also clear to me that that was not the answer that my mother was expecting.

'I thought you were sleeping,' I replied, instantly aware that this wasn't the right response either. My mother had taken to napping in the afternoons. The days of frantic cleaning from morning until late in the day had been stuffed inside my father's coffin alongside him, and my mother now spent her days pining. Maintaining her role of downtrodden housewife, she would quietly sweep up, tidy away what she referred to as clutter, and when those menial tasks were dealt with she would indulge in some quiet time. She read, occasionally, and stared at the damned spot in the hallway frequently, as though expecting something about it to change. And then, at around this time every day, she slept, exhausted from her morning of mourning.

'Why are you going out all the time now?' she asked, with a greater measure of suspicion than I thought the question warranted.

‘That’s what normal people do, Mum.’

I had no idea whether that was true or not but it seemed a feasible argument, and when my mother nodded and disappeared back into the living room I assumed that it must have been an acceptable one too. She was right, of course; I was going out more. Chiefly to escape my mother who these days needed more interactions than I was capable of providing, but also to see these so-called normal people – the ones who I thought might be out there. I had tried libraries, coffee shops, parks – although the latter was too closely associated with my less-normal activities – and on that evening my destination of choice was a restaurant.

It turned out to be one of those cliché places, solely lit by candles and occupied by couples. The walls were decorated with chalk boards, cheap artistic prints, and odd-angled shelves that displayed empty wine bottles. There were six couples already in the room by the time that I arrived, all seated a safe distance from each other.

‘Table for one, lady?’

Without waiting for confirmation the short, plump man grabbed a menu and marched away from the couples, leading me to a table for two tucked away in a corner. A large part of me was tempted to turn for the exit, but it wasn’t often that I was given the opportunity to observe this style of interaction in real life. Much of my romance schema had been fed by romantic comedies, and I was aware of their likely artifice. And so I followed him.

The man deposited my menu on the table and nodded towards one of the chairs.

‘You sit here, lady, we take order soon.’

I wondered whether the Italian accent and poor English were authentic. Before I had time to make a decision, another interruption arrived:

‘Of all the corners, in all the restaurants, in all the towns, she walks into mine.’

Casablanca. 1942. Humphrey Bogart. But it wasn’t quite right.

In my initial scan of the room I had missed someone. Two tables away there sat another solitary diner, on a table for two in the lonely corner of the restaurant.

‘I’m not sure that’s quite right,’ I said.

‘I’m sure it isn’t but I needed something.’

He smiled and so I smiled in return, feeling I should. He was a conventionally attractive young man of average build, and height, from what I could gather, although his sitting position made it challenging to properly judge. But he was pleasing enough to the eye, with a neat albeit lopsided smile and hair tucked up into something that nearly resembled a quiff. He didn’t wear glasses, although he appraised the room with a squint that suggested he needed them. His clothing created the illusion of someone slightly older, but his face belonged to someone in the same age bracket as myself.

‘Sometimes the movies can say things better than I can.’ He shrugged.

My smile that followed this was much more authentic than my first. There was something all too familiar in his sentiment.

On the table in front of him there sat a half-empty bottle of Corona. There was one menu and one place setting, also directly in front of him, and one set of cutlery. There was no coat draped over the back of the chair opposite, nor a handbag hidden beneath it. When I looked back to the young man I saw that while I had surveyed his surroundings, he had surveyed me. He smiled before speaking again.

‘Do you mind if I scooch over a little towards you? There’s a fair bit of distance with all these tables here in the way.’

My cheeks began to burn with what felt like frustration – although I couldn’t say whether it was directed at the young man or at myself. I had walked into this situation.

He tucked a well-worn corduroy blazer beneath his arm, before picking up his menu

and his bottle, and migrating over to the empty seat opposite me. A grate caused me to wince as he pulled his chair closer to the table, dragging the legs along the floor. When he felt close enough to the table to be comfortable, he took a second to smooth down the front of his shirt – a strange off-white with a brown stripe, presumably picked to match his brown blazer. He appeared to think he had just sat down to a job interview rather than to dinner with a stranger. I wondered whether his schemas were the same for both.

As he settled himself into the chair, it occurred to me that I had probably missed my opportunity to halt his plans. Or had I? I could have still stopped him, I suppose. But when would an incident like this occur again? One to one conversation with a stranger for a prolonged period of time would be a challenge, but it may also be a worthwhile undertaking.

‘I’m Daniel.’

‘Gillian.’

‘That’s a pretty name, Gillian.’

‘Thank you, Daniel. Yours is...’ I stumbled over the compliment. ‘Also nice.’

Following the formula for a conventional introduction Daniel promptly stuck his arm out across the table; at the end of his arm there was a flat and expectant palm. I took a quick glance at his face to search for signs of humour or irony. Blue eyes looked back at me; the shade of blue so bright that you seldom find it in adults. His mouth was pulled up at one side in a lazy-looking smile that caused an indent in his cheek.

‘Sometimes, when people are meeting for the first time, they shake hands.’

‘I’m not sure it’s singularly associated with the first meeting.’

‘Ah, so you are familiar with the gesture.’

I took his hand and delivered an abrupt shake; his palm was sweaty.

‘You have a good handshake, Gillian.’

‘I didn’t realise you could classify handshakes.’

‘Absolutely! There’s too-firm, where you fear for the safety of your fingers; too-limp, where your hand comes away feeling a little insulted. And there are unfathomable types in between those. Yours is certainly one of the better ones.’ He pressed his palm against his chest before he continued: ‘And I really do mean that.’

The whole situation felt highly irregular, increasingly so, as the minutes rolled by.

Fargo. 2014. Billy Bob Thornton. ‘No, highly irregular is the time I found a human foot in a toaster oven. This is just odd.’

Trying to regain some perspective then, I asked: ‘Daniel, do you often eat dinner with strangers?’

I was certain this behaviour wasn’t actually normal practice, but Daniel had taken to it with such ease that I had to check. He relaxed against the back of his chair, as if the question would take some serious thought, then said: ‘Well, it’s better than eating alone, isn’t it?’

We perused our menus after that, with Daniel occasionally interrupting the quiet:

‘Do you think you’ll have a starter?’

‘Are you more of a pudding person?’

‘How do you feel about salmon?’

‘And what about people who eat salmon?’

‘Should I have some sort of grievance with people who eat salmon?’ I asked.

‘It’s hard to say. I’m sure you could if you tried, though, you seem the type.’

We ordered a bottle of red wine and two steaks. Daniel wanted his well-done, I wanted mine as close to rare as they were comfortable serving it.

‘How can you eat your steak like that?’ Daniel quizzed.

‘It’s better when it’s bloody.’

‘Well, there’s a life motto that I can live without.’ He laughed, but I was unsure why his remark had been amusing to him. Part of me – the desperate to conform part – wanted to laugh with him; the observational part just wanted to know what this Daniel character might do next. ‘So, Gillian,’ he started again. ‘What is the wildest thing you’ve ever done in your entire life?’

The steaks were set on the table just as Daniel completed his question. He tucked in immediately, pouring himself half a glass of wine before grabbing at his cutlery. He clearly expected me to hold the conversation. It was tempting to squash the naiveté of his question with a truly honest answer and, although I barely knew the boy in front of me, I believe that my not-knowing him was part of his appeal. I could have been entirely honest with him, and then just walked away. Would we walk away, though? Is that actually how this would end? I thought, and in the thirteen seconds it took me to consider this Daniel began to speak again, apparently noting the unexpected difficulty of his question.

‘That was probably a little unfair, actually. Shall I go first?’

I nodded.

‘Okay, when I was seven, maybe eight. Although, I don’t suppose my age has much to do with the story so we’ll just say seven slash eight. I took a book out of the library using my mum’s library card, and, well, to this day I still haven’t taken it back.’ At that he theatrically dropped his cutlery on to his plate and leaned back in his chair, releasing a deep sigh as he did so. ‘You have no idea how good it feels to finally get that off my chest.’

Despite my best efforts to remain unmoved, I smiled.

‘Is that true?’

‘Are you silently judging me for being a juvenile thief?’

‘No, I’m judging you for being so boring.’

‘Interesting. So you’re not opposed to theft, then? Now, is that generally or is it specifically a book thing?’

‘What book was it?’

‘Do you know something, Gillian, of all the people in the world to hear that sordid tale, you are the first person to ask that question.’

‘I’m wondering whether it was worth stealing.’

‘The *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.’

It seemed a peculiar book for anyone to steal, but it said a lot about him.

As the evening progressed I found that I was beginning to like Daniel. Over the course of four and three-quarter hours, two steaks, several more glasses of wine – Daniel was more of a drinker than me – and one and a half desserts, we established that Daniel had recently moved to this area, to care for an aunt who was now battling cancer. It was just Daniel – he had no siblings – and his two healthy but self-centred parents had relocated to Nice to live the great cliché – Daniel’s words – leaving him responsible for the remainder of their affairs in the United Kingdom. Prior to the business with his aunt, Daniel’s profession had officially been ‘financial assistant’, which he assured me was as boring as it sounded. He believed comedies to be the superior genre of film; he liked music mostly taken from the charts, but he preferred to tell women that he listened to jazz because he believed that it added something charming to his persona; and when he didn’t sleep through his weekend alarm, he always made the effort to attend church on a Sunday.

‘I’m just saying, if God wanted us all to get up at the crack of dawn every Sunday morning then he wouldn’t have gone and called it the day of rest. Am I right, or am I right?’

I couldn’t decide whether the question was rhetorical.

Daniel was making eyes at the half-eaten chunk of brownie on the plate in front of me

when he spoke again.

‘If I remember my law studies correctly, it’s actually a little bit illegal to leave something that looks that good,’ he said.

‘You’re welcome to finish it.’

‘No judgement?’

I shook my head. He pulled the plate towards him and, turning the fork on its side to score a line along the brownie, he then pulled away a decent-sized chunk which he slipped into his mouth. He let out a series of exaggerated ‘Mmms’ and ‘Ahhhs’ as he chewed his way through the generously-sized piece. When he had finished his performance he set his fork down and grabbed a napkin. He dabbed at the corners of his mouth, catching one or two stray flecks of chocolate.

‘Now you know everything about me, including my dark history of fraudulent behaviour, and my penchant for anything made of chocolate, and I don’t even know so much as your favourite colour.’

‘Yellow.’

He grimaced.

‘What’s wrong with yellow?’ I asked.

‘Isn’t it something to do with death? You always see it, don’t you, on funeral cars and headstones and, well, just where death is I suppose.’

He drained the remains of his wine glass and glanced at his watch.

‘Christ, I think I have stolen far too much of your time, and my own, come to think of it. So, Gillian of Yellow, I shall pack up, pay up, and go home with little to no knowledge of the woman with whom I have just spent an entire evening.’ He wiped away a faux tear.

As I turned to search for my purse in my coat pocket he interrupted me:

‘Please?’ He gestured with his wallet as he spoke, as if it were a part of the question. ‘I’m sure you weren’t too fussed about having my company and you were just too polite to tell me, the least I can do is pay for your dinner.’

Not for the first time that evening, I felt unsure of what was happening. But then I felt equally unsure of how, or even if, I could decline Daniel’s offer. The evening had, after all, adopted the conventional structure of a date – much as the term and indeed the conduct perturbed me. Also, as modern society would have you believe, the male, whether by pride or a throwback to the hunter-gatherer ancestry, is somehow inherently inclined to pay for the pleasure of feeding his female companion.

I smiled and nodded then.

‘It has been -’ I paused and wondered how to complete the sentence.

‘Irritating? Demanding? Blood-boiling?’

‘Pleasant. I think it’s been pleasant.’

Daniel clenched his fist in mock anguish.

‘Damn it! Pleasant would have been my next guess. Although, I suppose there’s nothing wrong with pleasant, is there, Gillian of Yellow?’

‘Thompson.’

‘Oh, at last, Gillian Thompson tells me something. And now, if you’re feeling generous, tell me something else, Miss Thompson: What is the wildest thing you’ve ever done in your life?’

‘At the beginning of the summer, I killed someone.’ I remained neutral as I spoke, as if this were the most natural answer in the world for someone to give to such a question.

‘Pretty wild, Gillian Thompson.’ He took a deliberate pause, as if considering where he could move the conversation on from this. ‘Doesn’t really compare to the whole library

book thief thing, though. Does it?’

Chapter Seven

The outside world seemed brighter than it had a few hours ago. Not in a metaphorical sense. The sky was a light charcoal with intermittent smudges of clouds and the stars were spread out erratically, as if a child had gained control of a glitter shaker. And it was good to be alone. I hadn't realised how disruptive Daniel had been over the course of the evening but as I walked home I greatly appreciated the quiet that accompanied me.

I avoided the bench on the way. It made the journey longer but it felt necessary, although I struggled to decipher why. At three minutes past midnight I arrived outside my mostly-dark house, though there was a glow emanating from the living room. It was clear that behind those closed curtains there was a low-watt bulb still wide awake, and although I listened carefully on my approach I couldn't hear a noise to go with it. No television; no late night phone call to the Samaritans.

Reluctant to ruin the serenity of the moment, I placed my key into the front door with great care. I had a vision of my mother's head snapping towards the sound and so I rushed to complete the manoeuvre as quickly as I could. I pressed against the inside lock until I heard the second click. I pulled the larger lock across (for our safety, although the monsters had always lived inside the house), and I waited.

After a minute I took three steps forwards, bringing me level with the living room door. My mother was sitting upright in my father's old armchair, her body angled towards the television screen that showed nothing but static. The combination of the lazy table lamp and the crackling glow from the television lit the room in an uncomfortable way. Her head

allowed for a quick twitch to the side as my footsteps became more pronounced. After an evening laden with human interaction, it was tempting to back away and to leave my mother alone to contend with any breakdown that she might have been having. But her expression concerned me. She was, after all, my mother.

‘I think that’s quite bad for your eyes, Mum.’

There came another head twitch. This one steadily evolved into a shake.

I turned the television off and the room became notably darker, yet enough light remained for me to garner a good view of my mother’s expression. The bags beneath her eyes had swollen into small cushions; the cheeks beneath them were overrun with red blotches competing for space. Train tracks of mascara had run down each cheek in a way that I recognised from the funeral.

‘Have you been crying?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Where have you been tonight?’

Conversational exchanges have never been my strong point, but even I could tell that there was something misshapen about this interaction.

‘I went for a walk to begin with but then it rained...’

‘Where did you walk?’

‘Out to the public park, just outside...’

‘Why did you go there?’

‘Why do you keep interrupting me?’

It was the first time she had looked at me since I had entered the room. There was a hardness to her eyes that I didn’t recognise. I wondered whether she’d been drinking but a

quick scan of the room showed no empty bottles, cans, or glasses.

‘You’ve been out all evening. That’s a long time.’

‘I wanted some air and so I started walking. I didn’t think much about it until I stopped.’

‘That sounds like a little lie, Gillian.’

I didn’t know what response she was expecting. Stumped, I continued with my itinerary.

‘It started raining while I was out so I found somewhere to have dinner as well, and now I’m home. That’s my whole evening.’

She narrowed her eyes as though she were physically inspecting the words. Her mouth was tucked up at one side in a sort of smirk, implying a level of self-assurance that seemed inappropriate for my mother’s general character. I couldn’t help but return to the idea that an alcoholic stimulant might be involved here. No, there was no evidence, but my mother had spent enough time clearing up after my father to know how to clear up after herself.

‘Mum, have you been drinking?’

‘Worse, love, I’ve been thinking.’

A high-pitched squeak followed. It later occurred to me that it was a laugh.

‘Do you want to tell me why you’ve been crying?’

Her mouth dropped, her head shook, and a small puff of air escaped from her.

‘You can’t work it out, love?’

‘Dad?’

‘What else could there possibly be to cry about?’ Although it was a question something about her intonation suggested that she wasn’t looking for an answer. ‘I’m struggling here, Gillian.’

‘Struggling with me?’

I thought that must have been the case. Otherwise, why tell me?

‘Struggling with...’ she paused and lifted her arms in a defeatist gesture. ‘This.’ She looked up, but I couldn’t bring myself to look back. ‘Love, are you struggling at all?’

That time I did look at her, involuntarily; a knee-jerk reaction response to her question. Biologically speaking there are occasions when certain elements of the human body react ahead of the rest of it. This was an embarrassing case of physical reaction prefacing a vocal or mental one, and when I was looking her directly in the eye I knew that it was too late to retract the move. Continuing with the so-called natural response, my mouth fell open slightly in the prelude to speech. I hoped that an ‘Of course’ or an ‘I can’t believe you’re asking that’ would chase after the gesture, but my mother intervened before I had the chance to force the sentiment.

‘I do worry for you, Gillian.’

‘For me?’

‘With all this. With all what happened.’ She paused and puffed out her cheeks. Her head tilted slightly from one side to the other as if trying to gauge the physical weight of what she was about to say. ‘Maybe we should talk about this in the morning, love.’

I said nothing about the fact that my mother had stayed awake to have this conversation. Whatever ‘this’ was, I agreed with her that yes, it would be better discussed after sleep. The unanswered query regarding my mother’s alcohol intake was all too apparent when she attempted to lever herself from the seat beneath her, exhibiting the same struggle that my father had often experienced. From this angle, there was a disturbing similarity between the two of them. With one arm wrapped around her, and tucked neatly beneath her left armpit, I helped my mother up to bed. When she breathed a goodnight kiss against my

cheek, the alcohol was unmistakable.

I had always hated the smell of bacon. Yet I had a distinct childhood memory of my mother cooking it the morning after my father's binges, or his incidents, although the terms seem somewhat interchangeable given that we seldom experienced one without the other. And so the following morning when an enthusiastic sun slipped through my curtains, I made my bed, got dressed, and shifted downstairs to make breakfast for my mother. While the meat hissed in the frying pan I stood next to the open window on the other side of the kitchen, pulling in mouthful after mouthful of fresh air. With the bacon held out at arm's length I turned it, begrudgingly, to evenly cook its surface before retreating to the safe side of the room where I buttered bread. I was midway through the second round when the door let out a small creak and my mother appeared.

'You look dreadful.'

'Thank you, Gillian,' she said, rubbing her face as she spoke. 'But I feel surprisingly chipper, all things considered.'

She made no further comment on what all these considered things were and I didn't push the issue.

'I thought breakfast might help.'

'That's nice of you, love, but I really just need some tea.'

I was midway to the table, clutching a small plate on top of which sat a bacon sandwich, when she made this announcement. She looked from the sandwich to me and flashed a thin smile before leaning away from the table.

'Pop it down, maybe I'll manage it after some tea.' She looked the food over with more suspicion than seemed necessary. 'You hate bacon, love.'

I nodded confirmation and moved to the kettle, unsure of what to do with her remark.

‘If you hate bacon, why did you cook it?’

‘You used to cook bacon for Dad when he’d had a lot to drink.’

‘Gillian, I...’ she paused there, as though trying to collect together enough words to construct a coherent explanation for her behaviour. ‘Sometimes you just need a drink, love.’

Animal House. 1978. John Vernon. ‘Fat, drunk, and stupid is no way to go through life.’ Not that my mother was fat.

I threw teabags into cups, added small measures of milk, and set the kettle to boil. As it did so, I turned to survey my mother and found her elbows balanced on the kitchen table, her head firmly planted in her hands. At some point the bacon sandwich had been pushed an additional ten inches away from her, which just seemed rude. I completed the task in silence and set a full mug of tea down in front of her.

‘Maybe that will make you feel better,’ I offered, although I had no memory of it ever having worked for my father. I quietly hoped it wouldn’t work for her.

She held the mug close to her face and blew over the edge of it, twice, three times, before taking a measured sip. When the liquid hit her lips she winced.

‘Too hot?’

‘Just a little, love, yes.’

Funny that, you blew on it and everything.

‘Gillian, I want us to talk about what happened with your Dad.’

I nodded but said nothing.

‘Do you have anything you’d like to say, about what happened?’

There was something – it may have been a small flicker of panic – hovering in my lower abdomen when she completed her sentence. I simply puffed my cheeks, turned down

the corners of my mouth, and shook my head. A ‘Nope, nothing there,’ sort of gesture, I hoped.

My mother closed her eyes and shook her head, dismissing a thought. She expelled a breath I didn’t even know she had been holding. Her hands released their grip on her mug of tea and she placed them both, palms down, on the table.

‘I’m going to stay with your Aunt Jackie for a few days. Why don’t you come with me?’

I hadn’t seen Jackie since we had moved into this house some eleven years ago. She was particularly vocal about her disapproval of my parents’ marriage. Because of that, my father was particularly vocal about us having nothing more to do with her.

‘I didn’t realise that you were in touch with her.’

‘I called her last night, before you came home.’

She paused, leaving a beat that I felt obliged to fill.

‘How is she?’

‘Concerned, mostly, love.’

‘About you?’

My mother rolled her eyes, creating an expression that I suspected I wasn’t meant to notice, before confirming that yes, Jackie was concerned about her. Between the two of us we managed to construct a coherent enough chat regarding Jackie and her current whereabouts – Cornwall, it turned out, had been her hideaway after the fall out with Mum, and she now couldn’t bring herself to leave the place. We even covered the brief details of what she had been doing with herself more generally over the last decade or so. I won’t bore you with the specifics of that. The quick explanation is: not much.

‘You’re not talking about what happened with your Dad, Gillian, and you’re obviously

not keen on talking about it either. And, well, it worries me, love. Jackie, she's always been good at the talking thing, you know, being the big sister and all.'

It felt like a tenuous link but I urged her to continue anyway.

'I think a few days away might help. We can talk, really talk, about what happened, and how you're feeling about it, and where we move forwards from here. And I know you haven't seen Jackie in a long time, but she's a good talker, like I said, and she'd like to help us.' She paused, sighed, and then picked up with: 'What do you think?'

I remember thinking lots of things at that moment in time. But above all, I remember thinking that I should have expected this. I should have seen this sort of intervention perched on the horizon; I should have seen it hurtling towards me. Perhaps noting this hesitation, my mother pressed forwards with yet another helpful comment:

'You need to talk about what happened, love, and if you can't talk to family then who can you talk to?'

The question, it transpired, was largely rhetorical. So when I said:

'A healthcare professional?'

My mother was, perhaps, quite within her rights to be so surprised.

'You'd prefer to see someone?'

Having a heart to heart with a stranger was a favourable alternative to having a heart to heart with my misshapen mother and her estranged sister, yes. Of course it was.

'I think so, yes,' I replied.

'But you realise there are only certain things you can say to a stranger.'

I stifled a smile. It had been some time since my mother had spoken to me like a child.

'Mum, what are you really worrying about here?'

The silence held up for just shy of eight seconds before she answered.

‘You’ve been involved with a terrible accident, and you aren’t saying anything about it.’

Her careful phrasing had done nothing to dissuade me from seeing someone. Not if the only real alternative was to discuss it with her (and Jackie?) instead. I promised that I would see a professional. The pledge was so convincing that it was only a minute later when my mother was discussing her plans to visit Jackie again.

‘It hardly seems fair to leave you on your own, though, love. It’s not right, is it.’

It was a statement but she looked for an answer. I was familiar with the tactic so offered:

‘I think it’s a difficult time for both of us, Mum, and if you feel like you’d benefit from visiting Jackie for a few days, then I’ll support your decision.’ I smiled, and then added: ‘Just like you’re supporting my decision not to.’

My mother disappeared to pack a small suitcase. She was taking the train down to Cornwall so that she could leave the car – my car, I assumed, given she hadn’t driven my father’s at all since his death – with me, in case I needed it. I thanked her, despite not feeling altogether sure why I was doing so, and then offered to drive her to the train station. Before she slid out of the passenger seat, she said:

‘You will see someone about this, love, soon?’

I nodded. ‘Of course, Mum.’

‘You really need to, Gillian.’ She leaned back in and planted a small kiss on my cheek. ‘And you will be okay for a couple of days?’

The question seemed redundant now given that she had already decided to leave.

‘I’ll be fine. I just want you to concentrate on looking after yourself for a change, Mum.’

I couldn't recall which film I had borrowed the sentiment from, but I felt certain that it was one of the most sincere things I had ever said to her.

Chapter Eight

There was something unsettling about the house after she'd left. I felt as though I were trespassing behind enemy lines, waiting to be caught. An average twenty-two year-old would probably have felt delighted by this freedom, but I was not average, and even the proposed period of time left me feeling anxious. How long was a few days, precisely? This concern, combined with a cavalcade of others – Was she seeing Jackie? What had she told her? Would she even come back? – meant that it just slipped my mind to feel excited.

I filled the new silence by boiling the kettle, toasting bread, slicing cheese. The doorbell chimed in then as well.

'Morning, Gillian-dear!'

The words hit my ears before the door was fully opened. Number 34's smile was too wide, too bright, but the slumped up mass of teenage hormones that hovered behind her went some way towards counteracting it.

'I'm surprised to see you,' she said, in a tone that sounded authentic, although I couldn't fathom why – I did live there, after all. 'You remember my son?'

How could I forget?

'Of course,' I replied.

'Is your mother about, dear?'

She leaned in as she spoke, taking a peak about inside the doorway as though she expected my mother to be loitering, just waiting for her arrival.

'Was she expecting you?'

It seemed a fair question but her expression became puzzled.

‘Well, no, she wasn’t. You’re quite right. This is ever so rude of me.’

I was right: this was rude of her. But I was sure that I hadn’t actually said that.

‘It’s nothing important, why I wanted to see her, I mean, it’s just that I brought this over,’ she said, handing me a fabric bag that was packed to bursting. ‘I’ve made up some more food, you see, after you said how much you liked the casserole. It’s just a few bits and pieces, different things that you can pop in the microwave. You have a microwave?’

What sort of household did she think this was?

‘Yes, we have a microwave.’

She played at wiping her forehead before she spoke again.

‘Phew. And your mother isn’t around at all?’

‘She has been struggling lately, I’m sure you can understand.’ She interrupted me with a thin-lipped smile and a ‘Mm’. ‘She’s actually away visiting my aunt at the moment. She left this morning. I’ll mention you, though, when I speak to her, and pass on your concerns.’

Number 34 hovered, as though I hadn’t quite provided enough information yet. An exhale of genuine relief flooded from me when the house phone started to ring somewhere in the background. With a faux apology from myself and an overtly polite, ‘Oh, of course, dear,’ from Number 34, I was finally able to excuse myself from the situation.

It was my mother. My still-inquisitive mother, it seemed. We talked briefly about whether I was coping alone, whether I needed her to come home, whether I was okay, and, two minutes later, whether I was still okay. It had been a day, I reminded her, and I was managing just fine, even though I expressed the sentiment with underwhelming conviction. She had never asked so many questions and I had never felt so bitter about having to supply any one person with quite so many answers. I was relieved to say goodbye to her. The

conversation was hardly deep, merely repetitive, but the emotion she forced down me had become clogged in my throat somehow during my attempts to digest it. I needed a change of scenery, a walk, and perhaps something else.

Years of making meticulous observations had allowed me to determine that the afternoon dog walk was typically the household responsibility of the woman. That afternoon there was a vast array of so-called designer dogs around Runner's Route, with their designer owners in tow, both constructed to be petite, pleasant to look at, but utterly insignificant. I wandered along the path as a woman in a purple velour tracksuit jogged ahead of me. Her tracksuit was a perfect match for the purple of her Labradoodle's collar, and I wondered how much money it had cost her husband to make that coincidence happen – whether he even knew that that was what he was paying his wife for.

I walked further, trying to shake off the medley of feelings sitting in my stomach. I thought of my father, my mother, of Daniel – why Daniel? – as I walked, and, thankfully, after thirty-four minutes of observing the same woman on repeat, divine intervention struck.

It was a spectacular looking animal, and it far surpassed the standards set by those around it. Its legs were strong, with a distinct thigh muscle that suggested remarkable physical ability, and it boasted a heavysset jaw that looked equipped to crush the animals that surrounded it. The dog's owner paused for breath in what had apparently been a furious run for them both, and that's when the teeth appeared. It broke into an exhausted pant, revealing a set of well-maintained fangs that belonged to a hunting animal.

They settled on a bench some nineteen feet away from my own and enjoyed a moment of rest. The man removed a small sports bottle from the support band around his waist and took three measured mouthfuls from the container. Without hesitation, he up-ended the bottle and held the dripping mouth-piece out towards the animal in front of him; it maintained its

military stance but extended its neck towards the bottle, creating an audible slap each time its tongue caught the liquid. The surrounding women appeared to find the whole display endearing; they illustrated this with a string of stares and coos that became more pronounced. One woman even attempted to make contact; she laid a patronising pat on the animal's head before saying something to the owner and laughing. His face remained steady, unimpressed.

It really was remarkable. I had never seen something so well-built. It would never fit in the box; it had enough strength to fight back; it would be missed. And yet, it was undeniably attractive to me. The dog's tongue hung limp from the side of its mouth while it panted, catching at air and pausing only to slap its top and bottom jaw together long enough to wet its mouth, before the jaw dropped open again. It fidgeted a little, while remaining seated, its leg muscles contracting from the intense exercise. Sweat dripped from its forehead and a hand rose up to wipe away the liquid, rub at the back of a damp neck, and then pat the equally exhausted dog.

I had no idea which one of them I had been watching.

They remained seated for five minutes and thirty-two seconds. As they both attempted to regulate their breathing I found myself wondering how long they had been running for – how often they ran. The animal remained seated, panting, its tongue hanging limply from the left side of its mouth creating an altogether less intimidating expression than the one it had started with. It threw occasional glances in the direction of its owner before eventually clambering back to its feet, to indicate that now would be a good time to leave. The owner smiled with a recognition that said he had been expecting this.

The man patted the dog on the head – presumably to illustrate affection? – before placing one hand on each muscular knee and heaving himself up from the bench, releasing an unexpectedly loud groan as he did so. He underwent a series of quick but deliberate stretches;

I half-expected the animal to do the same.

‘Come on then, girl.’

He gave a tug on the chain-link lead. When they moved to leave the park, I moved to follow.

The dog walked two steps ahead, pulling the lead taut as animals are inclined to. But it soon forced out a coughing fit. They paused and the owner lowered himself down, voicing concern for his pet.

I had maintained a measured twenty paces behind them since leaving the park, but this break in their stride disturbed me. I could have turned in the other direction and made my escape; or I could have continued walking, moved straight past them. But instead, I intervened.

‘That sounds like a nasty cough.’

The dog was enduring enthusiastic throat rubs from its owner. Its eyes had narrowed into slits and small grumbles were rising from its throat now, which indicated that this was more of a pleasurable process than a medicinal one.

‘She never learns, do you, Peaches? Say no, Pops, I never learn, and I never listen to my Pops when he tells me that I shouldn’t pull on the lead.’

His language deteriorated into something that I had previously heard referred to as Baby Talk; this seemed to be something that animal-lovers employed on a regular basis. The dog appeared to be enjoying the whole thing – I made a mental note of it for future reference – and as a result was now making determined attempts to lick the man’s face. He repeatedly dodged her advances. Baby Talk was one thing but kisses were clearly too much.

I watched their display and, just for a second, I wondered: Who would miss them?

‘Christ, how rude of me.’

He pushed himself into an upright position as he spoke; by the time his legs were fully extended he was at least six inches taller than me. He would be incredibly hard to subdue.

‘I’m Paul, and this mutt is Peaches.’

One hand remained wrapped around the end of the dog’s lead as he spoke, while the other was buried inside his front left pocket. I was grateful that he had skipped the handshake.

‘I thought you were Pops?’

He laughed and I took this as a cue to smile.

‘Guilty as charged. I am one of those embarrassing animal-loving types who believes that their pet is their child. Ergo, I am Peaches’ Pops.’ He followed this with another laugh; it felt awkward to flash another smile but I wasn’t sure how else to continue. ‘Honestly, it’s a more common affliction than you might realise.’

‘I believe you.’

‘Anyway, thank you – Christ, how rude of me again, I didn’t even get your name.’ He laughed again. This one was awkward, embarrassed. ‘I promise that I am usually much better at this conversation malarkey.’

‘I’m Gillian.’

‘Well thank you, Gillian, for stopping to check on this silly mutt of mine.’

The dog let out a disgruntled moan that was timed so perfectly I wondered whether their conversations were rehearsed.

‘Peaches and I are heading up this way, are you-’

‘Oh, I’m up this way as well.’ I lied. By now I was already a forty-five minute walk away from home.

Paul and Peaches lived an additional ten minutes of walking in the opposite direction, and Paul was a conversation-enthusiast. During those ten minutes I discovered a little about

them: Single, freelance website designer, Prescott Lane.

‘It’s a recent move, actually. Nasty break-up, you’ve probably heard that romantic little tune a thousand times, right?’

Faerie Tale Theatre. 1987. Lesley Ann Warren. ‘There’s more to life than romance.’

I flashed a thin-lipped smile and nodded, hoping for a convincing expression.

‘She kept custody of the house; I got custody of the dog.’

Peaches’ backstory sounded almost as downtrodden as that of her owner. She had apparently been abandoned outside a shelter at four months old, covered in various cuts and scrapes. She was adopted by Paul who had treated her like ‘a four-legged queen’ in the five years that he had owned her. I made a special effort to ‘Aww’ in what felt like the right places.

‘This is where we get off I’m afraid. Peaches and I are in the park the same time most days, though, so perhaps we’ll all bump into each other again.’

I gave Paul my best smile before saying my goodbyes to both him and Peaches.

‘It’s been a real pleasure,’ I said. And I meant it.

Chapter Nine

There isn't much in this world that you can't get, as long as you're willing to pay for it. Which would perhaps explain why my mother – just thirty-five hours after leaving – was calling to tell me she'd managed to get an emergency therapy appointment with a woman based just ten minutes from our house. She gave me the details slowly, sounding out each syllable as though talking to a hard-of-hearing child. And another eighteen hours or so later, I was working up a draft of which guts I was allowed, or expected, to spill to this new woman in my life.

The room was fairly unremarkable. I'm not sure what I'd been expecting of the interior of the woman's office space, but it seemed too simple by comparison to her ornate personal exterior. Her hair was pulled back into a perfect – compulsively neat, some might say – ponytail that sat dead centre at the back of her head; it made a pendulum of itself as I followed her from the reception area to her office, so captivating that I was almost saddened when she turned to face me. Her clothes weren't impressive on their own – an expertly-pressed black blouse coupled with darker-than-navy blue jeans – but they worked to give her a casual look. Which, given this could-be-vulnerable (for me) situation, I thought might have been a deliberate effort on her part.

On entering the office she had steered me away from the professional desk, and the high-backed chairs that were positioned around it, encouraging me instead towards the two sofas that sat opposite each other at the other end of the room. The door had hidden them – although I couldn't say whether this was accidental or strategic – when I'd first walked in.

Between the two sofas there sat a low coffee table that held a jug of water and two squat glasses. I wondered how often those tumblers were changed.

‘Please, help yourself.’

She had caught me looking. I held up my hand and shook my head as she continued to skim through a small selection of papers. This was only our opening consultation; how much information could she possibly have already, and why had my mother provided it?

‘Before we get started, Gillian, is there anything that you want to ask me?’

‘What’s your name?’

The woman tutted quietly, at herself, I assumed, as I could see nothing tut-worthy in what I’d asked her.

‘I’m Louise.’ She leaned forward as she spoke, holding her hand in an appropriate pre-shake position, despite us already having completed this formality five minutes earlier. I reciprocated the gesture before falling hard against the back of the sofa. ‘Quite rude of me, Gillian, my apologies. It’s been a long old day.’

I nodded, smiled. I was unsure of what to say.

‘We’ll get started then?’ she said.

‘Okay.’

‘I have a few introductory questions here, if that’s okay with you.’

I nodded, again.

‘In your own words, Gillian, why are you here today?’

‘My mother told me that I needed to be.’

A small laugh erupted from her as she made a note of something on her pad. When she glanced back to me, she found my deadpan expression looking back at her.

‘Oh.’ She crossed out whatever she had just written. ‘Okay, and is that because she

thinks that there's something to be gained from this, do you think?'

'Or she just wanted to rob me of an hour of my afternoon.' I punctuated the line with a thin-lipped smile, to soften the blow.

'Okay, different phrasing then. Why do you think that your mother wants you to be here today? A serious answer.'

There was a window to my left. It was an inconvenient distance away to observe anything specific outside, but it was certainly close enough to gaze through while putting my answer together.

'My father has recently passed away, under difficult circumstances, especially difficult, I mean, and I think my mother is concerned that I'm not handling the whole thing as I should be.'

'And how should someone handle the death of a parent?'

I searched for a point of reference: Bambi? A little juvenile. Batman? A little too honourable.

'I'm glad that you've stalled on that, Gillian, because you're illustrating my point for me. There are no shoulds when we lose someone who is close to us, so I'd like to put that word itself on the back-burner for now?' Her heavy inflexion made a question of the sentence. I nodded a quick confirmation and she continued. 'Okay, good.' She added something to her notes before setting the pen and paper down on the stretch of sofa alongside her. 'You said that your father died under especially difficult circumstances. Maybe you can tell me something more about what you mean by that?'

There was more, much more, but I momentarily wobbled over which version of events I should offer her. I had driven seven point two miles to attend this appointment. This woman was far enough from my own neighbourhood for my father's death to have missed the area's

idle gossip. But still, she was one internet search away from verifying the whole story.

‘There was an accident at home. My father was something of a drunk.’

As soon as the words popped out I was shaking my head at them. I was inexplicably flustered, but I knew that those sentences didn’t fit together – at least, not without something else sandwiched in between them.

‘Take your time, Gillian. There’s no rush.’

But there was. Mum had only paid for an hour.

Determinedly, I started again:

‘My father was an alcoholic, and physically abusive towards my mother. One evening they had a drunken altercation and my mother tried to defend herself and, I suppose because my father didn’t exactly have his full wits about him, I don’t know, something that would have been a harmless shove under normal circumstances just became something more fatal.’ I shook my head at my own phrasing. ‘Not that there are degrees of fatality, obviously.’

Louise flashed a sympathetic smile.

‘And when did this happen?’

‘It’s been seven weeks and four days.’

‘That’s very precise, Gillian.’

I wasn’t sure what I was expected to say to that.

‘I have to be precise,’ I replied.

Louise’s lips thinned as she reached for the pen and paper from her side. She wedged the paper against her left thigh, angled in such a way that I could see nothing of what she was writing. I wondered what I’d said that was note-worthy.

‘Have you always had to be precise, or is that a recent habit?’

It felt like there was an unspoken section of the sentence but, try as I might, I couldn’t

find it. I turned it over for six seconds and after that it felt not only polite but absolutely necessary that I say something in response. Louise sat with one leg crossed over the other and her hands slightly parted, as if physically braced to catch my answer.

‘Yes, I’ve always had to be.’

She paused, scribbled, and picked up her speech again.

‘It’s still very early days, Gillian. Both you and your mother are very much in the infant stages of this process, not that it’s an exact science, of course. But given that there’s no timeline for this, it’s important that you unpack some of the feelings you’re having, so we can really get to grips with this stage, you see? I’d really like your own thoughts on this. Because you must have some, Gillian, maybe even some that you’ve been keeping in, from your mother?’

Entirely by accident my right eyebrow arched midway through her speech, which was, I thought, likely to be the reason behind her final words of encouragement. Perhaps she was right; perhaps I did have some thoughts about the whole mess. Unfortunately she was also right about my unwavering reluctance to reveal those thoughts to anyone else, which saw us sink into a solid minute-long silence while I considered my options with more panic than I was accustomed to feeling. What was I meant to say here; versus, what was I allowed to say here? That I was angry, disappointed? That in all my wildest fantasies not once had I imagined such a crushing anticlimax? That the only thing I missed when it came to my father was the opportunity to get rid of him more effectively – dare I say, more enjoyably?

‘You can be honest here, Gillian.’

But not that honest, I thought.

‘I feel angry.’

‘At your mother, or your father?’

I hadn't realised that I was allowed to be angry with either of them, specifically, but rather just the situation as a whole. I tried another thought on for size:

'At both of them, I think.'

'Because?'

Because he died too quickly? Because she took the credit for it?

'Because they're my parents and they should have done things better.' A stream of air fell from Louise to punctuate my answer and for a second I was flustered by the thought that it perhaps hadn't been a believable one. 'That sounds childish, I know –'

'It sounds reasonable, Gillian.'

Interruptions typically irked me but this one felt like a salvation.

'Our parents love and support us, and we rely on them for that. When that natural order becomes disturbed, we're allowed to not feel okay about it, and you are certainly allowed to feel angry. I wouldn't encourage you to hold that anger in, either.'

There was a twinge of something in my stomach.

'You wouldn't?'

'Absolutely not. There are stages, Gillian, and if you stall at one then all you do is stop yourself from moving on to whatever comes next, which just creates an entirely new problem in itself. Do you understand that?'

I thought I did, yes. I nodded.

'I'd like us to talk a little more about your father, if that's okay with you? You said that he was physically abusive to your mother. Just to your mother?'

This was a line of questioning that I should have anticipated, really.

'Do you remember when it started?'

'Were you always aware of it?'

‘Did it happen often?’

‘To what extent was he violent?’

And so I answered – ‘Yes, just my mother’ – and all of the questions that followed, until we hit on an entirely new area of questioning. A notably more difficult one, in fact.

‘And how does that make you feel about your mother?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Presumably it had an impact on your relationship with her?’

Had it? Did it? How would I even know? I spat out several false starts before grabbing at a thread that I felt comfortable pulling.

‘It may have done but I don’t really have a wider point of reference for that.’

She nodded, scribbled, spoke:

‘Okay then, how would you describe your relationship with your mother?’

By the time I was seven years old my numeracy and literacy skills belonged to someone two years my senior. I was pushed – by teachers, never by family – to excel academically in both English and Mathematics, and this encouragement didn’t waver until I was twelve. Then Mr. Burton noted my natural aptitude for the sciences – biology in particular – and after that my efforts switched subjects. In one field or another at one time or another, I have always been above average intelligence. So what was so goddamn difficult about Louise’s question?

My relationship with my father had been so temperamental, beginning as far back as I could recall, that my quiet and understated relationship with my mother had always felt satisfactory enough to me, normal enough to me – by comparison, that is. It was a new thought – a troubling thought, I’ll admit – that my relationship with my mother may actually be below par as well – by a different comparison. Noting that she had thrown something of a

spanner into my internal workings, Louise said:

‘Gillian, we’ve done a lot of work for one session. Maybe we should save this for the next time I see you?’ She paused, for confirmation I assumed. I smiled, more in response to her presupposition that she would see me again, and she continued: ‘Rachel can set you up with another appointment now, or you can phone her another time, maybe when you’ve had some time to digest the things from today?’

‘I’d like to discuss things with my mother, really.’

It was, of course, a complete lie. I had no idea why I’d even said it.

‘Of course. Whatever you’re more comfortable with.’ As she spoke she walked to her desk. She returned holding an off-white business card. ‘Bear in mind, Gillian, that I haven’t met your mother. However, from what we’ve discussed today, this may be useful.’

She handed me the card.

Alison Warren.

‘Alison runs an out-reach programme for people who have or have been in,’ she paused, searching for the most appropriate phrase. ‘Difficult relationships, of varying degrees. It may be useful for your mother to get in touch with her.’

I slipped the card into the back pocket of my jeans and thanked Louise, for both the business card and for her time – although my mother had paid perfectly good money for the luxury of both things, despite my not wanting either of them. She saw me out of her office and – inappropriately, I thought – said that she looked forward to seeing me again.

We shook hands then, said our goodbyes, and I left the building, already drafting a number of perfectly feasible excuses to explain to my mother why I wouldn’t ever be going back.

Chapter Ten

I was far from being a committed fan of social media. It had always seemed disingenuous to call strangers friends and to share your emotional innards with them through the medium of an internet connection. What recent information could I even have shared with my primary school comrades and undergraduate associates?

Getting ready for Dad's funeral - feeling sad ☹

Had to help mum get dressed again today - awkward much?!

Nevertheless, I did have one social media account attached to my name, for the sake of maintaining an acceptable public persona. And so for an average of five minutes per week, I devoted some concentrated time to the maintenance of a digital profile that I strongly resented having.

Three days after my mother left, a day after Paul the dog walker, I typed my sign-in details into the log-in window and waited for a flood of information to arrive on my laptop screen. I already knew that I would be interested in little to none of it though. Of everything that you could find online now, rifling through old friend's unmentionables seemed like a thorough waste of a broadband connection. However that day, when my information loaded, hovering at the top of the page there was a message I couldn't recall seeing before.

One new request for friendship: Daniel Lodge
(You have no mutual friends in common. If you do
not know Daniel, please click here.)

He had tricked me, I now saw. I didn't know this man as Daniel Lodge, although he was undeniably The Daniel, but despite his frequent pleas for my last name during dinner, he had neglected to provide me with his own – and now I understood why. It was tempting to lie then; to say that no, I didn't know Daniel Lodge, and to let the internet cleanly sweep this character out of my life. The compact picture in the window alongside his name was undoubtedly him, though; from the small slip of his shoulders visible in the bottom corners of the image, I thought he may have even been wearing the same jacket. His mouth was contorted into the same lop-sided smile and I wondered then whose benefit this was for: the camera maybe, or perhaps the person behind it. Despite my initial irritation, I felt compelled to click on this smaller window to enlarge the picture, and it quickly hijacked the majority of my laptop screen.

His expression was familiar now, as though I were looking in on a friend who I had known for some time, rather than a stranger. I clicked the screen in the appropriate area to scroll across to another photograph and there he was again, sporting the exact same smile as if it were a default setting. In this picture there was a friend either side of him, and a slightly smaller sag of skin beneath his chin than there had been in the previous photograph. This second picture was three years older and I developed a sudden need, on seeing this time stamp, to know what had happened between then and now, aside from a small weight gain.

I clicked my way out of the album and back towards the request. I still felt a measured amount of apprehension but it felt miniscule in comparison to my curiosity about precisely

what could happen next. And so, I clicked ACCEPT.

Gillian Thompson is now friends with Daniel Lodge.

To view Daniel's profile, please click here.

I now felt contractually obliged, by the Gods of social media, to suffer any and all consequences associated with my decision. And then the first consequence arrived.

You have one new chat window open.

Daniel Lodge:

Do you come here often?

Haha

Seriously though GT, you know how to keep a man waiting

It's been three whole days

I thought I might have just imagined you

He was a multiple-messenger. One of the worst types of messenger you could encounter. The weight of my decision to accept his request felt heavier now, which was irrational, really, given that I could escape the conversation whenever I needed to by clicking the cross in the corner. However, in amongst these feelings, there was also a small flutter of what I thought was probably excitement at the prospect of replying, matched only by the flutter of nerves at not quite knowing what to say.

'I don't come here a lot, no,' I said aloud in time with my typing the message. The

response felt bland, curt, two sides that I didn't particularly want to display so soon. I backspaced, returned to Daniel's stream of messages for a second read-through, and tried my very best to land somewhere in the region of charming:

Gillian Thompson:

How do you know that you didn't imagine me?

I felt that I had drafted a perfectly acceptable response but when the reply floated up on the screen I realised it had sounded much better in my mind than in practice. I should have read it aloud, I thought.

Daniel Lodge:

Then how am I talking to you now?

Unless this is all an elaborate hallucination

Are there no depths that I won't sink to –

Just to talk to a pretty girl?

I couldn't recall a time before this when I had been referred to as pretty. Pretty peculiar, pretty unusual, pretty fucking weird by my father during one of his drunken displays, but no one had ever thought of me as just pretty. Before I could muster an appropriate response I started to suffer a disconcerting physiological one somewhere in my lower abdomen.

Daniel Lodge:

And yes. I think you're pretty

Is that okay?

Gillian Thomsson:

I'm not sure.

Daniel Lodge:

Oh

Well

It was kind of a rhetorical question anyway

Gillian Thompson:

I'm sorry. I'm usually quite good at spotting those.

We maintained a virtual exchange for some twenty-eight minutes after this but despite my well-drafted responses I still felt nervous. While the distance created by the computer screen lent me more thinking time, it also took away the facial expressions and intonations of Daniel's responses, which made him impossible to read. There were no narrowed eyes, no dipped smile, no half-laughs, and in their absence I felt unprepared to hold a conversation at all.

Daniel didn't ask any more rhetorical questions – I don't think – but he did pursue the usual topics of asking how I was (Fine, thank you) and what I had been doing with myself since our encounter (Nothing exciting, I'm afraid). This avenue of conversation was a safer area, and a relatively familiar one. I knew that it was proper to enquire how he was now, and perhaps even how life had been treating him.

Daniel Lodge:

Ah, fit as a fiddle on the outside

To be honest though

I've got quite a lot going at the moment

Some stuff on my mind

That was as much information as he offered. I wasn't sure whether the natural pause that followed was something I should fill with questions, or pleas for further details. Or even whether there was an expectation that I should want further details. Speaking out loud, I tried on various options:

‘What’s going on?’

‘Tell me all about it.’

‘What is it that’s on your mind then?’

I couldn't make any of them fit comfortably, and for the first time during our exchange I felt grateful that it was being constructed through a computer screen. When three small dancing dots appeared in the corner of the window to indicate Daniel was typing, I felt even further gratitude.

Daniel Lodge:

My aunt went into hospital this morning

Gillian Thompson:

I'm really sorry to hear that!

I added the exclamation mark to highlight how sorry I really was.

Without further information it felt tricky to react beyond what I had already said.

Daniel had led me to believe that his aunt was quite ill, and that her cancer showed no signs of shrinking. I assumed that this meant she was a frequent visitor at the hospital, which would surely make this latest visit an unremarkable thing. But it seemed to bother Daniel more than an unremarkable thing should.

Daniel Lodge:

They found this thing on her last scan

Something that wasn't there before

And so they think things might be getting worse

Terminal, I thought, they think it might be terminal. But Daniel didn't want to say that.

Recent months had taught me that people had quite an aversion to acknowledging mortality.

Daniel Lodge:

They've decided the best option is to open her up

Have a look around

See if they can find out more that way

I didn't need facial expressions or vocal intonations to confirm that Daniel was upset by this development. And, strangely, I found Daniel's upset to be quite upsetting to myself.

Another virtual silence appeared and, after so much effort on Daniel's part, I assumed

that this time I would have to fuel the conversation. I relied on my limited experience and on borrowed sentimentality and said:

Gillian Thompson:

Is there anything that I can do to better the situation?

As I said the phrase aloud to myself I couldn't help but wince. The sentiment was right but the expression was rigid. I was grateful again for the computer screen. Although I had typed and sent the words, they just didn't sound right coming out in my own voice.

Daniel Lodge:

There is one thing

If you don't mind

And if that was a sincere offer

Because you can never tell over these things

Haha

There was something admirable about his honesty and I felt moved to match it when it came to my reply. I quickly typed a response – 'I'm sorry, no, that wasn't actually said with sincerity; I was just trying to be polite.' – but I knew that it wasn't right. As I read and reread the message I developed a strong sense of no, I should not be doing this. The tip of my right index finger hovered about in the small space between the Backspace button and the Enter key. I eventually settled on the former and tapped at it repeatedly, deleting one callous character at a time. I typed what felt like a more socially acceptable message and hit Enter

without even proof-reading it, for fear that I might delete this one, too:

Gillian Thompson:

Of course. I wouldn't have extended the offer otherwise.

The response was a little clinical, again, but it was certainly more approachable than the previous attempt. And while I read and reread this message, waiting for a reply – or at least the dancing dots that would indicate a reply was on its way – a thought occurred to me that I found unsettling: did everyone have to try this hard? Of course, it wasn't exactly the first time that this thought had made an appearance. Throughout years of self-editing and linguistic censorship in even the most simple of conversations, I had thought this before. But now, observing the awkward tone of my own messages sat alongside the perfect ease of Daniel's, I couldn't help but pull myself back to the question. I wondered then whether this was more difficult because it was with Daniel. I couldn't see what was so different about him, but there must have been something. Throughout my entire teenage years people had failed to hold my attention for particularly long stretches of time, but Daniel?

And before that thought progressed further, a message interrupted me:

Daniel Lodge:

Are you free this afternoon?

I know that it's short notice

But something about being here at the house

While she's in there

I just need to get out for a while I think

But I understand if you're busy

Or even if you just don't want to haha

Despite Daniel's virtual laugh, I couldn't envisage him laughing in person. The only image that I could scramble together was one of Daniel sitting in an empty house, waiting for the dancing dots to appear on his screen.

The clock that was tucked into the bottom left of my laptop screen reminded me I was busy – 'Peaches and I are in the park the same time most days.' – and I did have somewhere to be, fairly soon. But something else seemed determined to convince me again that that wasn't a proper response and so I endeavoured to strike a balance between easing Daniel's apparent emotional discomfort, and inflicting any type of discomfort on myself.

Gillian Thompson:

Do you know The Runner's Route park?

Daniel Lodge:

On the way to town?

Where the dog walkers go?

Gillian Thomson:

Yes. That's the one. It's a nice place to spend an afternoon.

I asked Daniel if he could meet me at the park in thirty minutes. Paul and Peaches were less likely to bump into us then, but we'd still be in good time to see them both.

Chapter Eleven

Daniel and I spent the afternoon walking. In terms of actual time it was no longer than an hour and thirty-two minutes, but Daniel's tendency to fill every silence gave me the impression that our walk had lasted longer – despite my multiple attempts to further amuse myself with several rounds of 'spot the dog walker'. When the trail came to an end I hoped that this would provide an opportunity for our conversation to conclude as well.

'Ah, course, Gillian must have a whole clan of Thompsons waiting for her at home.'

'I just live with my mother.'

'Ah.'

The silence lasted a beat too long; I had to fill it.

'She's actually away at the moment, but all that means is that the task of keeping the house clean falls on me. So that's my occupation for the rest of the day.'

It was a flimsy excuse but I hoped that it would be believable enough to explain why I couldn't commit any more time to Daniel. And sure enough, it worked. But Daniel was right when he said that I wouldn't need to clean the house every day. And yes, I suppose everyone did need to eat at some point. And yes, there really is something special about a home-cooked meal, isn't there? And of course I had a number that he could reach me on. And before I really knew what was happening I was typing my home telephone number into the keypad of Daniel's mobile. He said that he would call me the following morning to see what time he should arrive and whether he could do anything to assist.

Bring whatever you expect to eat, I wanted to say. But instead I told him that I looked

forward to hearing from him – and the words actually felt right.

At 09:32 the following morning I was preoccupied with the mammoth task of filling the silence in the house by making a noisy breakfast. The kettle wobbled as it approached boiling point, its whistle becoming more pronounced, and then the unfamiliar tone of our house phone leaked in from the hallway. It took longer than it should have done to register the sound.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi, Gillian?’

‘Yes, it’s Gillian. Daniel?’

I hadn’t been expecting a phone call from anyone else, but there was something attractive about pretending that I was. People like to know that they are hankering after something popular.

‘Yes! I thought I might have missed you, the phone seemed to be ringing forever. I’m glad I that I have caught you though, because I’ve been thinking about our plans.’

I felt the return of an unsettling knot inside my stomach that somehow seemed to encapsulate my general feelings towards Daniel. I was already becoming quite accustomed to the push (I wonder if he’s calling to cancel the whole dreadful thing), and the pull (wouldn’t that be disappointing?).

‘It’s pretty unfair of me to invite myself over like that and then expect you to do all the cooking. And I am after all a fairly modern, respectable, metro sort of man, I think.’

He took a deliberate pause, waiting for some kind of denial or confirmation of what he had just said. I wasn’t sure which to give.

‘Okay, or not, ah, so my suggestion. Maybe I could come over to yours and I can be in charge of cooking? You’ll just need to point me in the direction of the kitchen when I get

there, and relax. And maybe sort out something for dessert, if you can manage it.' He laughed.

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why would you do that?'

'Oh, just to be nice, Gillian. You know, to be nice to you.'

I didn't quite understand but I gave him the address anyway.

I was halfway to the supermarket's in-store bakery later that day when I saw him – Paul, that is, not Daniel. With an empty basket hung over his arm, I watched him head towards what turned out to be the animal section. I hovered, pretending to peruse the discounted savoury items that had been strategically placed at the end of every other aisle. Barely ten seconds later and Paul was already torn between a soft plastic pig and a packet of tennis balls. He dropped the latter into his basket before his fingers pulsed around the pig, forcing out three sharp squeaks. There must have been something pleasing about the noise because he dropped that in too. We very nearly bumped into each other during our respective food shops; not that Paul noticed. Fresh vegetables and fruit, followed by meat, and then the unavoidable frozen items – because even the most health-conscious shopper sometimes buys for convenience. Had the circumstances been different I would have thanked him for his last minute rush to the bakery. I still hadn't chosen a dessert. Paul picked up a large tiger loaf and balanced it on top of the week's worth of shopping crammed into the basket. He left me struggling between pecan plaits and cinnamon swirls. Tuesday seemed an odd day for a weekly food shop.

The rest of the day proved uneventful, that is until Daniel arrived at 18:28 (earlier than he had told me he would be there, but it seemed petty to mention it). After I opened the door,

I made two conclusions about Daniel's character: his lop-sided facial expression definitely was a default setting; and that hideous corduroy jacket was his favourite article of clothing. Across both hands he had balanced the carrier bags – one bag in one hand, and the other two precariously balanced around the other hand in such a way that he was at risk of losing fingers. His lop-sided smile was now framed by inflated cheeks, puffed out in exasperation. He took hesitant steps forwards, struggling with the weight of his purchases. Each movement was accompanied by the rustle of plastic, a threat that the bags may not make it to the kitchen. Unsure of my responsibilities, I stepped to the side of the front door to allow him access and directed him towards the dining room.

‘Through the dining room, towards that far door.’

Daniel nodded and continued his weighted walk from one side of the house to the other. On arriving at the closed door he turned to angle the ball of his shoulder against the wood; he heaved his weight against it then, struggling to keep upright as the thing gave way beneath him with considerable ease. A stampede of sounds followed his entrance and just as I was beginning to imagine a cavalcade of meat and vegetables making their escape across the floor, I heard a not entirely convincing, ‘I'm okay.’

‘Is it safe to come in?’

‘Absolutely, GT, abso-bloody-lutely.’

Inside the room there was a picture of calm that left me wondering whether the previous crashes and bangs had been theatrical. The kitchen work-surface was now a display of disorganised colour as Daniel had carefully removed each vegetable and arranged them in a system that failed to make sense to me, but almost certainly made sense to him.

‘You haven't jumped ship to vegetarianism or anything drastic like that, have you?’

‘No, definitely not.’

‘Marvellous. Because, Gillian Thompson, you are about to have the best bit of meat that you can get in this town. And trust me, I’ve done the legwork to find the best bit of meat today, I can promise you that much. I kept asking around for a butcher, a town like this must have a butcher, but everyone kept mentioning the same shutdown shop, like that’s any use. Something about the owner dying?’

Daniel was concentrating on the piece of meat, manoeuvring it around in the limited space between the hot tap and the kitchen sink. He was facing away from me whilst doing this, so he couldn’t have seen my facial expression. He couldn’t know that that shop now technically belonged to me and my mother. I didn’t know whether in light of recent revelations I was now obliged to tell him.

‘That’s my father’s shop. Sorry, it was.’

The meat hit the metal sink with an unappetising thud.

‘Oh, arses.’

He turned to look at me; his hands dripped blood-tinged water on to the floor.

‘Gillian, I—’

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘But I don’t want to talk about it.’

Daniel banished me from the kitchen after that. My involvement in the preparation was limited to locating the necessary pots and pans, and preparing the dinner table; the latter being a job that I couldn’t remember being given the responsibility of before. I set out place settings and crept into the kitchen to find the necessary cutlery. I could hear my mother’s voice throughout the whole process.

‘This dining table will be kept for best, love, only for very special occasions.’

The words had been riddled with pride and admiration for the beautiful table and accompanying chairs. She said them without a hint of irony or humour though, as if she

hadn't realised that the best actually wasn't yet to come.

The sound of Daniel kicking his way out of the kitchen interrupted my nostalgia. He wandered into the room with an air of confidence that didn't fit him, a food-laden plate precariously balanced on each hand. He set one plate down in front of me and took the other to his own place-setting at the opposite end of the room. He stood at the head of the table with one hand pressed against his chest and his head cocked slightly towards the ceiling; he released a dramatised cough before he began speaking, in an accent that didn't belong to him.

'Ere we have le pork, salted and seasoned on a bed of peppered vegetablay mash accompanied by twice roasteed potatoes. Bon appetite, madam!'

He made what I thought was meant to be a kissing sound before collapsing into his chair and grabbing his cutlery. His cheeks were red and his hair more dishevelled.

'I'm starving,' he said.

His voice had reverted to the default sound, but I had to ask:

'Why were you talking like that?'

'Because the best chefs are French, oui?'

'Are you one of the best chefs?'

'I've given you twice roasteed potatoes; how can you even ask me that?' He finished the sentence with a wink that I hadn't seen him use before, but I thought that it suited him.

After that we ate, we laughed, and the potatoes really were delicious.

It was the closest that the house and its inhabitants had ever come to hosting a conventionally normal evening – with a guest too! As we began to clean up from dinner I wondered whether my mother would be proud of the evening's performance. Look, Mum, I'm a real live girl; isn't this what you wanted?

'You should stay sitting while I fetch dessert,' I said, thinking that this was a

successful attempt at being an exemplary host.

I had purchased two sizeable cinnamon swirls, which I served alongside a scoop of vanilla ice cream. It had taken longer than I expected it to, to decide on an appropriate dessert. I hadn't realised before that I cared quite so much about the distinct differences between plaits and swirls. Daniel seemed to enjoy my choice though. He delivered a series of over-dramatised 'Oohs' and 'Aahs' before leaning back and rubbing his stomach.

'Was that homemade?'

'They told me that it was when I bought it.'

Daniel released a small chuckle.

'Gillian Thompson, you do make me laugh.'

'I don't mean to.'

'I think that's precisely the reason why you do, though.'

'So you're really just laughing at me?'

'Yes, Gillian, but in a very kind way.'

'I don't think that I understand.'

'I don't think that you need to.'

Daniel sat opposite me, smiling, with a much more severe facial imbalance than I had seen before. The left side of his mouth was now tucked up in such a half-smile that his left eye was near to closing.

'You look happy,' I observed.

'Oh, GT, I am much more than happy. I am content.'

A Single Man. 2009. Colin Firth. 'The dumbest creatures are always the happiest.'

I tried to smile as I shook the reference away; Daniel was hardly dumb, as far as I could gather. After this he offered to assist with the cleaning of pots, pans, and other utensils,

but I was reluctant to let him after he had already given so much effort to the evening. Instead I pointed him in the direction of the living room.

‘It’ll take hours to do all of that on your own,’ he said, in a tone that suggested he was trying to reason with me.

‘You’re welcome to make yourself comfortable, or leave.’ It was the first time that I had been so aware of my own bluntness. ‘I didn’t mean that how I think it may have sounded.’ It was also the first time that I had felt a pang of guilt for it.

‘It’s okay, I understand what you meant.’

We went our separate ways into the living room and the kitchen, and I was surprised to see that Daniel’s estimation of how long it would take to clean up was far from hyperbolic. I hadn’t even been aware that this amount of cooking paraphernalia inhabited our kitchen. It would be much more time effective, I thought, for me to cook next time. Or perhaps next time we could go for dinner somewhere, given the relative success of our previous encounter at a restaurant. And sandwiched somewhere between those thoughts – and the uncharacteristic thoughts that followed – I realised that I had just decided that I would like to see Daniel again. It was an odd sensation, like heat spreading somewhere in my lower abdomen, and I had to drop the half-clean plate back into the bowl of water to properly concentrate on what I was feeling.

Star Trek: Voyager. 1996. Jennifer Lien. ‘Romance is not a malfunction.’

Exhaling, I thought: so, this is romance then?

Chapter Twelve

After Daniel left the house, my mother called so promptly that I actually managed to convince myself she must have known he'd been there. She mentioned nothing, of course. But the human mind works in mysterious ways. She called to verify that I was coping – which I was – and to ask what I'd been doing with myself – not much. For the three questions that followed she skirted around the issue of whether I had been to my therapy appointment. Sifting through my experiments box while my mother worked up to this apparently impossible question, I eventually settled on a jarred heart, surrounded by tiny pieces of tissue. I shook the container from side to side and watched the flecks tumble down to the bottom as the liquid settled.

'Louise is nice,' I finally said. She sighed, which I took to be a marker of relief.

'The appointment went okay, then?' She tried to sound casual, as though she hadn't steered the conversation in this direction. I provided her with a brief overview of the meeting – strategically removing the discussion of my inadequate parents – and said yes, it had gone okay, and yes, I would see Louise again if she wanted me to.

'Gillian, what's that noise in the background?'

'I'm sorry?'

'There's a noise, like water or something.'

With over-baked care I lowered the jar back into the box.

'I can't hear anything, Mum. It must just be interference on your end.'

We said our farewells shortly after, as though the fabricated interference had given us both a good enough excuse. The next morning when she called again, it was to ask whether I

would mind being left alone for another few days. I thought of the new man – men – in my life, of the time that I could freely spend with them.

‘No, Mum,’ I said. ‘Whatever it is you need.’

It turned out, though, that it wasn’t quite the unencumbered span of time I had expected it to be. My mother continued to call intermittently over the days that followed, at random intervals which made her intrusions impossible to predict, and I began to think she may be trying to catch me out on something. Throughout my adolescence she had always resisted asking questions; about my whereabouts, my after school activities, any friends that I may have accumulated. She was always giving me space – perhaps too much space, in hindsight – to have my own privacy. Now it felt as though she were somehow trying to compensate for that. It wasn’t until midway through our fourth impromptu phone call that I wondered why I didn’t just tell her about Daniel; why I had decided to make a secret of him. Listening to my inner adolescent – the one that observed and mimicked, rather than the one who poisoned animals – I decided: it was nice to have something that was just mine.

Daniel and I saw each other every day during the week my mother was away. It didn’t even feel like a conscious decision – not on my part, at least – but rather something that just happened. It didn’t occur to me that eventually my mother would come home and could, quite easily, in fact, complicate our relationship – assuming that’s what Daniel and I had fallen into. So it was somewhat jarring when, following an afternoon with Daniel, I came home to find my mother perched on the edge of my father’s armchair in the living room. Her elbows were propped on her knees allowing one hand to hang down somewhere between her thighs, while the other lingered about in the area of her neck. I watched her with curiosity as the one hand drifted up to her chin creating what looked like a Thinking Man parody.

‘Mum?’

She looked away from whatever had been holding her attention and stared straight at me.

‘Love, where have you been?’

‘I’ve been with Daniel.’

The words fell out before I could censor them. I’d had no idea just how desperate I’d been to talk about him. And yet there his name was, perched on the tip of my tongue, just waiting for me to open my mouth.

‘Who’s Daniel?’

‘A friend, I think.’

‘You think?’

‘It’s a hard question to answer, Mum.’

‘Only if you make it hard, love.’

She had brought a new confidence home with her, and I wasn’t sure that I liked it.

‘Can I go to the toilet before we have this conversation?’

She sighed and nodded with some effort, as if I were asking her for something more inconvenient than the chance to empty my bladder. Dodging the bathroom, I instead headed to my bedroom to buy myself enough time to process the updated mother sitting downstairs. But as soon as I stepped through the doorway I was hit by a smell that didn’t belong there. The acidity of vomit combined with an undercurrent of bleach.

Back downstairs, I hoped to strike up a reasonably normal conversation.

‘How was your time with Jackie?’

There was certainly something different about her. The trousers she wore – which I didn’t think belonged to her – were carefully pressed with designer creases, while her shirt – another garment that I didn’t recognise – was deliberately oversized in a way that made her

frame look even more petite than it had done previously. Her hair, too, was different, cared for, and her make-up had a professional touch to it, although the colour distinction between her jaw line and neck was enough to make me wince.

She seemed uninterested in discussing her time with Jackie, and instead served up the bare minimum of details. It was nice, she said, to spend some time with her sister after being apart for so long, but she never seemed to venture further.

‘You must have enjoyed yourself though, to want to stay longer.’

‘Oh I was fine while I was away, yes, love.’

I ignored the implications of this, hoping that I could wedge another question into our dialogue before my mother could take hold of the conversation. But she beat me to the punch.

‘Now, tell me about this Daniel. When did you meet him?’

‘That evening that I went for a stroll, out to the park, before you left.’ I felt the need to keep adding to my explanation although I had nothing else to give her. ‘That’s when I met him.’

‘You didn’t mention it?’

‘It didn’t seem worth mentioning, really.’

With pursed lips she nodded at this, before shifting her tongue around her mouth in a movement that made it look like she were physically chewing.

‘And, what are your intentions with him?’

‘My intentions?’ I repeated, pushing for time.

She pulled her mouth up at the corner as one eyebrow arched several millimeters higher than the other to make a new expression; one that seemed to suggest I should know exactly what she was talking about – and yet. I remained quiet for what my mother obviously thought was a beat too long. She rubbed at her forehead and then moved, shifting from the

armchair to the sofa. She patted the spare seat and so I joined her.

‘Look, Gillian, we still haven’t talked about what happened with your father, and now there’s a new person around, I really think that we need to.’

There was an implied link between the two things, but I couldn’t work out what it was.

‘What happened with Dad was just an accident, Mum.’

‘Was it though, Gillian?’

The question hit me with a force. She had accepted it all so easily; fabricated our cover story as though she had had it ready for years. I had never imagined that we would arrive at a place where that was questioned. She had always seemed so safe. I had clearly underestimated her though, and shame on me for that.

I considered alternative responses to the query, but I couldn’t find anything that felt even remotely appropriate. And it felt much like my mother knew that would be the case.

‘Gillian?’ she pushed. I flicked through things as quickly as I could but I couldn’t find anything to give her. I hated her for being so neutral. I was panicked, unnerved, and I was sure that my mother should feel much the same. But there was no sign of it. Instead she was the picture of calm, as if this entire conversation had gone to plan; as if I had somehow become so predictable that she knew my moves before I had even thought to make them. At worst she seemed saddened by the discussion, and that prospect made me hate her all the more.

After nearly thirty seconds of silence I think my mother intervened through pity alone. She pulled in a greedy amount of air before unleashing her words, throwing them out at such a rush that they were run-ons to each other, as if attached by connective tissue.

‘I know what you do, Gillian. I know what’s in the box upstairs.’

Burn Notice. 2007. Jeffrey Donovan. ‘Sometimes the truth hurts. In these situations, I

recommend lying.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I replied.

Her mouth twitched into an almost-smile. I wondered whether she had expected that response.

‘You do know what I’m talking about, though, love.’ She sighed and then picked up her speech. ‘You think that I didn’t know what you did to the pond when you were younger? You haven’t always been good at covering your tracks. And then the look on your face, when you brought that box into this house. I knew that there was something.’

I flicked back to my bedroom and pulled in the memory of bleach, vomit. My mother hadn’t had the stomach for what she’d found. Abandoning my denial in favour of honesty was the only clear option that I could see now.

‘How did you find out?’

‘Things were always dying around you, Gillian. Always.’

And then I had to sit alongside her while she calmly presented her overwhelming evidence for how true this remark actually was. My mother, in a way that mothers are wont to do, could even recall incidents that had long since faded from my own memory store. She discussed my inappropriate enthusiasm when my father, having found a dying fish in the outside pond, had suggested that we freeze it.

‘You were so excited,’ she started, but then paused for some seconds. ‘I should have done something then, really. I do know that.’ Her tone was somewhere between affectionate and remorseful.

Three minutes after the fish, and a sample of the pond water, had been scooped into a sizeable bag and deposited in the freezer, my mother had found me – a small me, perched on the tips of my toes – peering into the top drawer of the freezer, trying to garner a look at the

creature. The way my mother told the story, she had shushed me away with a ‘You don’t want to see that, love’ and, defeated, I slid down to sit on the kitchen floor, my knees pulled up to my chest and my back firmly against the freezer unit. I stayed there until my father removed the bag later in the evening. And as I listened to my mother retell this for a second I thought: she was right, she really should have done something.

‘You know that it’s not normal, don’t you, Gillian?’

I swallowed a laugh as my mother, of all people, approached the topic of normality.

‘At University, though, we do do these things.’

‘Things like what’s in that box?’

She had me on that one, I’ll admit. I couldn’t say yes, and I think she knew it.

‘I want you to talk to Louise about this,’ she continued.

‘Mum, I can’t –’

‘It’s a not a suggestion, love, it’s a stipulation.’ Her tone was curt, more serious than I had heard it in years. ‘Don’t you want to stop doing this? Gillian, do you even know why you’re doing it?’

‘Because I like it’ didn’t feel appropriate. She wanted a concrete explanation, something she could understand. I already knew by then that the experiments were a compulsion. And I knew that I didn’t want to stop. I didn’t know how I could communicate such thoughts to my mother though. The only comfort I could offer her was a half-promise.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘I’ll mention it to Louise.’

I couldn’t tell her about it explicitly, that much we both agreed on. Our compromise was that I would discuss my ‘anger issues’ with Louise, which is what my mother had decided this was – an inappropriate method of dealing with feelings of rage.

‘You must have some, how could you not, with your father and all?’ she said, creating

a causal relationship between his behaviour and my own that I wasn't comfortable acknowledging. I was – I am – nothing like him. But my mother needed to disassociate herself with this part of my psyche, and I had to allow it, despite the offence caused by her accusation. Anger was a base emotion, and there was a level of complexity here that rage didn't quite fit; I had never hurt anything out of anger, as far as I could recall, but again that hardly seemed like a point worth voicing aloud. I let my mother debase the whole process into something she could understand, something she could pass the buck on – because, I suppose, that's what she needed. It must be difficult for parents to admit just how much they got wrong.

'So we're agreed?' she finished.

Agreed seemed like something of an overstatement but I nodded all the same. An awkward hug followed and I made for my escape. I muttered something about being hungry as I moved to leave the room but my mother pulled me back in.

'Gillian?'

I retraced the three steps I had taken into the hallway and peered back into her.

'You need to get that box out of this house.'

I opened my mouth to dispute but before I could find a starting point she concluded:

'It's not a suggestion, love. It's a stipulation.'

Chapter Thirteen

My mother had shown a sparkly new aspect of herself that evening, and I felt inclined to conduct myself in a manner that would keep her firmly on my side; having an enemy was difficult but living with one would surely be impossible. After that, I scheduled a follow-up meeting with Louise for two weeks' time; my mother was dismayed by the wait for an appointment but, as I told her, they only had emergency slots free between now and then.

‘You don’t think this is an emergency?’

‘No, Mum, I don’t.’

As instructed, I removed the box from our family home. My mother watched me cart the thing out to the back seat of my car, and nothing more was said on the matter. I suppose she assumed I’d disposed of it somewhere, which in a fashion was true. I told Daniel that they were university experiments and that he was welcome to take a look if he wanted to, but before I could launch into a more comprehensive explanation of the contents he held his hand up.

‘You mean, like, dead animals and stuff?’

‘Well, bits of them.’

He swallowed hard.

‘I know all I need to know, GT. Just throw the box at the bottom of the stairs.’

Psychology is frequently assessed as a fake science of sorts, but so-called reverse psychology certainly has some merits when employed in real-life situations.

‘Won’t your aunt mind?’

I was yet to meet Daniel's aunt, but from what he had said of her already – namely her insistence on meeting me coupled with her incessant questions about the neighbours – she seemed the type of woman who was likely to pry.

‘Mind? She won't even know. I'm throwing those babies in the back bedroom where no one is likely to stumble across them.’

Daniel, as it turned out, was the best excuse for leaving the house with little to no explanation of where I was going or with whom. My mother, in fact, came to assume that whenever I left the house now Daniel would somehow be involved. Even on the evenings when I offered to stay housebound, to make a determined effort at being a present and fully functioning daughter to my mother, she was all too aware that my head was elsewhere.

‘You can't stop thinking about him, can you?’

I was midway through a mouthful of dinner and suddenly quite confused.

‘Who?’

She arched an eyebrow before lowering her head and tucking a chunk of chicken into her mouth. She chewed over the meat thoroughly before speaking again.

‘Gillian, it's okay to be thinking about a boy. You know that, don't you? In fact, love, I'd go as far to say that it's actually quite normal.’ She seemed disproportionately pleased by the assessment, trying but failing to hide a smirk. ‘Why don't you go and see him when we're finished?’

‘But, what about our evening?’

‘Gillian, there will be other evenings.’

And it was that simple. We finished our dinner over more polite and mumbled conversation and then I left, without any vague questions or wild accusations. And this, I thought, was perhaps my first practical reason for keeping Daniel.

The moment I stepped outside I was grateful that I had decided to walk rather than drive. The warm emotion plastered around my house that evening had wrinkled and peeled away from me in the forty-five minute saunter. It was unexpectedly cold out though; the type of cold that would prevent too many people from walking around.

At the front of the house, the porch light bounced about inside its plastic shell. Another light in one of the front rooms peered out from behind nearly-closed curtains. Directly above this was a room with no curtains at all, and through this uncovered frame I could see a bulb hanging bare. I watched this window for longer than the others, but when a full minute had rolled by I decided that the light had been left on by mistake. He was probably distracted, perhaps tending to her, and I couldn't reason why that thought provoked me so much.

I wondered what he could be doing, how he was busying himself, whether he was giving her all of his attention, or whether they spent their evenings in separate rooms. That would explain the amount of lights flickering about the house. Another one appeared then, this one at the side of the building. An upstairs bathroom, perhaps? The light tumbled out through the open window for just under two minutes before it snapped off again. I was convinced I heard a toilet flush.

Would he close the window later, when I'd gone?

Was that window always open?

Or was that just a slip? After an unusually difficult day?

When I had seen him earlier there had been something different about him, although I couldn't work out the specifics at the time. He was usually so focused away from her; as though devoted to getting through the task at hand, so that he might get back to her. I had seen

that determination several times now; during the food shop, once on a walk home, twice while he was out running. I wondered whether it was this sudden difference that had made him forget about the window that he'd opened.

I followed the lights around the house for twenty-three minutes and the same ones remained switched on, the same window still open. What was he doing? Pacing around, or watching television? Was she pacing around with him – was she even a pacer? I couldn't envisage her trailing about the house after him. Instead I saw her tucked away, in her own little room, where she could stare longingly at the door and wait for him. I imagined him walking in to check on her, and how her whole body would lighten when she saw him; how her head would perk up, how she might shake with happiness. And then, I thought, they'd probably sit and stare through the window together.

It must be beautiful to be so simple.

I checked my watch and made a note of the time; I was a little earlier than usual. In the future it would be better to visit later again, to see whether that top window was still open.

Several minutes passed before my mobile phone shook inside my pocket. A new voicemail had arrived, but I hadn't even felt the device ring.

'Hi, Gillian, it's me. I'm sorry that I've been a little quiet today. It really has been a funny old night with Emily and – and I definitely didn't call you to moan about that. Ah, I called your house phone but there was no answer there either. Guess you're out or something. So, call me, when you get this? Oh, it's Daniel, by the way, I can't remember whether I said that.'

Nothing appeared to have flickered or altered in the time it had taken to listen to Daniel's message. And it looked as though nothing was likely to. I took down one last mental blueprint of the building, to be sure, and then I skimmed through my phone book to Daniel.

By the time I looked back at the house, what I assumed was the bathroom light had flicked on again. The open window wasn't a mistake, I thought, he wouldn't have forgotten it twice.

In perfect synchronicity, Daniel's 'Hello' coincided with the male silhouette appearing in the illuminated patch of glass. I sucked in a stream of air that I couldn't bring myself to expel.

'Hello? Gillian?'

It was a little louder than his previous attempt.

'I'm here, yes. I'm sorry, I was distracted by something.'

'It must have been something good.'

He was fishing.

'Fairly good, yes.'

'Oh, well, ah, I can call you back another time, if I've caught you at a bad time now?'

Because – wait, no, you called me. Right?'

I half-listened to Daniel tie himself in knots and I half-watched the silhouette as it bobbed in and out of the window frame.

'Sorry, yes, I called you.'

Why had I called him?

Paul disappeared from the frame and snapped the bathroom light off behind him. I could concentrate on Daniel now. I half-listened to his chatter about how modern technology only seemed to work when it suited itself, then I started my pace home, walking with more determination than I could really explain. I had walked as far as Runner's Route when something on the pavement in front of me caught my eye.

'How's Emily?' I asked, filling the empty space in our conversation.

The something was a small bird, covered in fur-like feathers; it was attempting to

launch itself, but failing every time. On its third attempt it managed to lift itself several millimetres into the air. I had lifted my own foot three inches off the ground when Daniel started to speak, but then dropped my step some two inches clear of the creature. It wouldn't have done much for me, I knew, but there was certainly something tempting in the opportunity.

'Can we not talk about Emily?' Daniel's voice cracked midway through the question and I felt inclined to push for an explanation for why; he had, after all, mentioned her himself in his voicemail.

'Has something happened?'

'Things just aren't very good, GT.'

'With her cancer, you mean?'

Daniel breathed heavily into the phone.

'Yes, Gillian, with her cancer,' he said, his tone more curt.

I looked at the bird again, considered Daniel's tone, his anguish, then said:

'Do you mind if I come over to your house?'

Daniel took a beat longer than I expected to answer.

'You've never been to my house before.'

'And that's problematic?'

'I really don't want to talk about Emily, Gillian. The whole thing is a mess and she's really unwell at the moment and I just don't know how much sense I'll string together for all of that. It's just really difficult and she's not even herself at the moment, and it's crazy to try and piece someone else's feelings together, you know?' I didn't know much about what he was trying to say, but I could see that for something that he didn't want to talk about particularly, he had already found a fair amount to say. Noting my silence, Daniel started

again, 'I've not long got back from the hospital either. It's late, I don't want to drag you out at this time of night, really.'

'I'm already out,' I told him. 'You'll be keeping me company.'

I took one last look at the bird before I continued pacing along the pavement. Pulling my coat a little closer around me, I asked for Daniel's address and promised him I wouldn't be long.

Chapter Fourteen

The front door opened so promptly that I thought Daniel must have been looking out for me. When he stepped out to greet me, I saw that his hair was a little more ruffled than usual, and he looked particularly boyish in his Batman pyjamas. His lop-sided smile offered a great reassurance but as he raised his right arm to rub at the back of his neck, the smile gave way to a nervous laugh.

‘Consider me your hero?’ he said.

‘Do you have tea?’

‘Brewing in the kitchen.’

‘Then you must be a hero.’

Daniel tried to smile; there was something inauthentic about the expression. He stepped away from the doorway and gestured me inside but, even though I was the person who initiated this visit, there was a moment of hesitation on my part.

‘Do you want me to bring your tea outside?’

‘No,’ I said, forcing a smile. There was something new here that I was struggling to decipher, but I knew that I couldn’t communicate that. I stepped through the front door and hovered as Daniel pushed it shut behind us both; he edged past me and walked along the hallway towards a closed door.

‘Come in and we can set the world right.’

I didn’t respond and so Daniel added:

‘Or we can just sit and drink tea, that’s okay as well.’

He pushed open the door to reveal a display of aging worktops and well-worn wooden cupboards. It may even have been the same kitchen that had been here when the house was first built. He pulled out a seat at the table then and wandered into a corner to fill cups and pour milk. The seat looked like it might collapse underneath me but it would have been rude to ignore the gesture. I watched Daniel fish out the tea bags and thump them down on a saucer before carrying the cups to the table. The finished product was such a deep brown that I wondered whether my memory of watching him add milk had been imagined. But there was something dangerous about criticising someone's ability to make tea. I lifted the cup, took a restrained sip, and set it back down on the table.

'Too strong?'

'It's perfect.'

In the less-forgiving light of the kitchen I could see now that there was something wrong with Daniel's face; more specifically his eyes. The skin that surrounded them was pink, irritated, maybe even a little swollen, and I remembered what these three things usually meant.

'Something's upset you?' I asked.

He pursed his lips into a thin line and shook his head. But I spotted his lie this time.

'What were you doing out and about at this hour anyway?' Daniel asked, making it sound much later than it actually was.

'Why don't we talk about Emily?'

'I thought we were going to talk about you?'

I couldn't remember agreeing to that.

'Haven't we got time to talk about you as well?'

He expelled a long stretch of air, sipped his tea, and said nothing.

I could appreciate the heavy burden of upset, and I understood the knock-on effect that was having on his ability to perform adequately in a conversation. However, I lacked the skills required to build an exchange on a foundation of one-word responses, and so I waited until Daniel was ready to say more.

‘I’m sorry, GT, I’m not much of a talker at the moment.’

No, I thought, you aren’t.

Neither of us spoke for some time, but instead sipped our respective cups of tea until we reached the dregs of the drinks.

‘Do you feel like talking yet?’

‘I’m not sure what there is to say, Gillian.’

‘You could say what happened.’

He swallowed so hard that a thudding noise emerged from his throat.

‘This is too heavy, GT, we’ve known each other for five minutes, and this is really not your stuff to deal with.’

‘Why not?’ I asked. Daniel tilted his head and smiled at me in a way that felt a little patronising. I couldn’t understand what was so heavy though, or why sharing the weight was such a terrible idea.

‘You’re sweet,’ he said, which I took to be patronising again.

‘I don’t mean to be.’

Daniel took a hard look at me and sighed.

‘They found another tumour. They can’t, or won’t, whatever, I don’t suppose it makes a difference, either way it’s not coming out. They’ve offered her more treatment, chemo and the rest of it, but it won’t cure her. It’ll never cure her, they say, it’ll just keep her alive a bit longer, and she doesn’t want that anymore.’

‘She doesn’t want to be alive?’

He winced again. I thought he might cry but the urge to weep seemed to pass as quickly as it had arrived. While Daniel battled with this new wave of emotion I looked down into my mug, my hands still tightly cupped around it. It was the only thing I could think of to give him some privacy. I became so absorbed with this, though, that I barely noticed Daniel moving towards me until I felt the inside of his hand rest around the outside of mine. I kept perfectly still, half-scared of making any sudden movements that would either disturb or develop this contact. I was unsure of which I wanted. Daniel gently kneaded his fingertips against my hand before pushing out a deep sigh.

‘Okay, I’m done on this for now, GT. Your move.’

He leaned back in his chair, pulling his hand away, and I instantly missed the contact.

‘My move?’

‘It seems like something is up.’

I didn’t realise Daniel was so perceptive.

‘It’s just my mum,’ I started, knowing that I needed to give him something. I had hoped that that alone would be enough but when I looked up and found Daniel, wide eyed and expectant, I saw that he needed more. ‘She keeps asking about you, that’s all.’

Daniel gave a half-laugh.

‘And that’s what this trouble is over? She’s your Ma, she’s meant to ask questions.’

‘She’s nervous though, I think.’

‘That’s understandable too.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re her baby?’

Daniel and I were coming at this from very different angles, I had to remind myself.

‘No, I mean, I think she’s nervous that I’m going to hurt you.’

And just like that, the truth was out.

‘Pff, you must be a real heart-breaker, GT.’

‘I don’t think I understand.’

Another laugh emerged as Daniel rubbed at the back of his neck.

‘Usually parents worry about their own kids getting hurt, especially when it’s a girl.

No offence, obviously, I mean, usually a parent isn’t worried about the other kid getting hurt, so for your mum to be worried about me and not you, that must make you a love ‘em and leave ‘em kinda girl, do you see?’

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. 2005. Jonathan Safran Foer. ‘Why couldn’t I be the kind of person who stays?’

‘I understand, but I don’t think that’s it, really.’

‘No? A girl like you hasn’t left a trail of emotional devastation behind her?’

I flinched. A girl like me.

‘You’re quite lovely to look at, Gillian,’ he added, as though hearing my repetition.

‘Oh.’

‘Which is a good thing,’ he offered, noting my hesitation.

Of all the possible connotations and meanings I could have attached to what Daniel meant by a girl like me, my physical make-up wouldn’t have even made the top ten. I knew it was a good thing. But it was also a new thing, a slightly uncomfortable thing.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘You’re welcome.’ He moved his hand back around mine. ‘So you’re not planning on breaking my heart, then?’

‘It’s not in my summer timetable, no.’

We shared a smile which evolved into a laugh. But with a thud Daniel came back down to earth. His smile drained away and was replaced by something inexplicably pensive.

‘Did I say –’

‘Sorry, no, you didn’t say anything, GT.’ He stalled here but the explanation was clearly incomplete. He pulled in a long breath before he continued. ‘It feels a bit wrong, sometimes, starting something with you.’ I don’t know what expression my own face fell into then but whatever it was, it prompted a quick chorus of apologies from Daniel. ‘Christ, I didn’t mean that how it came out, at all. I just meant, with Emily, and what’s happening with Emily. You and I will outlive her, you know? There’s something, I don’t know, there’s something sort of weird about that.’

I’d never thought about it in those terms but, yes, I suppose there was something peculiar about it. But there was also something a little bit exciting.

‘Tea?’ I thought that we might have had enough tea but Daniel nodded anyway. I moved from his eye line to make the beverage that I didn’t even want to drink, all for the sake of giving him the space he needed to talk. And this, I thought, was the sort of sacrifice you must make when you like someone, feeling pleased with this sudden understanding. While I hovered about the kitchen Daniel talked his way through a spectrum of emotions. He tried so hard to find the right words while overlooking the one that would summarise everything he had just said: Daniel felt guilty. It wasn’t a feeling that I had first hand experience of, but I knew enough of it to recognise the symptoms.

‘She knows about you and everything, and she’s really happy,’ he said as I placed the refilled mug down in front of him. I smiled, unsure of what I was meant to take from this.

‘How can she be happy, though?’

Although it was likely rhetorical, I couldn’t help but put some real thought into this.

‘Something has happened, and I know that I shouldn’t be telling anyone this, but I really feel like I need to,’ Daniel said, changing the tone then.

I felt what I thought must have been empathy. Unknowingly, Daniel had just described my entire life in one sentence. I nodded to indicate that I understood, more than he could know. His hand was tucked around mine when he began talking again, but as he spoke I shifted, quickly tucking my fingers around his and allowing them to settle there, our extremities comfortably intertwined.

‘You can trust me,’ I said, and I think we both believed it.

‘It’s so hard to see someone you love in pain every day and not be able to help them,’ he started. ‘And up until recently I would have done anything, like, actually anything, to help her. But now, she’s asked me to help her to do something, like a dying wish, I don’t even know what you’d call it, but it’s something I’m not sure about. I mean, I’m not sure I can do it. Instead I just leave her there.’ His voice picked up volume as he raised an outstretched arm and gestured somewhere beyond the kitchen. The hospital, as it turned out. ‘I leave her there and I tell her to have a good hard think about what she’s actually asked me to do, like I’m bloody reprimanding her.’

There was a satisfying twinge in my stomach. Daniel had moved carefully around the issue, I’ll admit, but I could take a perverse and reasonably well-educated guess at what had happened. Or more specifically, I could guess at what a dying woman might ask of her carer. I squeezed his hand to pull his attention back around to me and watched as his expression slowly softened.

‘Daniel, could I meet her?’ I asked, more curious than ever about the woman in question.

He smiled and returned my squeeze.

‘I think she’d really like that, GT, yeah.’

Chapter Fifteen

Emily remained hospital bound for longer than anticipated after that. An infection had found its way into her system after her most recent stint of exploratory surgery – ‘An infection, in a hospital. Christ, what sort of place are they even running?’ Daniel had asked, understandably frustrated and irrational – which detained her for several days longer than originally expected. Even following her release she wasn’t firing on all cylinders, so Daniel said, but he wanted her to meet me anyway. Neither of us would say so, but I suspected a concern was lingering inside Daniel by then that if I didn’t meet Emily soon, I might not have a chance to meet her at all.

‘Only if you’re comfortable meeting her, GT, this is a big step, I know.’

‘A big step?’

‘You know, meeting the family and all.’

‘No, it’s a great idea for me to meet her,’ I said, brushing over the fact that it had been my idea to do so in the first instance.

Emily’s bedroom – the would-be dining room of the house – was an end of life sanctuary. Tucked into the corner there sat a bed with a bent mattress, the style that belongs in a hospital, complete with adjustable bars. The rest of the room boasted a mash-up of misplaced furniture. Two feet along from a bedside table there was another table, lower, that leaned against the wall for support. On top of this there was box upon box, bottle by bottle of medication, and beneath it there was a stack of magazines acting as a leg. I wondered what the magazines were, whether Emily – after breaking the leg one afternoon – had bolted to the

nearest newsagent and pulled down a pick and mix of publications, long before cancer had confined her to this room.

Against the opposite wall there stood a dressing table, complete with a large mirror. The reflection was disturbed by the photographs wedged into the wooden frame around the glass and I had to swallow the urge to look at them in detail.

Between these walls there was a large window, shielded by Venetian blinds. They were rolled down but angled open, so that a viewer positioned at the right height would be able to see through. And, sitting in a high-backed armchair by this window, was Emily. Her frame was so petite and the armchair so over-sized that I worried the furniture might swallow her. As she shifted higher, no, lower, no, a little higher again to gather a better view of the neighbours, it was impossible not to notice how the invading streaks of sunlight hit her head, which was mostly void of hair but for a few candyfloss wisps.

‘Keith Watson’s got his grand-daughter here again, Danny.’

There was a strength in her voice that I hadn’t expected; her tone gave a nod to a Northern accent.

‘Emily, I’ve brought Gillian to meet you.’

Daniel shifted into her line of vision and I followed; with a slight adjustment of her head she could see us both. In that first glance from her though, I met scrutiny. She eyed me in a way that suggested a surveyor’s report of sorts may follow. As she considered me, I noticed a small indent in her right cheek reminiscent of Daniel’s own as she struggled to pull her mouth into a smile. We held eye contact for a beat too long and I was thankful when Emily pulled her glance away, averting her eyes and shifting her hand towards her mouth to catch a cough that both looked and sounded particularly painful. She leaned forward then and held her uncontaminated hand out towards me. It was skeletal, and I was suddenly quite

concerned that my usual handshake might break her fingers.

‘Gillian.’ She said the name as though she were tasting it, and then added: ‘Mind if I call you Gillie?’

Under different circumstances, I would have said absolutely not. No one had ever abbreviated my name and it seemed an unnecessary habit to encourage now. But I recalled how Daniel had become Danny, and I wondered whether this abbreviation was Emily’s mark of approval.

‘Of course, please do.’

The tight smile she wore relaxed a little.

‘Marvellous, Gillie. Call me Emily, by the way, given that this oaf hasn’t actually introduced us. Danny, you’ll have to make us girls some drinks if you expect us to get to know each other.’

Daniel laughed from somewhere behind me.

‘Oh, of course, we can’t have a guest without having a brew, that just wouldn’t do at all. Gillian, do you want to help me in the kitchen?’

‘You make ten cups of tea a day, what could you possibly need help with?’ Emily said, and before Daniel could answer she continued: ‘She doesn’t want to help, Danny, now scoot.’

Daniel seemed amused rather than offended. He must be accustomed to this, I thought. He flashed raised eyebrows and a half-smile at me as he pulled the door closed, leaving ‘us girls’ to get to know each other.

‘Please, Gillie, take a seat.’

The same frail hand now gestured to a non-matching armchair that sat opposite. It looked just as over-inflated as the one in which she was wedged so I lowered myself down

with care, for fear that I was also at risk of being swallowed by enthusiastic cushions. I needn't have bothered, though. When my buttocks came into contact with the seat it became clear that I had been encouraged to sit on something that, in terms of comfort, resembled a concrete slab.

'I don't usually like my guests to stay too long,' she said, noticing my expression.

A mischievous and throaty laugh followed. I was instantly fond of Emily. Her honesty, alongside these undertones of a calculating nature, was refreshing. In the minutes that followed she peered through the gaps in the blinds, presumably at neighbours that I couldn't crane my neck far enough to see.

'Anything interesting happening your side?'

'Not that I've noticed, I'm afraid,' I said, not realising that I was meant to be looking.

'Oh you'll notice all sorts when you're my age, all sorts.'

It occurred to me then that I knew nothing more of Emily beyond her diagnosis of terminal cancer, which had, admittedly, been enough to pique my interest. I needed to ask the woman something. I eyed her left hand and noted the absence of a wedding band, the absence of any evidence to suggest one had ever existed there, and said:

'Are you married, Emily?'

An amused, 'Pff!' fell out of her mouth.

'Oh.'

'Don't be too tender, Gillie, it's not a sore subject. I haven't had the best of luck with men, that's all.' She paused to wipe a small gathering of spittle from the corner of her mouth. 'In my experience, they're a little like dogs. If you don't train them properly in the beginning, they will be running riot by the end. And my men do tend to run a little riot.'

I couldn't fit together the withered physicality of the woman in front of me and the

confidence she was voicing. Daniel had told me, warned me, that Emily was quieter than her usual self, and so this had been the last thing I was expecting from a woman in Emily's position. From the smirk on her face I thought she had perhaps expected me to feel this way.

'I'm dying, Gillie, not dead. There's life in the old girl yet.'

She punctuated the sentence with a wink and in that I could see a much younger woman. A healthier woman. Perhaps even a woman who used to be a bit of a handful.

Daniel kicked his way through the door then with an accompanying rattle from the tea-tray. Emily scanned the room looking first at Daniel, then at me, and then back towards the window. She smirked and I wondered whether she too had the feeling that Daniel had been listening to our chatter.

'Did you go to China, Danny?'

'Only the best for you, Emily, so I went one better than China.'

'Hm, and where's that, dear?'

'Co-op.'

Daniel winked at me as he set the tray down on the table beneath the mirror. A chorus of clinks arose as he grouped together cups, saucers, and teaspoons.

'No sugar for me today, Danny, Gillie here is sweet enough.'

Daniel looked at me; he appeared impressed. I forced out an awkward laugh to show that I had at least acknowledged the compliment. While Emily persisted in her neighbourhood watch, Daniel carried a half-full cup of tea over to her, and as the saucer beneath the cup changed hands it became clear why it was only half-full. Emily's hands shook with the ferocity of an addict absent of a fix. Daniel made sure to keep his own hands beneath the cup until Emily's had properly adjusted to the weight. They shared a knowing smile and I thought that this must be common practice in their household.

Emily took a sip, released a satisfied sigh, and turned to me.

‘Danny makes a good cuppa, don’t you think?’

‘I was taught by the best.’

‘Rubbish. He’s got a natural talent when it comes to looking out for me, Gillie, you mark my words.’ She paused for another sip of tea. ‘Don’t you have to be somewhere?’ The question was directed to Daniel who then looked at his watch and conjured something that resembled a clucking sound in his throat.

‘What, now?’

‘It seems as good a time as any, Danny.’

‘Ah, okay, so I have to be somewhere.’

Emily pulled her eyebrows together and shook her head lightly.

‘Danny, you’re about to start flapping. Go, do something. Gillie is alright where she is, aren’t you?’ she asked, turning to address me. I was stunned and pleased in equal measure and so offered a restrained nod in response. ‘Perfect. Now, Danny,’ she turned to face him again, ‘You can leave.’

‘Emily, you can’t just –’

‘Leave.’

Daniel expelled a long stream of air through his nostrils and turned to me.

‘Will you be okay here for a bit? I won’t be long.’

‘Daniel, I’m not going to eat the girl.’

When Daniel finally excused himself I moved to speak, but Emily held her hand palm up towards me, halting my sentence. When the front door banged shut, she lowered her hand.

‘Now we can really have a talk,’ she said, in a way that made her intentions sound more threatening than perhaps intended. ‘You can tell me all about you two lovebirds.’

Her use of the term lovebirds left me uncomfortable, although from her over-emphasis on the word I thought perhaps she knew it would have that effect.

‘We bumped into each other at a restaurant and –’

‘Good God, that was you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought Danny had made the whole thing up.’

She tagged a small laugh on to the end of her sentence.

‘Where did you think he’d been for the evening?’

There came an almost dismissive wave of the hand before she answered.

‘Boys will be boys and all that. He could have been anywhere for all I knew. But I certainly didn’t believe dinner with a strange girl as his cover story.’ She laughed again. ‘The excuses my first husband came up with when he was out late; I bumped into so and so; I was out with whoever, from work, yada yada,’ she said, waving her hand again. ‘I didn’t want to guess what Danny might have been doing.’

‘You have been married, then?’ I asked, sensing the opportunity for a subject change.

Emily married her first husband – one of three, as it turned out – on her eighteenth birthday.

‘It was all very romanticised, Gillie. I remember feeling like I’d been sold a dud one about two months in, if I’m honest.’

Throughout our time together that afternoon she punctuated her stories with glances through the window and occasional tangents about neighbours I wouldn’t recognise, should I ever meet them in person. She provided brief overviews – a highlights reel, she called it – of her marriages and then her career. ‘A once upon a time dancer until I got pregnant,’ she said with such flippancy that I felt as though this pregnancy – and, presumably, the subsequent

child – were things I should already know about. I bit down on the urge to ask where this offspring was now, and why Daniel had been the one left to care for her.

Emily delivered her stories with a cheerful tone but there was something sad about her face for the duration of our talk. They were fond memories, that much was clear, but perhaps still painful to revisit.

‘Do you have any regrets?’

Before Emily could answer her eyes watered; she held back from blinking, presumably for fear of sending the tears tumbling down her face. I wasn’t sure what I’d done, but it was clearly a very wrong move. Abandoning my seat, I squatted down in front of her instead and took up her small hand in my own.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘Oh,’ she half-started, pulling her hand back from me to rub a fingertip under each eye, catching at the tears before they could escape. ‘There’s no such thing as prying too much, Gillie. It’s quite nice to run through the old scrapbook, actually, just stirs up one or two things, you know?’ She took a long hard look at me then, as though realising something, but she didn’t share her revelation. ‘Anyway, another life that was,’ she said, steadying her voice. ‘You must be sick of my rambles by now, and that Danny must be on his way home so give me the last few details. You two seem to be seeing an awful lot of each other.’

Before Emily could steer the conversation down an unwelcome avenue – ‘Things must be quite serious with you two, then?’ – the front door opened and slammed, and Daniel tumbled into the room laden with carrier bags.

‘You needed to go the supermarket, today?’ I asked, instantly realising how redundant the question was. ‘But it’s Tuesday; who does their food shop on a Tuesday?’ Paul, I thought, now deeply uncomfortable with the image of him and Daniel in such close proximity.

‘So if you’re home for the afternoon, then I can unleash Gillie back into the wild, yes?’ Emily added.

‘Ha, if she’d like to be unleashed, then yes.’

I followed Daniel back into the hallway. He asked if I would call him later and I promised that I would, before shouting another quick goodbye back into Emily.

‘Gillie?’ she shouted back. With my feet still firmly planted in the hallway I craned my neck around the doorframe to look back in on her. ‘Same time next week?’ she said, with a wink.

And after that Tuesday and Thursday afternoons became time ear-marked for Emily.

Chapter Sixteen

My mother and I coasted along to my appointment with Louise, alluding to but never directly discussing the so-called anger issues that had led us here. On the morning of the appointment though, as I was mentally preparing myself for the lies I was about to tell, my mother offered what I thought was intended to be a word of encouragement on the matter.

‘You’ll be okay.’

I wasn’t sure whether it was a question or a command.

‘And you know what you’re discussing with her this time?’ she said, as though I hadn’t known what to say for myself during my previous encounter with the woman. I nodded again, and then offered my mother monosyllabic answers to her semi-concerned questions and mostly redundant advice, ahead of leaving nearly an hour early, now desperate to escape home.

On entering the appointment room Louise steered me in the direction the sofas. We sat opposite each other, in silence, while she fumbled through a collection of notes, the majority of which must have belonged to someone else, I remember thinking, because I surely couldn’t have given her that much material from one meeting alone. She looked tired that day, worn down, as though I were the last hurdle on a particularly difficult Wednesday. Which didn’t bode well, given that it was only lunch time and so she presumably had an onslaught of further issues to contend with from whoever was booked in for her afternoon. She wore black jeans that time, with a white shirt that would have been neat had it been properly ironed

beforehand. As it was, it only compounded her worn out exterior.

‘How have you been, Gillian?’

Rather than looking at me while talking she instead maintained eye contact with the pad in front of her, scribbling the time and date in the upper margin while waiting for my reply.

‘Okay, mostly. How are you?’ I said, half to be polite, and half because she really did look like she needed someone to ask. She pressed her lips together and for a second I thought she may be on the cusp of launching into a genuine answer.

‘I’m very well, thank you.’

‘You look a little tired.’

‘Gillian, that’s not really...’ she paused, closed her eyes for a beat too long to be a blink, and then started again. ‘Why don’t we just get stuck in for today?’

‘Okay.’

‘I was a little surprised you called for a follow-up appointment.’

It wasn’t a question but she stared at me expectantly, like she’d asked something.

‘There are some things that my mother wants me to talk through.’

‘So this is another appointment for your mother?’

I hadn’t said that, had I?

‘No, it’s not, well she’s not here, so it’s not an appointment for her, no.’

Louise set her notepad down on the seat alongside her. She crossed her right leg over her left, tucking her foot behind her calf somehow. Apparently deciding that this was a comfortable position, she focused on me with some concentration. I didn’t know whether I was meant to be talking, or performing, but I was sure that as conventional conversational exchanges went it was her turn to say something.

‘You seem flustered, Gillian.’

‘Only because I don’t know what I’m meant to be saying.’

She expelled a sharp puff of air from her nose, almost a laugh.

‘That’s an interesting way of phrasing it,’ she said as she leaned over and made a quick note of something on a clean sheet of paper. ‘There is no meant or should here, though, remember? We discussed this last time, Gillian. You need to be open in this space.’

I nodded as though I understood, despite my mother having offered conflicting advice not two hours ago just ahead of my leaving the house.

‘You just need to tell Louise your feelings.’

‘Really, Mum?’

‘You must have feelings, Gillian.’

I flinched. Her tone was cutting.

‘And don’t mention the box.’

‘Are you okay, Gillian?’ Louise brought me back into the room.

‘Of course, sorry.’

She frowned, but didn’t push.

‘So we briefly discussed your relationship with your mother, and your anger at your parents. Let’s unpick some of that further today, shall we?’ she asked, although I sensed it was rhetorical.

‘I think that would be useful, yes,’ I lied. Two months ago no one had even thought that I had feelings of anger, and now it seemed to be all anyone wanted me to discuss.

‘Talk me through your feelings, Gillian. If we’re unpacking them, show me the box.’

Not that box, I thought, she doesn’t want to know about that box.

‘Okay.’ I paused, trying to find a starting point. ‘When I get agitated I tend to lash out,

I suppose, in a way that my mother doesn't approve of, and I suppose her concern is that this behaviour will worsen if I don't do something to stop it.'

'Okay, and do you think this behaviour will worsen?'

My mind flicked to an image – my father lying misshapen at the bottom of our stairs – so abruptly that even after it had dissipated, it took a few seconds for me to catch up with what I had remembered. Yes, I thought, the behaviour will definitely worsen. But I couldn't admit that to Louise, or my mother.

'Hard question to answer?' she asked, noting my hesitation. I nodded. 'Okay, I won't ask too many specifics, because if you wanted to tell me then you would have done, yes? But, when you lash out, as you phrased it, do you hurt your mother?'

Something unpleasant pulled at my insides at the very suggestion.

'No, I could never do that.'

'Do you ever hurt yourself?'

When I had cut through – sawn through – the rat's cervical vertebrae, I accidentally cut open my palm. It was only a centimetre in length, an inch or so below the smallest finger on my left hand. But I could remember how disruptive it had been. How I'd tried to carry on the procedure without stopping. How I'd been forced to pause, bandage, and pause again when the gauze became soaked with blood that seemed disproportionate for the small cut that had created it. I occasionally hurt myself collaterally, yes, but Louise probably hadn't meant that.

'No, I don't ever do that either.'

'Okay, so, talk me through this lashing out. Is it physical, verbal?'

'Physical.'

'Do you hit things?'

I wondered whether it was disingenuous to say yes. Probably, I thought, but it was also the closest I could tread to an honest answer.

‘Yes, I hit things.’

‘Because hitting something makes you feel better?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘And how often does this happen?’

‘There used to be quite a gap between them, but then, things changed when I went to university.’ I remembered the weekly experiments performed for an audience, the excitement at being watched. ‘And things have changed again since my father passed away. Things have been different, more difficult, maybe.’

More difficult since Dad? Had I really said that?

I reassessed the sentence as Louise started on another sheet of paper. I had provided her with too much material in such a short space of time.

‘Can I be honest?’ I threw out, without fully considering what would follow. There was an uncomfortable flutter of something sitting my stomach that told me I needed to say something though.

Louise smiled and, without even finishing the sentence that she was midway through scribbling down the side margin of her page, she set the pad and pen down on the sofa again. Leaning back into the cushions behind her, she flashed her hands, palm up, at me, in a ‘The floor is yours’ gesture.

‘I think my mother’s concern is mostly founded on her worry that I’m an angry person, and I think she worries that I’m like that because that’s how my father was.’ I thought of the box again. Much as I would have liked to blame my father, I had, in fact, brought this whole thing on myself. ‘Anger was always an immediate emotion in our house, and my

mother seems to think that's been more damaging to me than it actually was. Everyone has something, don't they?'

Louise bunched her eyebrows together.

'What do you mean by that, Gillian?'

'Whatever it is that makes other people do things that they shouldn't. People smoke, and drink, and shop until their credit card is within an inch of its expiry limit. But no one rushes them into therapy for it.' I paused and considered what I'd said. 'Sometimes people rush them into therapy for it, in very extreme circumstances.' Was this an extreme circumstance?

'So you're comparing you lashing out, as you phrase it, to these other habits?'

'Yes,' I said, relieved that Louise had managed to decipher my meaning.

'So it's a coping mechanism?'

I stalled again. It was the second time in two sessions that I had lost my way like this; I was concerned that Louise might take it personally now. Although perhaps she should, given that it was largely her fault. This level of acceptance was alien to me, though. Of all the names she could have given it, she gave it the one that I had been using to validate it for years. Was I cured, then? Was everything about me now much more normal than I had given it credit for being?

'There's nothing wrong with it being a coping mechanism, Gillian. We don't even have to give it that name, if you'd prefer not to.'

It wasn't the name; it was the acceptance. The normalisation of it to someone who was originally intended – in my mother's dreams, at least – to eradicate the issue.

'No, coping mechanism is fine, I think.'

'Everyone has them, as you clearly already know. It's difficult without knowing the

specifics of the behaviour, but you'll tell me that when you're ready, I'm sure. The other thing to consider with these things, these coping mechanisms, is, aside from the concerns it may raise for your mother, which is problematic, I know, but the thing you always need to ask yourself is, who is this behaviour actually hurting? If it's hurting no one but helping you, then that in itself is cause to allow yourself these,' she fumbled over her phrasing. 'Things, these moments.'

And there was that benchmark again.

'One thing that I would say though is that there are options for this, and by that I mean there are better, no, sorry, not better necessarily, just different coping mechanisms available to you. There are ways to lash out, as it were, in a less destructive way, if the destruction of things is the real issue here, and if that's something you'd like to talk through with me in the future.'

'Constructive instead of destructive, you mean?'

She nodded.

'Maybe before the next session, you can think of some ways you might do that?'

I flicked to an image of Daniel.

'Absolutely, I can manage that.'

Louise launched into her stock explanation of how well I'd done. I can't say for certain that it was verbatim what she had said previously, but the farewells were certainly close. Despite the uncomfortable silences, the hour had moved relatively quickly and while that had minimised the anguish of having to attend this meeting at all, I couldn't stifle a growing worry that something had slipped out that shouldn't have done. I hadn't mentioned the box, though, and at the time that seemed the most important detail to hold on to.

'If you head back down towards reception then Rachel can sort you out for another

appointment. I know you had a little wait for this one, so best to get a jump on for the next one. But you can, of course, call me in the meantime if there's anything you need.'

I thanked her, waited for the door to close shut behind me, and then set off walking in the opposite direction to the reception area.

Chapter Seventeen

It was two hours later when I arrived back at home. My mother would have expected me much earlier, I knew. But after the food shop and the thirty minutes spent following Paul – his “German Shepherd on Board” badge dangling with pride in the back window of his car – the afternoon had largely slipped away from me. And I hadn’t even been able to work out where he was going – beyond somewhere that broke his usual routine.

It irked me to be so out of his loop. I tried to shake the feeling away as I emptied my backseat of perishable goods. I had only made it halfway up the drive, heavily laden with bags, when I noticed that my mother was in the doorway. Her feet were twelve inches apart and her hands were on her hips. I heaved myself on to the front door step and set the bags down either side of me; their contents had already started to spill out over the floor.

‘Your appointment was this morning.’

It wasn’t a question, but she clearly expected an answer.

‘I’ve been food shopping. I must have just lost track of time. I thought we could talk this morning through over dinner.’

My mother eyed the shopping with suspicion. What exactly did she think I was trying to smuggle in?

‘But you did see Louise this morning?’

The suspicion seemed disproportionate given my impeccable behaviour of late. It offended me how easily she could think the worst of me now.

I was suddenly quite aware of a slump in my shoulders, a downwards pull at the

corner of my mouth. I hoped that I had created a look of disappointment, but would have settled for bemusement. Without saying a word I squatted down to the bags around my feet and gathered their handles. I stood slowly, in order to distribute the new weight around me.

‘Look, Gillian, I know that you think –’

‘Some of this needs to be chilled or it will be useless. Excuse me.’

She allowed enough room for me to waddle through the doorway and into the house. Two food-stuffed bags hit her shin and I decided it wasn’t worth an apology. Instead I quietly continued on my way to the kitchen. I had counted through my first minute when the kitchen door swung open, as if my mother had been counting as well. I busied myself by setting the oven temperature, organising the vegetables, stashing the apple pie – which had definitely been my mother’s favourite thing at some point – in the fridge, shortly followed by a canister of whipped cream. She could stand and watch me for as long as she wanted to. I would not speak first.

The water was boiling for gravy and I was dicing an onion when my mother gathered together the nerves to say:

‘I’m sorry if I’ve upset you, Gillian.’

‘I’m not upset,’ I said. But I thought I was allowed be.

‘I was just thinking all sorts of nonsense when you didn’t come home from that appointment. I know you were nervous, must have been nervous, talking to her about that sort of thing and it just got me thinking that –’

‘It’s clear what you were thinking.’

I added boiling water to the gravy granules and stirred until the mixture was smooth, then I threw in the diced onion. The mixture sat cooling on the work surface while I rummaged through the freezer to pick out the bag of chicken that I had only minutes ago

shoved in. My mother continued to reflect. Her elbows were propped on the table, her hands cradling her chin, and her eyes had narrowed on a random spot on the floor.

‘Gillian, I appreciate that you’re an adult,’ she started. ‘But you need to appreciate one or two things as well. This hasn’t been easy, you know? The box and –’ she cut herself off before she could finish the thought. ‘I’m trying my best,’ she concluded, in a deflated tone.

When I turned to face her I was already wearing a frown that I couldn’t shift.

‘But if we’re going to go down this therapy route, which I really think we should because I’m not at all fond of the alternative, then I just need to know, and trust, that you can be honest with me. And it works both ways, love, because you need to trust that you can confide in me without me overreacting, or, I don’t know, you just need to trust me with these things.’ She paused here and expelled a shallow sigh, almost a huff.

Before I Go To Sleep. 2014. Nicole Kidman. ‘Don’t trust anyone.’

My mother continued: ‘Trust that you can tell me things without me doing whatever it is you’re nervous of me doing.’

What, like making me go to therapy? I wanted to push, but instead I nodded to indicate that I had heard her; I stood silently, arms folded, as I processed her speech. Not at all fond of the alternative, she had said. Which was what? I wanted to ask but swallowed the question.

The situation hadn’t developed as I had planned. The unpredictability of my mother these days made it more challenging to anticipate her reactions to certain stimuli. I had assumed that this would lead to something much more explosive, though; that the calm attitude would finally give way to something much more interesting, and it would then fall to me, the considerate daughter, to defuse the situation with a touching display of emotion. But my mother had beaten me to it. And worse still, she had upped the ante. This would take

something exceptional.

I walked over to her side of the table and, standing next to her, I held my arms outstretched towards her. My mother stood and complied. It was a good and convincing hug, I felt sure of it. The next stage in my plan proved more taxing, though.

‘Iloveyoumum.’

A hand came up to pat the back of my head then. We stayed close like that for a handful of seconds before my mother pulled away and I went back to cooking. I didn’t say anything at all about the fact that she hadn’t said it back.

‘Do you want to tell me about this morning, love?’

‘There isn’t much to tell, really. She gave me some good ideas, though.’

‘Ideas for what?’

My mother was hoping for an epiphany. I left the knife suspended but loosened my grip around it slightly as I considered my explanation. I threw out an overview of the morning’s events, delivering to my mother small pebbles of information that I thought would appease her, including the plan to deal with my so-called anger in constructive rather than destructive ways, which she hmm’ed over. When she changed the subject to something more palatable, I knew that my retelling had pacified her.

‘And, have you spoken to Daniel today?’

‘Earlier, yes.’

‘Is he well?’

I couldn’t remember whether I had even asked him.

‘A little stressed,’ I said, thinking that this was likely the truth. ‘He has some family troubles at the moment.’

‘I wouldn’t want to rush you, because I know what a big thing meeting the family is

and all,' she said. It seemed that everyone, apart from me, could appreciate the magnitude of introducing someone new to the family. 'But it would be nice to meet this boy, you know?'

'Why don't I invite him over for dinner?'

The question popped out, bold and fully formed. The determined silence that followed indicated that my mother had been surprised by the suggestion too. Some time rolled by before she managed to say anything at all, and I found myself so preoccupied with thoughts of Daniel – and the warm feeling in my abdomen that was a standard response to him now – that I almost missed her reply.

'That's a lovely idea, but not tonight.'

'No, no, not tonight. But, soon?'

Three days later, after spending the afternoon with Emily, I slipped the suggestion of a family dinner into my goodbyes with Daniel. His usual composure abandoned him and gave way to a sudden wave of what appeared to be panic.

'I'll have to check, with Emily,' he said.

It took another four visits but we eventually decided on a convenient date for everyone.

'What time do you want me?'

'Half past six?'

Four hours later the front door bell interrupted my mother's unwelcome critique of my outfit for the evening. Behind the door there stood Daniel, wearing his lop-sided smile and his corduroy jacket that I had grown quite fond of. In his right hand he held a bottle of wine which, as I glanced down towards it, he promptly lifted until it was level with my chest. He held the bottle securely at arm's length as if there were something dangerous about it. I

reciprocated his smile, and his nervousness, and took the bottle from him.

‘I’ve never seen you drink wine,’ he said.

‘No, but it’s polite that you brought it.’

He laughed and rubbed at the back of his neck.

‘Emily’s orders.’

I stepped aside and gestured him into the house. My mother was hovering behind me, her eyes wide and expectant. She took an enthusiastic step towards us and, from my peripheral vision, I was sure that I saw Daniel flinch.

‘Mum, Daniel. Daniel, this is Geraldine.’

I knew this introduction was right. I had seen it so many times.

My mother ushered us towards the dining room before I could say anything interesting about either of them. When we walked through the open double doors it was clear that she had gone to some effort in making the room look presentable. To her credit, it did look very well put together, although not as appealing as it had done when there had only been two place settings.

‘Do you know, Daniel, this is the first special occasion we’ve had for using this table since we moved here?’

There was a satisfied smile on her face as she walked through to the kitchen. Daniel and I swapped understated smirks of amusement. There was something satisfying about the fact that we now shared a secret.

‘I’m sorry. She’s a little...’ I hesitated.

‘Enthusiastic?’ Daniel offered.

We had time to share a laugh before my mother burst into the room holding a plate in each hand, with a third one precariously balanced on her left forearm. She distributed our

meals before sitting down with her own, at which point an awkward silence fell over the table. The three of us exchanged glances as we fought to chew through the circles of mush that sat on our respective plates.

‘How are the fishcakes, kids?’

So that’s what they were meant to be.

‘Certainly the best homemade fishcakes I’ve ever had, Mrs Thompson.’

It was a physiological battle to stop myself from smirking over Daniel’s response. I thought these must be the only homemade fishcakes he had ever eaten, making them the best by default. Regardless of whether there was any truth to Daniel’s sentiment, it had been complimentary enough to lure my mother from her shell and, from that point onwards, their only moments of silence seemed to occur alternately while the other one was speaking. My mother quizzed Daniel like he was the first real live human being she had ever encountered. Although, over the course of our mediocre starter I began to think he might have taken my mother too seriously when she had demanded that he tell her everything about himself.

Throughout our main course of roast pork with an assortment of vegetables I continued to learn various things about both of them that I had been ignorant of before. I’d had no idea that my mother used to be a valued assistant at Clive and Jenkins’ Accountancy Ltd nor did I know that Daniel was severely allergic to penicillin, something that he discovered right in the middle of a family holiday, much to his mother’s annoyance.

Should I have known? Were these normal things to ask?

It wasn’t until Daniel was mopping up the remnants of pork-tinged gravy with a round of bread that I became relevant to the evening at all.

‘I’ve really taken you up to when I moved in with Emily now, and when I met Gillian.’

When I looked up from my dinner plate they were both already looking at me.

‘That’s quite a potted history of Daniel you’ve been given there, Mum.’

‘It really is.’ She paused to laugh although I couldn’t see why, and Daniel reciprocated the effort. I managed a smile.

‘Sorry, I might have missed something here but who is Emily?’ my mother probed further.

‘Oh, she’s my aunt. I moved here to care for her. It was a big decision but, you do these things for family, don’t you?’

My mother looked genuinely confused.

‘I told you about Daniel’s aunt, Mum.’ Because why wouldn’t I have told her?

‘I’m sure you didn’t, Gillian.’ She looked back to Daniel. ‘You said you care for her?’

‘I do. The only other option was a hospice and it just didn’t seem right, so, here I am. Nurse Daniel.’

Daniel smiled. I batted the expression back to him in return but my mother’s effort at joining in with this display was unconvincing. I was all too aware that I had missed something crucial and whatever it was had made for a sour turning point in the evening.

‘Gillian, take Daniel’s plate for him and help me, in the kitchen.’

She disappeared through the door as she finished speaking. I collected my plate, and Daniel’s, and followed her. Behind the kitchen door I found her with her back towards me, her hands hanging on the kitchen work surface, as if attempting to steady herself. Without turning to face me she said:

‘Is she very unwell, Daniel’s aunt?’

She turned to face me then, leaning back against the work surface.

At some point in the last minute or so my mother’s face had reddened. It looked as

though she were close to tears and, while I could empathise with Daniel's situation, I couldn't help but think my mother might be taking her reaction too far.

'Yes, she is.' Hence the mention of a hospice, I wanted to add but didn't, for fear of souring the situation further.

My mother closed her eyes. Her right hand came up to her head and she rubbed at her temples.

'Gillian, you have nothing, and I mean nothing, in common with this boy. He is kind, he is the first boy you have brought home, and, well – what am I meant to think?'

I wasn't sure what she was meant to think; but then, I was having a difficult time working out what she was thinking at all.

'Mum, weren't we were having a nice normal evening out there? But now Daniel is sat,' I paused to gesture beyond the kitchen in case my mother had forgotten the close proximity of our guest. 'Wondering, much like I am, what on earth is going on. I care about Daniel very much, and Emily, for that matter.'

The words emerged with a power and conviction that was surprising even to me and I realised then how authentic the sentiment behind them must have actually been. And then something snapped. Some censorship, or sense of parental respect, something that would have ordinarily held me in my place suddenly sprang open, unleashing:

'How dare you, Mum? I meet someone who I like, and I share that with you, and you turn it into – I don't even know what you're turning this into, but it isn't what it was meant to be. Honestly, Mum, what the fuck is wrong with you?'

I rushed out of the kitchen, uninterested in any response she might offer. In the next room Daniel was staring at the dining table with disproportionate concentration. He flashed a sad smile when he saw me in the doorway. When my mother joined us seconds later, Daniel

thanked her for a pleasant evening but said he really must be getting home.

‘I didn’t realise the time,’ he added, with an awkward laugh.

Like respectable and fully functioning adults, we all said our overtly-polite thank yous and goodbyes. When the front door closed I stormed up to my bedroom and stayed there for the remainder of the evening. My mother tried, once, for verbal contact through my closed bedroom door – ‘We have to talk, Gillian.’ – but I had nothing I felt I could say.

Chapter Eighteen

Following the argument with my mother I spent more and more time at Daniel's house – or at least, that was the impression my mother was under. She and I exchanged clumsy niceties before I slipped out of the house for a therapy appointment that I hadn't booked, or I left to spend an afternoon with Emily – the latter, though, more often than not was actually true. Emily and I became close friends – dare I use the term – but she never mentioned whatever it was that she'd asked Daniel to do for her. She mentioned a host of other things, though. We discussed the dancing career – less a career, more something she did to irk her then-husband – the child, the near-child that never quite came to fruition, and the divorces – 'There are always divorces, Gillie,' she said and I nodded like I agreed with her. We even discussed Daniel's parents once or twice – 'It's hard to believe he came from the same stock as them; it's hard to believe that I did.' she'd said, and from what I now knew of their dispassion towards human suffering and their lack of family loyalties, I was inclined to agree.

Late one evening, when Emily had finally settled, Daniel and I were hidden away in the kitchen. Sitting across the table from each other, hands clasped and mouths silent, I approached the one subject Emily had avoided.

'Did you find a resolution to whatever it was Emily asked you about?'

'What she'd asked me about?'

'She asked you to do something, didn't she?'

Daniel swallowed hard as he registered what I was referring to.

'Ah, yeah, I'm not sure that's something we'll come to an agreement on, GT.' His

fingers switched position around mine and Daniel watched them with an unnecessary intensity, grateful, I thought, for something to focus on. ‘People disagree on things all the time, don’t they?’

He dismissed the question with such flippancy that I worried whether my guess had been entirely wrong.

It was a Tuesday morning, some weeks into our scheduled visits, when I turned up earlier than Daniel had been expecting me, ahead of him going out for general supplies. In the hallway I eyed my watch – 9.15am – and thought how tardy it was of him to still be bed-shaped when he actually had things to be doing.

‘What time do you have to go out?’ I asked.

‘Pff, no time, really. I have to shower first, though. I’m not sure the world is quite ready for this.’ He gestured from his dishevelled hair all the way down to the small turtle heads that made up the pattern over his pyjama bottoms. I wondered then what it would be like to sleep next to Daniel, whether I’d sleep at all given the brightness of his attire. He noticed my stare. ‘It’s not that bad, is it?’

I shook my head. He leaned forwards and planted a damp kiss on my forehead, and this time I felt no urge at all to pull away.

‘You might want to give Emily a bit of time to come round today. We had a rough night.’

The tardiness made sense now.

I hid myself away in the kitchen and nursed a cup of tea while Daniel showered. The house was so quiet. As if by accident then I wondered whether Paul’s house would be this quiet in the morning, or whether the place would host an ongoing series of clicks as paws paced over wooden flooring. I had seen Paul’s hallway only once and from my somewhat

shoddy viewpoint at the time it had been hard to gather whether it was carpet, or a carpet rug sitting at the entrance ahead of a wooden floor. But I had mostly decided on laminate flooring; Paul somehow seemed the type.

Thirty minutes later Daniel returned to the room looking much more presentable. The lemon scent of his shower gel was so pungent that I imagined the whole room felt revitalised just from him having walked into it.

‘Well, how do I look?’

His hair was flamboyant, his trousers properly ironed, and the front of his t-shirt was completely devoid of anything resembling a cartoon character. I wondered what the special occasion was.

‘Where are you going, looking so neat?’

It was uncharacteristic of me to pry but there was something different – more attractive, even – about Daniel that morning, and an unfamiliar voice in the back of my head was frantically trying to work out why. General supplies, he’d said. What did that even mean?

‘Neat?’ he questioned.

It was the wrong word but I had to stick with it.

‘Yes, neat.’

‘Is neat a good thing?’

‘Usually. I suppose it depends on where you’re going, really. But I don’t suppose anyone would ever want to be messy.’

Daniel let out something between a laugh and a ‘Hmm’ before planting a kiss on my cheek. These little displays had become more commonplace over recent weeks and I was always surprised – and proud, I’ll admit – when I succumbed to them this easily.

‘You’re a peculiar little jelly bean, GT, you really are.’

These little names were commonplace too, although I was less comfortable with them.

‘So what should I do with Emily, just go in and sit with her?’

Daniel fidgeted, rubbed at the back of his neck, averted his eyes. I couldn’t make the movements fit together meaningfully.

‘I’d leave her, if I were you,’ he said, staring somewhere outside of the kitchen window. ‘Yep, definitely best to leave her.’ With a quick shake of his head, as if shooing away his thoughts, he was back in the room with me. I wondered how bad Emily’s bad night had been, and how hard Daniel must be trying to process it. ‘I promise that I’ll be back soon.’

Daniel excused himself before I had ample time to voice my touching display of genuine concern. I found him in the hallway tugging on a coat.

‘Did you say where you were going?’ I asked again, all too aware that I was pushing but far too curious of his answer to stop myself.

‘So curious today, GT,’ he said, evidently holding back a laugh. ‘I won’t be long.’

And he was gone.

I explored the house – something that I’d done several times already at this stage, but I always managed to find something new – and found myself enamoured by the twenty one photographs that were dotted around the living room. They were scattered over the tables, the fireplace, tacked on to the wall to make a jigsaw-like feature of themselves – and they watched you every time you moved. I had seen them on earlier visits but had never studied them, not properly, not carefully enough to track one set of physical markers to another. Despite my best efforts though, I couldn’t match their faces. I couldn’t even find Emily.

By the time Daniel had been gone for a little over an hour, I had grown frustrated by the photographs around me. I hadn’t managed to tie any two individuals together and it perturbed me, disproportionately so, in fact. I walked from the living room out into the

hallway, hoping that there may be signs of life from Emily by now. At home I was always glad of the quiet and solitude but when I was at Daniel's, there was an instant and desperate need for human interaction. I pressed my ear against Emily's bedroom door, and held my breath firmly inside my lungs while scrutinising any sounds hidden by the wood. There was an understated hum from one machine or another but beyond that, there was nothing to suggest it was a good time for me to intrude.

From somewhere inside the kitchen an alarm started to ring. 12:30pm meant that it was time for one lot of medication or another. Inside I found the noise emanating from a small clock balanced on top of a box of what I remembered were painkillers. Emily's medication had slowly increased over recent weeks and, while various nurses tended to her every whim for their allotted time with her, some responsibilities – more responsibilities – tumbled on to Daniel.

'There are so many, GT, I just can't, I can't chance it, you know?' he had been frantic when he made this argument, despite my having told him that the alarms were a good idea.

I put the clock to sleep, setting it to wake up again in another six hours, before washing my hands thoroughly and unloading three white caplets on to a small saucer. 'We need to keep things as clean as possible,' Daniel had said, again frantically, although it had seemed like a perfectly sensible request to me. The first time that I had done this for Daniel – or rather, for Emily – I had only shaken loose one tablet. Now, eyeing the three that had tumbled out on to the plate as I took a glass down from the top cupboard, I thought what a testament those tablets were to the worsening state of affairs.

Knock on Any Door. 1949. Nick Romano. No, wait. John Derek. 'Live fast, die young, leave a good looking corpse.'

'Danny won't even recognise what they put in the ground.' Emily said two, maybe

three, visits go. I hadn't told Daniel. I never told him when we'd had conversations like that.

I loaded the saucer and a glass of water onto a tray before dropping four chocolate digestive biscuits on to another small saucer. Daniel rationed these treats now. Despite the utter absurdity of it, he seemed to have convinced himself that a healthy diet might go some way towards counteracting the effects of a fast-advancing stage four cancer. Emily had batted her hand at Daniel's naivety – or was it optimism? 'Let him have it, if it makes him feel like he's doing something,' she had said, and I had been sneaking her the biscuits since. The sudden influx of memories conjured a tug of affection as I pushed through the kitchen door and wandered out into the hall.

With the tray precariously balanced on one hand I pushed down the door handle, eased open Emily's door, and waited for a greeting. It seemed farfetched to expect a 'Good morning, Gillie,' but I had expected something, a rustle of the bedclothes if nothing else. There was a mound of blankets on the hospital issued bed, beneath which, I assumed, was a sleeping Emily. It seemed almost cruel to wake her but missing a batch of medication could upset her system for an entire day, as Daniel insisted on reminding me on a sometimes hourly basis now. I hoped that there would be something – heavy breathing, some signs of discomfort – that would justify my waking her but there was nothing to suggest that she was anything but peaceful at that moment.

If I made enough noise, I remember thinking, she'll wake up on her own. I was disproportionately desperate to escape the guilt of disturbing her. I set the tray down with a deliberate bump on the dressing table and forced out an embarrassingly chirpy, 'I think you're due some tablets, Emily.' I made my way closer to the bed, glass of water in one hand and a saucer of pain relief in the other, and although I was walking towards her, it wasn't until I was a mere three steps away that I saw it. The relaxed expression, the unblinking eyes, the tinge of

blue that was already chasing its way around the edge of her lips. In an accidentally dramatic gesture I dropped both the glass and the plate and then, without fully considering why, I reached forwards to touch her. I ran the back of my hand against her cheek, tucked my fingers firmly around hers, fighting against the onset of rigidity. It was the most peaceful that I had ever see her. And I couldn't have felt more disappointed.

Chapter Nineteen

Under normal circumstances I had a reliable method of emotionally dealing with life incidents. It wasn't that I didn't experience emotions, you understand, more that I couldn't – still can't – decipher them adequately and, because of that, my verbal and physical responses to certain stimuli leaves something to be desired. I flicked through my reference bank but struggled to find what felt like an appropriate media representation of someone reacting to the death of a person who they weren't biologically related to. Sadness seemed to be the general theme, but I needed something more specific. And something told me that my failsafe plan of calling my mother for advice wouldn't be appropriate this time.

American Psycho. 2001. Christian Bale. 'I have to return to some videotapes.'

I called Daniel three times, only to be immediately bounced to his voicemail as though his mobile was turned off, or lifeless. On the fourth attempt I heard a ringing, but I still didn't get an answer. In the hallway I searched through the drawers of a waist-high unit, on top of which sat the house phone. I hoped to find a letter, a name, a phone number but instead found tens of letters, from scans, appointments, and every second, third, and fourth opinion available on the severity of Emily's condition. All I found was overwhelming evidence for how hard Daniel had fought to keep her alive, and I felt a sudden pull on my insides then at realising I would have to be the person to tell him that he'd failed in that endeavour.

Unable to find any remotely useful paperwork on how to proceed, I had no other option but to call the police, or an ambulance, I wasn't sure. In my best mock tones of anxiety and panic, I communicated that confusion to the woman on the other end of the phone who

asked what my emergency was.

The paramedics came, saw, and confirmed it, on the off chance that I had been stupid enough to miss a pulse or mistake the beginnings of rigor mortis for something else. It looked as though it had all happened at some point in the last four hours. Her levels of Adenosine Triphosphate had long since drained from her face and, I suspected, many of her larger muscles were likely affected by now as well. The paramedics didn't explain this to me – 'It looks like she's been gone a little while, pet,' was their preferred delivery – but God, how I wanted them to explain it. They talked me through what happened next, who I needed to call, and what I could do until then.

'I'm not the next of kin, though,' I rushed out, thinking this was something they should know – as though it would influence Emily's current state.

From the mass amounts of paperwork that I had managed to wade through, I eventually found a name and a doctor's surgery. The female paramedic offered to call for me, while her male counterpart repeatedly offered his sympathies before asking exactly who I was – a question that should have occurred to him sooner, I thought.

'The doctor is coming out now, pet.'

The doctor, fortunately, knew me as Daniel's Friend, so at least she could verify my involvement with the family – sorry, with the deceased. While the medical professionals held their conference together in Emily's room, I paced through the hallway with my phone pressed to my ear and my thumb punching the green and red call buttons alternately, every time Daniel's answer machine informed me that the person I was calling wasn't available to take my call at the moment. I shut out the chatter and listened carefully, just in case buried about the house somewhere there was Daniel's forgotten mobile.

'Come on, Daniel, answer the bloody phone.'

‘Miss Thompson?’

‘Yes? Sorry, I’m trying to get hold of Daniel.’

‘We need you to, really. We can’t proceed any further without him.’

When the doorbell sounded – three times in rapid succession – I knew that it was him. He never took his house keys now, not when I was with Emily. He would ring the bell, steal a kiss, and Emily would be none the wiser. Behind the door now he was panting, sweating, and although I was half-prepared to break the news to him myself – in what I hoped would be a soft and appropriate tone – the ambulance that was blocking his driveway had been the only announcement that he needed.

‘It’s happened, hasn’t it?’

In the days that followed Daniel wasn’t himself. But I suppose that’s to be expected. Real people aren’t themselves, necessarily, when they’re grieving. There were flashes of his normal character but they were quickly undercut by fidgets and awkward stretches of silence. Nevertheless, I went to his house every day without fail. I never thought to ask whether he wanted me there or not; but I do remember thinking, where else would I be?

‘How are you?’

‘Chipper, with a cold front of melancholy sweeping in from the west. Which I think is probably normal.’ He stepped away from the doorway and gestured me inside. ‘I’m not convinced it’s all properly gone in yet, but, sorting out the funeral stuff helps, I suppose.’

I followed him into the kitchen.

‘Emily had a folder, of funeral things.’

‘Plans, you mean?’

‘I always told her that she was morbid for something like that, and that...’ Daniel was

facing away from me as he spoke but the crack of emotion in his voice was unmistakable as the beginnings of tears. ‘But maybe she knew that this would happen. Maybe she knew that when the time came I really would be this fucking useless.’

I stood behind him and wrapped my arms around his body until my hands came to a halt on his stomach. I don’t know where the gesture came from, but Daniel seemed pacified by it, a deep sigh escaping him as my hands settled. My chin sat level with where I estimated his first thoracic vertebrae to be, such was our height difference. I breathed in his stale smell – a t-shirt that hadn’t been dried properly – and on my exhale, I pressed my sympathies into him.

‘I’m so sorry this has happened to you, Daniel.’

‘Don’t be sorry, Gillian, you’re not what killed her.’

Daniel didn’t ask whether I wanted a hot beverage but he served me a small mug of hot chocolate anyway. I deliberately sat down on the seat next to him rather than opposite. He propped an elbow on the table and balanced his forehead in the palm of his hand as he stared into the drink.

‘You just need to give him some time,’ my mother had told me, noting the frustration in my tone earlier that day when I had told her that Daniel was fine, too quiet, but fine.

‘That’s normal, Gillian,’ she said. But his quiet was too much for me.

‘Is there anything that I can do?’ I pushed.

Daniel sighed so hard that his frame drooped.

‘I think you’re already doing everything that you can, GT.’

I put my arms somewhere around his shoulders and torso then, and pulled him towards me. My fingers hovered at the edges of his hair until his shoulders sagged against me, and the by products of his sobs were quickly seeping through my t-shirt. It was the first time I thought

that I may actually be of some use to Daniel.

‘I’m just so angry at her, Gillian,’ he said, the words hitting my shoulder. When he pulled away from me I could see the skin beneath his eyes was red, swelling, glossy from tears that hadn’t made it either down his cheeks or into my clothing. He looked lost. The longer I watched him though, the more pronounced my own feelings became. Sympathy, rage, and something that felt much softer battled it out for space in my stomach.

‘Why are you angry at her?’

Daniel rolled his eyes as if I should already know the answer.

‘Weren’t you angry, when your Dad died?’

Yes, I thought, but probably for a different reason.

I reached out to him and left a small squeeze on his right thigh. I hoped he might find something comforting in the gesture. He inhaled deeply and pushed the air back out in an elongated stream as though trying to steady himself.

‘This is what she wanted, right?’

He looked across at me for an answer. I nodded.

‘She asked me to do this, more times than I can even – Christ, this is absolutely what she wanted. And I understand that, deep down, I understand she wanted things on her terms and she wanted – control? I guess, maybe. This is what she wanted.’ He repeated the phrase like an affirmation, reminding himself that Emily was ready for this, until he changed his beat: ‘She gave no thought to me though, GT. No fucking thought at all.’

‘What do you mean?’ I pushed again. I knew it, in my gut, but I needed to hear him say it. I wondered how beautiful the words would sound in Daniel’s voice.

‘I mean she begged me to help her finish things and she gave no thought to what happened afterwards, no thought to me, no thought to how I’m meant to live with this.’

Daniel's speech was staggered with caught breaths and unfulfilled sobs as he tried to communicate, and so it took me a moment or two to decipher the speech. This was it: Daniel was in an obvious state of emotional turmoil but I couldn't reach him; I was on the opposite end of the spectrum somewhere, with winged creatures occupying my stomach, desperate for the big reveal that I now knew was coming.

'I killed her, Gillian. She asked me to help, I did, and now I fucking hate myself for it.'

His eyes were clenched shut as the words fell from him, as though he were bracing himself for an inflamed or hurtful response. I tried to beat down a swell of curiosity and excitement but there was only one question I could settle on long enough to ask out loud:

'What happened?'

And he told me. Going back to their first conversation about it, Daniel revisited Emily's most recent hospital stay and sifted through the doctor's report on how the cancer was advancing. 'We can treat you, but I'm afraid it will only be an exercise in lengthening your life at this stage,' the doctor had told them both. 'And what use is that, really?' Daniel interjected into his own narrative. It had been a lot of use at the time, I wanted to remind him, flashing back to when he had scorned Emily's refusal for treatment, but I didn't for fear of disturbing his sequence. She had asked calmly, Daniel said, like she had reserved this request for a time when she would really need it.

'How can anyone make that decision? Like, why would you just give up like that?'

For fear of providing an answer that Daniel didn't want to hear, I instead nodded and urged him to continue.

'She kept mentioning it after that and I kept telling her that it wasn't an option. Then you came along,' he paused and fashioned an expression that may have been construed as

loving or admiring, under different circumstances.

‘What did I have to do with any of this?’ I asked, feeling disproportionately pleased by my alleged involvement.

‘She said life moves on and that I’d found someone to spend mine with now.’

Again, under different circumstances, and had I been a normal girl, this would have perhaps been the moment when an extravagant cast of woodland creatures would have poured in through the doors and windows to join me for a musical number. It wasn’t quite that reaction, no; I’m no Snow White, after all. But I still struggled to keep down a smile.

Daniel continued with the retelling – of how Emily had repeatedly asked him to help her and how he had repeatedly denied her that – until we got to their most recent discussion, which had taken place a week ago. Daniel and I had been out for the afternoon; Emily’s orders. ‘The girl is hardly making the most of her summer,’ she had said to Daniel, urging him to whisk me away somewhere. I wondered now whether this had somehow been part of her plan.

‘She’d been bringing up more and more fluids,’ Daniel said, diplomatically referring to the blood and mucus that had to be cleared away from Emily following every cough. ‘She knew that things were getting worse, and I did as well, and I was just – worn down, I suppose. Not with her, I don’t mean,’ he added, quickly, as if trying to save face. ‘I was worn down by her asking me to help her, and me running out of ways to actually help her because you can’t.’ He dropped both hands flat against the table, his head angled towards the wood in a way that allowed him to avoid my stare completely. ‘You can’t always help.’

‘Her medication box,’ he lifted his head to gesture towards where it used to live. ‘They’ve taken that as well now. But her box with all the heavy stuff in – Christ, it’s so wrong to even talk about this.’ He massaged his forehead roughly; the skin turned white from the

pressure.

‘Daniel, you need to tell me what happened,’ I said, desperate for the details.

‘I told her that I couldn’t do it. I’m weak, and I couldn’t. But if she wanted to, if she really felt like that was what she needed to do, then she could take extra. From the box.’ The soliloquy continued but was disturbed by repeated apologies and growing sobs that became so violent I was concerned Daniel may slip into a panic attack.

‘I killed her. I killed her and I have to be okay with that and I don’t even know how –’

I kissed him, hard, to catch his confession. He was half-right. He hadn’t killed her, exactly, so much as allowed her to die. But there was still something quite wonderful about it all.

Chapter Twenty

It had been a few days since Daniel's confession. We were spending much of our time together, and yet somehow we managed to navigate around the most obvious topic of conversation quite masterfully. It became harder to leave him for any substantial period of time, but the human body requires a certain amount of nutritional input to maintain an adequate standard of functioning. Eventually I abandoned the nest we had made for ourselves in the living room – which I had previously only left to return home and sleep – and ventured out to the supermarket. When I was close to the entrance of the shop though, that's when I saw her.

She maintained the same military stature that I had seen during our last encounter. Her rear end was planted on the floor, her feet a perfect distance apart. Each ear stood to attention, upright and alert, waiting for him. I looked at the bowed heads of busy shoppers wandering past us, ignorant, and I wondered – would anyone even stop me? Would he berate himself for leaving her when he came back to find she was gone? I bit back on the urge. It was impractical.

With the recent influx of excitement that had impacted my daily routines, I had completely neglected to keep track of Paul's. Of course he would be there. Where else would they be on a Tuesday afternoon? I glanced down at my watch: 2.38pm. Daniel had robbed me of much of my free time recently. I had neglected so many opportunities with Paul and, nursing a flutter of something at the thought of seeing him again, I only now realised how much I had missed my time with him. Calculating the approximate length of his shopping

excursion, I realised that I had to grasp at this chance while it was there. I walked back to my car, started the engine, and followed the quickest route from the supermarket back out towards Prescott Lane.

Paul was a relatively intelligent individual and yet, in the weeks before Emily's death, I had been truly incapable of grasping the security measures – or lack thereof – that he took with his home. Peaches may have endowed him with a sense of security but she was an ineffective tool in that respect given Paul's increasing tendency to remove her from the house every time he went out himself. However, Peaches' determined appearance aside, she was an almost entirely wasted measure given that Paul was yet to replace the lock on his back gate that had recently been broken, and, as it turned out, he wasn't particularly wary about unlocked windows either. Through the pane the upturned lock mechanism was easily visible and, with a slim enough implement and the proper leverage –

The window opened with an understated click. I perched on the ledge, folded my legs up towards me, and tucked myself through the frame. My previous guesswork had been right; this was the utility room. And so, curious about what I might actually find buried around the house, I wandered without urgency from one room to the next, as if I had just bought the place rather than having just broken in.

The kitchen was clinical. The living room understated and modern, with highlights of chrome scattered liberally throughout, and I was disproportionately pleased to see that my guesswork on Paul's wooden flooring was right. The dining room was unloved, housing nothing more than brown boxes that held the promise of furniture, with a backdrop of garden that could be seen through the patio doors. The garden itself was immaculate though, with a lawn neatly shaved into strips of light and shade.

‘Anything for Peaches.’

I stalled in the hallway.

On a waist-high unit at the bottom of the stairs there was a framed photograph. A slightly younger version of Paul stood proudly inside the frame, suited and smiling with an arm hanging around the shoulder of an uncomfortably pretty brunette positioned next to him. His fingertips were digging into her shoulder. Her smile didn't reach her eyes. Was this the woman that he had told me about? They were familiar with each other, clearly, but I couldn't comfortably tie them together in a romantic relationship from this image. Just an old friend, perhaps, or his sister even seemed more likely. I wondered what had happened immediately before this photograph was taken, and why Paul would want a snapshot memory of feelings so evidently forged.

Abandoning the image on the unit, I moved upstairs. I found the spare bedroom, the would-be-an-office, the bathroom – which was where I'd suspected it would be – and then finally Paul's bedroom. The double bed was neatly made but I was only midway through inspecting his hospital corners when something distracted me. On Paul's nightstand there was another image, this one of Paul kissing someone who appeared to be the same brunette from downstairs – not his sister, then – although I can't be too definitive about that. Her face was hidden by his but her frame was similar. A happier memory, from what I could see. But I still didn't understand why it was there.

There was an elaborate dog's bed – designed with the appearance of a bed that would belong to a human – in one corner, and a double wardrobe, doors still wide open, in the corner opposite. This wardrobe was entirely full of shirts though, organised according to colour so that the display ran as a spectrum from crisp white to almost black. I ran my hand across their edges.

I hadn't seen Paul in a shirt once. Not even on the mornings he left without Peaches.

Despite planning to leave the room, I was drawn towards the bed. Lying down, I manoeuvred myself into the exact position that I imagined Paul must sleep in, as estimated by the positioning of his pillows. From this angle, there was nothing in what would have been his eye line. No television, no books. Instead he had a clear view of where Peaches would lie, one head tilt away from the woman who occupied his nightstand. After taking another glance at the photograph – is that what Paul looked at, before he went to sleep? – I buried my face into his pillow. The case was scented by aftershave and perspiration. My nose chased after a flicker of cigarettes that I couldn't pin on Paul's character, unless, perhaps like the shirts, that behaviour was reserved for when I wasn't there to observe it.

Back downstairs I made an inventory, of sorts. The smells attached to the sofa, the knives readily available in the kitchen, the amount of locks on the front door. I wanted to know the inside of the house as well as I knew the out but I had already misplaced nearly an hour in Paul's home, and he would be back there no later than 4:30pm. Assuming, of course, that he'd driven (there was no car on the drive) and that he had stopped to stretch Peaches' legs somewhere on the way home (which was their usual habit for a Tuesday afternoon).

On my walk back to the utility room I considered taking something; something inconsequential that Paul would hardly notice. I shook away images of a shirt, a small knife, and found myself distracted then by a stuffed animal. It had been discarded in the middle of the kitchen floor, battered, and no larger than an apple. Paul had only bought this for her about a month ago, in the early days of our excursions. He had been caught between this and a more robust-looking plastic hamburger. I thought – as I had done originally – Paul would have been better off having purchased this second option. Peaches was a beast, after all.

The toy seemed like the safest option, but there was a more useful utensil that caught my eye as I walked back through the kitchen, and it was tempting. I ran a thumb over what I

thought must be a spare key to the front door, left discarded on the kitchen work surface. There was a key ring attached – the type that comes hollow, for you to force your own picture inside – that had a snapshot of a young Peaches in the frame. I hadn't noticed it on my first walk through; there had been nothing that I wanted, or needed particularly, from the experience after all. I had been there primarily for curiosity, I suppose. But how long until that curiosity reappeared? It felt like a step in a very serious direction and I wondered, briefly, whether I was ready for it. Time was a factor though, and it seemed unlikely that an opportunity quite this good would wander by me again and so I pocketed the key, feeling something between excitement and trepidation in my gut as I did so.

I left through the same unlocked window that had allowed me in and pushed it closed behind me. The gate knocked when I pulled it shut but, cautious of being spotted, or worse still recognised, I resisted the urge to look around for anyone who may have acknowledged the noise. My car was parked three streets away and so I set off towards it with the sun in my face, a spring in my step, and a heartbeat that was audible. The latter only quickened more so when I saw a car – theirs, not mine – travelling in my direction at a lower than the limit speed pace. It was Paul's way, it seemed, when Peaches was in the car with him.

He wasn't completely clear from this angle, but Peaches' head – which was hanging from the passenger window – was impossible to miss. I observed her, smiled – I may have even laughed, I can't quite remember – and then turned my attention elsewhere for the remainder of the walk, as they drove in the opposite direction to me. Inside my car I pulled the key from my pocket and pressed it into my glove compartment. On the way back to the supermarket then, I spent the journey practising my best, 'Bloody traffic everywhere,' before I called Daniel and told him that I was running late. He was kind, as he always was – 'Take your time, GT, there's no need to go rushing around for me.' – and for the first time I felt a

pang of what I think must have been shame, or at the very least something akin to it.

Chapter Twenty One

It wasn't until the business surrounding Emily's death that I really realised what had been happening with Daniel. It may come as no surprise at all to learn that I had feelings for him and, on reflection, I suspect that they had been blossoming for some time – for want of a less romanticised verb. It was beyond my control, though. Somehow Daniel and I slipped into a 'you hurt, I hurt' mentality, which was set to be reasonably dysfunctional given how defective we were as humans. Actually, defective may be too strong a word to describe Daniel; he was perfectly well equipped to function adequately around other normal people – but Daniel had a propensity to surround himself with the abnormal. The aunt who wanted to kill herself; the girlfriend who wanted to kill things. Defective? Perhaps not. But there's something unflattering to be said about the company he was keeping.

Daniel, I decided, made me a better human. I could live, breathe, feel through him and that's not to say he fixed me – as though I were only in need of minor repair – but he certainly did pull parts of me in closer. A chemical combination, perhaps, long ago lost by my lizard brain, somehow stitched back together by the archetypal boy next door. Daniel was the Victor to my monster; he breathed humanity (back) into me and I both liked and hated him for it at the same time. But, if I am the monster to Daniel's Frankenstein (which doesn't bode particularly well for Daniel, I don't suppose), then Paul became The Vitruvian Man to my da Vinci; a limbs-spread representation of the human body, its proportions, and its capabilities.

How I felt for Paul was how I felt for the rat, the bird, the countless cats that our neighbours had homed despite their total inability to protect them (from me). I wasn't

attracted to him so much as I was curious about him. Although Daniel unknowingly did his best to hinder the preoccupation, it became my mission in life to learn the basic formula of Paul's. I studied him – inclined towards afternoon walks; often at home alone during the evenings – how I studied the brown rat – most likely to enter your garden at night; tempted to climb great lengths to reach bird feeders. He wasn't a romantic interest, no; instead, it felt as though he became a bigger, grander specimen. I wanted to know what made him function, how his life was jigsawed together – what might stop him from working. Paul never did have the Prince Charming effect; he wasn't Daniel.

Daniel was always kind and caring; he thought I was genuinely a worthwhile person – and how wrong he was, as it turned out. But Paul? He was something else altogether.

Chapter Twenty Two

‘How was the funeral, then?’

My mother’s expression remained deadpan as she voiced the question, but something about the phrasing felt jarring. Were there different styles of funeral, I wanted to ask, something other than depressing and over-emotional for everyone involved?

The Fault in Our Stars. 2014. Shailene Woodley. ‘Funerals, I’ve decided, are not for the dead. They are for the living.’

I couldn’t find an answer for how the funeral was, though. It may have been heart breaking – in hindsight that was probably a perfect word to use – but in reality it seemed to me like an over-priced outpouring of faux affection delivered by names that Emily had never mentioned to me nor to Daniel. ‘There’ll be some who just come for the food,’ Emily had told me during one of our afternoon talks, and she had been right.

Instead of answering her, I took a step towards my mother and wrapped my arms around her. She remained rigid under the embrace.

‘It’s horrible to see Daniel like this.’

My mother held her rigidity for a second longer but then relaxed against me, lifting her arms up around me as she did so. We held the embrace for a beat longer than I expected, but eventually it was my mother who pushed me away. She cupped my shoulders with her palms and studied me at arm’s length.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

‘I will be.’

She nodded in response and then turned back towards the kitchen work surface where she was preparing dinner for us both. The funeral had taken place earlier that day but Daniel's house had become so overrun with money-hungry relatives – his words, not mine – that I had been forced to vacate in order for him to physically accommodate them.

'I can just go home for a couple of days,' I had told him. Daniel pulled a face at my offer, as though the helpful suggestion hindered his predicament rather than assisted with it.

'What's wrong?'

'I'll miss you, idiot.'

The Wizard of Oz. 1939. Judy Garland. 'I think I'll miss you most of all.'

'I'll miss you too,' I lied. Or did I?

I had packed away the few personal items that I'd left scattered around Daniel's spare bedroom, including my experiments box, which was now comfortably hidden beneath a larger-than-necessary-for-this-time-of-year coat in the boot of my car. Daniel had said that I could leave it, that no one would disturb it, but I knew how inquisitive family members could be.

'Funny how quickly things can change, even when they seem relatively stable,' my mother said, bringing me back into the room. She turned, gestured with a carrot, and added: 'With Daniel's aunt, I mean.'

It was an uncomfortable topic on which to launch a conversation, particularly after the last time Emily had occupied our dialogue. My mother was yet to address the issue of what we had – or rather, hadn't – spoken about on the night of our dinner with Daniel. During most of our exchanges now there was always a sense of something unsaid, as though my mother were constantly on the cusp of asking something, saying something, accusing something, but then thought better of it. I wondered whether now would be the time that the real questions

were finally launched, or whether my mother's self-control really knew no bounds.

'She did have cancer, Mum,' I said, as if this were an explanation all by itself – which, as far as I was concerned, it should have been.

She sighed.

'Yes, I'm aware of that, Gillian, but it was such a quick turn, that's all.'

It hadn't advanced overnight, I wanted to tell her, before launching into a comprehensive explanation of exactly how these cells develop.

'I think if Daniel is honest with himself then it was just a matter of time before this happened, really.' Daniel and I had discussed what we would tell people when they commented, which they would, on the suddenness of Emily's passing. Overreact, I had told him, overreact and tell them that there's nothing sudden about cancer. 'After all, Mum, there's nothing sudden about cancer, is there?'

My mother arched an eyebrow at the question before turning away again.

'I suppose there isn't, no.'

We continued in this vein for longer than seemed necessary, until much of the information I was giving my mother was recycled from the previous answers I had provided. No one had raised any questions. Yes, she had, technically, been on her own when it happened.

'It's hard to say,' I started. 'Daniel and I might have both been in the house when it happened, but the time of death is a difficult thing to pin down exactly.'

'Did neither of you think to check on the poor woman?'

'Of course we did, Mum, it was when I was checking on her that I realised what had happened and that's when I called for help.'

'You?' my mother asked, more interested now.

Yes, I.

‘Not Daniel.’ I snapped my teeth around his name, eager to protect him. My mother sensed a change in tone and altered her own accordingly.

‘Sorry, love. I thought you might want to talk about it.’

‘It’s all I’ve talked about since it happened,’ I said, which was a lie, of course. But Daniel and I had talked about lots of things around the topic of Emily. For the first twenty-four hours after her death we discussed her at length. When it happened, how it must have happened, how horrid it was that it had happened at all. We anticipated questions, drafted our answers, and we nursed our guilt in between. Sorry, no. Daniel nursed his guilt in between. There was no need for us both to feel it, I thought.

The Machinist. 2004. Christian Bale. ‘A little guilt goes a long way.’

‘I wondered, worried,’ my mother said, correcting herself. ‘How it might impact you, with what happened to your Dad.’

‘She’s Daniel’s relative, Mum.’

‘I know that, Gillian, but you only recently lost a relative of your own,’ she bit, but then sighed, as though disappointed by her own bluntness.

Attending two funerals over the course of one summer was not quite how I had imagined my time at home would play out, I’ll admit. The link she was making still felt tenuous, though. It was clear she was moving somewhere with this. After a beat too much silence on my part my mother turned to look at me and found me frowning over her response. Returning to the peeling, chopping, whatever she was doing, she added:

‘Bit close for comfort, love, that’s all I meant.’

The comment didn’t clarify anything so much as complicate it further.

‘I see.’

‘How are you feeling about things now?’

The question was on the tip of her tongue long before I had even decided on my own non-committal reply. And this, I thought, must have been the reason for the link: she wanted to discuss feelings.

‘I try and not think about Dad, if I’m honest, Mum.’

My mother prepared the rest of dinner in such a determined silence that I wondered – or perhaps hoped – that the conversation had fallen from her head. She finished dicing, successfully boiled and mashed as appropriate, and even wandered to and from our utility room with washed and to be washed clothes without uttering anything in the vein of a response. But when she set the food-laden plate down in front of me, I realised she had been saving this talk for the intimacy of dinner.

‘Gillian, do you really never think about what happened?’

That’s not what I said, I thought, as I threw a sizeable chunk of chicken into my mouth to buy myself thinking time. Did we always have to have these conversations over, or immediately after, the consumption of food? I wanted to ask. Did my mother not appreciate how indigestion worked?

‘Of course I do.’ I maintained eye contact with my plate. It hadn’t escaped my attention that my mother had more roast potatoes than I did and I was disproportionately irritated about that. ‘I wouldn’t be normal if I didn’t think about it, would I?’

‘I just thought that all of this with Emily might have brought some things up.’

‘They’re hardly similar situations, Mum.’

‘Aren’t they?’ she asked. I frowned into my dinner, confused by her insinuation, and she must have noticed. ‘Death is death, isn’t it? That’s all I meant,’ she added. But it wasn’t all.

I speared chicken, carrot, and potato one after the other and threw the medley into my mouth before I could say anything inappropriate or damning. The companionship I shared with Daniel had evolved into something that allowed us to say (almost) anything to each other. My mother and I, however, had no such relationship, and I needed to compartmentalise those two states before saying:

‘I’m not sure death is death. That makes the whole thing sound quite inconsequential.’

‘Don’t do that, Gillian.’ Her response was firm. I thought she must have been ready with it for some time, depending on what I contributed to this talk. ‘You’re being clinical again.’ A fine criticism, I thought, from someone who had boiled death down to a simple and derivative process. ‘All I’m asking is whether it’s brought any feelings up for you,’ she finished. I was convinced that I had already answered this query for her. When my silence stretched out too long, she changed the subject entirely: ‘So Daniel has family there at the moment?’

‘Mm, not his parents, though.’ I spoke around a mouthful of over-boiled carrots, untrusting of my mother to not fill the silence should I wait too long to respond. ‘Which I think is peculiar. Emily was related to one of them, after all, and your parents should be there for you during difficult periods in your life,’ I said, unaware of the accidentally snide comment that I had just made about my own parents, and more driven by my protective feelings for Daniel. My mother had noticed the potential for a malicious remark though.

‘What’s that meant to mean?’

‘Well, you’d think his family would support him.’

‘Even families have to draw a line, Gillian. We can’t always support you.’

It felt like we were discussing something else now.

‘Mum, is everything okay?’ I asked, trying a different tactic.

She considered the question for longer than seemed necessary before offering an unconvincing, ‘Yes, love,’ and returning to her meal.

‘I feel like there’s something you want to say but you aren’t saying it,’ I pressed. I was being stifled by this elephant in the room, one that now seemed to be swelling at an alarming rate. I was gripped by a sudden need to gun it down, gut it, and harvest its ivory.

My mother placed her knife and fork down either side of her plate and finished chewing with slow and deliberate movements. She swallowed, rubbed at her eyes, giving over an expression of exasperation, or maybe tiredness, and said:

‘I’ve got a lot on my mind at the moment, Gillian.’

My time with Daniel had well-informed me about what came next on my part.

‘Would you like to talk about it, Mum?’

I can’t be sure – it was just a flicker, really – but I think that she flinched.

‘Gillian, what did you do with the box?’

My face, despite my best efforts to hold back, must have looked startled. It hadn’t been the starting point that I was anticipating and I now found myself reassessing what it was that my mother was worrying about, for this to be her chosen point on which to build whatever came next. I thumbed through stock responses, frantically looking for an answer, when it occurred to me that they were hazardous. The animals, that is, not the answers I was looking through. It wasn’t a case of simply hauling them into a non-recycling bin. Would my mother know that? Even so, could I risk her knowing that?

‘They’re in the boot of my car.’

She definitely flinched then, as though physically pained by the answer.

‘Why are they there, Gillian, why didn’t you get rid of them?’ Her tone was measured and controlled but taut, pulling over the emotion that threatened to crack through.

‘They’re hazardous. Technically. I can’t just throw them in a bin.’

‘So how can you get rid of them?’

‘To be honest, Mum, I don’t really know.’ And why should I have known? It never occurred to me that I would need to get rid of them. ‘When I’m back at university I can ask one of my lecturers, or maybe even dispose of it through the university.’

She closed her eyes, shook her head slightly.

‘That’s not good enough.’

Nothing ever is, I thought, feeling an unfamiliar stab of bitterness towards her.

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Your lecturers have emails, don’t they?’

I nodded, understanding her implication.

‘I’ll email one of them first thing in the morning to see whether they can advise me on the matter.’ I flinched at my own tone, noting how clipped it was a little too late to edit it.

With the final roast potato left on my plate I chased around a dribble of gravy, dabbing the liquid into the food before tucking it into my mouth. When my mother didn’t offer any further remarks, I pushed a little harder: ‘Is there anything else that’s on your mind?’

‘Plenty.’

‘I’m here to talk, if you feel like expanding.’

She spat out a puff of air, rolled her eyes, and shook her head in rapid succession.

‘I don’t know what that means, Mum.’

A similar gesture followed but this one was accompanied by the rattle of cutlery as she placed utensils on the plate in front of her. She had left two roast potatoes, and I tried to not be aggravated by this as she pushed the plate towards me, indicating that it was my duty to do the washing up. I made off in the direction of the sink, which was already stuffed with various

pans and paraphernalia. So much so, in fact, that I wondered whether my mother had created such a mound in an attempt to keep me out of her way for a while, but I shook the thought away as idle paranoia. I was midway through running a bowl full of water when my mother spoke again, in such a quiet tone that I had to turn off the tap and ask her to repeat her remark.

‘I said: I’ll be ready to talk soon, I think.’

And then she left, saying something about an early night, and needing the extra rest.

Chapter Twenty Three

Louise's office was a medley of smells. There was tomato, garlic, coffee, perfume. I had interrupted her lunch and I thought I should feel a stab of guilt, or something, for that. But I was also sure that at some point – despite not being an actual doctor, I know – Louise must have taken one oath or another where she solemnly swore to protect her clients from harm. It was, perhaps, disingenuous to use this in my bargaining to see her. I wasn't in harm's way, I didn't think. But I couldn't be sure that someone else wasn't. The receptionist had asked whether it was an emergency. A moot question, I thought, given that I was standing directly in front of her having arrived unannounced without an appointment demanding to see my therapist – which shortly gave way to pleas of, failing that, any therapist at all. Does it look like an emergency? I wanted to ask her. Are these not urgent actions?

'She said she'll see you now if you pop down,' the woman said after hitting several keys on her laptop. No sooner had she uttered the sentence and I was gone.

In our usual positions on opposing sofas, Louise wiped at the corners of her mouth, inspected her thumbs – presumably for any remnants of food that she had just wiped away – then dropped her hands, folded, into her lap. She was evidently waiting for me to say something but she hadn't given me anything to answer.

She sighed, uncrossed and then re-crossed her legs, and said:

'Do you want to tell me what's wrong, Gillian?'

I tilted my head left and then right as if attempting to shake an answer loose.

'I think it's my mother.'

‘Okay. Has something in particular happened with your mother?’

I performed the same head shift as before but nothing came out this time. I wasn’t aware of anything particular having happened with her, no. But I nevertheless felt certain that she was the reason I had needed to see Louise. Since Emily’s funeral my attachment to my mother had slackened, for want of a better phrase, while the attachment I felt towards Daniel was growing tauter by the day. So much so that too much physical proximity from him sometimes gave me literal heartache – a romanticised phrasing for anxiety, of course, but still.

Despite our distance – or perhaps because of it – my mother had in fact been making what seemed like a determined effort to redress the balance of communication in our household. She cooked dinner for us both, sometimes for Daniel as well. She suggested that she and I should spend more time together, and she made an effort to maintain a conversation even when my ability to feign interest in such a thing had long faded. But she also asked, on an almost daily basis, how exactly I was feeling about ‘things’ – she was never more specific about what she was asking, but there was always an undertone of something suspicious beneath the question – and, in addition to this, it had not gone unnoticed that she checked my room intermittently. For tiny carcasses, I thought, with more amusement than I should have felt. Nothing had happened, no, but I couldn’t stifle the feeling that something was about to.

‘There’s something in the pit of my stomach that I don’t recognise.’

‘Something, meaning a feeling?’

I nodded.

‘And it’s not a feeling you’ve had before?’

‘Not that I can recall.’

She paused here to make a note of something.

‘Talk me through it, Gillian. What is the feeling like, what does it remind you of?’

Every phrase that I tried to wrap around the sensation sitting in my lower abdomen felt like an uncomfortable cliché. It was the dip in a rollercoaster, there was an eager beaver in my stomach, something that was chomping at the bit, bouncing off the walls, with bells on, on the cusp of hitting fever pitch. I pulled the words around me, scratched at them like they were cheap fabric, and then I stripped them away, discarded them on the floor, leaving a trail of intangible feelings behind me as I paced Louise's office, incapable of sitting still.

Interiors. 1978. Mary Beth Hurt. 'I feel the need to express something, but I don't know what it is I want to express. Or how to express it.'

'It might not be about my mother.'

She nodded.

'Okay, what else could it be about?'

'Someone I felt close to died recently,' I said, reaching for the first thing I could find.

'I'm sorry to hear that, Gillian. I assume we're not talking about your father here?'

'I said someone I felt close to,' I snapped, instantly regretting the remark.

'Gillian, I want you to close your eyes for me.'

I cocked an eyebrow at her suggestion. An almost-laugh escaped her and left behind the traces of a smirk. She set the pen and paper down alongside her in its usual spot, uncrossed her legs, and leaned forward so that her elbows were balanced against her knees.

'Trust me?' she said. And so I did. I leaned back against the welcoming cushions that were wedged on the sofa and I closed my eyes.

'I want you to breathe. But not normal breathing. I want you to inhale for me, and hold it until I tell you otherwise.'

And so I did. I pulled in a greedy amount of air as if fearing that this may be the last time I would have the opportunity to do so. My chest expanded until my once-slouched

position was now nearly upright as my lungs flooded. In the dead silence of the office, I could just about hear Louise counting – ‘One, two, three, four, five, six’ – before she said: ‘And exhale for me, Gillian.’ We repeated the process for longer than I realised at the time, although I remember thinking that these were likely to be the most expensive breaths I had ever taken, would ever take. When Louise was satisfied with my efforts, she said:

‘Without thinking too much about your answer now, I want you to keep your eyes closed, and I want you to tell me why you’re here.’

‘Daniel. I’m here because of Daniel.’

I hadn’t thought about the answer, but immediately after spitting it out my eyes snapped open with the startled expression of a cat on the cusp of being garrotted. Where had that come from? I thought. Between Louise’s questions and my non-committal answers, we spent the remainder of the session trying to work out just that.

‘Gillian, is this your first boyfriend?’

‘He isn’t a boyfriend.’

‘No, then what is he?’

I considered this, and then begrudgingly admitted defeat.

‘Okay, he’s a boyfriend.’

‘So this dynamic isn’t something that you’ve had before?’

‘No,’ I said, again begrudgingly.

‘Is it one that you find easy, or could this perhaps be a source of the struggle here?’

I considered this for a second. It hadn’t been easy, no.

‘It might have been easier if Daniel were the only man in my life.’

‘There’s another man in your life?’ Louise probed. Understandably so, I had just announced what I imagined to be a conventionally gossip-worthy piece of information, but I

instantly felt as though I should have kept it to myself. ‘Are you romantically involved with this other man, too?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘So, what is your relationship with this other person? Physical?’

I felt as though a penny had dropped. Yes, it was physical. That was exactly what it was.

‘How often do you see this other man?’

‘As often as I can, around Daniel.’

‘Surely that’s a source of conflict, though?’

‘It can be, especially with time.’

In the four days before this meeting I hadn’t been able to see Paul at all, because I hadn’t been able to leave Daniel. Not that I hadn’t wanted to leave but more that I couldn’t bring myself to; one need outweighed the other, but it was only temporary, I could never make it stick. There was a peculiar out-of-sight feeling with Daniel now – when I was with him, the thought of leaving was uncomfortable. But when I wasn’t with him, I didn’t always feel like I needed to be.

‘Do you you expect to always feel that way?’ Louise picked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘And this other man, do you always need to be around him?’

‘No. But I’d like to spend more time learning him.’

Louise scribbled something down ahead of saying, ‘That’s interesting, Gillian.’ She paused to write something else down, as though suddenly latching on to an additional piece of information, then she continued in a different vein: ‘And this distance with your mother, this has coincided with this new relationship, relationships, rather. Do you think that could be

anything to do with this?’

‘Why?’

‘Because we grow up, Gillian, and we move away from our parents as we experience life away from them. We’re independent entities, aren’t we?’ It hadn’t previously been Louise’s style but there was something slightly too Kumbaya about her current perspective and it made me nervous. ‘Perhaps we can discuss how this impacts you and your mother next time. If the focus is on Daniel, and this other person, then I’m interested in unpacking that further.’

‘I have these urges,’ I found myself admitting to her, some thirteen minutes later when Louise had finished with her stream of carefully constructed questions. They must have been effective, I thought, because I was suddenly outpouring feelings I had previously been unaware that I even harboured. ‘I have these urges and I’ve never had anything like it and I don’t understand where they’re coming from or what I’m meant to do with them. And it feels wrong, I think, to act on them or to consider acting on them because, is that behaviour actually allowed? Really? Or am I trying to convince myself it is, because it’s obviously deep-seated in the human psyche to such an extent that I’m feeling it, so, does that by default make the whole thing natural somehow, normal even?’

Louise looked at me sympathetically, as an older sister or perhaps even a mother might look at their younger female relative.

‘I think I understand what you’re talking about here, Gillian.’

I was glad she did because I just wasn’t sure anymore.

‘These urges, though. Who do you feel them for?’

I thought, harder than I’d thought about all of this before, and I searched for what felt like an authentic and accurate answer.

‘They’re both different, I think.’

Louise nodded and smiled, as though she had been expecting this.

‘And I think that’s probably where our conflict lies. You’re a young and healthy woman. These urges that you’re feeling, they’re completely natural, and I’m sure you know that deep down, don’t you?’ She cocked her head, craning for a view of my expression that was angled away from her. ‘Part of the problem, though, is that you’re not controlling these urges properly, because you don’t know where to direct them. Does that sound fair?’

I nodded. Not so much in agreement, but rather curiosity.

‘There are a lot of changes going on your life, and Daniel’s from what you’ve told me of him, but you actually sound like you’re very good for each other. You’ve never opened up like this before, about him, and surely that’s a sign of something positive.’

I wanted to ask why but she pushed again before I could.

‘This other person. What function are they serving, right now, apart from complicating your relationship with Daniel?’

I flicked to Daniel then, his floppy hair and his lazy smile. And then I flicked to Paul. Peaches. The house. The unlocked window.

I shook my head.

‘Take your time, Gillian.’

‘You’re saying that I should get rid of the other person?’ I asked, knowing that it was an unfair question, but somehow not caring. Perhaps because I knew what her answer would be.

She smiled, and said:

‘If you don’t need them, or want them, particularly, then why keep them?’

Daniel had told me that he had an open door policy. He had even mentioned giving me a key but at my request had refrained from it. It was just another thing for me to lose, I'd told him, and that was an adequate half-reason at least. Truthfully, though, it had felt like a clash of commitments somehow when Daniel thrust a spare house key in my face some two hours after I had taken Paul's.

When I'd finished with Louise I went straight home, skirted around my mother's questions – 'It went fine, we just talked about Daniel, actually.' – and I packed a bag. My mother didn't ask where I was going. She had already assumed that I would be going to Daniel's, because where else would I have been going?

When Daniel opened the door some thirty minutes later he was clearly surprised, and I thought then that an open door policy must mean something different to the two of us. His eyebrows were arched and his smile slightly less pronounced than I was accustomed to seeing it, but before I could pick up on either of these traits Daniel beat me to speech.

'This is a nice surprise,' he started, stepping aside in the doorway as a signal for me to move inside the house. 'Did we have something planned?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Coming in?' he asked, noting my fixed position on the doorstep.

'I'd like to stay over tonight, if that would be okay.'

He nodded towards the bag. 'I had guessed that was where you were going with this,' he said, pausing for a half-laugh. 'I told you, always welcome. The spare bedroom is made up.'

Something pulled at the corner of my mouth; a thought, or a feeling, dragging it down in a flicker of deliberation. Daniel caught the expression and lowered himself into my eye line. His face was a silent plea for me to speak but I needed a second to format the thought. I

flicked through references but couldn't find the right memory for it and I was unsure of how it should come out, whether it should be forward or understated, whether I should try to sound nervous. Was I nervous?

'I'd like to stay in your bedroom, if that would be okay. With you, I mean.'

Suspicion. 1941. Cary Grant. 'I think I'm falling in love with you, and I don't quite like it.'

Chapter Twenty Four

The last time I looked at the clock it was 1.38am. I waited for another two, perhaps even three, minutes but then decided that I really did need to leave. It wasn't Daniel, as such. Actually, perhaps partly Daniel, at a push. He was an enthusiastic sleeper, snorer, cuddler. In many ways the latter was what I had silently agreed to when I got into his bed instead of my own, but I hadn't realised the full extent of the physical contact – after the physical contact, that is – that happened when two people slept alongside each other. It was, arguably, naivety on my part, and had I not felt such a persistent need to be elsewhere then I might well have enjoyed the moments when I would start to drift off and, quite out of nowhere, a hand would land on my arm, stomach, thigh, as if Daniel were checking that I was still there. I pulled up my underwear and jeans in one motion. While casing the room for signs of my clothing from the night before, I couldn't help but imagine the medley of surprise and panic Daniel would feel the next time he reached over to the other side of the bed. His imagined reaction was nearly enough to make me stay. Only nearly, though.

Fully clothed again I turned to grab one last look at him and for another second I thought, maybe I shouldn't leave. Maybe I should put this out of my head and, like a normal girl, spend the night in bed with her boyfriend after a near-satisfying bout of shared physical intimacy. But my body ached, and I couldn't believe that that was anything to do with what Daniel and I had done. It was far too familiar a feeling for that.

The house was a different playground entirely at that time in the morning. Streetlights crept in through the windows like non-discreet burglars trying to case the hallway for access

points, and as I paced around, half-convinced that I might still be able to talk myself out of what was coming, I felt as though the light followed me. From one room to the next the dim interrogation lamps fell through the windows, catching at my face on occasion. The longer they persisted the more pronounced their imagined questions became to me, asked without the urgency that they really required under such circumstances, though. ‘Are you sure you want to do this? Are you really going to make this happen?’

Daniel had two sets of knives in his kitchen. There was the set wedged neatly into the light wooden block that lived on his work surface, and there were the harsher, rougher ones that lived inside the kitchen drawer, beneath the sink and to the left. I ran my fingers over the plastic handles that were sticking out of the blocked set and I remembered:

‘Do you even like cheese?’ Daniel had asked, knife in hand, his back towards me.

‘It depends on the cheese.’

A snort of air had escaped him as he shook his head.

‘What an answer. Okay, GT, easier question. Do you want cheese on your sandwich, or not so much?’ He turned to face me then, revealing a light hearted smile and a sizeable wedge of cheddar that was lying on the counter behind him. I nodded, smiled in return.

‘Okay, cheese and ham sandwiches it is then.’

I could even remember the knife that he’d used.

The drawer – beneath the kitchen sink and to the left – played host to a range of potentially dangerous implements which were, of course, intended for cooking preparation. There were possibilities, though, I thought as I ran my fingers across the handles that were messily bunched together at the bottom end of the space. I stalled at one handle, slightly larger than the others, attached to a carving knife.

‘Do you want me to do that?’ I’d asked Daniel on seeing him fumble about with the

blade. 'I don't want you to hurt yourself, Daniel.'

'Christ, Gillian, emasculating much?' He turned to assess my face but on seeing my blank expression he softened. 'I am man. Man carve meat. Woman eat meat,' he said, in mock caveman tones that balanced out the bitter snap of his previous response. 'It'll be fine. What's the worst that can happen?'

'You cut yourself?'

'Now if that's the absolute worst, I reckon we'll be alright.'

I remembered how he'd cut the meat, clumsily digging the blade in this way and that, desperately trying to get a better score on the crisped skin.

'Okay, so, I can't cut meat.' Daniel eventually admitted, dropping the knife with a light clang on the kitchen work surface. 'You're up, GT.'

The meat had fallen away from the bone. Daniel just didn't know what he was doing with a knife. And I remember thinking what a good thing that probably was.

From the kitchen work surface I grabbed a tea towel and, after pulling the carving knife from the drawer, I secured the blade inside a doubled up stretch of the fabric. After that, I marched. Out of the house, through the streets, towards Runner's Route, with a determination that suggested I knew where I was going and I suppose, by then, I had already decided on an end destination. The time had rolled somewhere beyond 2.00am now. Paul would be asleep, as would Peaches, I hoped, although I had no way of knowing for certain. She could have been roaming, she could have been a barker, eagerly waiting for the sound of an intruder before alerting her owner. But it didn't seem to matter much by that point. With the bound blade tucked underneath my arm I pressed forwards, pausing only briefly to eye something slumped on one of the benches in the park.

The man's head was bent so low towards the top of his chest that his neck was barely

visible. At that angle, streaks of streetlights were bouncing about on the bald patch on top of his head, which could be seen through the hole in his hat. On closer inspection it became clear that the man was made up entirely of hole-ridden clothes, right down to the shoes, both of which had small and blackened toes sticking out from their fronts. His feet were guarding what appeared to be near-empty bottles of cheap liquor; kept for sentimental value, I wondered. The body rose and deflated with breaths that were so laboured they were almost a snore. And I wondered for a second whether this person would be better. Whether Paul deserved what was about to happen to him. Whether deserving it had anything to do with it at all. Which it doesn't, of course, I did realise that eventually.

The Godfather: Part II. 1974. Al Pacino. 'If anything in this life is certain, if history has taught us anything, it is that you can kill anyone.'

The homeless man was an opportunity, yes, but not quite the one that I was looking for. I passed by him and continued through the streets, surprised at how many houses were lit at what I thought to be fairly antisocial hour. When I rounded the corner into Prescott Lane, though, there was only one house that still had lights bouncing around its innards. In the thirty minute walk I had constructed, deconstructed, and re-imagined one possibility after another for how the following events may play out; I even berated myself for leaving Paul's key in my car – for all the use that it would ever be there – before soothing myself with the knowledge that, as far as I had seen, he still hadn't repaired the back gate. It hadn't occurred to me, though, that of all the ways in which this could go wrong, Paul still being up and about in the middle of the night was a genuine possibility.

Dim lights were dotted around the house – various table lamps, I thought, used to light one hallway or another – while the main light was tumbling out of the living room. Whatever Paul was doing, he hadn't even closed the curtains. I could have, should have, left. But

somehow, even then, it all still seemed worth the risk.

Edging around the house I eventually stood alongside the frame of the living room window, taking deep in-breaths and exhales to steady myself while I attempted to formulate some kind of action. The original plan might still work though, I thought. Paul being awake, alert, it hardly seemed to matter. Because I was outside his house and I knew what I was doing and I knew how I was going to do it and the basic plan was still very much in place – until I looked through the window. I couldn't recognise her from the angle she was at, her face dipped down towards Paul, but I felt certain that she wasn't the brunette from the photographs; the shade of her hair was all wrong. Paul was sitting on the floor in front of the sofa while she sat behind him, her legs open enough for him to have shuffled back in between her thighs. His head rolled around in what I assumed was enjoyment as she kneaded at his shoulder blades, Paul's reactions slowing as the woman paused to unbutton his shirt.

So this was who Paul saved his shirts for.

I watched as she ran her fingers over his chest and then back down over his shoulders, before eventually settling around his neck area. She felt around his clavicle, shifting muscle and skin in such clumps that it looked mouldable, and I lost track of how long I watched them like this. I pulled in a sharp breath as her fingertips settled on his laryngeal prominence; they hovered there for a second longer than I thought they should have done but then she continued on her path down his body. When I let my breath go the air stuttered out of me.

Jealousy is disgusting, isn't it?

Chapter Twenty Five

I gave them another ten minutes while I assessed my options, observed their apparent intimacy. The woman, whoever she was, was only half Paul's size. Her frame naturally petite, she clearly wasn't inclined towards developing her muscular strength. I could take her, I thought. It would be easy enough to wrap eight fingers round her neck and press two thumbs, hard, against her windpipe. But what would Paul be doing? It seemed unlikely that he would leave me to go about my business. Likewise though, I couldn't quite imagine this woman standing still and waiting her turn. The whole evening had already been a risk, but this would be too much.

When I backed away from the window – from their display – there was something that resembled a sinking feeling in my chest cavity; the sensation you experience when it takes longer than usual to find your car keys, or when you realise that you haven't replied to an important email. I couldn't watch any more, but it was hardly like there was somewhere else that I could be. I could have gone back to Daniel, I suppose, but I didn't trust this feeling with him and so I walked, kept walking –

The pavement was bloodied; small clots of something pressed flat, and then smudged away. It took longer than it should have done for me to realise that these marks were squashed berries. There were one or two full-bodied survivors dotted along the side of the road. I imagined them with emotions that didn't belong to them: shock and abject horror. I had to do something with the feelings. Seven steps later there was a crunch underfoot that stopped me. A partially flattened beer can was wedged underneath my boot; two steps along there was

another empty can, and three steps beyond that, there were the people still drinking. A group of them – only just younger than me, I thought – were spilling from the front garden of a half-lit house, sporting cigarettes and slurred sentiments.

‘You’re so special to me, man.’

I was a full three streets away from Paul’s house by now. It was a built-up area but the drunks didn’t seem to mind. Their conversations increased in volume and I worried for their neighbours.

‘I’m not even drunk, though.’

‘You are.’

‘Am not.’

I crossed the road to avoid pushing through the cracks in their group.

‘Ask her!’

The instruction was slurred. I didn’t turn around but I was instantly aware of the words dribbling in my direction. Don’t ask me, I wanted to tell them; I don’t know anything. I quickened my pace to get away from them, slowing only when their voices became indiscernible. It took a full two streets. I was surprised that no one had called the police, reported their disruption – but that wasn’t an action that I was going to initiate. I had seen enough of the police for one summer.

In the minutes that followed I walked with determination, compulsively even, as though I could out-run what had happened earlier. I focussed on the inane and replaced counting seconds for counting streets; houses with their lights on; how many lights to a house. Grange Road had seven households still awake; Manor Road, five; The Crescent, just two. The lights deteriorated and soon so did the houses, replaced by pavement, empty roads, and over-hanging trees – too-dark stretches where streetlights should have been. I buried my

hands in my pockets, lowered my head, pressed forwards as though I knew where I was going; I don't think I had decided by then though, that came in the minutes after.

There were another three streets coming up, the first of which was a matter of twenty short steps away now: Orchard Gardens (four households awake), Winsdor Road (two), Hurst Lane. There was a car pulling out when I arrived; one male driver. I paused on the footpath while he looked left, right, and then left again before pulling out on to the main road. When I crossed the junction I looked along the stretch of houses. There was one house awake; three lights in the house; one woman at the end of the drive. She was scantily dressed, her left arm midway in the air as though she had just waved the man goodbye.

There was that jealousy again.

It wasn't until I ran out of houses, ran out of streets, that I assessed my options: I could walk home through the park, or I could walk back the way I had just come. Paul and her might have been finished by now – but what difference did that make? The park was a three minute walk away and there were streetlights every twenty-five steps. I slowed in between; it felt too interrogatory to stand directly underneath the lights.

Two minutes away and the air changed. It would have been refreshing under different circumstances but something about this new smell was stale. The pavement became spongy, as though the concrete may be about to give way – and part of me wouldn't have minded if it had. The grass banks that framed the pavement to Runner's Route had been cut and their dead trimmings were gathering dew. In the thicker patches the spongy feeling became a bounce.

One minute away from the park and the silence somehow felt denser. It left me wishing for the companionship of the drunken louts, the half-awake houses, the strangers driving home from whatever they had just done to each other. Now I was this close Runner's Route was the quickest course back home; I had nowhere else to go. But when I stood at the

East walkway entrance – an entrance I had passed through two dozen times over the summer alone – the dark expanse that stared back looked less familiar, somehow unfriendly, as though the whole place had been taken out of context. Six steps in and the ground at least became more stable; they hadn't cut the grass here yet. Twenty-nine steps in and I wandered, as though on auto-pilot, along the same path that I had trodden earlier, back towards the homeless waste who I expected to still be there. It took a further eighteen steps for me to notice that my footfalls had developed an echo. Somewhere behind me there were footsteps; company.

I took a tactical pause in the middle of the walkway, prompting a new noise. It was a scraping, a dragging. The sound that appears when something sodden is disturbed and I wondered whether my shadow had grown bored already. The thought was both comforting and, if I'm honest, a little disappointing.

I clutched the handle of the knife a little tighter, peeled away the protective fabric and held the object close to my chest, before taking a hesitant step forward. Somewhere behind me someone else took a step as well.

My footsteps fell into a run, carrying me towards the streetlight at the edge of the walkway. As my pace increased I became aware of the steel rubbing against my jacket, creating a scrape with each movement. The metronome effect went some way towards pacifying me although I was still counting the seconds between the copycat footfalls. But then I settled under the blinking light. I circled around my safe space, looking for signs of life, maybe even an amused face. Look at the scared little girl, isn't she funny?

I crouched down, knowing that I needed to steady myself. The fingertips of my right hand stretched to the ground and bent uncomfortably under my weight. I inhaled – one, two, three – and exhaled – four, five, six – but I was no longer in a state to steady my breathing.

The tacky mess of emotions in my stomach was accompanied by a pain inside my chest now.

As I slowly resumed an upright position, I lay my palm flat across my forehead, hoping for a cooling sensation – hoping that I could find reminders of where I was going, and what I would do when I got there, but I was too far gone. The familiar clotting of out of control emotions was growing already now – and I could hear them: my mother’s accusations; my therapist’s optimism; now, perhaps worst of all, Daniel’s praise, his panting, his persistent moans of my name. They were too much, too loud, and only slightly broken down by the footsteps around me, somehow louder now as well.

I changed my grip on the knife as the footsteps quickened into a run. With the implement angled upwards I turned and, as if they were a part of the same movement, raised the knife. I couldn’t have known the full force of my movement, nor the full force of his run into me; I couldn’t have known that our body differences were so conveniently matched that they left my hand level with his stomach; I couldn’t have known that it would be quite this easy.

The Crow. 1994. Laurence Mason. ‘Let me tell you about murder. It’s fun, it’s easy, and you gonna learn all about it.’

The boy collapsed forwards on to me. My grip was still tight around the handle as I leaned my weight against him and he stumbled backwards then, crying out as the other side of the implement was dragged out of him.

He was a kid; six or perhaps seven years younger than me, with a generic hooded appearance that made him seem both unremarkable and indistinct. His eyes grew darker as I watched him, suddenly brimming with tears that might spill over at any minute. I recognised something in that.

The pleas that followed were broken. Grimaces and gasps for air had disturbed the

sentence but the meaning was still clear: ‘Help, please. Call someone.’

The words were difficult to catch after that. His breathing was deteriorating at an impressive rate as he sank closer to the ground, his body a burst inflatable.

‘You should lie down,’ I told him. ‘If you fall then it might make it worse.’

I pulled my phone from my front pocket.

‘Please, I know –’

‘I can’t get signal here so I need to leave you for a minute, okay? You need to lie flat on your back, I think, and take some deep breaths. Can you do that? And then I’ll come back when I’ve called someone.’

As I moved past him he set a bloodied hand around my ankle. I swallowed the urge to kick him away.

‘Promise, you’ll call for –’

‘I promise.’

He loosened his grip. His body hit the ground.

I walked out of the spotlight and into the shadows, my phone in one hand and the knife in the other, as if it had become part of my anatomy. I pressed down on the button at the top of my phone and waited for the screen to light up, in one last kick of life, before extinguishing entirely. I slipped it back into my pocket and looked over to the boy. From this distance he was just a shape but I could see something sitting on his stomach, his hands, I thought. I imagined him applying pressure, just like the television shows had taught him.

When I rushed back to him his eyes were tightly closed, making his face a grimace. I kneeled down next to him.

‘You came.’

‘I said that I would.’

‘Is someone?’

The effort that it took him to half-open his eyes was exhausting to observe. Each eyelid fluttered underneath the light like an excited moth. I rested my palm across his forehead, now drenched with sweat, and moved my hand down until it covered his eyes, closing them in one movement. His mouth was now a perfect O as he tried to breathe through the pain. The red patch on his abdomen was much larger than it had been to begin with, his clothing now sodden against his skin. His breathing was barely audible, each exhale somewhere between a light sigh and a wheeze. As he concentrated on getting air in and out of his body, I brushed stray damp hairs away from his forehead.

‘Is someone coming?’

I ran my palm over his forehead again until the skin was clear of moisture and then I moved my hand back to his eyes. My palm sat there lightly to begin with, but then I applied pressure, forming a mask over the top half of his face. I felt his eyelashes flutter against my skin as I moved my hand down, slowly, to study the contours of his expression, before coming to a rest over his mouth. His eyes widened, tears tumbling out of their corners now. His arms moved to fight against me but there was hardly much fight left in him at all.

With clenched teeth I leaned forward and left one single kiss on the boy’s forehead; his skin was damp with sweat again. When I pulled away from him I allowed myself some time, just a few seconds, to look into his eyes. He breathed heavily against my palm as we watched each other and, quite suddenly, his struggle stopped. It’s inappropriate, I think, to think of one person when you’re with another, but as if by accident, I thought of Daniel. With this unconscious boy in front of me, and this feeling of complete fulfillment sitting at the base of gut, I thought of Daniel, of what I had done with Daniel, and I realised that this was what had been missing. I kissed the boy’s forehead again and, close to his ear, I promised that it

would all be over soon.

I had convinced myself that it mattered – the who, the when, the how. It didn't. It just mattered that it got done.

Chapter Twenty Six

I folded my jeans into a square and placed the knife on top of them. Over the top of that I folded my jacket, also into a square, and then placed the sandwich of evidence in the bottom of my wardrobe. In the shower after this the water turned pink as it ran away from me. I shampooed and rinsed my hair three times to settle the concern that it still harboured a metallic smell, despite the actual levels of foreign iron molecules being barely perceptible after the second wash. When my hair was pinned into a bun I leaned back against the cold tiles and with some relief allowed my knees to buckle beneath me. I slipped down the wall then until I was sitting in the shower bowl, my knees pressed against my chest with my arms pulled tight around them. I tilted my head back, allowing my mass of conditioner soaked hair to act as a cushion. With my eyes focused on the ceiling I concentrated on breathing, inhaling the steam until parts of me that were previously clogged began to ease open.

Now would be a good time to try it, I remember thinking, and with droplets of water fleeing from the showerhead, I managed to half-convince myself that I'd already started to cry. I jerked my shoulders until they mimicked a heaving motion and I pulled my face into a new expression, too – scrunched shut eyes and a theatrical frown. After performing these elements in isolation from each other I combined them with my newly, deliberately, laboured breath, to conjure what I hoped would be an authentic and satisfactory outpouring of emotion.

Half a minute passed before I admitted defeat. I let my fingertips reach up and study the imitated signs of emotion, to catch small balls of water between my thumb and index fingertip and to marvel at them, like they were something miraculous – like they were

something I had made. I knew that they weren't though, you see, because try as I might when I thought about what I'd done to the boy, I couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

After that shower I slept sounder than I had in months. While tucked away inside my bedroom I was aware of the world now itching to stretch its arms and indulge in a morning yawn outside my window. With the beginnings of sunrise teasing from behind my closed curtains, I turned, buried my face into my pillow, and slept dreamlessly for four and a half hours until my mother woke me. Her weight dropping onto the bed initially alerted me to her presence and although I had instantly made the decision to ignore her, the curl of her fingers around my upper arm and the gentle shake that followed made it challenging. With my eyes still closed I grumbled at her, feigning more tiredness than I felt in the hope that it would stifle her efforts.

'Gillian?'

'Mm.'

'Love, wake up for me a second.'

'Hmm.'

'Gillian,' she snapped then, apparently losing patience.

'What?'

'Are you okay?'

With both eyes wide open then, I readjusted my position, propped myself upright against my headboard and took a long look at my mother.

'Is that why you woke me up?'

'Yes,' she said without any hesitation or hint that she might be lying. She held my gaze firmly while waiting for a reply but I found myself so stunned, momentarily, that I couldn't actually provide one. 'So? Are you?'

‘Yes, Mum, I’m fine, thank you for asking,’ I replied after another beat of silence.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked then, thinking that was the right format to adhere to.

She hesitated. There was a flicker of something across her face but I couldn’t decipher what feeling the expression was attached to.

‘A young boy was killed last night, not far from here. I thought,’ she paused, shook her head, then picked up her sentence in an entirely different place. ‘I just wanted to check you were okay, that’s all. I heard you come home late, or early, I can’t – either way, I just needed to check.’

The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy. 1981. David Dixon. ‘Don’t panic... Don’t panic.’

I readjusted my position in bed, rubbed at my head and performed a number of other mundane and unnecessary actions to buy myself another second or two, to pull some thoughts together. I lazily settled on:

‘That’s terrible. Do you know what happened?’

She shook her head.

‘I’ve heard it was a stabbing. Someone found him. In the park. First thing this morning. Some poor dog walker or another.’ With each snippet of information that she shared with me she took a glance at my expression, as though waiting for it to change. I nodded along and only briefly thought of Paul. I had already edited him and Peaches into the discovery. ‘Anyway, as long you’re okay.’

She phrased the statement in such a way that it sounded like a question and so I nodded again, flashing a thin-lipped smile as I did so.

‘I’m fine, just tired.’

She excused herself after that, pulling the door closed behind her while still muttering

a promise that she wouldn't disturb me again – 'You do look worn out, Gillian, best to get some rest today.' I couldn't rest after she'd gone, though. How could I sleep, given the announcement that my mother had just made? This was a living, breathing incident now; people would be discussing it, people would be talking. With my knees pulled up towards me I reached out to my bedside table and found my mobile phone.

You have (2) new messages.

Daniel (1): Okay so waking up on my own was a bit surprising. I hope you're okay GT.

Daniel (2): I hope last night was okay too. Maybe call me when you get this. I'm a bit worried. X

I wasn't ready for a full conversation with Daniel, and text messages left a better trail than a phone call did.

Sorry, I couldn't sleep. Everything is okay though. Just can't talk right now.

I typed the words without any deep consideration of them. It was only after I'd sent the message that I realised I had lied; everything wasn't okay. The world had become a different type of playground, my soul – if such a theory can be entertained – was marked, my body was physically lacking something now; something that only yesterday I had been in full possession of. Everything was different, and change is never okay – but somehow, I felt fine.

Daniel (1): So last night was okay then? Like. I didn't do anything bad?

Daniel hadn't done anything bad; the opposite, in fact. He had done things better than I expected them to be done. It may have been lack of experience talking but there certainly hadn't been anything unpleasant about any part of the evening – including the parts without Daniel as well.

Last night was one of the most special nights of my life.

Daniel (1): I can say this over a text easier than to your face so don't judge me okay? I'm so glad that it happened with you. A girl like you I mean. You're pretty damn special.

Daniel (2): I'm glad that you were my first. X

Alexander Pichushkin, 2007, during his trial as the Chessboard Killer: 'A first killing is like your first love. You never forget it.'

I was glad that they were my first too.

When the doorbell rang just over two hours later, I deliberately didn't make a move to answer it. Upstairs in my bedroom, I remained tucked out of sight until I heard a muffled greeting emerge from my mother, and I moved to the top of the stairs then. Perched two steps down, I pulled my knees up towards me, tucked my t-shirt around them, and involuntarily held my breath as Daniel moved into sight. I took a glance at my watch. He was a little earlier than I'd told him to be.

It was a calculated risk, yes, but a risk all the same. Perhaps that went some way towards explaining the abdominal flutter I felt on seeing Daniel, standing in my hallway,

unknowingly holding the potential to crush what I had hoped would be my alibi for the previous evening. The plan was balanced delicately on two assumptions. The primary assumption being that my mother, unable to stifle her curiosity – or perhaps her suspicions – would not be able to resist asking Daniel whether I had stayed at his house the previous evening. The secondary assumption was that Daniel would be so prematurely embarrassed by the possibility of disclosing any details of our mutually shed virginities that he would confirm my whereabouts, yes, and then promptly change the subject completely. It might be crass to talk about them both as pawns, but I suppose I was just that confident about the moves that they would make.

I was mostly indifferent about their conversational preamble, and instead found myself distracted by studying Daniel from this new view. He rubbed at the back of his neck with such vigour that the muscles in both his fore and upper arm flexed. I wondered then whether his body shared the aches that my own felt that afternoon. At the sound of my name – ‘Sorry, Mrs Thompson, is Gillian actually home?’ – my attention snapped back around as Daniel tried to steer the conversation.

My mother laid her foundations masterfully. Yes, she told him, I was at home, resting, though, she thought, given that I was still hidden away upstairs, and I’d slept in much later than usual too, so perhaps I’d had a poor night’s sleep.

‘I’d assumed that she’d be staying at yours when she didn’t come home,’ she said, a question without a question that saw Daniel’s face immediately redden into a blush that stretched around near his ears.

‘She did.’ Daniel spat out the confirmation so abruptly that even I thought my mother was right to look so taken aback by his tone. He let out a quick stream of air through his lips that were moulded into a neat O and I fought hard to blink away images of the boy who I had

left Daniel for the previous evening.

When he spoke again his tone had softened.

‘She did, have a restless night, I mean. I think she just decided that she’d be more comfortable here in the end.’

My mother, lips thinned and arms folded, took a careful nod before pushing forwards with another question.

‘Nothing happened, then?’

‘I’m sorry?’ Daniel hurried the words out in a much higher octave than usual. He irregularly bounced on the balls of his feet and as I observed him, something both inconvenient and potentially problematic occurred to me: Daniel looked guilty. And from the expression that my mother wore in response to his outburst – one eyebrow arched, arms still firmly folded, a twist in her mouth that suggested she already didn’t believe whatever Daniel was about to say – I was certain that she had noticed this as well.

‘You two didn’t have a fall out?’ she offered.

‘Oh.’ Daniel’s shoulder dropped and his face gave way to a smile. ‘Nothing like that, no, the opposite, if anything, we had a really lovely evening together. That daughter of yours is something special.’

I heard my mother’s non-committal – and frankly a little hurtful – ‘Hm’ as I padded back towards my bedroom. I tamed my hair into an over-stretched bobble, pulled on a too-rigid pair of jeans that hadn’t yet loosened following their latest wash, and seconds later I made a noisy display of walking down the stairs. The conversation instantly came to a halt when they saw me. My mother eyed me then, with an embarrassingly fake smile clawing at her mouth, while Daniel, by accident I assumed, dropped a small and nervous laugh in the hallway as he kneaded at the back of his neck again.

‘Do you want a cup of tea, Daniel?’ my mother asked, lazily looking for something to fill the silence that I had created.

‘I’m fine, thank you, Mrs Thompson.’

My mother nodded, smiled, and excused herself, leaving Daniel and me to float awkwardly around the open front door, apparently half-clueless on how to properly behave around each other now. We had torn pieces from each other the previous evening, but now there was a ball of nervous energy wedged between us.

I tried to find something worth saying but my mind was a jumble of snapshot images now. I remembered how his breath had fallen out of him in great pants, from a mouth contorted into such a twist that under different circumstances it would have looked like he was in pain. I remembered slowing, asking if he was okay. I couldn’t remember why I’d done that. I couldn’t remember my reasoning but I remembered his answer:

‘I just want this to be good for you.’

The audio had the wrong image attached, though. It was Daniel’s voice, but the boy’s body, and my thrust, and even though I shook it away there it was again immediately after until I couldn’t pull the individual components away from each other and I –

‘Gillian?’ Daniel set his hand on my shoulder, pulling me out of the memory – memories. ‘Everything okay? You looked like you slipped out on me there.’

‘Sorry,’ I paused, shook away the last of the boy’s face. ‘I’m fine.’

He nodded, pressed his lips together, and then said: ‘So how was it for you?’ He laughed over the question but the humour mostly escaped me, given that I thought we’d already half-had this conversation. My expression remained blank and so Daniel readjusted his tone when he spoke again, adding: ‘Seriously, GT, was it okay?’

The house phone ringing cut through my thoughts then but this was quickly

extinguished by my mother answering the call from elsewhere in the house.

‘It was mind-blowing,’ I said. But after that we fell into a game of reassurances. Every compliment that I delivered was met with a, ‘Really?’ or a ‘Do you mean that?’ from Daniel, and I quite quickly ran out of ways to tell him how satisfactory his performance had been. He may have sensed this, or perhaps he just realised how one-sided our exchange of compliments had been. Whichever it was, something happened that made him move towards me then, the fingers of his right hand were loose around my shoulders and his lips were firm against my forehead. He’d barely pulled away from this kiss when he muttered against my skin:

‘You’re a phenomenal woman, Gillian Thompson.’

‘I am?’

‘You are.’

‘Gillian?’

I hadn’t heard my mother step back into the hallway. She set the phone back in its cradle on the sideboard, prompting a musical tone from the handset to signal its charging.

‘I’ve got to pop out, Gillian.’

Her face was pale, pained.

‘Is everything okay, Mum?’

‘Multiple stab wounds, Christ, he was only seventeen.’

I threw a puzzled expression at Daniel that he bounced back to me.

‘Timothy Westburn.’

So that was his name then, I remember thinking. My mother had said it with some familiarity, though, and she looked at me with an expectant expression as though she were now waiting for a reaction. I nodded slowly, making a silent bid for more information.

‘Anne’s son?’

Daniel's hand was on my shoulder again now, delivering what I thought was meant to be a reassuring squeeze, but I still couldn't find a reaction for all of this.

'You'd know her by sight, Gillian, she's one of the women who brought food over, after your father,' she added this last bit with hesitation. And suddenly I knew exactly who my mother was referring to. Big hair, painful smile, workaholic husband, generic son.

Dead son now. Thanks to me.

Chapter Twenty Seven

It had been eight days since Timothy Westburn's murder. Or the Westburn boy's murder, as our neighbours were now referring to it, which they did, multiple times, during any given conversation, whether it was relevant or not. No matter how tenuous the link, the women of our street would somehow find a way to incorporate the incident into their day to day chatter and the habit was apparently contagious given that within two days of the incident happening, my mother was suddenly suffering from this same affliction. Anne, a woman who we had never spoken to prior to my father's death, was suddenly the only person worth talking about and my mother, for reasons I couldn't fathom at the time, couldn't help but talk about her relentlessly. About her pain, and her loss, and about how horrible life must seem now. Each platitude was a knife to the stomach – for want of a better turn of phrase – although with hindsight I think that my mother might have known that, or at the very least hoped it.

'Doesn't it break your heart, Gillian?' she had asked once, in such a deadpan and unemotional tone that I had to watch her expression for a beat just to ascertain whether her question was serious.

'Of course it does, Mum.'

I saw her once. Anne Westburn. She was smuggled into the back of what I later thought must have been an unmarked police car. Her eyes had been angled out of the window but her resting expression suggested that she couldn't see a thing. My initial reaction, after that first contact, was unexpected and unstoppable, but then vomiting usually is. I pounded up the stairs as my glottis closed and my larynx raised, already anticipating the contraction of my

diaphragm and the vigorous tensing of my abdominal walls. The biological procedure was a relatively familiar one. The shakes and sweating that followed were easily explained, as was the sudden feeling of dehydration. I could rationalise the whole act away as a biological reflex, a physical reaction, as it were. But I couldn't – or perhaps, didn't want to – explain, specifically, what it was a reaction to.

'Are you okay?' my mother asked from the doorway of the bathroom. I was perched on the closed toilet seat, leaning over the sink to cup handfuls of water into my mouth.

Between gulps I replied:

'Probably a reaction to something.'

'Something that you've eaten?'

'What else would it be?' I snapped, already knowing, before the sentence was fully formed, that I shouldn't have done.

My mother was still asking too many questions, I thought. We discussed the Timothy Westburn incident, at length, at the most inappropriate of times as well – over dinner, just before bed, sometimes even in Daniel's company – but we also discussed Daniel and me, how things were going, what the status of my feelings were, both in and outside the context of my newfound romantic relationship. And she appeared to pick over my answers with an attention that felt forensic in her hunt for minor details. Four days into the phenomenon of my mother talking over everything to within an inch of its life, even Daniel felt moved to extend a hypothesis on the matter.

'Do you think your mum knows?' He asked the question in a tone that made him sound only half-interested as we wandered through the aisles of Tesco. These excursions to the supermarket had felt more natural – more normal – since I had lost touch with Paul. I'd only seen him once since the night it all happened, and even then it had been by coincidence,

not design. Daniel had asked if we could be outside, go for a walk: ‘What about that park you like?’ The space meant something different now. Paul was no longer my immediate thought when the park was mentioned. I was even surprised when I saw him that afternoon, with Peaches – and a different woman. By then I’d started to feel grateful that it hadn’t been him after all.

‘Gillian?’

Daniel’s question caught me midway through picking out vegetables for dinner.

‘Do you think she knows what?’

He let out a sharp breath.

‘You know what, GT.’

Daniel paced away then, now appearing uninterested in the conversation he’d started.

‘Christ, Daniel, how would she possibly know that?’

The words were hurried out, louder than intended, reaching Daniel who was only five steps away now, and apparently catching one or two fellow shoppers on the way. A man and a woman – another couple, perhaps – turned, widened their eyes, and looked from me, the source of the noise, to Daniel, the equally startled target of it. Daniel laughed it off but as he moved over to me the couple promptly removed themselves from the aisle. He stood next to me, one arm wrapped around my shoulders with his chin balanced on my head as he made a gentle and entirely unwelcome ‘Sssh’-ing sound.

‘Hey, where did that come from?’ he asked, pulling away to look down at me. I couldn’t explain it away and so opted for a stern silence. Daniel leaned in and kissed my forehead. ‘Sorry, GT, I’m sure she doesn’t know. Like you said, how could she, right? How could anyone?’

Another four days rolled by without any anomalies occurring. I had recovered from the brief bout of vomiting and my digestive tract seemed to be in fully working order, but the choking sensation I experienced when Daniel and I rounded the corner to my street, to find a police vehicle parked directly outside my house, was undeniable. Daniel asked what they could be doing there; I don't think that I answered. The sound of chatter emanating from the living room instantly ceased as we closed the front door behind us and my mother appeared in the hallway soon after.

'There are some policemen here, Gillian.'

Hot Fuzz. 2007. Simon Pegg. 'She is not a policewoman. She's a police officer. Being a woman has nothing to do with it.'

I didn't correct her, though I desperately wanted to.

'They've asked if they can talk to you,' she added.

'Of course. That's fine,' I said, wondering whether I was actually allowed to refuse.

Inside the living room, perched side by side on the sofa, there were two men. One – the older one of the two – wore Police Constable attire. From what I could see of his white shirt, half-hidden beneath a black vest, his upper half was pressed with military precision, as were the trousers that completed him. He was leaning forwards, forearms balanced on his knees and his hands hanging loose between them. When I glanced at his posture I noticed a wedding band. The notably younger model who sat alongside him boasted no signs of being married, but I had to wait until he lifted a hand to readjust his glasses to be sure. This other man was clearly the senior officer of the two, which worried me slightly, partly due to his age but chiefly due to his fast and loose interpretation of what he must have considered to be appropriate work attire, which had left him looking too dishevelled for me to take seriously. The grey scuff mark at the front of his left shoe irked me. This second officer half-stood as

my mother guided me into the room; he leaned over the coffee table to offer a handshake:

‘Detective Sergeant Ayleson, and this is Police Constable Shiefs.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ I said, instantly feeling that it wasn’t right.

Both officers waited for me to position myself comfortably in the seat opposite them before they launched their questions.

‘Miss Thompson, on the night of the Timothy Westburn incident, did you see anyone unusual hanging around the street? Perhaps someone who you didn’t recognise?’ DS Ayleson fired off the question while his colleague remained stern alongside him, a pen already hovering over a small notebook should I say anything at all worth writing down.

‘I wasn’t actually here much on the evening that it happened.’

‘Oh, so you were where?’

‘At a friend’s house.’ I flinched. I had used the wrong word. ‘Boyfriend, sorry. At a boyfriend’s house. My boyfriend.’ I was suddenly conscious of Daniel, somewhere in the house, perhaps even directly outside of this room, listening to me fumble about with his title.

‘Okay, and –’

‘I came home, though.’ I interrupted him, not knowing why I was offering this information so freely, yet instantly appreciating the world of difficulty it may open.

‘During the night?’

‘Yes.’

‘And did you drive? Walk?’

‘I walked, yes.’

PC Shiefs was writing something down. I had to physically restrain myself from taking the pen away from him.

‘Whereabouts was that from?’

‘He lives on Clevehill Close.’

‘That’s quite a walk back from there to here,’ PC Shiefs chimed in at last.

‘I like walking,’ I replied, uncomfortably aware of how feeble the response sounded.

Detective Sergeant Ayleson picked up again then: ‘Which way did you walk home?’

‘I cut through the Coleman Estate and came along Neathfield Avenue.’

There was a flicker of something in Ayleson’s face before he said:

‘Isn’t that the long way home?’

‘It’s better lit, coming through the houses rather than the outskirts,’ I explained, and he nodded as though he believed me.

‘Now, Miss Thompson, this boyfriend who you mentioned –’

Daniel must have taken this as a cue. He appeared in the doorway then, slumped against the frame with an ease that suggested he had been perched there for the entire conversation. He raised a hand, as though replying to a roll call, and flashed a thin-lipped smile at the officers.

‘Boyfriend,’ he said.

They took what they must have considered to be the necessary details from Daniel then. His full name, his age, his address, the details of anyone living at home with him – a line of questioning they surely regretted taking – and they inquired about his relationship with me. It made for uncomfortable listening. Daniel was now sitting on the arm of the chair that I had tucked myself into, meaning there was no escaping his answers. Their words were swapped like trading cards over the top of me, as if I were just an aside now. As if Daniel had suddenly become the real star of the conversation. I resented that more than I should have done. But the conversation pulled back around and I brushed off that resentment, replacing it with what I believe was my first flutter of real panic since this interview ordeal had started.

‘And what time did Miss Thompson leave your house?’

I felt Daniel shrug. When I looked up I found both officers looking to me for an answer then and I suddenly wondered where my mother was, whether she was within earshot, whether she would recognise a lie.

‘I’m not sure what time I left, to be honest,’ I offered. ‘My mother heard me come home, though, so you might be best off asking her. I know it was quite early in the morning by the time I was getting into bed here.’

I left my answer deliberately vague, hoping to leave the officers without concrete facts to fall back on. The whole thing had felt remarkably similar to telling the truth. But then this was a version of the truth, I thought. This was the version of events that the majority knew now. And I wondered, idly – already knowing that it didn’t, of course – whether that somehow made this the new truth.

‘Verify that with the mother.’ Ayleson said to Shiefs before flicking his look back in my direction. ‘Miss Thompson, how old are you?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘And you’ve lived here your whole life?’

‘Not this house, but this area, yes.’

‘And, have you ever heard about any trouble in the area?’

Daniel and I exchanged quizzical looks. The question hadn’t been directed at him but I had hoped that he could help me decipher it.

‘Trouble?’ Daniel pushed.

‘Drugs, scraps, any issues with the younger members of this street, or the surrounding streets, that should have been mentioned to the police but maybe weren’t, for one reason or another. Anything ringing a bell there?’

The more he developed the question, the less sure I felt about what he was actually asking me.

‘No, no bells.’ I said, weakly.

He sighed and so I assumed I must have given him the wrong answer.

‘Timothy Westburn’s murder has raised some serious questions for us here about youth groups in the area, Miss Thompson. I know you’re a little older than the victim, but anything that you can think of now would be useful in our investigation into this.’

I had to pull back a smile. They had nothing. Absolutely nothing. And they were asking people – they were asking me, of all people – to try and help them. It was just beautiful, really. The whole situation was suddenly beautiful.

Obviously I knew nothing in that vein and I told them so. With Daniel’s hand offering an unnecessarily reassuring squeeze on my shoulder, I explained to the two officers that I had never been considered popular enough to be drawn into that side of youth culture and they nodded, as if they knew something about that.

‘I understand that, Miss Thompson,’ DS Ayleson offered. But he couldn’t. He was far too attractive, far too likeable, to possibly understand. DS Ayleson struck me as the sort of person who was simply given his normalcy at birth; some of us had had to work for ours. ‘In which case, I think we’re about finished here for the time being. Thank you, both,’ he said, as though suddenly remembering that Daniel had appeared midway through the process.

The four of us exchanged pleasantries ahead of our collective goodbye. DS Ayleson offered me his business card on the understanding that I would contact him should I remember anything that would be useful.

What, like my having killed the boy? A voice offered from somewhere in the rear of my cranium and on hearing it I wondered where my guilt was now.

‘Thank you again for your time,’ the senior officer said on his way out of the front door, taking with him little to no information, and concluding my first and, as it turned out, final, encounter with the police.

Chapter Twenty Eight

It was one week and six days on from my audience with the police when my mother found me in my bedroom, neatly folding items of clothing into squares that were then stacked regimentally on top of each other in properly marked boxes. The clothing I had worn on that night was the first to be packed, tucked away beneath a winter wardrobe that I wouldn't need for another three months. There were two weeks remaining of the summer holiday from university, and I was eager to get back to the normalcy of that life. The daily experiments, the forced conversations with people whose names I barely remembered, because they hardly required or even wanted me to. There was a feeling of familiarity with your fellow students and simultaneous anonymity in your surroundings, which made university life markedly easier than the life I had been trying to piece together at home.

'You aren't due back for weeks yet,' my mother said, arms folded as she leaned against the doorframe. Somewhere between her saying this and my finding a reply she moved over to my bed and sat down rigidly on the mattress.

'You can never be too prepared though, Mum. You taught me that.'

'I'm glad that I managed to teach you something.'

The words were chased out by a sigh as she began to survey the room around her.

'You've taught me lots of things, Mum.'

'Mm, like what?'

I hadn't been anticipating this. She eyed me for an uncomfortably long time and I suddenly became all too aware of how hot my face felt. I fumbled, searching for anything

now.

‘You taught me how to tie my shoes, didn’t you?’

She may have done. But I had a nagging feeling that it had been my grandfather from my father’s side who had actually done that for me.

‘Yes, Gillian, I did,’ she said, with a tint of amusement colouring her words. ‘Not much of a legacy, though, is it, as mother daughter bonding goes? Shoe tying and preparedness.’ Another sigh fell out but this time the stream of air was expelled entirely through her nostrils. Her lips remained tightly pressed together until she spoke again. ‘They haven’t made any developments, have they, about the Timothy Westburn murder?’

I was sure she had put a heavy emphasis on murder, but felt unsure of why.

‘Have you heard anything about it?’ she continued.

‘Why would I have done?’ I snapped, the words sounding sharper than I had meant them to. I knew my mother would have noticed. I continued packing as I waited for her response, my eyes firmly averted.

‘The police seemed to think that you might have.’

I dropped what I was holding. I can’t even tell you what it was, but I distinctly recall trying to make the action look deliberate.

Everything that my mother said during the opening stretch of that conversation felt like a double entendre. But the indecent and amusing second meaning had been replaced by something accusatory and unsettling. Unsure of how to proceed, I blindly felt my way about the conversation that followed, breathing a sincere sigh of relief when my mother changed the subject to something I felt more able to discuss adequately.

‘How are things going with Daniel?’

My stomach lurched. I had become accustomed to the feeling, though.

‘Things are going well, I think, thank you.’ Should I offer more information? I remember thinking. When my mother failed to pick the conversation up, I decided that yes, I probably should. ‘We’ve been discussing what will happen when I’m back at university, actually.’

Two evenings prior to this Daniel had launched the conversation. We had just finished dinner and we were in the midst of tidying away cooking utensils when he said:

‘I’m going to miss you.’

I turned, tea towel in hand and puzzled expression on face.

‘When?’

‘When you go back to university, idiot.’

‘Oh.’

Daniel shuffled slightly, apparently waiting for something.

‘Do you,’ he started, paused, swallowed. Tried again. ‘Do you think that you’ll miss me, or, that’s dumb, right?’

We hadn’t decided precisely what would happen when I returned to university but we had decided that we would attempt to stay together. As I repeated this conversation to my mother she raised her eyebrows at this but, again unsure of the meaning behind the expression, I pressed on with my retelling of the transcript.

‘Daniel mentioned moving to Bristol with me but I’m not sure that’s a good idea.’

‘Why not?’

Because then he would find out what I am, surely, I thought.

‘Because it all seems very fast,’ I said instead.

My mother nodded, her eyes narrowed as though inspecting the words.

Our conversation continued in this vein as we leisurely wandered around the topic of

Daniel, my relationship with him, and my plans to pursue that further. Still feeling about blindly, I was at least by now half-confident that I had constructed a convincing and reliable narrative to stretch out for the remainder of the conversation. But as the minutes rolled into a half an hour block of time, I realised that we would soon run out of Daniel-related chatter. My mother, though, had planned ahead. My mother had already decided what we would discuss next. Before I could find another foundation on which to steady a conversation, my mother, with an unexpected air of confidence, looked me in the eye and said:

‘And does Daniel know?’

For a number of seconds – no more than three or four, at the most – I didn’t know what my mother was asking. And then I looked directly at her; saw teary eyes on the cusp of spilling over, and lips thinned into a grimace that suggested physical discomfort. Suddenly, I knew.

I would love to give you details of the blind panic that followed; of the sensation of my mother’s words tickling at my amygdaloid nucleus, and how my brain promptly smashed neurotransmitters together by way of a response. But all I loosely remember from the seconds that came immediately after this well-crafted revelation was a distinct feeling of, ‘Hm, so my mother knows,’ as if she’d caught a younger me smoking outside a friend’s house, or engaging in sexual activities before my time. ‘Hm, so my mother knows,’ was the best that my above average mind could settle on.

‘You’ll have to say something eventually, Gillian.’

She was too calm, too measured. This perturbed me more than the question itself had.

‘How are you so calm?’ I asked, moving into her eye line. I needed to see her face.

‘I’ve had a lot of time to think about this.’

‘How much time? I mean, how long have you thought this?’ I chose my words with

care; I couldn't – wouldn't – admit to anything, not yet.

My mother, her eyes closed now, mouthed illegible words and bounced her head lightly, presumably in time with her thoughts, as though she were attempting to give me an exact temporal measurement.

'I've thought it since the police visited,' she said, still in a measured tone. 'Daniel doesn't know when you left the house that night, he's guessing. The shower drain was caked with something the morning after that boy died, I just didn't know what it was. It's clear what you and Daniel have been up to, so I thought, or I might have hoped, that it was something to do with that. But the bloody clothes hidden in your wardrobe, well –' My mother's voice cracked with emotion but her facial expression appeared much calmer. For the first time in my life I entertained the possibility that perhaps not all of my psychological quirks had come from my father.

'And let's not forget the fact that you haven't actually denied it,' she concluded.

But I haven't admitted to it either, I thought.

'A normal person would have denied it, Gillian.' She paused and exhaled hard in an almost laugh. 'But then, a normal person wouldn't have killed someone.'

Forrest Gump. 1994. Sally Field. 'What does normal mean, anyway?'

Halloweentown. 1998. Debbie Reynolds. 'Being normal is vastly overrated.'

Carrie. 2013. Chloe Grace Moretz. 'I want to be normal.'

'Gillian?'

'I'm trying to find something to say.'

She let out another hard sigh.

'I think anything would be good at this point, love.'

'Are you going to tell anyone about this?' I wasn't sure whether this was an

acceptable starting point, morally speaking, but it seemed like a logical one. My mother clearly had a plan – she had been sitting on this information for long enough to have developed a fairly detailed one, I thought – and I needed to know what my role in it would be. She let out a noise that would have been considered a sharp laugh, under different circumstances, and I thought then that perhaps she hadn't meant it when she said anything would be a good thing to say.

'I understand why you might feel disappointed in me, Gillian,' she said. I thought this was a peculiar place to start. 'I haven't been good at all, especially not recently.'

'Why would I be disappointed in you, Mum?'

I was sure that it should be the other way around. I was standing in front of her then, meaning I caught the narrow-eyed glance that she threw in my direction as though I had just asked something stupid of her. She went back to avoiding eye contact before speaking again.

'You are always meant to love your children.' She spoke as if that were a complete explanation, but then added: 'I know there must have been times when it seemed like I didn't.'

I nodded, although I didn't feel like she'd answered my question.

'Your father and I did this,' she started again. 'You have to take responsibility, Gillian, of course. But we did this as well. I sometimes wonder whether you ever stood a chance with us.'

I marvelled at her level tone, her measured presentation, as though reading each snippet from an autocue positioned somewhere beyond my bedroom where she held her gaze.

'You saw all of that violence for years. And it fed something.'

My mother continued in this vein for longer than felt necessary, feeding snippets of my childhood to the case-hungry nature versus nurture debate, which my mother sat firmly in

the centre of during her soliloquy. She shifted between believing there was something wrong with me and believing there was something wrong with my life, and she almost made a good case, I remember thinking. But it's hard to be definitive one way or another with these things without a formal diagnosis of the participant in question – in this case, me.

‘I don't think bringing Daniel into this is fair either, Gillian,’ she said, shifting topics.

Analyze This. 1999. Robert De Niro. ‘What, are you gonna start moralizing on me?’

I swallowed the quote. I knew that I couldn't take that tone with her. I stood in front of her then, waiting for another nugget of something to fall from her mouth. With my hands tucked behind my back, I was a child waiting for their reprimand from a troubled parent. ‘I'm sorry I stole the cookie, Mum, I'm sorry I killed the boy.’ My idle apologies may have worked when I was younger, but I felt as though I should keep them to myself now.

‘What if he finds out?’ she pushed.

‘He won't,’ I snapped out, instantly realising how defensive I sounded.

‘I did.’

‘You're different.’

‘I found your tells easily enough, right there in the wardrobe.’ She rubbed away the threat of fresh tears and sighed. A heavy, exhausted, emotional sigh. ‘Why, Gillian, why him?’

I remembered the footsteps, how the boy had been running towards me, and how for a split second as he lay there, I thought how this could be self-defence. But that argument requires reasonable force, which I suspected would be misplaced in a case of an armed versus an unarmed individual. I could have called someone, though, I thought to myself then, not for the first time since it had happened. I could have called someone and I truly believe – or have to believe – that when I left to call for help, that was my honest intention. But I hear the road

to hell is paved with the best of those. And an honest intention doesn't count for much at all when you have a knife buried to the hilt in someone's abdomen.

'Because he was there,' I said eventually, somewhat ashamedly, giving her the most honest answer that I could lay my hands on.

My mother didn't speak for a while after that. I didn't think to count how long, exactly, but it was definitely longer than a minute. I shuffled, I moved forwards, only to move back to my original position seconds later, and I even tried to speak, just once, only for the first syllable to be met with a headshake from my mother who was now staring determinedly at the floor. When she did speak the sentiment was simple but the voice that uttered it sounded newly vulnerable:

'I will protect you.'

She paused to pull in a large mouthful of air, as though fuelling whatever was going to come from her next.

'You won't understand this until you have children, you know, Gillian. You'll know that I'm doing this because I'm your mother but you'll never understand. Not really.' She spoke more to the floor than she did to me. 'It will kill me as much as it killed that poor boy, Christ, and his poor mother,' she paused for a shaky breath, as though stifling a sob. 'It will kill me but you are my daughter and, I can't. I can't do that. I won't.'

Dexter. 2006. James Remar. 'Remember this forever, you are my son, you are not alone, and you are loved.'

I sighed heavily and on hearing this sign of relief my mother picked up again:

'But it needs to stop, Gillian. This whole bloody nightmare needs to stop.'

And what if it doesn't? I wanted to ask her. Her eyes snapped up at me as though I had said the query aloud. She stood up from the bed and stared at me with a determination that I

had never seen my mother wear before.

‘I won’t do this for you again. If it doesn’t stop, then you’re on your own.’

And she left, pulling my bedroom door closed behind her.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The thought that perhaps my mother was in part responsible – more responsible than she would ever admit, at least – for the less than savoury elements of my psychopathic make up occurred with more frequency in the days that followed her big reveal. We spoke as normal from the morning after the event, and she addressed me with such ease that the whole thing felt almost anti-climactic. As though in the absence of explosions, accusations, and snide remarks, I was somehow now desperate for them. I had been intermittently reprimanded for various behaviours my entire life, and yet somehow the comeuppance for this one fell short of my expectations of how a normal mother should react. If indeed there is a normal reaction to discovering that your child is a murderer.

‘How are you doing this?’ I finally asked her, in response to a question about whether I would be home for dinner or not.

‘Cooking?’

‘No, being so normal.’

She sighed. ‘Would you prefer me to outwardly hate you, Gillian?’

I tried to decipher whether there was an implication that she now inwardly hated me.

‘We’ve discussed it. I don’t want to spend the rest of our lives discussing it because frankly if we do then there’s every possibility that I’ll change my mind about what we’re doing here,’ she said the words with confidence, as if this were another normal conversational exchange to take part in while putting away the weekly shopping. ‘If you need to discuss it, genuinely need to, then we can, but I’d rather we didn’t, starting now.’ She slammed a kitchen cupboard closed, as though punctuating her point. ‘Now are you home for dinner or not?’

When I left the house thirty minutes later my mother didn't even ask where I was going. She assumed that it was to Daniel's, I suppose. A safe assumption to make on a normal day, but there was another man who required my attention that morning. I stopped en route to buy twelve yellow roses, and then I walked to meet him. The journey took less time than I had originally calculated though, and before I'd had time to put together my perfect opener I was in front of him, placing the flowers on the ground, and pinching at the knees of my trousers to loosen them before kneeling down.

'Morning, Dad.'

I reached out my fingertips towards the headstone in front of me and traced the letters one by one.

In Loving Memory Of

Joseph Thompson

Beloved Husband, Father and Friend

The longer I stared at the words the more I had to concentrate on stifling a small laugh.

'That must have been written by a stranger. Unless she really does have a sense of humour after all.'

I slapped the top of the headstone with the same vigour that my father had always used when punching my shoulder, usually when he had made a joke at my mother's expense. 'But you can't be offended by a joke so s'alright,' I could hear him spitting into my ear.

Half-sitting on my father's bones now, I pushed the flowers a little closer to the headstone.

'I bought you these, out of politeness, really.'

The surrounding graves were littered with fresh flowers and sentimental trinkets; there

were cards, laminated photographs, overwhelming markers of love and grief that I played voyeur to for a moment, before turning back to the headstone in front of me. My father's grave had gone unacknowledged since the afternoon that he had been flung into it.

‘You’ll remember all about keeping up appearances, won’t you?’

I ran my palm flat across the face of the grave, brushing away small chunks of debris that had managed to attach itself.

‘Maybe I should have come sooner, but I didn’t really know what I could say. I still don’t. Maybe I should apologise to you, but then,’ I shook the idea from my head. ‘You’d know that I didn’t mean it.’

My hands dropped into my lap and I leaned back from the stone, putting an additional two inches between us. There was no rush, I reassured myself, I had ample time to decipher what I could and shouldn’t say. I heard Louise then though, her coo of reassurance, her, ‘This is a safe space, Gillian, there are no shoulds here, try and remember that.’ She was right, of course, this was a safe space now.

‘You’re about the only person I can be honest with, I suppose,’ I said, noting how dejected I sounded by the admission.

A rustle of grass somewhere behind me bought me an additional minute of thinking time while one grieving relative tended to a dead one. From this angle, I thought, they probably think that I’m praying. When the silence had settled again I took a cautious glance around to verify that we really were alone. While I still hadn’t decided what I was about to divulge, I was sure that it wasn’t something that I would want anyone to overhear.

‘You’ve missed a lot,’ I started.

I told him about Daniel, Mum, Emily. I span out the sordid tale of Emily, her request that Daniel help her to end her life and his eventual compliance with that. I explained the

closeness – the need for closeness – with Daniel that followed his confession, and how what I did to Timothy – what I had needed to do, the night of Timothy – had somehow become inextricably bound up in those feelings of closeness, as though opening myself up to one set of emotions had made me vulnerable to experiencing others. One feeling leading to another seemed like a normal emotional reaction for a normal girl, just that one time. But a small laugh escaped me as I tried to squeeze into the label. If I listened carefully then I could catch my father’s curt ‘HA!’ as he joined the joke.

This was the first opportunity that I had had for such an uninhibited confession of feelings. I was all too aware of the bitter twist of irony cutting through it though: this outpouring, to my father no less. The first man I had known, loved, hurt – killed. Now I was talking to him like he was someone I trusted. I reached forward and ran my fingers over the lies hammered into his headstone. Palm flat against the surface, as though needing a physical support, I confessed:

‘I think that there’s something wrong with mum.’

Psycho. 1960. Anthony Perkins. ‘Mother – what’s the phrase? She isn’t quite herself today.’

‘She’s completely herself,’ I explained. ‘And I feel like she shouldn’t be.’ I relayed the last four days to my father; how my mother had helped me pack, cooked me meals, even offered to take me shopping – although shopping for what exactly, she couldn’t say: ‘I don’t know, Gillian, anything you might need.’ There were moments when it had felt as though she were the one making up for something, while I felt confident that it should have been the other way around.

‘She thinks that you and her have got something to do with what I did; said I never stood a chance, as though you’d worked together to breed a little monster.’ A small laugh

broke through; not quite the real live girl I had been hoping to portray. ‘She obviously thinks that you and I are quite similar in a lot of ways too.’ I paused here, noting how uncomfortable the thought was. ‘Funny, really, when it’s you and her that share similarities at the moment. You’ve both kept secrets for me now.’ I wondered whether my father would have kept this secret – and an unwelcome thought appeared then: could I really trust my mother to? I thought of her bustling about the kitchen, refusing to discuss what had happened –

‘Do you think I can trust her?’

My mind flicked to an image of my mother, hiding her best carving knives, asking herself a similar question. Maybe my mother and I weren’t that dissimilar after all.

‘She might think it still, but I’m nothing like you. I could never hurt her, or him; even through all of this, even I was desperate to. I’d hurt someone else first, always,’ I said the words boastfully, although I’m unsure now why I felt such pride. ‘And they’ll both protect me. That’s what I know now; that’s what I can really take away from all of this.’

I pressed both palms flat against the floor to help lever myself into a standing position. My knees were caked with damp mud that I tried to brush away before it had time to dry into the fabric.

‘Like I said before, you and I are different types of monsters.’ I leaned hard on the top of the stone. ‘You were an animal. You just couldn’t help yourself; I know that now too. And I know that I’ll do this much better than you did. I can be better, kinder, normal. I can be a real person; Daniel will make me that.’

I ran my muddied hand over the flat top of the headstone and took a step closer to him; bending over at the waist, I lowered myself down until my lips were nearly touching the granite. When I inhaled against it I was overwhelmed by the blend of warm lager and raw meat that had always come home from work with him. I lowered my voice down to a whisper

level before saying my goodbye.

‘In case you were wondering, Dad, I don’t regret you at all.’

I pressed my lips down on the stone, planting an abrupt kiss on its surface.

Now

It is Monday now, which means two things: I have a late seminar at university, and it is Daniel's day to cook dinner. A month after Daniel moved in with me – four months after I moved back to Bristol – he pinned a cleaning and cooking rota to the door of my fridge, and we have mostly adhered to the timetable. When I return home carrying double the amount of textbooks that I left the house with this morning, Daniel is already busying himself in the kitchen. It isn't until I thump the deadweight of academic literature down on our dining table that he even seems to notice that I've walked into the room.

'Christ, GT, drop those any louder?' he says, reaching out to turn down the radio before turning to look at me. 'You could scare the hair off a cat.'

I try to hold in a flicker of something – intrigue? – prompted by his analogy.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump.'

He waves away the apology and smiles before returning to the chopping board in front of him. The radio is turned down to an inaudible level but the voices create something like a hum in the background.

'What were you listening to?' I ask.

'This police panel show sort of thing. It wasn't great, to be honest, but they're talking about that kid – you know, the one who died, round your area?'

I am jarred to hear Daniel's flippancy on this topic but I had, deep down, been waiting for this to come up. We are closing in on a year since Timothy Westburn's murder and the police are yet to make an arrest for it – in fact, they are yet to even isolate a suspect. The closest they have come to something promising, something concrete, is a statement that was

released six months after the incident.

‘We’re looking for a man in his mid-to-late thirties. Short dark hair, dark eyes, of average body build, approximately six foot two in height. We have a witness who has placed him at the scene of the crime and it is imperative that we contact him as this investigation moves forward.’

I couldn’t remember seeing anyone who matched that description. Unlikely though it was, for a moment I wondered whether the police were desperate enough for a suspect that they would fabricate one entirely – but it was a poor effort, if that was the case. Not only were they looking for a make-believe monster, but their killer had been given the wrong height, build, not to mention genitalia.

‘It’s crazy though, right?’ Daniel says, pulling me back into the kitchen where he is now lifting a casserole dish into the open oven. I have hated casseroles since my father’s death, which prompted repeated deliveries of them, miraculously deposited on mine and my mother’s doorstep at seemingly random intervals. But it doesn’t feel right to mention this to Daniel after six months of him cooking them and my feigning enjoyment at eating them.

‘Don’t you think?’ Daniel picks up again, noting my extended silence.

‘What’s crazy?’

‘That they never found that kid’s killer.’

‘I don’t know. It happens, doesn’t it? You hear about it more often these days.’

Daniel considers this for a moment.

‘I still think it’s mental, GT. Someone out there is a murderer and like, no one has any idea. He’s just walking around, living his life, Christ, he might even have family.’

He might even be a woman.

‘Do you think anyone knows?’ Daniel says, sounding more excited than I think he

should. I can't talk about this any longer, I decide, not without things tightening in my chest, not without breathing becoming a little uncomfortable. I walk over to him and, tiptoeing slightly, I kiss the side of his temple.

'I think you must have had a boring day at work to be so excited over this.'

Daniel laughs because he has learnt to take these comments light heartedly, no matter how serious I appear when I say them. And given that he is working as a Financial Assistant again, boring is probably exactly what his day has been.

'Fair point,' he says, before kissing me back. 'Casserole okay for dinner?'

He turns and so can't see the twinge of a grimace that appears when he asks this.

'Perfect. How long will it be?'

'How long do you need?'

Daniel knows that there are nights when I need to escape for a while, and on these nights he thinks that I run. I am usually gone for anywhere up to an hour and while I do leave the house donning athletic attire, and I do return reasonably sweaty, the process isn't quite as simple as I have allowed Daniel to believe for the last six months.

'An hour?' I say, already knowing that this is fine and that, if necessary, Daniel will halt dinner preparations and pick them up again when I'm home.

'An hour is fine, GT, I've got some work to do anyway.' He is still chopping at something when I move to leave the kitchen, but I halt when he throws a quick, 'Love you,' after me. More human or not, these moments still baffle me.

American Psycho. 2001. Christian Bale. 'And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable... I simply am not there.'

'You too,' I say, already halfway out the door.

When I leave the flat I am wearing loose fitting jogging bottoms and an ill-fitting t-shirt that used to belong to Daniel. However, much like many of his other clothes, I have now adopted this too as part of my own wardrobe. I shout goodbye but he has already connected himself to a set of headphones that are wired into his laptop and so he doesn't hear me leave.

The run to the storage centre used to take me half an hour on its own. But, as with all exercise, I have become more accustomed to the run over time and it now takes little more than fifteen minutes. I exchange pleasantries with the guard at the entrance – ‘How’s the family?’ I ask, as I do every time I walk through these gates – and head to my storage unit which is, as requested on initially signing the contract for it, one of the furthest from the main entrance. ‘I’m particular about proximity,’ I had said to the manager and he had shrugged, taken my money in exchange for the key and then disappeared, seemingly nonplussed by my request. Over the last ten months I have learnt that people are often too busy with their own unmentionables to go rummaging about in yours, unless they have a particularly good reason to.

‘What’s in storage, anyway?’ Daniel had asked, after accidentally opening an invoice for the space.

‘Boxes,’ I had replied. ‘University experiments, old clothes, you know.’

And that had pacified him entirely.

Inside my unit – number 034 – there are in fact five boxes.

Experiments.

Miscellaneous.

DG

AT

And the most recent addition: PW

When I arrive home a little over an hour later I am already drafting an apology to Daniel who, I assume, will be readying dinner. When I walk through the front door though, I can see that Daniel is sitting in the living room, his elbows perched on his knees and his eyes fixed on something that is moving across the television screen.

‘Daniel?’ I raise my voice a little, playing that I haven’t seen him.

‘In here, GT.’

When I walk into the living room I can see that it is a news report that has Daniel so transfixed. I brace myself for another police panel, or worse still a commemorative speech from The Mother of the Boy, but instead Daniel cuts through the broadcast to announce:

‘They found him.’

‘Who?’

‘That bloke. That Peter Whatshisname bloke.’

‘Wincher,’ I say.

‘Yes, that’s the bloke, that’s the bloke who they’ve found.’ Daniel says this with a level of excitement that seems disproportionate for the announcement that he’s making. ‘You know the one who went missing last month? They’ve bloody found him.’

‘Where?’

‘His body was dumped at some running track or another. How they’ve only just found him, mind, on a track like that, I’ve got no idea.’

Probably because he was well hidden, I think, but I say nothing.

The interactions between the live feed and the studio fill our momentary silence.

‘And what have the police said about this so far, Claire?’ says the smart-looking middle-aged news anchor who is taking up the right half of our television screen.

‘The police have said very little, Philip, but we have heard some speculation that Peter

Wincher's case is markedly similar to those of David Green and Aaron Turner that we saw earlier this year. The police, understandably so, don't want to encourage rumour,' the woman says, maintaining what feels like an intimidating level of eye contact with the camera. 'But there is talk of this being a killing spree of sorts, potentially at the hand of one individual.'

The X Files. 1997. Gillian Anderson. 'Psychologists often speak of the denial of an unthinkable evil... What we can't possibly imagine ourselves capable of we can blame on the ogre, on the hunchback, on the lowly half-breed.'

On the unnamed, inhuman individual.

I turn the television off.

'Why did you do that?' Daniel asks, irked by the interruption.

'Why do you want to watch that, Daniel? It's gutter press.'

'Gutter press? Gillian, there could be a bloody serial killer out there.'

'Oh, Daniel, don't be so absurd.' I snap, biting harder at him than I mean to and he is visibly pained by my tone. 'I'm sorry. It's just, it's scary, don't you think?'

Living with Daniel has been invaluable to my developing how to talk to people. We had been living together for just six weeks when I had perfected this tone – this meek and vulnerable tone – that led to him offering me comfort for one thing or another, and that's exactly what he did. Daniel stands from the sofa and wraps an arm around my shoulders. He plants a kiss near the crown of my head and says:

'Sorry, GT, I know how stuff like that gets to you.'

And it does get to me, I think, in ways that Daniel will never understand.

'But hey, whoever it is that's bumping these folks off, you obviously don't need to worry,' he says, and I give him a quizzical look. 'Well, they're all blokes, aren't they?' He winks and it is clear that he is trying to be playful, so I smile in return. We both walk to the

kitchen and while Daniel continues with his preparations for dinner, I fabricate details of my run – ‘I really think I’m getting my time down now.’ – in the hope that this will keep Daniel busy. I am talking and talking at a frantic pace but somewhere in the back of my head I am already replaying things. Replaying Daniel. And when he places our plates on the dining table, I hear him, clear as day.

‘Someone out there is a murderer and like, no one has any idea. She’s just walking around, living her life, Christ, she might even have family.’

‘You okay there, GT?’ Daniel asks.

‘Walking around, living my life, I’m doing okay,’ I say, before I tuck into my casserole.

VIOLENT WOMEN: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE VIOLENCE IN MURIEL SPARK'S 'THE DRIVER'S SEAT', VIRGINIE DESPENTES'S 'BAISE-MOI', GILLIAN FLYNN'S 'GONE GIRL', AND C.S. BARNES'S 'NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST'

VIOLENCE AND GENDER: A THESIS OVERVIEW

Amongst contemporary readers, there is a growing interest in fiction featuring a violent female protagonist. Eva Wiseman, who describes this fiction as a ‘rich sub-genre’, reports that it has become ‘a profitable slice of noir publishing’ in recent years.¹ The proliferation of such a ‘rich’ and ‘profitable’ trend should, on the face of it, be indicative of an increasingly progressive attitude towards female violence in fiction. However, upon closer inspection of the works in question, it appears these violent women remain confined to a very narrow set of literary tropes. These tropes consistently ensure that violent women are written differently than violent men. This difference is located chiefly in how motivations for female violence are represented. Violent women are either acting out of self-defence, are protecting their children or enacting revenge, typically against a leading male. In this way, female violence in fiction remains governed by what may be considered “conventional” female behaviour.

To explore how pervasive these tropes are and how difficult it is for even self-consciously feminist texts to evade them, I will analyse three novels all of which depict female violence in innovative ways: *The Driver’s Seat* by Muriel Spark (1970), *Baise-Moi (Rape-Me)* by Virginie Despentes (1993), and *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012). Female violence is depicted differently across all three texts, however they all ultimately encounter the same limitation: violence – and motivations for violence – are consistently written as gendered. The two elements remain entangled despite the authors’ attempts at innovation, and as such female violence remains limited. Furthermore, when female violence is permitted, it is

¹ Eva Wiseman, ‘The Woman On The Train With A Book With ‘Girl’ In The Title...’, *The Observer*, 8 January 2017, p. 15.

always enacted by women who are depicted somehow as victims, once again undermining the feminist stance the texts may initially appear to adopt.

Following this analysis, wherein I will illustrate the existing limitations around depictions of violent women, I will discuss my own novel *Never Forget Your First*. Written with the express purpose of deviating from the above literary tropes, my work endeavours to escape the confines which have too long been placed on narratives of female violence.

The assumptions surrounding gendered violence remain as problematic to women as they do to men. Literary tropes, rather than reinforcing gendered abilities, must be re-invented in order to shift overall perspectives. It is the aim of this paper, then, to highlight not only the pervasiveness of these tropes in existing fiction, but also to propose why, looking ahead, authors should strive to write against them.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER: AN INTRODUCTION

Men are inherently more aggressive and violent than women: it is a belief so commonly held in contemporary society that it is rarely contested. Recent studies confirm that ‘90 per cent of violent crime in Britain is committed by men’.² As a result, aggression has historically been linked to the male gender. It is a popular belief that men will ‘express anger directly’, unlike their ‘pouting, crying’ female counterparts.³ Studies also suggest that women ‘have more to gain from negotiation and manipulation of feelings’ due to having less social power.⁴ The image of females as ‘passive, weak, and receptive’ further supports the above ideals of non-aggressive women.⁵ Additional research indicates that ‘social learning from earliest childhood appears to facilitate the greater use of all forms of aggression by men’.⁶ Thus, an assumed relationship between men and violence is established early in life. In many cultures ‘the man as the aggressor and the woman as the victim’ are the social roles ascribed to (and largely accepted by) the two genders.⁷ This is reinforced by the belief that a male ‘with feminine characteristics’ is in fact ‘not a proper man’.⁸ In this sense, the expectation of male aggression is not dissimilar to the expectations of femininity in women. After all, the female who is ‘womanish or effeminate is merely fulfilling her biological and cultural destinies’, much like the aggressive man is fulfilling his.⁹ So accepting are audiences of these assigned roles that readers and viewers alike readily engage with fictional representations of the violent male.

² Harriet Bradley, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) p.186.

³ Mary Crawford and Rhoda Unger, *Women and Gender: A feminist psychology* (McGraw-Hill Higher Education: Pennsylvania, 2000) p.35.

⁴ Peplau and Gordon, 1985. Cited by Crawford and Unger, p. 304.

⁵ Freda Adler, *Sisters in Crime* (New York: McGraw Hill Paperback Edition, 1976) p.2.

⁶ Crawford and Unger, p.213.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.518. This is supported by Griffin (1971), cited by Crawford and Unger.

⁸ Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000) p.6.

⁹ *Ibid*.

Consider the critical acclaim of Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter, for example, wherein the aggressive male commits unspeakable acts of physical violence, and through this has become an iconic character in serial killer fiction.¹⁰ The willingness to perceive men as physically violent can be noted in a number of stand-alone publications too, such as Austin Wright's *Tony and Susan* (2011) and even Fiona Barton's *The Widow* (2016) both of which introduce physical aggression from their male characters, despite both novels being predominantly led by a distinct female narrative.¹¹ Although, for overtly explicit stand-alone representations of male violence, audiences need look no further than Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, which has received similar critical acclaim to that of Hannibal Lecter himself.¹²

It would, however, be inaccurate to discuss violence as a strictly male phenomenon. Women, like men, do – and, within certain parameters, are allowed to – engage in violent behaviour. However, female violence is not considered as inherent and is only considered socially acceptable when it occurs in specific circumstances. For many people the most common exposure to female violence comes through going to the movies or watching TV; and there rather obvious depictions such as the female action hero are the norm. A figure often discussed as a feminist icon, this female action hero is designed to combine 'conventional femininity and traditionally male activities'.¹³ Here we can consider figures such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who have both developed a cult following. These two characters have come to symbolise something akin to an uprising of violent, and empowered, women. A closer analysis, however, reveals that they are 'allowed to

¹⁰ Thomas Harris, *Silence of the Lambs* (London: Arrow Books, 2013)

¹¹ Austin Wright, *Tony and Susan* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011); Fiona Barton, *The Widow* (London: Transworld Books, 2016)

¹² Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador Classics, 2015)

¹³ Cristina Lucia Stasia, 'My Guns Are in the Fendi!: The Postfeminist Female Action Hero', in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.237-249. p.243.

be violent only within the parameters allowed by patriarchal discourse. That is, they may be threatening but are always heterosexually attractive'.¹⁴ It is also note-worthy that their violence is only sanctioned when employed to fight evil, i.e. when it is morally justified. Furthermore, it cannot go unnoticed that these female action heroes exist within separate universes from our known reality. Lara Croft lives in a world of evil masterminds while Buffy Summers spends her days fighting vampires and demons. Significantly, we must suspend our belief in what is real to believe in these characters. It is in this world of fantasy that the (attractive, righteous) violent woman can comfortably find a home.

Outside the realm of the superhuman, violence exhibited by women is largely represented as being reactive, almost exclusively to male behaviour. There are three pervasive tropes that are heavily relied upon in popular literature that frame exhibits of female violence. All three tropes ensure that these violent women are still governed by conventional “femaleness” – they largely appear as protective, or somehow scorned. The first of these tropes is that of self-defence, wherein women are permitted to engage in violence as a physical response to violence that has been inflicted on them.¹⁵ The second trope depicts women driven to violence with the specific aim of protecting their children, and in broader terms of protecting children in general.¹⁶ The final trope allows women to enact violence as a means of gaining revenge, typically, although not exclusively, on a romantic partner.¹⁷ It is

¹⁴ Ibid, p.238.

¹⁵ Graeme Cameron, *Normal* (Sydney: Harlequin Enterprises, 2015); Gillian Flynn, *Dark Places* (London: Orion, 2010); SJ Watson, *Before I Go To Sleep* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2011); Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2015); Lauren Beukes, *The Shining Girls* (London: Harper Collins, 2013); Monique Roffey, *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009); Judith Rossner, *Perfidia: A Novel* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1997)

¹⁶ Paula Hawkins, *Into The Water* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2017); M.J. Arlidge, *Pop Goes The Weasel* (London: Penguin Books, 2014); Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008); AE Rawson, *A Savage Art* (California: Fahrenheit Press, 2016); Robert Tine, *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* (New York: Signet, 1992); M.R. Carey, *The Girl With All The Gifts* (London: Orbit, 2014)

¹⁷ Emilia Zola, *The Beast Within* (London: Penguin Books, 2007); Sabine Durrant, *Under Your Skin* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014); Peter Swanson, *The Kind Worth Killing* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015); Mo Hayder, *Poppet* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2013); Val McDermid, *The Mermaids Singing* (London: Harper

important to note that, irrespective of tropes, the violent women presented in these texts are rarely depicted with any psychological sophistication. Graeme Cameron's *Normal* (2015), for example, relies on a depiction of female violence that reads as far-fetched and therefore difficult to take seriously: 'Erica pitched her assailant sideways, kicking her leg against Green's head and slamming her to the ground.'¹⁸ Erica – who has no experience of hand-to-hand combat, incidentally – is also given a 'teasing smile' having just been attacked with a knife, and later stares at a gun with a 'childlike' expression.¹⁹ This cartoon-like depiction of violent females has been rehashed to such an extent it reads as a trope in itself.²⁰ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, in *Lady Audley's Secret* (originally published 1862) delivers an overtly nice female killer, viewed as: 'a dear girl... a generous-hearted, bouncing, noble English lassie', despite her propensity for murder.²¹ Conversely, Stephen King's *Misery* (1987) borders on the comedic in regards to the protagonist's violence.²² The novel is led by Annie Wilkes who captures a man and later amputates his foot with an axe, as punishment for him trying to escape from her. In a broader sense, beyond these listed examples, women are consistently depicted as either protectors, revengers, or self-defenders. Through these depictions, fiction ultimately maintains the woman-as-victim paradigm; a paradigm built on the base assumption of female non-violence. Thus violence in women tends to be represented as something exceptional while male violence requires little explanation: here it can be the simple expression of natural aggressiveness.

Collins, 1995); MJ Arlidge, *Eeny Meeny* (London: Penguin Books, 2014); Stieg Larsson, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (London: Quercus, 2008)

¹⁸ Cameron, p.303.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.283; p.304.

²⁰ A contemporary example of this is L.S. Hilton's *Maestra* (London: Bonnier Publishing, 2016). The novel is a tale of revenge, enacted through female violence. However, the violence is so masculinised, and the sex scenes so abusive, that the protagonist's conduct is not only laughable but also wholly unbelievable by the close of the novel.

²¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) p.224.

²² Stephen King, *Misery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987)

Alongside these distinct typologies of violence within fiction, there is room in which to discuss the gendered violence of sadism and masochism. Frida Beckman and Charlie Blake have reported on the ‘unthinking association of masochism... and femininity’, as the submissive elements of masochism are ‘traditionally and clinically considered essentially feminine’, i.e. passive females have become synonymous with the passivity of masochism.²³ Masochism – meaning the enjoyment of having pain inflicted upon oneself – has been reported by Rita Felski as illustrative of women trapped beneath patriarchal oppression.²⁴ When women self-inflict violence then, they do so under the guise of this being their natural outlet for violence, a thought supported by criminological studies too – to be discussed later in this paper. Linda Williams supports Felski’s discussion of female masochism, commenting that it is ‘the “norm” for women under patriarchy’.²⁵ The key distinction to draw here then is that while women have been confined to masochism – violence inflicted on the self – men have, in contrast, been associated with sadism, i.e. being the individual to inflict violence. Ultimately this illustrates that violence, even when framed in markedly different terms, still maintains the same biased gendering earlier highlighted.

The literary tropes for violent women are much too constrictive. Empirical research has highlighted the female capacity for violence under circumstances beyond those detailed in fiction. Thus, not only are these fictional depictions unrealistic, but they are perpetuating the two-dimensional image of women as inherently nice and ultimately harmless – unless threatened. This image of the harmless woman is rooted in gender essentialism: ‘the belief that men and women are fundamentally different’ and that women are weaker and indeed

²³ Frida Beckman and Charlie Blake, ‘Shadows of Cruelty’, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 15: 1, (2010), pp. 1 – 12. p.5.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “frenzy of the Visible”* (California: University of California Press, 1989), p213.

more passive.²⁶ The consequence of this is that behaviours remain gendered to the detriment of social and cultural development; essentialism prevents gendered limitations from expanding. Barbara J. Risman not only encourages contemporary society to ‘undo gender’, but in fact calls for a ‘postgender society’, wherein individuals are not confined to gendered binaries.²⁷ Sara L. Crawley supports this re-structure of gender, commenting: ‘Masculinities and femininities are not inherent or immobile parts of personality or psyche’, lending credence to the notion that binary genders can indeed be “undone”.²⁸ While these discussions may borrow from a familiar call for equality, gender theorists are expanding this towards ‘sex-gender diversity’, referring to the distribution of genders and gendered behaviours along a continuum.²⁹ When the term “feminism” is employed throughout this paper then, it is done so as an amalgamation of two elements. In part, it refers to the call for equality on which feminism has historically been based. Complementary to this, “feminism” – sometimes dubbed equality, or equalitarianism throughout this work – alludes also to this idea of gender expansion, or gender diversity. Violent women, therefore, should not be thought of as masculine, nor of adopting masculine behaviours, but rather of moving along a gender continuum that allows them to be both female and aggressive.

In a continuation of these ideas then, it seems imperative that fiction expands its parameters around violent females to allow for a better developed exploration of the violent woman. Through the creative element of the PhD programme, I have endeavoured to narrate a different type of female violence. The resulting novel introduces a protagonist who is

²⁶ Julie Collins-Dogrul and Jaimis Rebecca Ulrich, ‘Fighting Stereotypes: Public Discourse About Women in Combat’, *Armed Forces and Society* (2017), pp. 1 – 24. p.6.

²⁷ Barbara J. Risman, ‘From Doing to Undoing: Gender As We Know It’, *Gender and Society*, 23: 1, (2009), pp. 81 – 84. p.83; p.84.

²⁸ Sara L. Crawley, ‘Visible Bodies, Vicarious Masculinity, and “The Gender Revolution”’: Comment on England’, *Gender and Society*, 25:1, (2011), pp. 108 – 122. p. 111.

²⁹ Collins-Dogrul and Ulrich, p.4.

psychologically inclined towards violence, rather than socially steered towards it. This will be discussed at length later in this paper. However, prior to that, I will analyse a small selection of texts, all of which complicate the tropes of female violence outlined above and will help us appreciate both how writers attempt to challenge the tropes sketched above and how difficult it is to entirely escape the tropes' pervasive hold. Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*, Virginie Despentes's *Baise-Moi (Rape-Me)*, and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* all manipulate the traditional depictions of violent women. However, while their efforts provide interesting and innovative versions of this violent character, they also illustrate that gender remains entangled with fictionalised violence.

The first text that I will explore is Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*, published in 1970. The novel follows Lise, an unmarried, career-minded woman, who is taking a vacation from work. Throughout this vacation, Lise's main concern appears to be finding 'the right one', an oft-repeated reference to her search for a male companion.³⁰ It is not until later that we discover Lise is in fact searching for her own murderer. The climax of the novel sees Lise coercing a man into stabbing her, in what becomes a heavily sexualised murder. The novel is rich with comments on gendered behaviour in the 1960s. As such, it will be discussed alongside Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published seven years prior to *The Driver's Seat* and a seminal text in Second Wave Feminism.³¹ Both Spark and Friedan depict gendered behaviour as ruinous to women – albeit to different extents.

Throughout Friedan's discussion of the unhappiness of married women, aggression becomes a recurrent consideration. *The Feminine Mystique* cites a limited number of

³⁰ Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006) p. 41.

³¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Penguin: London, 2010)

occasions wherein females can exhibit aggression. Significantly, the female pursuit of a male companion is a key area in which Friedan reports this aggression. Considering this, it becomes possible to consider *The Driver's Seat* as an allegory of Friedan's proposals. Friedan's non-fiction and Spark's fiction follow the same narrative structure: a woman pursues a man, finds a man, and loses her autonomy. In capitalising on this area of female aggression, Spark has written a satire wherein looking for marriage becomes the same as looking for one's own murderer. The novel narrates the limitations of female aggression, critiquing it as something aimed at the self. Thus, Spark is using Friedan's work to represent anticipated female behaviours, and their destructive potentials.

Following on from the analysis of *The Driver's Seat*, I will discuss Virginie Despentes's 1993 novel *Baise-Moi*, translated as *Rape-Me*.³² In this novel, female violence is foregrounded in a much more obvious manner and is taken to levels rarely encountered in fiction. The novel follows two female protagonists who react to violent attacks, experienced repeatedly throughout their lives, by embarking on a violent rampage themselves. Despentes does initially conform to one of the tropes of violent women, which is violence as a mode of revenge. However, the characters' behaviour rapidly transforms from violence as vengeance to violence for enjoyment. These women aim to leave as much social devastation as they can: 'I've thought about one thing: we should leave as many witnesses as possible.'³³ Thus, Despentes's novel functions as an example of literature that attempts to depict women who are violent for the sake of violence.

Finally, I will discuss Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, published in 2012. The novel's female protagonist, Amy Dunne, fictionalises her own murder in order to frame her

³² Virginie Despentes, *Baise-Moi*. Trans by Bruce Benderson. (New York: Grove Press, 1993)

³³ Despentes, p. 206.

adulterous husband. She then flees to an old boyfriend for assistance, before murdering him and returning home.³⁴ Since its publication, Flynn's book has caused much controversy. It is often discussed for its provocative comments on gender roles, and its comments on the violent capabilities of women. It has also highlighted contradictory opinions of what makes for a contemporary feminist icon.

Gone Girl is heralded as one of the earliest examples of the so-called Domestic Noir genre. This growing body of literature accommodates first person narratives, delivered by a flawed female. In addition, these novels are rooted in a domestic setting. This returns us to a consideration of Friedan's own work, wherein she remarked – with some frustration – that even when women were offered the world, they were still inclined to move back to the home.³⁵ However, Domestic Noir presents this move home in a notably different framework. The novels within this genre present women who are 'on the verge of changing into something else', no longer 'simply a victim, or a wife.'³⁶

Five years on from the publication of *Gone Girl* and the novel still gains mixed reviews. The controversial female at the centre of the book has secured it as a cultural phenomenon. Flynn has since admitted that she wanted to discuss a 'dark side' of women, commenting: 'I deeply mourn the lack of female villains'.³⁷ However, these justifications are not strong enough explanations for some. Amy has remained such a provocative character that Flynn has been accused of 'peddling misogynist caricatures' and harbouring 'a deep animosity towards women'.³⁸ These accusations are in part prompted by Amy's distortion of

³⁴ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2012)

³⁵ Friedan: 'Not long ago, women dreamed and fought for equality; their own place in the world. What happened to their dreams; when did women decide to give up the world and go back home?' (p. 24)

³⁶ Wiseman.

³⁷ Gillian Flynn, *I Was Not A Nice Little Girl* (2015) <http://gillian-flynn.com/for-readers/> [accessed 1 March 2017]

³⁸ Oliver Burkeman, *Gillian Flynn on her bestseller Gone Girl and accusations of misogyny* (2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny>> [accessed 19 February 2017]

the housewife stereotype, and her failure to adopt this role with any success. There is also room in which to question Amy's psychological credibility as a character, which may further account for audience animosity. However, while Amy fails in certain areas she succeeds in others, as she conforms to an alternative female image: the femme fatale. An iconic figure in 1940s Noir, this woman was not only 'poised' and 'charming', but she also 'did real violence, both literal and symbolic'.³⁹ Thus, it is altogether possible that Amy is 'a continuation of and an improvement on a trope' catered to a new kind of patriarchy.⁴⁰ Ultimately though, it is this depiction of '[a] female psychopath [who has been] allotted the amorality and obsessiveness that... have traditionally been the province of the male', that has caused a culture split between those who see Amy as a feminist icon and an anti-feminist nightmare.⁴¹

Admittedly, three novels published across more than four decades do not provide sufficient evidence for how representations of female violence have shifted across this period of time. Nonetheless, they are at least suggestive of certain shifts in how women are or can be represented. The belief 'that female characters ought to be, at their core, loving and good' is deeply ingrained in both society and literature, and it is also unnecessarily essentialist.⁴² Authors have written against these cultural rules for many decades, trying out different strategies. While some authors are now giving more overt prominence to 'complex, evil female characters', these characters do come with an unavoidable amount of controversy.⁴³ If there is indeed a shift in the perspectives on female aggression and violence, Western

³⁹ Becca Rothfeld, *Gone Girl's Feminist Update of the Old-Fashioned Femme Fatale*. (2014) <https://newrepublic.com/article/119743/gone-girl-has-offered-feminism-new-hero> [accessed 27 June 2017]

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ David Cox, *Gone Girl revamps gender stereotypes – for the worse*. (2014) < <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/oct/06/gone-girl-female-stereotype-women>> [accessed 19 February 2017]

⁴² Eliana Dockerman, *Is Gone Girl Feminist or Misogynist?* (2014) <http://time.com/3472314/gone-girl-movie-book-feminist-misogynist/> [accessed 18 February 2017]

⁴³ Ibid.

culture's acceptance of these qualities in women still sits awkwardly alongside the ease with which readers anticipate these qualities in men. A worthwhile illustration of this is Lisa Hall's *Between You and Me* (2016), a tale of domestic abuse.⁴⁴ The couple's names, however, are gender neutral, and Hall avoids gendered pronouns. This builds anticipation for a violent male, later subverted by the reveal of a violent woman. This is an interesting commentary on how readily we assign violence to a male, in order to avoid placing it on a female.

Contemporary readers continue to expect violent women to be motivated by revenge, so dependent are we on the paradigm of female victimhood. M.J. Arlidge's work, referenced earlier, is another clear example of this. Across the series we observe both male and female serial killers. However, the males are condemned while the females are given histories of abuse, and subsequently sympathy.

It is with the aim of destabilising the gender essentialist structure that the creative element of this PhD project was written. The accompanying novel will be discussed at length, following my discussion of *The Driver's Seat*, *Rape-Me*, and *Gone Girl*. My own work, *Never Forget Your First*, is the narrative of a young woman on the emotional and psychological journey towards her first murder. In terms of genre it can be aligned with *The Driver's Seat* and *Gone Girl*, as these books, much like my own, are heavily rooted in domesticity. That said, the levels of violence contained within the book sit more in accordance with that exhibited in *Rape-Me*. However, *Never Forget Your First* endeavours to narrate female violence on another level altogether, offering a violent female protagonist who is driven by a psychological need, rather than a societal push. This, of course, is only one possible shift that could be adopted in new narratives of female violence. However, if we are to alter perceptions

⁴⁴ Lisa Hall, *Between You and Me* (London: Carina, 2016)

of gendered violence this shift, and others like it, will be a necessary endeavour for contemporary authors.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN MURIEL SPARK'S *THE DRIVER'S SEAT*

Betty Friedan's manifesto, *The Feminine Mystique*, was a landmark publication in Second Wave Feminism. Friedan defines the concept of the mystique as 'the image to which we [women] were trying to conform', which triggered 'a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives' and indeed this idealised image.⁴⁵ Friedan further assesses this discrepancy as a 'schizophrenic split', which she cites as a contributing factor in the psychological difficulties of housewives in the era.⁴⁶ The manifesto comments on 'the housewife trap', namely women's decision at the time to give up professional opportunities and return to domesticity—although, given that '[a]mbition' was 'made a dirty word by the feminine mystique', the return to housewifery was more of an expectation than a decision.⁴⁷ The institute of marriage becomes integral to this, given that '[m]arriage and motherhood is the end' for any woman who dreams of an autonomous existence.⁴⁸ Friedan isolates 'the need to grow and to realize one's full potential' as a defining characteristic of independent individuals.⁴⁹ It was only when this personal growth was allowed for that women functioned fully as human beings. While housework was portrayed as worthwhile work, it did not serve humankind on a grand enough scale to be considered adequately fulfilling. Friedan explains: 'the core of the self becomes aware, becomes real, and grows, through work that carries

⁴⁵ Friedan, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 288.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 289.

⁴⁹ Friedan, p. 253. Friedan refers to this again later, citing this personal growth as something rooted in: 'the service of a human purpose larger than' oneself (p.271).

forward human society.’⁵⁰ As such, Friedan cites work, or lack thereof, ‘as the key to the problem’ experienced by women of the time.⁵¹

Alongside the aforementioned issues, *The Feminine Mystique* also contains a compelling discussion of female aggression. Friedan mentions three circumstances where aggression is permitted, or noted, amongst women. She comments on aggression as a means for protecting one’s offspring: ‘aggression, is not masculine when a psychiatrist considers it part of the maternal instinct’.⁵² She also notes that aggression is something exhibited by women towards other women: ‘a woman who is more than just a housewife can expect a few barbs from her suburban neighbours’.⁵³ Chiefly, however, Friedan cites the aggression noted in women during their search for a mate: ‘the girls whose passive pursuit of a ‘home career’ has resulted in a new kind of domination and aggression’.⁵⁴ Friedan also notes the ‘aggressive pursuit of sexual fulfilment’ present in housewives once they have obtained their domestic status, as though the initial aggression has somehow shifted.⁵⁵ This implication that the manifestation of female aggression is changeable is an intriguing one. Friedan discusses these areas at length, emphasising the initial “aggressive” determination felt amongst women to achieve housewife status. It is this aspect of the manifesto in particular that will be considered alongside Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*, published seven years after *The Feminine Mystique*.

Muriel Spark remains a celebrated author whose work has attracted significant academic attention. However, *The Driver’s Seat*, wherein Spark narrates female violence in an unconventional manner, has seen little to no literary criticism. Following its nomination for

⁵⁰ Friedan, p. 271.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Friedan, p. 160.

⁵³ Friedan, p. 288.

⁵⁴ Friedan, p. 220.

⁵⁵ Friedan, p. 213.

the Lost Man Booker Prize in 2010, the novel has since gained attention via online blogging platforms.⁵⁶ In regard to academic discussions of the novel, the most note-worthy comes from Martin Stannard's *Muriel Spark: The Biography*.⁵⁷ Stannard discusses the novel and also notes the reception it received from critics: 'Some notices were warm, several admiring, but the general drift was that this was an incomprehensible narrative with an unsympathetic heroine.'⁵⁸ Let us first review the plot of this 'incomprehensible narrative': the novel follows Lise, who has never married and has instead devoted her life to her job 'in the accountants' office where she has worked continually... for sixteen years and some months'.⁵⁹ As the novel opens, Lise is on the cusp of taking a vacation – although the reader is never given Lise's geographical whereabouts – and, shortly after leaving, she becomes consumed with finding 'the right one'.⁶⁰ It is not until later that it becomes apparent that Lise's search is not driven by love but violence. She is in fact searching for her perfect murderer. In a heavily sexualised death scene, Lise allows her life to be extinguished by a man, in circumstances that she herself has orchestrated. It is through this climax, alongside Lise's aggressive determination to find her murderer in the first place, that we can draw distinct parallels between this and *The Feminine Mystique*.

The novel reads as an allegorical parody of Friedan's description of the behaviour of American women of the 1960s: *The Driver's Seat* mimics the process that young women, in search of husbands, would have experienced. If we consider Friedan's assessment of marriage

⁵⁶ Tyler Coates, *Muriel Spark's The Driver's Seat is a Brief Yet Powerful Thrill Ride* (2014) <http://flavorwire.com/450999/flavorwire-author-club-muriel-sparks-the-drivers-seat-is-a-brief-yet-powerful-thrill-ride> [accessed 30 June 2017]: 'Spark excels at delivering 107 of the most stressful, uncomfortable pages in modern literature.'

⁵⁷ Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: the Biography* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2010)

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 369. Prior to this conclusion Stannard also remarked that many reviewers were 'perplexed' by the book (p. 368).

⁵⁹ Spark, p. 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 41.

as a deprivation of female individuality—a kind of self-annihilation—then Lise is imitating this in her search for a murderer. I have cited earlier, Friedan comments on the newfound aggression and domination noted in young women striving for a ‘home career’.⁶¹ This aggression, too, is closely mirrored by Lise. She deliberately and repeatedly puts herself in situations where she may encounter the “right” man. Lise is so driven towards finding him that the prospect of failing is deeply upsetting: ‘She is crying, her tears fall heavily. She says, ‘I was sure he was the right one. I’ve got to meet someone.’⁶² In her relentless pursuit of a man, Lise follows in the footsteps of thousands of women who abandoned their own independence to adopt the role of housewife. In other words, Spark has created a reality wherein the terms husband and murderer become interchangeable. An intriguing response to the institute of marriage, which extinguishes the individuality of woman in favour of her merely supporting her husband: ‘[t]he mystique would have women renounce ambition for themselves... women are supposed to be ambitious only for their husbands and their children’.⁶³ It is this loss of personal interest and personal welfare that occurs during marriage that Spark has recreated in Lise. When Lise finds the right man she loses herself, to the extent that she is no longer a living individual but rather the deadened product of an aggressively patriarchal society.

In this unconventional retelling of marriage, Spark has incorporated an unconventional heroine. Lise, despite her efforts towards being feminine, repeatedly proves incompetent at this. In the opening chapters we can observe Lise clothes shopping, unsuccessfully, where she is drawn to attire ‘too vivid for most’.⁶⁴ We later learn that this is a reference to a specific outfit: ‘a red and white striped coat’ beneath which Lise wears a dress of ‘purple, orange, and

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 220.

⁶² Spark, p. 41.

⁶³ Friedan, p. 289.

⁶⁴ Spark, p.7.

blue V-patterns'.⁶⁵ A woman observing this 'laughs aloud in Lise's face' before asking whether she plans to join the circus.⁶⁶ Lise lacks the "feminine" ability to dress attractively—though she recognises the need to do so. In another awkward attempt at adhering to stereotypically feminine characteristics, Lise also makes a concerted effort to make her voice sound more girlish: 'she now speaks in a little-girl tone'.⁶⁷ Alongside Lise's difficulties regarding conforming to stereotypically feminine patterns, it is noticeable that she is at her most comfortable when she is predatory. Spark describes Lise's observations of those around her with decisive and clipped sentences. When Lise boards the plane, for example, Spark details how: 'Lise surveys her fellow passengers' 'but not in a manner to provoke attention'.⁶⁸ Spark even remarks that Lise 'absorbs each face', bestowing on her gaze a vampiric quality.⁶⁹ This image of Lise as a predator complements Friedan's comments on female aggression when searching for a mate. These determined observations are arguably an articulation of the hunter-like precision that women in search of husbands were thought to possess.

Alongside this aggression from Lise, we can also observe the second style of female aggression proposed by Friedan, that is, aggression from one female to another. Mrs. Fiedke, whom Lise encounters quite suddenly on her travels, only to then spend an entire day in her company, represents a manifestation of this. Fiedke reads as the caricature of a 'man-hating, embittered... spinster'.⁷⁰ During a conversation with Lise, Fiedke remarks that women need to maintain their roles within the home to prevent men from stealing them: 'they will be taking over the homes and the children... while we go and fight to defend them and work to keep

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.16.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.17.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.19.

⁶⁸ Spark, p. 24.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Friedan, p. 61.

them.⁷¹ Spark is parodying stereotypical views towards feminism, transferring these ideas onto men: ‘they want their equality’.⁷² Beyond this parody though, Fiedke’s views, whilst initially appearing misandrist, are geared towards keeping women inside the home and, in this sense, her views read as supportive of those perpetuated by the feminine mystique. In addition to this, Fiedke’s views are further illustrative of Friedan’s prediction for women who endeavoured to escape domesticity: ‘[a] hazard a woman faces on her way out of the housewife trap is the hostility of other housewives.’⁷³ Fiedke discusses the possibility of domesticated men with resentment: ‘the male sex is getting out of hand. Of course, Mr Fiedke knew his place’.⁷⁴ Through this inversion, Spark is again illustrating one of Friedan’s predictions: ‘women who are living vicariously through their husbands and children resent the woman who has a life of her own.’⁷⁵ Fiedke performs two functions within Spark’s narrative then. She extends Spark’s parody through her views on gender and domesticity, but she also illustrates the capabilities for aggression and hostility within women.

Alongside this passive aggression, Spark does extend her discussion to physical aggression also, allowing Lise to intermittently flirt with violence. An early incident, where we observe Lise on the plane with her new companion, Bill, sees Lise considering cutlery she has been given. She ‘feels the blade of the knife’ and ‘the prongs of the fork’, commenting neither are sharp enough.⁷⁶ Bill responds: ‘Who needs them, anyway?’ The undercurrent of disappointment felt by Lise as she observes the limited capabilities of these objects is apparent though. This raises an altogether different question: What is it that they are not sharp

⁷¹ Spark, p. 72.

⁷² Ibid. Spark is also introducing issues that would be discussed at length by later critics. Contemporary discussions in this area have isolated the ‘feminized man’ of this era, later ‘problematized as both men and women seemed to reject this figure’ and his adoption of feminine responsibilities (Bradley, p. 58).

⁷³ Friedan, p. 288.

⁷⁴ Spark, p. 72.

⁷⁵ Friedan, p. 288.

⁷⁶ Spark, p. 32.

enough for? Violence is referred to again in a later incident, where Lise's behaviour satirises the trope of the meek, helpless woman approaching a police officer for help. This exchange has the potential of being a typical illustration of social power: the woman must rely on the man – better educated, and equipped to take care of her, and in this case imbued with the authority of a state organ. In Spark's rendition of the scene, however, Lise simply asks the officer: 'Do you carry a revolver?' The man, too stunned to respond, says nothing, allowing Lise to conclude: 'Because, if you did, you could shoot me'.⁷⁷

It is the suggested possibility of female violence that gives weight to both of the above incidents. During a later incident, this relationship between violence and the female protagonist is complicated further. When talking to a man whom she meets in a hotel bar, Lise is regaled with tales of his hunting endeavours: 'The poor bloody beast comes out the next day... You have to shoot'.⁷⁸ Significantly, conventional masculinity – the man is virile, aggressive, confident – causes Lise to lose interest: 'You're not my type after all... I thought you were, but I was way out'.⁷⁹ In the chapter that follows, Lise explains: 'He'd gone on safari... Shooting animals', implying this was the cause for her disinterest. Despite Lise's own attraction to violence, this scene implies that violence is not a quality she admires in a man. This inversion of gender roles – wherein Lise is aggressive, but demands passivity from men – is supported later during the murder scene wherein Richard, her will-be-killer, occupies a passive role. This is also further evidence for the malleability of Lise's character. How she initially moved from girlish woman to predator in the opening chapters, Lise also moves between aggressor and victim. The changeability of her character is arguably illustrative of Friedan's comments on the multiplicity of roles that can be occupied by women.

⁷⁷ Spark, p. 82.

⁷⁸ Spark, p. 88.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Subsequently then, Lise's malleability allows her to cater her behaviour to her audience; she 'allows herself to transform her signifying role to the person with whom she is speaking.'⁸⁰

Lise appears as the character that she feels is required of her – girly-woman, predator, flirtatious-woman, victim – and the definitive example of this comes during her own murder.

It is this murder narrative where Spark concludes her mimicry of Friedan, completing Lise's journey from autonomous individual to character-less woman. Prior to the murder, Lise establishes herself as a dominant female. The men surrounding her are enamoured by her and, even when they endeavour to resist Lise, they still succumb to her. This in itself raises questions with regard to the power possessed by these men. Rather than 'adventurous, forceful, and independent', Spark's men are inclined towards sentimentality, submissiveness, and superstitions.⁸¹ Lise herself assesses men as 'cowards' who have 'too much self-control'.⁸² Admittedly, Lise's views on men and their cowardice are subjective. Although, Spark allows for these claims without a defence and therefore Lise's self-ascribed dominance – superiority, even – remains intact up to the point of her murder.

On discovering her will-be-murderer, Richard, at the Hotel Tomson, Lise instructs him: 'You're coming with me.'⁸³ Richard is 'trembling' at the sight of her: 'His round face is pink and white, his eyes wide open with fear.'⁸⁴ In the opening moments of their exchange we observe Richard resist Lise, both physically and verbally: 'No, I don't want to come. I want to

⁸⁰ John Horn, *Muriel Spark's The Driver's Seat: It's All About Context* (2014) <http://www.literaryramblings.com/1000-books-in-10-years-vol-306-the-drivers-seat-by-muriel-spark> [accessed 3 July 2017]

⁸¹ These gendered characteristics are outlined in Crawford and Unger's work (p. 35) but are sampled from an international study of gender stereotyping, compiled by Williams and Best (1990). The above characteristics – of being sentimental, submissive, and superstitious – are cited within this work as conventionally feminine traits.

⁸² Spark, p. 71.

⁸³ Spark, p. 101.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

stay. I came here this morning, and when I saw you here I got away. I want to get away.’⁸⁵

Lise is undeterred by Richard’s reluctance; she continues to physically manoeuvre him towards the car before she ‘gets into the driver’s seat’.⁸⁶ The symbolism of Lise in the driver’s seat is clearly significant as the couple ebb closer towards the novel’s climax. Lise’s position in the driver’s seat illustrates both her power and her control in this situation. It is ironic then that it is this same power that will eventually lead to her self-destruction.

The murder itself warrants close attention for its heavy sexualisation. *The Feminine Mystique* makes reference to the ‘aggressive pursuit of sexual fulfilment’ that was noted in housewives of the era.⁸⁷ Friedan proposed this ‘insatiable sexual search’ was a manifestation of ‘aggressive energies’ that the mystique forbade women from using elsewhere.⁸⁸ The parallels between sexual intercourse and Lise’s murder gain an additional significance with this in mind. Lise devotes a huge amount of energy to her pursuit of a man. Having found him, Lise is forced to channel her energies elsewhere, namely towards her own murder. She talks Richard through the process of killing her to her expected standard. This sexualisation of murder is an effective illustration of how an aggressive pursuit of a male will lead to the consumption of the female.

Friedan notes that media representations of women at the time portrayed them as ‘mindless over- or under-sexed sex creatures’, in need of ‘perverse stimulation’.⁸⁹ To some extent, through the sexualisation of her murder, Lise feeds this image. Lise’s desire to be stabbed exacerbates the sexualisation of the scene, even more so when considered alongside the areas of her body she guides Richard towards: ‘She points first to her throat... Then,

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 101 – 102.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 102.

⁸⁷ Friedan, p. 213.

⁸⁸ Friedan, p. 212.

⁸⁹ Friedan, p. 214 – 215.

pointing to a place beneath each breast.⁹⁰ She instructs him: ‘be sure to twist it [the knife] upwards or it may not penetrate far enough.’⁹¹ Stabbing is a masculine method of murder, and the action of driving something into the body is connotative of the physicality of penetrative sex. This is emphasised again through the description: ‘he plunges into her’.⁹² This prompts Lise to expel, ‘Kill me’, which she ‘repeats in four languages’, mimicking throes of passion.⁹³

The scene does much to destabilise the roles of aggressor and victim. The physical violence inflicted by Richard, in traditional terms, makes him the aggressor. However, the physical submission adopted by Lise is something she performs uninstructed: ‘I’m going to lie down here. Then you tie my hands with my scarf; I’ll put one wrist over the other, it’s the proper way.’⁹⁴ Lise fluidly moves between aggressor and victim, even during her own murder. This is illustrative of the rigidity of gendered behaviours given that, despite her attraction to violence, Lise can still only view herself as a victim. Through her mimicry of finding and securing a mate, Lise is ‘committing a kind of suicide’ more literally than that performed by housewives – but to the same overall effect.⁹⁵ Prior to this ‘she has been a lonely anonymous woman’ but her suicide secures ‘recognition in the world’, much like

⁹⁰ Spark, p. 106. It may be accidental that Lise directs this man towards two of the main female erogenous zones. However, there is a level of sexual intimacy implied in both of these areas of the body that contributes to Spark’s exploration of the female and her sexual fantasies.

⁹¹ Spark, p. 106.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Spark, p. 105. Alongside sexual aggression, Friedan also noted a deep-rooted desire, felt by women within the mystique, for ‘the acting-out of sexual fantasy’ (p. 213). Lise’s remark that tying her hands above her head is the proper way can imply that Lise has nurtured this fantasy and so has constructed an ideal narrative. However, despite the fantasy element and the overt sexual elements, Lise is disinterested in sex. She reiterates this – ‘I don’t want any sex’ (p. 106) – remarking early on that she is scared of what happens afterwards (p. 103). This can be inferred as an additional statement towards the aggressive sexual pursuits of women. Spark may be alluding to the idea that women’s sexual aggression is a way of channelling energies, rather than them being more inclined towards sex. Friedan remarks: ‘Sex is the only frontier open to women who have always lived within the confines of the feminine mystique’ (p. 212) which, although in allegorical form, is now the space in which Lise finds herself. Arguably, Lise does not have an increased desire towards sex, but rather an increased desire towards her fantasy, and it is merely a consequence of culture that it becomes sexually driven.

⁹⁵ Friedan, p. 273.

marriage would have done.⁹⁶ To complement the symmetry between marriage and murder, Spark makes allusions to victim-blaming in Lise's final moments. When Richard remarks that many women are killed in the park these days, Lise responds: 'Yes, of course. It's because they want to be.'⁹⁷ Lise then extends this argument to suggest that women strive to be murdered: 'they look for it'.⁹⁸ This 'mocking of the rape-culture mentality that often resorts to victim-blaming' may read amiss in this setting.⁹⁹ However, in the context of this as an allegory, Spark is in fact commenting that women lose their autonomous selves to housewifery through their own choosing. This assessment is, to some extent, justified and it is appropriately positioned to introduce Lise's own demise.

The Driver's Seat offers a rich critique of gender and aggression, and Spark does not shy away from destabilising gendered expectations, to some extent. From the opening of this narrative, Lise is a unique character. Her fantasies are shocking, her femininity is lacking, and her attraction to violence is apparent. She is, in terms of conventional femininity, considerably lacking in what is often deemed "normal" femaleness. Despite – or arguably because of – this, Lise has to die before the close of the novel. This reads as a testimony to the strength of gendered perspectives and herein the book encounters its most significant problem. The violence of *The Driver's Seat* remains gendered to the extent that even when Lise is the aggressor, she is still the victim. Violence, despite being possessed by the woman is then given freely to the man so that he may use it against her, rather than Lise be allowed to inflict any physical violence by her own hand. With this in mind, the book can be read as innovative in many ways, but is also illustrative of how violence and gender remain entangled. That said,

⁹⁶ Ian Rankin, 'Surface and Structure: Reading Muriel Spark's "The Driver's Seat"', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 15, (1985), pp. 146 – 155; p. 154.

⁹⁷ Spark, p. 104.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Horn.

the gendered violence that results in Lise's demise does allow Spark to conclude her parody in regard to marriage ending autonomy. Furthermore, while the violence remains gendered, there is also something to be said of Lise's lasting impact overall. Lise's violence is so pervasive that it makes a victim of her murderer long after she has ceased to be – which in itself is a comment on the power of Lise's violence. Given the unconventional plot, her violence could be read as farcical, or in-keeping with literary tropes; Lise may be posthumously enacting a violent revenge on her killer by eventually destroying his life. During Richard's interview with the police he concludes with a poignant admission: 'I was hoping to start a new life.'¹⁰⁰ Lise's lasting damage is not limited to Richard, though. During an earlier visit to a hotel restroom Lise emotionally disturbs a toilet attendant, which again blurs Lise's roles as perpetrator and victim. This minor character is left 'trembling at the event which has touched upon her life without the asking.'¹⁰¹ While this does not bear the same significance as Lise's pursuit of Richard, it nevertheless contributes to the underlying message. Lise may be a victim, but the victims that surround her are there of her own making, through her own brand of female violence.

Spark relies on this parody of gender and aggression in order to critique patriarchal constructs. To develop this discussion further, let us now turn to a novel that instead depicts a more literal, more physical, female violence, namely that featured in *Baise-Moi* by Virginie Despentes.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Spark, p. 87.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN VIRGINIE DESPENTES'S *BAISE-MOI*

While *The Driver's Seat* places female violence in a discussion of middle-class careers and marriage, Virginie Despentes's *Baise-Moi*, translated as *Rape-Me*, instead stages female violence in a world of abuse and prostitution.¹⁰² The novel follows two female protagonists, Nadine and Manu, who are both living in unpleasant circumstances. Both women have been subjected to various forms of abuse and, following a chance encounter at a train station, they establish a friendship. Nadine and Manu exchange life stories and when the opportunity to separate arises, they decide: 'it'd be a pity to stop when things are going so well'.¹⁰³ Instead they initiate a vengeful rampage on society that becomes more violent as their story progresses. Despentes uses this structure to make interesting comments on the distribution of violence across genders. Initially it must be noted that she frames this discussion within one of the most commonplace narrative conventions about violent women: the women's victimhood and their desire for revenge. However, revenge only appears as the spark for this rampage. Nadine and Manu move from victims to aggressors as their focus shifts from vengeance to general devastation. An early indicator of their propensity for violence appears in chapter two, wherein we learn that Manu is 'not in control of her violence'.¹⁰⁴ This theme is then picked up by Nadine who becomes 'madly attracted' to a woman who is self-

¹⁰² Virginie Despentes, *Rape-Me*. Trans by Bruce Benderson. Grove Press: New York, 1993. It is worth noting here that *Rape-Me* is the translated title of this text. The French original was titled *Baise-Moi*. With translated publications it is imperative to note that the text is now 'operating outside the boundaries of the context in which it was created'. Chantal Wright, *Literary Translation* (London: Routledge, 2016) p. 7. It is no longer the work of a single author but rather two, a collaboration of author and translator (*Ibid*, p. 7.); my discussion of *Rape-Me* refers to this collaborative English-language text and not the French original.

¹⁰³ Despentes, p. 94.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

harming.¹⁰⁵ Neither Manu nor Nadine are what Friedan would describe as ‘heroines of women’s magazine stories’ who searched for ‘a life of their own’.¹⁰⁶ However, *Rape-Me* gives these women both a ‘heroism’ and a ‘degeneracy’ that is worth exploring.¹⁰⁷

The term ‘degenerate’ features prominently throughout the novel. To understand the implications of this phrase, it is necessary to isolate the characteristics it has been attached to. Manu and Nadine’s consistent disregard for conventionally feminine behaviours is often accompanied by the word. Thus, there is space in which to argue that their so-called degeneracy is entangled with their lack of “femaleness”. Lakim, an accompanying male character, goes as far to cite Manu as a cause of degeneration: ‘With you it always has to degenerate.’¹⁰⁸ Although, given that this comment follows Lakim having hit Manu as punishment for her verbally abusing him, it in some sense provides further evidence for how degeneracy and (a lack of) conventional female behaviour – in this instance, submissiveness – become entwined throughout the book. While both protagonists display some inclination towards conventional femininity – ‘She’s careful to open a beer *before* doing her nails’ – these incidents are largely undercut by the aggression, and misogyny, exhibited by the two protagonists.¹⁰⁹ Degeneration, defined as something ‘having fallen below a normal or desirable level, especially in physical or moral qualities’, is an interesting term to associate with Nadine and Manu then.¹¹⁰ Through the employment of this word, Desportes is associating those who fail to perform their gender correctly – or consistently – with something

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23. It is interesting to note that when presenting this - one of the earliest examples of female violence contained within the book - Desportes quickly establishes this base-line for female aggression as something inflicted on the self.

¹⁰⁶ Friedan, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Desportes, p. 56.

¹⁰⁸ Desportes, p. 37.

¹⁰⁹ Desportes, p. 15, my emphasis.

¹¹⁰ Dictionary.com (no title) (n.d.), <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/degenerate?s=t> [accessed 13 September 2017]

that ultimately falls short of societal expectations. With this proposal in mind, it seems pertinent now to turn to theorists who have explored gender in society in greater detail.

Judith Butler, in her work on gendered behaviour, proposed that gender is something that is performed. Individuals encounter and subsequently rehearse these acts throughout their daily lives: 'performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual.'¹¹¹ Butler believes that gender is the result of a 'tacit agreement to perform... various acts of gender' that work to create the idea as a whole.¹¹² Gender as a social and cultural construct then works to 'constitute that which it enunciates'.¹¹³ This concept of gender performativity has become a central point of focus in both gender and feminist studies. Butler's initial publications on these matters remain so influential that they have since become the foundation on which many gender theories have been based.¹¹⁴ Broadly speaking, the most traditional gender norms to be employed in society have limited women to being 'heterosexual homemakers', 'socially and psychologically incomplete until they had [have] a man to marry'.¹¹⁵ Women who failed to adhere to these norms were considered 'unfeminine or even male-identified'.¹¹⁶ This only perpetuated the belief that women thought of as 'domineering, strident, and aggressive', in fact 'just wanted to be men'.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p. xv. Butler has discussed this at length, most recently commenting: 'It is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views... have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticisms, but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations' (p. xv). Thus, while there is an element of changeability to performativity, it is imperative to note that while Butler may have modified her discussions, the core elements have remained the same: 'performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act", but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (cited from Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) p. xii).

¹¹² Butler, p. 190.

¹¹³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) p. 164.

¹¹⁴ Alison Stone, *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007): 'Gender only exists insofar as we engage in social practices that are organized by norms about gender' (p.66). In accordance with this idea Stone also commented: 'One only remains feminine to the extent that one keeps engaging in the relevant practices' (p. 61-2).

¹¹⁵ Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* (California: Alyson Publications, 2004) p. 6.

¹¹⁶ Wilchins, p. 128.

¹¹⁷ Wilchins, p. 7.

To negate the limitations imposed on women by traditional gender roles, theorists have proposed a form of ‘gender liberation’ achieved by engaging activities that challenge traditional gender performances, and thus create non-binary identities.¹¹⁸ Nadine and Manu are surely illustrative of such liberation in practice. Despite their occasional propensity towards performing “feminine” acts, such “womanly” behaviour cannot be sustained by either of them. In fact, this is one point of connection between *Rape-Me* and *The Driver’s Seat* as Lise, too, struggles to maintain her femininity. The three women share moments of performance wherein they adhere to “feminine” behaviours, to varying degrees of success. Lise’s attempt to go clothes shopping is one example. Similarly, Manu’s “feminine” consideration of her painted nails is undercut by the comment: ‘she really would smash his face’ that occurs on the same page.¹¹⁹ We later observe displays of feminine behaviour from women who are ‘fixing their makeup in front of the mirrors’ in a public bathroom.¹²⁰ This incident is interesting in its juxtaposition with the emphasis placed on Nadine’s lack of femininity. When this incident takes place Nadine and Manu have already launched their destructive careers and Nadine is now a murderer.¹²¹ When Nadine studies her own reflection, she finds her appearance disfigured: ‘Nadine looks at herself in the hand dryer. It deforms her face, makes her look like a wild, grinning monster.’¹²² Despentes takes up the theme of female physicality in a broader sense through Manu’s alienation from her own body. Butler notes that in many societies women have become ‘the object of exchange’, implying women as a commodity. Manu displays a similar lack of feelings of ownership when, immediately after she has been raped, she compares her genitalia to a parked car in a poor neighbourhood,

¹¹⁸ Bradley, p. 21.

¹¹⁹ Despentes, p. 15.

¹²⁰ Despentes, p. 91.

¹²¹ Prior to this we observe Nadine strangle her flatmate: ‘Nadine’s hands have instinctively found their target on Severine’s neck and are squeezing it with implacable rage.’ (p. 58)

¹²² Despentes, p. 91.

explaining: ‘you don’t leave anything valuable in it ‘cause you can’t keep it from being broken into’.¹²³ This is followed by her assessment that: ‘It’s just that things happen... when you’re a girl.’¹²⁴ The significance of these comments is two-fold. Chiefly, they communicate a belief system towards women, as exhibited by a patriarchal society. Secondly, they illustrate that these ideas are so engrained that women too will articulate them, regardless of their personal beliefs. This can be aligned with Butler’s ideas regarding the acceptance of gender: gender roles are reinforced through habit and repetition to the extent that they become natural to us, even when they are obstructive to one’s standing as a valued individual. Furthermore, this has been discussed more recently by the likes of Emer O’Toole who retells her personal experience of this style of behaviour, wherein she exhibited sexist attitudes towards women to comply with what she thought was society’s preferred belief system: ‘within a sexist society one way that we, as women, can gain power is to take on sexist values ourselves’.¹²⁵

These patriarchal views are both returned to and distorted throughout the text. Nadine’s recurring dream, which occurs in a later chapter, is one such example of this. The dream both confirms patriarchal views of women and distorts them, through Nadine’s domesticity and use of violence respectively. In contrast with the patriarchal views expressed by Manu, Nadine’s dream – wherein she has to hide a body – is refreshingly nonconformist. Significantly, Nadine’s attempts to hide the body are thwarted by the arrival of guests: ‘She cuts it in pieces and somebody comes over, so she tosses the pieces all over the place and has to take tea.’¹²⁶ ‘In the dream, she has to make conversation as if nothing has happened,

¹²³ Desportes, p. 52.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Emer O’Toole, *Girls Will Be Girls* (Orion: London, 2016) p. 50.

¹²⁶ Desportes, p. 58-9.

although there's a severed arm sticking out from under the chest of drawers.'¹²⁷ This bleed between the role of the domesticated woman and the violent one is interesting. Desportes achieves this blend of female roles in a notably more overt manner to how Spark explores the theme. However, Spark does introduce this idea through Lise's parodied desire for domesticity that ultimately manifests as violence. Throughout *Rape-Me*, Nadine finds it challenging to deviate from "feminine" behavioural patterns. The dream is an early articulation of this inner conflict. The use of the dream also invokes ideas of expressed and unexpressed desires. Desportes puts (the desire for) domesticity and violence at a similar level of importance here, perhaps implying both are as "inherent" as the other, to subversive effects.

A similar subversion of "inherent" femininity can be found in Manu's rape scene. Expressing his expectation that women are emotional, one rapist voices dismay that Manu does not cry during her assault: 'Look at her, she isn't even crying.'¹²⁸ He later remarks: 'she's not even a woman'.¹²⁹ This expectation of gendered emotional reactions is discussed repeatedly throughout the novel. The protagonists address it themselves following one particularly violent action. Nadine has murdered her flatmate and absconded with a stranger when she remarks: 'It isn't any time to feel good, but I feel great. I don't have the right emotion'.¹³⁰ Manu supports this improper emotional response with: 'I feel good, too, I don't see what's wrong about that.'¹³¹ It is interesting that while Nadine is troubled by her lack of (feminine) emotions, Manu appears to be accepting of this "lack". Indeed Nadine often finds herself preoccupied with how she should behave, or feel: which emotions she should

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Desportes, p. 50.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Desportes, p. 102.

¹³¹ Ibid.

perform.¹³² Manu is more liberated in Bradley's sense of the term: Bradley sees liberation as something gained through 'challenging the rules of performance to create 'transgressive' gender activities'.¹³³ In this sense, Manu's lack of conventional femininity works to 'break down binary thinking on gender'.¹³⁴

Conventional, and indeed unconventional, performances of gender are addressed through secondary characters also. Tarek is a male associate with whom Nadine and Manu establish a platonic relationship. During their initial encounter, Tarek 'studies them [Nadine and Manu] closely', commenting: 'For girls on the run, you don't look too upset.'¹³⁵ This anticipated upset, which follows the reference to their gender, ties these two considerations together. It is also note-worthy that Tarek refers to Nadine and Manu as 'girls' rather than women, implying an assumed innocence that does not belong to their characters. When Tarek discusses the pair's most recent crime though, this innocence evaporates: 'they said you'd fired on a woman and the father of a family.'¹³⁶ It is clear that a shift has occurred, moving Nadine and Manu from 'girls' to murderers. Thus, it is possible to read Tarek's later remark as a continued critique of their gender: 'It's hard to believe that it's you; if I'd passed you on the bus, I wouldn't have batted an eyelash.'¹³⁷ Manu's response, 'That's what makes it the ultimate scam, that's how we get away with it', highlights her awareness of this gender bias also.¹³⁸ Lacan proposed that women are 'in need of masking', or are 'in some unspecified sense in need of protection'.¹³⁹ For Nadine and Manu their gender becomes a mask, which is

¹³² In accordance with this, let us not forget that it was Nadine who, when confronted with the conventional femininity of the women in the public lavatories, found her own appearance to be monstrous by comparison.

¹³³ Bradley, p. 21.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Desportes, p.173.

¹³⁶ Desportes, p. 174.

¹³⁷ Desportes, p. 174.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Butler, p. 63.

arguably what allows them to maintain their violence for so long. Despite all evidence to the contrary, their gender marks them as harmless.

A complementary dynamic can be observed later in the novel, when Nadine and Manu encounter a male architect whose house they have broken into with the intention of stealing from him. Given their propensity for violence, it is perhaps inevitable that the man will be harmed during this robbery. This man, though – this ‘superhero’ – when under threat from two women, tries determinedly to rationalise their behaviour: ‘You must have suffered a lot to have come to these extremes’.¹⁴⁰ He guesses that they have lived through terrible ‘wildernesses’ to have led them to such violent behaviours.¹⁴¹ Desportes is here addressing the same trope that she critiqued in the early parts of her novel. Now, however, another level of critique is introduced. It becomes apparent that ‘He doesn’t imagine for one moment that they can harm him’.¹⁴² Peter Vronsky’s real-life research on societal attitudes towards violent women suggests that the fictional architect’s underestimation here closely mirrors reality. With regard to female serial killers and mass murderers, Vronsky comments: ‘the notion of a female serial killer has not entered our popular consciousness of fear or into our alarmed imaginations’.¹⁴³ In fact, Vronsky extends this further with the belief that female killers ‘border on the comic or titillating for many of us’.¹⁴⁴ Desportes constructs the architect incident as illustrative of these societal beliefs, depicting common assumptions on gendered

¹⁴⁰ Desportes, p. 218.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Desportes, p. 219.

¹⁴³ Peter Vronsky, *Female Serial Killers: How and Why Women Becomes Monsters* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2007) p.3.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. Vronsky establishes a good foundation for this discussion in the introduction to his work. While acknowledging that violence is chiefly associated ‘with the male and the masculine... thought to be implicit in the male physique’ (p. 5), Vronsky overtly addresses the increase in female violence too, whilst also hinting at the implications of this shift in gendered behaviour. While ‘women have been generally perceived to be capable of committing only “expressive” violence – an uncontrollable release of bottled-up rage or fear’ (p.6), Vronsky proposes that we have in fact vastly overlooked the violent tendencies inherent in women: ‘in the end, when we negate the feminine, all that remains is a potential murderer’ (p. 7).

violence. Rather than appearing fearful, the architect finds the afternoon ‘quite exciting’, as ‘he holds out his wrists’ for Nadine to tie.¹⁴⁵ This flirtation is continued when the architect informs Nadine that he wishes they had met elsewhere: ‘I really regret that fate didn’t make us meet... under other circumstances.’¹⁴⁶ The man here persists in sexualising both women, exhibiting no real awareness of their threat. Despite the fact that neither Nadine nor Manu are anything like the female action heroes discussed in my introduction, their violent threat triggers the architect’s need to make them ‘heterosexually attractive’.¹⁴⁷

However, it must be noted that the architect does eventually exhibit fear, when ‘Manu has just pointed her gun at the back of his head.’¹⁴⁸ Nadine’s own remark – ‘doing you in will do me a lot of good’ – implies that she will find something therapeutic in this kill.¹⁴⁹ The architect repeatedly approaches the situation with the assumption that both women are somehow vulnerable, and susceptible to him. He informs Nadine that something about her: ‘makes me trust you.’¹⁵⁰ He maintains ‘his flirtation’ throughout, commenting: ‘I see you as beautiful’ despite the imminent danger Nadine poses.¹⁵¹ This rehash of the image of an inherently trustworthy and always-beautiful woman re-establishes the idealised image that neither protagonist conforms to. Thus, Nadine’s desire to destroy him, and his views, is arguably symbolic of her relationship towards gender. This commentary on gender continues when Manu describes Nadine as an ‘Avenging Angel’, suggesting something honourable and politically-motivated about the murder she has just committed.¹⁵² Significantly then, it is the

¹⁴⁵ Despentes, p. 219.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Stasia, p. 243.

¹⁴⁸ Despentes, p. 220.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

architect's steadfast belief in the weakness of women that ultimately secures his violent death.¹⁵³

The murder itself is also note-worthy. Manu, despite being the more dominant character, hands the responsibility of the kill to Nadine: 'Fatty, kill this asshole for me.'¹⁵⁴ While Manu is not reluctant towards violence, there is something notably feminine in her handling of this situation. Vronksy notes that a conventional expression of female aggression sees women encouraging others 'to commit a violent act' on their behalf.¹⁵⁵ This incident alone does not reinstate conventional femininity within Manu. She has been a notably "masculine" woman throughout much of the text. Rather it illustrates how, in Desportes's novel, one individual can move fluidly between conventionally male and female behavioural patterns. It is worth considering additional incidents that illustrate this same shift. A memorable moment comes when Nadine discovers Manu 'crouched in a corner, wearing just her high heels... studying some blood flowing from between her legs.'¹⁵⁶ While Nadine – notably more gender-rigid – 'judgementally considers' this, Manu views menstruation with fascination, commenting: 'you end up liking it.'¹⁵⁷ Desportes is here addressing various ideas that exist around menstruation. While Nadine judges, Manu instead studies this articulation of her biological gender, and comes to embrace it. The latter's unashamed appreciation of this

¹⁵³ It arguably cannot be determined whether the women would have murdered the architect regardless of sexist or gendered comments made on his part. However, it holds a significance that it is the overt confidence – 'you're confident enough to really let it show' – he has that these women will not harm him, or rather, that he can charm them into not harming him, that pushes Nadine and Manu towards their kill. His reliance on conventional gender stereotyping appears to offend both women more than anything else that occurs in their exchange with him, which contributes further to the pertinence of this scene.

¹⁵⁴ Desportes, p. 221.

¹⁵⁵ Vronsky, p. 46. This is discussed alongside the myth of 'female "masked criminality" where as an offender the woman is perceived as instigating and inspiring violence' (p. 47). It is imperative to note that Vronsky documents these notions as perceptions of female aggression, and by no means cites them as the defining manifestations of such behaviour.

¹⁵⁶ Desportes, p. 151.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 'It' here being a reference to her menstrual flow.

exclusively female bodily function is a poignant moment with regards to her attitude towards gender.

While Manu appreciates female biology above, an earlier chapter sees her physically distort it. After taking possession of a gun, Manu wedges ‘the piece between her stomach and trousers.’¹⁵⁸ It is not only the barrel, but also the placement of it alongside Manu’s genitalia that establishes phallic imagery. There is an obvious significance to Manu’s commandeering of this phallic symbolism, the bestowing of a phallus upon her own body. Manu’s behaviour appears to endorse the Freudian idea that women innately desire a penis.¹⁵⁹ Actually, it is the power that is intrinsically bound to the gun-penis that has become desirable. By acquiring this gun-penis, Manu is again blurring the lines between biological gender and exhibited gender.

However, the strongest example of gender subversion occurs at the novel’s climax. Here Despentes reconstructs the physicality of one of her main characters in such a manner as to suggest a switch in gender. Somewhat unexpectedly, it is Nadine rather than Manu who experiences this transformation. She borrows ‘a black summer suit from the architect, as well as a white shirt and a tie’.¹⁶⁰ With her hair cut shorter too, Nadine is taken aback by her own appearance, while at the same time being ‘surprised she didn’t think of it earlier’.¹⁶¹ This displacement of gender by donning clothes associated with the “other” gender – drag, if you will – has been integral to discussions relating to gender’s fluidity. Drag, according to Butler, ‘is meant to establish that “reality” is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be’.¹⁶² The

¹⁵⁸ Despentes, p. 119.

¹⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality, and Other Works*. Translated under James Strachey. (London: Vintage, 2001)

¹⁶⁰ Despentes, p. 227 – 8.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Butler, p. xxv (*Gender Trouble*) To contextualise Butler’s comment regarding drag, she defines it as something that ‘plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed.’ (p. 187) (*Gender Trouble*) This is something that happens on more than one occasion within *Rape-Me*.

gender displacement exhibited in *Rape-Me* supports this idea. Desportes's book endeavours to make gender fluid, ultimately critiquing our perceptions of physical/biological "realities". While this chimes with Butler's comments on performativity, it also highlights limitations placed upon the representations of violent women. Our belief in the violent woman can only be expanded so far. Beyond that point, to observe a woman as 'built and programmed to destroy', we must observe a destabilising of her physical gender, too. She must appear as masculine – or, more strictly, as a male, as is illustrated by Nadine.¹⁶³

Desportes's final critique of gender follows Nadine's gender-shift. Here, we observe the two protagonists during their climactic act of violence. During a seemingly innocuous visit to 'an isolated grocery by the side of the road', Manu pulls her gun on the owner.¹⁶⁴ The owner shoots before Manu does, resulting in her death. Butler writes: 'We regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right'.¹⁶⁵ Viewed in this light, it is interesting to note that Manu – not Nadine – is killed at the end of the book. 'Manu goes into the grocery store without waiting', and soon after this Nadine hears two gunshots.¹⁶⁶ It is significant here that it is Manu who has consistently challenged gender roles throughout the novel, much more so than Nadine. However, Nadine now appears as a man, thus making an interesting comment on gendered punishments. Manu has failed to "do" her gender properly, and appears to have keenly enjoyed these transgressions. As such, she puts herself in a position to be punished. Arguably, Nadine is now failing to perform her biological gender, too. She is, however, adopting characteristics that traditionally belong to the gender she now displays. Consider Nadine's reaction to Manu's death, for example: 'Her thoughts are on automatic. But nothing

¹⁶³ Vronksy, p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ Desportes, p. 229.

¹⁶⁵ Butler, p. 190 (*Gender Trouble*)

¹⁶⁶ Desportes, p. 230. Following this we learn: 'Manu is on the floor. Nadine's seen enough bodies to know what it looks like. To understand that when that much blood flows from the throat, you can call it a corpse.' (p. 230)

brings up nothing, there's no emotion... It's a clinical process.'¹⁶⁷ Nadine reacts in a clipped and unemotional fashion, evocative of a stereotypically male response rather than becoming emotional, and "womanly". When Nadine appears female, there are occasions where acting in an "unfeminine" way causes her conflict. In shifting her physical appearance, Nadine has become inclined to perform the anticipated behaviours of the gender she appears as, rather than her biological gender. The fact that she is incarcerated rather than murdered is something that supports this shift, given that (transgressive) males are typically punished in a different fashion to (transgressive) females: broadly speaking bad women must die. This gendered punishment can be found in a host of texts, *The Driver's Seat* being one example. Lise's death, much like Manu's, is also illustrative of the ways in which fiction has been taught to punish "degenerate" women.

To conclude then, it appears that while Desportes establishes her narrative by adhering to the trope of the victim-turned-aggressor, she also endeavours to move beyond this trope. Nadine and Manu both engage in gratuitous violence and, through this, Desportes introduces intriguing ideas regarding the violent capabilities of women, and challenges traditional frameworks for narrating female violence. While both protagonists are victims, drawn towards violence by necessity, it is apparent that there is something enjoyable in their violence also.¹⁶⁸ At some point in the narrative, their motivations shift toward something altogether "unfeminine". Consider how 'Nadine's hands have instinctually found their target on Severine's neck' and, later, how Manu advises Nadine to 'go with instinct.'¹⁶⁹ While there

¹⁶⁷ Desportes, p. 230.

¹⁶⁸ In this construction of female violence, Desportes has disputed an alleged second-wave feminism 'tendency to associate female criminality with an aspiration for freedom from slavery and oppression at the hands of "the patriarchy"' (Vronsky, p. 8). Far from validating female violence as a form of liberation, Desportes has allowed these women to become increasingly violent merely because of their apparent enjoyment for it, which is ultimately what makes *Rape-Me* so relevant.

¹⁶⁹ Desportes, p. 58; p. 112.

are moments of moral scruple, these go unheeded.¹⁷⁰ ‘Manu... sticks the barrel underneath the woman’s jaw and pulls the trigger without hesitating’ while, seconds before this, Nadine: ‘takes the face in both hands and smashes it against the wall as hard as she can’.¹⁷¹

Admittedly, the death of the transgressive female and the survival of the transgressive male – albeit symbolically – is a somewhat disappointing ending, from a feminist point of view, unless it is read as a critique of these conventions. In any case, Desportes has still succeeded in constructing two hugely influential violent women. Throughout *Rape-Me* Desportes illustrates the malleability of gender and violence to great effect, and ultimately succeeds in writing two women who, through their use of violence, begin to transcend gendered limitations.

¹⁷⁰ Desportes, p. 66: ‘She didn’t think she’d fire. She’d come to it, but she’d thought something would stop her’.

¹⁷¹ Desportes, p. 116.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN GILLIAN FLYNN'S *GONE GIRL*

Betty Friedan famously asked: 'When did women decide to give up the world and go back home?'¹⁷² The emergence of the Domestic Noir genre may be encouraging contemporary readers to ask this same question. Characterised by first-person narratives from the point of view of flawed, often immoral, female protagonists, this genre is rooted in a domestic setting. Here the authors – largely female themselves – pervert this stereotypically feminine space into a setting for female revolt. The genre is illustrative of the multiple ways in which housewifery can malfunction in modern society; the domestic sphere it depicts is often also the site of a troubled marriage.¹⁷³ This is reminiscent of Friedan's comment: 'it is not surprising that the bodies and minds of healthy women begin to rebel as they try to adjust' to their housewife status.¹⁷⁴

Domestic Noir, as a term, was coined by Julia Crouch in 2013 and has since been adopted by a range of critics.¹⁷⁵ In her discussion of the genre, Crouch comments: 'Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely... with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants.'¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Friedan, p. 24.

¹⁷³ Romantic entanglements are a prominent theme within the genre: while Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* discusses a defective marriage, Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* (2015) discusses both on-going and long-extinguished relationships, while *Before I Go To Sleep* by S.J. Watson (2011) (incidentally, one of the few male authors writing within this genre) presents a hugely distorted – and, it transpires, fabricated – marital relationship. In contrast to this, however, Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003), which was published long before this sub-genre was established, also firmly belongs within the Domestic Noir boundaries. It is a first person narrative of a working mother who finds herself spending more time at home following the birth of her child. The child – male, significantly – is problematic for the protagonist in that she struggles to bond with him, and vice versa, and their relationship evolves into something distorted and ultimately fatal. Thus, while many authors may steer their discussions towards the interplay between marital relationships and domesticity, it is worth noting that this genre has expanded its discussion beyond that framework.

¹⁷⁴ Friedan, p. 235.

¹⁷⁵ Julia Crouch, *Genre Bender* (2013) <http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender> [accessed 7 August 2017]

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

The interest in Domestic Noir is fuelled by the runaway commercial success of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. However there were several novels published prior to *Gone Girl* that also complied with Crouch's genre specifications. These related novels have not prompted the same level of controversy that has become attached to Flynn's work. Despite this controversy, readers have also found something undeniably attractive about *Gone Girl*, which details the dysfunctional relationship of Amy and Nick Dunne. Amy and Nick are married, but their happiness is questioned from the opening of the novel. Soon after we are introduced to both characters, Amy goes missing. Through a medley of narratives – Nick's, Amy's, and Amy's fabricated diary – Flynn tells the story of an adulterous husband, framed by his wife for her own murder, only for the pair to reunite at the climax of the story. While Nick initially portrays his spouse as 'triumphant, wifely', Amy in fact functions as a subversion of the stereotypical housewife.¹⁷⁷ The Happy Housewife who finds, in Friedan's terms, a 'mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor' cannot be found in *Gone Girl*.¹⁷⁸ In fact, Flynn constructs a narrative that not only dismisses the Happy Housewife, but creates a space in which we can question how such a woman ever existed.

Gone Girl is a story about a jilted woman seeking revenge on her husband; a familiar trope. Amy is 'the wronged wife for whom hell hath no fury', yet we still cannot quite understand the extremity of her response.¹⁷⁹ It has been proposed that a problematic element of the story is not that it stretches readers' credulity too far, but that it in fact resonates with

¹⁷⁷ Flynn, p. 8.

¹⁷⁸ Friedan, p. 8. While the stereotypical housewife may have found great enjoyment in waxing her kitchen floor, there is a wonderful symmetry to be noted between this comment and the film adaptation of *Gone Girl*. In the film, the only time that we see Amy (Rosamund Pike) content with cleaning the kitchen floor is when she is cleaning away fabricated evidence that will help towards framing her husband for her murder. A subtle allusion, arguably, however in terms of Amy's housewife duties and her enjoyment when engaging in them, this one moment in itself is illustrative of an interesting shift brought in by the Domestic Noir sub-genre.

¹⁷⁹ Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, *Female Villains and False Accusations: A feminist defence of Gone Girl*. (2014) <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/10/female-villains-and-false-accusations-feminist-defence-gone-girl> [Accessed 14 April 2017]

readers' desires: 'It has found a creepy, confused, and troubling part of us, and expressed it.'¹⁸⁰ Several critics have also proposed that *Gone Girl* has done a disservice to women and contemporary feminisms. David Cox's discussion is one such example, wherein Cox argues that *Gone Girl* has re-established gender stereotypes for the worse. He comments on Amy's diary, 'faked to capitalise on the presumption of female victimhood', which is then doubly distorted by the reveal that the details within it are fabricated.¹⁸¹ Cox's concern seems to be the amount of readers, or viewers, who are adopting the belief that women 'are self-serving, venomous and deceitful but can get away with whatever they want'.¹⁸² Rather than observing the likes of Amy Dunne as a shift towards equality, in terms of immoral behaviours and their gendered associations, the likes of Cox are instead focussing on Amy as a manifestation of immorality misplaced on women. A stark contrast indeed when pitched against Ellie Levenson's discussion, wherein she argues: 'Women can be stupid, they can be vindictive and they can be shits' but the mark of real feminism, and equality, amongst women is 'applying the same standards to determining whether they are stupid, vindictive or shits as we would to men.'¹⁸³ Given this range of reactions and comments, it seems a mistake to simply dismiss *Gone Girl* as a trashy, easy-to-read novel with (anti-)feminist undertones. I will argue that the novel is representative of a new style of equalitarian-feminism, and as such warrants academic attention.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Joshua Rothman, *What "Gone Girl" Is Really About*. (2014) <http://www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/gone-girl-really> [Accessed 14 April 2017]

¹⁸¹ David Cox, *Gone Girl revamps gender stereotypes – for the worse*. (2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/oct/06/gone-girl-female-stereotype-women> [accessed 19 February 2017]

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ellie Levenson, *The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2009) p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ It should be noted that 'equalitarian-feminism' is being employed as a generalised reference towards the recent influx of contemporary authors now trying to open a dialogue about bad, evil, or immoral women. As feminist speakers work to expand the boundaries that previously held women firmly on their moral pedestals, the importance of texts such as *Gone Girl* cannot be undervalued.

Significantly, much of *Gone Girl*'s narrative – both Amy's and Nick's perspectives – echoes Friedan's manifesto. Nick's ideals of femininity, for example, that shape much of his early narrative are worth considering in this context. It is Nick who, after describing Amy cooking, states: 'If I took her in my arms, she would smell like berries and powdered sugar.'¹⁸⁵ In his clichéd representation, Nick is embracing the trope of 'the gentle wife', 'the good, pure woman on the pedestal'.¹⁸⁶ He continues to do so throughout, albeit with increasing disappointment when Amy fails to comply with these ideals. Nick's later perspective, in regard to Amy's reluctance towards housework, is also reminiscent of ideals found within Friedan's description of the feminine mystique. Nick comments on 'the principle of the thing', explaining: 'I work a lot of hours, and Amy doesn't, and I think that it would be good for her if she did some basic maintenance.'¹⁸⁷ The very phrasing – 'it would be good *for her*' – is further illustrative of ideas within the mystique framework. Friedan argues that, within a patriarchal society: 'Housework, washing dishes, diaper-changing' would need to share the importance of 'splitting atoms' and 'penetrating outer space', in order to increase fulfilment in housewives.¹⁸⁸ It is essential for female self-esteem, according to this patriarchal society, that these behaviours are portrayed as worthwhile and therefore are of benefit to the woman and her family. Nick is endorsing this perspective when he places the benefit of housework with Amy, rather than with himself. These ideals are also shared by Gilpin, the male police officer present during one of Nick's many police interviews. Gilpin remarks: 'You're an old-fashioned guy, right? I'm the same.'¹⁸⁹ It is arguably a testimony to how old-fashioned these views are, given that they accord with Spark's Mrs. Fiedke, a character

¹⁸⁵ Flynn, p. 8.

¹⁸⁶ Friedan, p. 77; p. 31.

¹⁸⁷ Flynn, p. 202.

¹⁸⁸ Friedan, p. 195.

¹⁸⁹ Flynn, p. 202.

penned in 1970.¹⁹⁰ In the same exchange Gilpin details a conversation with his wife wherein he tells her: ‘Sweetheart, I’ll catch the bad guys... you throw some clothes in the washer now and then.’¹⁹¹ From Nick’s comments about Amy, Gilpin concludes: ‘So you just wanted a housewife’, making the proposition sound ‘reasonable’, to Nick.¹⁹² In addition to Gilpin and Nick, Flynn also uses Amy herself as a mouthpiece on this conception of female domestic roles. Amy’s diary, which is sandwiched around Nick’s own narrative initially, is full of clichés about female behaviour.¹⁹³ Amy remarks that in becoming a wife she has given up her ‘Independent Young Feminist card’.¹⁹⁴ Following this, she comments on her change in behaviour since becoming a wife, that has seen her balance Nick’s checkbook and trim his hair. ‘I’ve gotten so retro’, she comments, adding how she is now: ‘shuffling out the door in my swingy tweed coat, my lips painted red, on the way to the *beauty parlour*’.¹⁹⁵ While Amy finds her behaviour in part ‘ridiculous’, there is a sense of pride when she admits: ‘I spend my days thinking of sweet things to do for him.’¹⁹⁶

However, as this diary narrative continues, Amy quickly shifts from the ideal housewife to ‘a shrill fishwife, or a foolish doormat’.¹⁹⁷ A particularly interesting moment

¹⁹⁰ Spark, p. 72: ‘If we don’t look lively... they’ll be taking over the homes.’ Fiedke’s views are expressed under the guise of keeping men out of the home. However, as a result of this, women must remain in the home and must remain as housewives. Subsequently then, this mirrors the underlying ideas voiced by Nick and Gilpin some forty years later.

¹⁹¹ Interestingly, it is not until Boney – the female police officer present – is brought into the conversation that the gender roles begin to slip, albeit only slightly. Gilpin asks: ‘Rhonda, you were married, did you do the domestic stuff at home?’ To which Rhonda responds: ‘I catch the bad guys too, idiot.’

¹⁹² Friedan, p. 202.

¹⁹³ By way of a disclaimer, it is important to note that the diary entries were largely fictionalised. While this does not automatically discredit what is expressed in these chapters, it is worthwhile to remember that there is room here to introduce a question around the reliability of the narrator.

¹⁹⁴ Flynn, p. 43.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Flynn, p. 45.

¹⁹⁷ Flynn, p. 78. This, alongside other descriptions, makes overt visual comparison with Friedan’s own housewives of her time. In support of this, consider Amy’s later comment: ‘You don’t ever want to be the wife who keeps her husband from playing poker – you don’t want to be the shrew with the hair curlers and the rolling pin.’ (p. 178)

occurs when Amy confronts the topic of housewives directly, critiquing women who are excited by ‘husband care and homemaking’.¹⁹⁸ However, far from criticising these skills, they are in fact ones that she wishes she had: ‘I wish I cared more that Nick always has his favourite toothpaste.’¹⁹⁹ Amy concludes this confession with the image of ‘an unconditionally loving woman whose greatest happiness is making my man happy’, reminiscent again of Friedan’s observations.²⁰⁰ Unwilling to merely ‘live through her husband’, Amy brands this tradition as ‘unsustainable’, commenting: ‘I’m not selfless enough.’²⁰¹ There is a sense of continuity between Lise, Nadine and Manu, and Amy here. All four protagonists illustrate the difficulty of maintaining conventionally feminine roles. This in itself can be read as a critique of these roles and how unattainable they are.

In addition to Amy’s critique of housewifery, she expands her comments beyond the domestic to consider female personas in a broader sense. She articulates some of the most problematic beliefs surrounding women in contemporary society – chiefly, the pre-determined roles they are encouraged to adopt – by listing her own previous personas: ‘Preppy 80s Girl... Brainy ironic Girl... Cool Girl and Loved Wife and Unloved Wife and Vengeful Scorned Wife. Diary Amy.’²⁰² This too is reminiscent of Friedan’s list of roles open to women in the 1960s: ‘modern housewife: wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, chauffeur.’²⁰³ Thus, despite their temporal distance, both texts articulate the limited number of highly gendered roles that have been, and still are, expected of women.

¹⁹⁸ Flynn, p. 159.

¹⁹⁹ Flynn, p. 159.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Friedan, p. 165; Flynn, p. 159.

²⁰² Flynn, p. 266. It is of interest that, when describing the Diary version of herself, Amy remarks that she ‘was meant to be likeable’ (p. 266). The implication of a fabricated niceness here is note-worthy, as are the manipulative qualities that this implies within Amy. Amy’s ability to construct this nice character – designed to make people sympathise with her – has the potential to make an interesting argument towards the changeability of what makes for a “good” woman, and indeed how fictionalised this persona is.

²⁰³ Friedan, p. 19.

Amy's most popular remarks on gender expectations can be found in her Cool Girl speech, considered by David Haglund as '[T]he cultural legacy of the book'.²⁰⁴ Amy explains: 'Nick has decided on a version of me that doesn't exist'.²⁰⁵ She then details the image of herself that she sold to her husband: 'the Cool Girl', 'a hot, brilliant, funny woman'.²⁰⁶ In addition, Amy later explains that being 'cool', in this context, is 'the defining compliment' that can be provided by a man.²⁰⁷ Cool women, she explains: 'never get angry, they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want'.²⁰⁸ Shulamith Firestone, in her *Dialectics of Sex*, argued that '[T]o pretend a coolness she does not feel... would be... painful' to any woman'.²⁰⁹ However, Firestone cites this coolness as something expected of women, despite the pain it causes. This required malleability of emotions lends credence to the idea that 'love... is the pivot of women's oppression today'.²¹⁰ It was, after all, Amy's romantic pursuit of Nick that led to her establishing the Cool Girl persona. In fact, Amy shows herself to be aware of this dynamic, observing how 'women across the nation colluded in our degradation' by conforming to the Cool Girl trope.²¹¹ *Gone Girl* here echoes Friedan once again, who also commented on a system that 'encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity'.²¹² Far from finding oneself in a society that allows for explorations of female identity, Amy explains: 'Every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't,

²⁰⁴ David Haglund, *The Strange Thing David Fincher Does With the "Cool Girl" Speech in Gone Girl* (2014) http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/09/29/gone_girl_movie_cool_girl_speech_is_in_it_but_there_are_no_men_seen_during.html [accessed 18 April 2017] The ideas expressed within this stretch of Amy's monologue have resonated so strongly with a contemporary audience that, far from merely being popular in the context of the novel or the film, the speech has inspired work in other creative practices. The most mainstream example perhaps being the recently released single from Tove Lo, titled 'Cool Girl'.

²⁰⁵ Flynn, p. 136.

²⁰⁶ Flynn, p. 250.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. In addition, it is worth noting the extremes to which this discussion develops, when Amy then remarks: 'Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.' (p. 250).

²⁰⁹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (London: Verso, 2015) p. 125.

²¹⁰ Ibid, p. 113.

²¹¹ Flynn, p. 251 – 2.

²¹² Friedan, p. 53.

then there was something wrong with *you*.²¹³ While *Happy Housewife* and *Cool Girl* exist almost sixty years apart, Friedan too noted that women of the 1950s and 60s were conditioned to believe that if they ‘had a problem... something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself.’²¹⁴

Amy places *Cool Girl* in a notably feminist framework. Her cynical discussion of the archetypal *Cool Girl* makes a parody of female stereotypes. While *Diary-Amy* functioned as an echo of Nick’s earlier narrative, the Amy who narrates the later portions of the book reads as defiant of these roles and becomes distinctly feminist. When discussing ‘pretender women’ (*Cool Girls*), Amy comments: ‘They’re not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they’re pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be.’²¹⁵ The underlying sentiment here is one of female empowerment and certainly reads as feminist. However, accusations of Amy as an anti-feminist character have remained potent in spite of this. While academic discussion on these matters is somewhat limited, many online sources maintain that Amy is ‘entangled with misogynist caricatures’, regardless of her feminist views.²¹⁶ Robert Palmer – a blogger who has discussed *Gone Girl* at length – maintains that the novel is made up of ‘really misogynistic narratives’ that Amy’s *Cool Girl* speech cannot redeem.²¹⁷ However, while *Gone Girl* may feature misogynistic elements, it is the most overtly feminist message

²¹³ Flynn, p. 252.

²¹⁴ Friedan, p. 8. In her opening critique of the housewife role, Friedan talks in detail about this dissatisfaction amongst housewives – later coined as ‘the housewife’s syndrome’ (p. 10) – and how the blame was laid plainly at the doors of the women themselves: ‘The problem was dismissed by telling the housewife she doesn’t realize how lucky she is... What if she isn’t happy – does she think men are happy in this world? Does she really, secretly, still want to be a man?’ (p. 13). Considering this then, aligned with Flynn’s more contemporary views, there is a strong argument to be made that when women fail to live up to society’s ideals, it is consistently considered as a problem with the female gender, rather than a problem with the expectations and constraints placed up it.

²¹⁵ Flynn, p. 251.

²¹⁶ Robert Palmer, *Gone Girl and the Specter of Feminism* (2012) <https://web-beta.archive.org/web/20141016111053/http://interrogatingmedia.com/2012/08/20/gone-girl-and-the-specter-of-feminism/> [accessed 20 April 2017]

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

within the book – namely, the Cool Girl speech – that remains the legacy of the novel.²¹⁸ The speech itself has leaked into popular culture with revisions of Amy’s language appearing throughout various media outlets. The speech, which is ‘fundamentally about wishing all women would think for themselves and pursue their own interests’, transcends the book.²¹⁹ As such, it is problematic to brand *Gone Girl* as being hinged on misogynistic narratives when the novel is in fact hinged more so on Amy’s destabilisation of anti-feminist roles (namely, the Cool Girl and the Happy Housewife).

While Flynn lampoons conventional female roles, she also uses Amy to make a scathing critique of fiction itself, commenting on the extent to which fiction reinforces female stereotyping. While Nick has fallen for a fabricated Amy, her parents did so too, in the form of the *Amazing Amy* book franchise. *Amazing Amy* is a series of books, written by Amy’s parents, whose protagonist is a child protégé who achieves everything her parents hope for. *Amy* is Amy’s ‘literary alter ego’ who has been ‘the Elliot bread and butter’ throughout Amy’s childhood and into her adulthood.²²⁰ *Amazing Amy* becomes a passive aggressive means through which Amy’s parents criticise her shortfalls as a daughter, and as a woman.²²¹ Flynn is making significant points in regards to female roles within fiction here. As explained by Amy: ‘I can’t fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right.’²²² To some extent, fiction here becomes the lens through which “proper” female behaviour can be apprehended, and improper behaviour identified and punished. This gendered perception

²¹⁸ Hadlund.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Flynn, p. 29.

²²¹ ‘When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book... When I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, Amy recommitted to the game.’ (Flynn, p. 30) At this point in the novel it is worth noting that the current *Amazing Amy* book celebrating publication is one in which *Amy* gets married: ‘Rand and Marybeth feared that I might take Amy’s marriage as some jab at my perpetually single state.’ (p. 29).

²²² Flynn, p. 30.

within fiction again hails back to the treatment of “improper” female behaviour in *The Driver’s Seat* and *Rape-Me*. The treatment of fictional females as described above may be at the root of the controversy surrounding *Gone Girl*. Amy is, by conventional standards, a defective woman. She cannot conform to the role of housewife, and her energies largely go towards bettering herself, either through learning new skills or making new associates. Additionally, she expresses no desire towards having children – until the final chapters, where her pregnancy becomes a punishment for her husband. Chiefly, though, it is Amy’s propensity for violence that challenges her femininity. Flynn has, admittedly, incorporated a version of gender equality here in that Nick also appears inclined towards violence.²²³ However, despite his fantasy of ‘smashing in Amy’s busy, busy brain’, Nick is never moved to a violent act – unlike Amy.²²⁴

Initially, Amy’s use of violence is one of the few areas wherein she conforms to conventional female patterns. For example, to end a childhood friendship Amy invents a stalking allegation, after which her friend is forced to move schools.²²⁵ Additionally, when Amy’s violence becomes physical, she initially turns it on herself – another conventionally

²²³ It is worth noting that on several occasions Nick suggests an inherent aggression, which he often attributes to his father. There is an argument to be made then that Flynn, at least occasionally, is supportive of inherent aggression in men, or, as suggested through Nick’s later interactions with Andie, perhaps supportive of an inherent dislike of women within men. Consider how Nick addresses his violence as something passed on through the patriarchal line: ‘I feel my father’s rage rise up in me in the ugliest way.’ (p. 68). In more overt examples of rage, however, Nick at one point expresses a deep-seated desire within him: ‘an urge to kill my wife’ (p. 395). Far from this being exclusive to Amy, though, he narrates another moment of desired violence when talking to Andie, his mistress: ‘I wanted to smack her, right then, the obliviousness, the *girliness*, of her’ (p. 108). What is particularly interesting in this second example is Nick’s reasoning for wanting to hurt Andie. The emphasis in this quotation is one that Flynn uses and, as such, while much of Nick’s desire to hurt Amy appears to be rooted in her endeavours towards sabotaging him, Nick’s desire for violence against Andie seems to be rooted merely in her excessive femaleness.

²²⁴ Flynn, p. 399.

²²⁵ Flynn, p. 326. While this is not aggression – nor violence – in a conventional sense, it can be considered as an articulation of how female aggression manifests itself at a certain age. Vronksy explains that when females hit puberty they are more likely to use their: ‘newly acquired linguistic and social skills to practice aggression. Females begin to use indirect or “masked” aggression, manipulating others to attack or somehow using the social structure to harm their intended victim.’ (p. 46).

feminine display of aggression. We learn that Amy ‘scratched up’ her own face to falsify claims of a physical attack from Desi Collings’ mother.²²⁶ Dockerman suggests that Amy’s ‘vengeance is utterly feminine’ when punishing her husband.²²⁷ In a similar vein to the opening of *Rape-Me*, here the scorned or harmed woman is again permitted a certain level of “feminine” violence. However, it is Amy’s violent murder of Desi that appears as far from typically “female”. We learn that Amy cuts Desi ‘through the jugular’, and how, with a ‘cut like that, he bleeds out in, like, sixty seconds’.²²⁸ It is in this murder – and in Amy’s non-physical violence towards Nick – where audiences will find an answer to the question of whether Amy can be regarded as a feminist icon.

Amy has been branded ‘the crystallization of a thousand misogynist myths and fears about women’, creating a caricature so insulting that it ‘sinks the entire novel’.²²⁹ However, it is dismissive of Flynn’s aims to reduce Amy down to a misguided manifestation of misogyny. Flynn wanted to illustrate that ‘[f]emale violence is a specific brand of ferocity’ and, mourning the absence of female villains in fiction, she asks: ‘Isn’t it time to acknowledge the ugly side?’²³⁰ Subsequently, Amy must be considered alongside Flynn’s feminist standpoint: ‘Women are just as capable of being evil as men.’²³¹ In fact, ‘[b]ald-faced evil from a female character is a wholly unexplored trope’ in mainstream literature, so dependent have authors become on the three tropes initially outlined.²³² *Gone Girl* attempts to expand limitations

²²⁶ Flynn, p. 402.

²²⁷ Dockerman.

²²⁸ Flynn, p. 427. This chapter does see Amy with ‘rope-wreathed wrists... [a] damaged vagina... bruises’. However these are again displays of violence turned in on herself and, far from punishing herself to any degree, these wounds are inflicted merely by way of supporting her narrative of why she was forced to murder Desi. (p. 417).

²²⁹ Palmer.

²³⁰ Flynn.

²³¹ Jane Jones, *Take Us Off The Pedestal, Please: Women Can Be Just As Evil As Men* (2014)

<http://www.ravishly.com/2014/10/20/gone-girl-evil-women-feminism-pedestal> [accessed 20 April 2017]

²³² Matilda Dixon-Smith, *The Gone Girl Problem* (2014) <https://overland.org.au/2014/10/the-gone-girl-problem/> [accessed 20 April 2017]

around female behaviour, taking steps towards equality even with regards to humanity's most unsavoury behaviours – violence and aggression. Amy becomes the manifestation of stereotypically masculine characteristics, but far from being punished, she literally gets away with murder – unlike her violent comrades. Through this Flynn, much like Despenes and Spark, is distorting gendered violence through re-distributing gendered behaviours. Amy's motivation may be "feminine", but her behaviour is not necessarily limited by this. This is a strong feminist message, albeit delivered through a character with her own drawbacks in terms of her psychological authenticity. While Flynn's Amy may be 'a sociopathic, morally indefensible' woman, she is also seemingly unaware of this.²³³ Not only is this problematic in terms of character depth, but it is also challenging to believe. That a woman with Amy's intelligence would not once question such morally reprehensible behaviour sits awkwardly within the book. Furthermore, the lack of psychological realism that sits behind Amy's violence has the potential to destabilise Flynn's comments on gender. Amy's violence is, after all, still dictated by the trope of the woman seeking revenge. With this in mind, one may find grounds on which to accuse Flynn of writing towards the cartoon-like female violence – absent of psychological sophistication – that was introduced in the opening of this paper. While Amy – much like Lise, Nadine, and Manu – employs violence, it is still not to the same extent that violence is enacted by fictional men. Thus, while Flynn shapes a feminist argument through *Gone Girl*, there are still shortfalls to be noted. These, alongside other problematic elements in writing violent females that have been addressed thus far, became motivating factors when crafting my novel, *Never Forget Your First*. Through this work I

²³³ Amanda Dobbins, *Yes Gone Girl Has A Woman Problem* (2014) <http://www.vulture.com/2014/10/yes-gone-girl-has-a-woman-problem.html> [accessed 28 April 2017]

attempt to shift the boundaries that have limited narratives of female violence, in order to illustrate an alternative way of depicting the violent woman.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN *NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST*

In discussions of gender and violence, the dominant focus is male violence enacted against females.²³⁴ Seldom, if ever, do contemporary fictions – even in Domestic Noir – entertain the prospect of an intrinsically violent woman. This is largely due to our belief ‘in an intrinsic non-threatening nature’ within women.²³⁵ Consequently, critical discussions of violent women have been limited. Admittedly, Domestic Noir has opened up new approaches in how we represent female violence, and has raised the question of how deep-rooted violence may be within female psyches. Given that ‘violent offenses by females have been rising significantly’ in recent years, it is still startling to see how few fictional works tackle the issue.²³⁶ Vronksy proposes: ‘when we negate the feminine, all that remains is a potential murderer’.²³⁷ While the likes of *Gone Girl* and *Rape-Me* stage female murderers, both do so in a way that roots violence in victimhood. Both novels suggest a deep-rooted aggression, although the violence is only articulated as a response – namely to adultery and assault. This does not discredit either publication’s contribution to the explorations of female violence. However, through these depictions, *Rape-Me* and *Gone Girl* lend support to the idea of female violence as reactive, rather than something some women can be biologically or psychologically inclined towards. Furthermore, this also illustrates the tendency towards writing violence as gendered. This may be because society is accustomed to viewing behaviours – and indeed holding people accountable for behaviours – through their gender. It is clear then that ‘violence is still almost universally associated with the male’.²³⁸ When

²³⁴ Marinucci: ‘Feminist discussions of the ethics of violence usually focus on men’s violence against women.’ (p. 71).

²³⁵ Vronsky, p. 3.

²³⁶ Vronksy, p. 7.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Vronksy, p. 5.

considering how to apply this research to my own creative work, it appeared to me a worthwhile endeavour to not follow these pre-existing narratives, but to move past them and represent a credible female murderer who kills from desire rather than defence. As a result of this, while gendered expectations do appear in *Never Forget Your First*, they do not dictate nor initially motivate the protagonist's propensity for violence. This was the first of several significant narrative deviations I endeavoured to employ when writing the novel.

Never Forget Your First, while attempting to shift parameters of how female violence is written, does still adhere to many Domestic Noir conventions.²³⁹ It is a first person narrative of a morally flawed female and is heavily rooted in her home life. Alongside the protagonist – Gillian – the novel is largely carried by her relatives or those close to her, which emphasises the domestic boundaries of her life. The novel is essentially a coming-of-age story of a woman who has grown up in a violent household. Through observing her father physically abuse her mother, Gillian is exposed to violence from a young age. However, after the death of her father, Gillian's family dynamic shifts. This allows her to explore violence to a different extent, which ultimately sees the character commit her first murder.²⁴⁰ An additional aspect of the plot is Gillian's relationship with Daniel. He is a young man whom Gillian meets early in the novel, and with whom she establishes a romantic relationship. The interplay between these two elements of the plot is integral to Gillian's explorations of violence. Thus, while the romantic male "foil" complies with the conventions of Domestic Noir, Daniel's presence works towards a different effect than the convention would perhaps encourage.

²³⁹ It is worth noting that when this project was conceived some three years ago, the genre 'Domestic Noir' had not yet been established. While several books had already been published that catered to what would eventually become the conventions of the genre, it is a recent development to provide these novels with an umbrella term.

²⁴⁰ I am not counting the murder of her father here which is left deliberately ambiguous.

The representation of females and violence within the text does adhere, in part, to the trope of female victimhood, although this is not communicated through Gillian herself. In a similar fashion to the narrative structure of *Rape-Me*, this trope is initially employed to emphasise the later subversion of it. The earliest examples of violence in the book illustrate this: here Gillian's father repeatedly physically attacks her mother who appears compliant, even complicit, with this violence. The only exception to this pattern is a single moment of defiance, when Geraldine, Gillian's mother, defends her daughter. Illustrative of female aggression as an extension of the maternal role, Geraldine orders her husband who has grabbed young Gillian around the wrist: 'You get that bloody hand off her.'²⁴¹ The assertive nature of Geraldine's intervention is significant here, too. This non-physical defence adheres to the behavioural pattern of women who suffer 'long-term abuse at the hands of males', leading to: 'Battered Woman Syndrome or Battered Spouse Syndrome'.²⁴² Women in abusive situations seldom proffer a physical intervention against their attackers. As such, Geraldine is to some extent establishing a baseline for female violence within the novel by not exhibiting an inclination towards the levels of aggression that will later be articulated by her daughter. In this sense Geraldine, and the abusive dynamic of her marriage, are working to illustrate 'a society that tolerates and even sanctions men's authority and entitlement to subdue and control a woman'.²⁴³ The conflicting reports offered by neighbours who observed the abuse establish this idea further. The establishment of this belief system felt essential as an introduction to a narrative that aims to subvert it.

Gillian's own behaviour, however, goes beyond the conventional patterns of female violence as depicted in fiction. From A Note From The Narrator we learn that Gillian

²⁴¹ This is a reference to Friedan's assertion that: 'strength, even aggression, is not masculine when... part of the maternal instinct' (p. 160).

²⁴² Vronsky, p. 6.

²⁴³ Crawford and Unger, p. 483.

possessed a ‘curiosity’ for experimenting with animals from a young age: ‘When I was eight years and six months old I squeezed the life out of our family cat.’²⁴⁴ From the beginning there is an attraction to violence within Gillian – long before she observes her father’s violence. This predisposition is then expanded on by the circumstances under which Gillian grew up. Violent adults – or, more specifically, adult serial killers – become more attracted to violence after having been exposed to it, directly or through observations, during their youth.²⁴⁵ Another recognisable trait of will-be-violent adults is cruelty towards animals from a young age; Gillian conforms to this, too, with her box of experiments.²⁴⁶ In fact, Gillian exhibits an emotional attachment to her animal-specimens, calling on them in times of need: ‘it was the best remedy that I could get.’²⁴⁷ Thus, the experiments are not only a symbol of Gillian’s propensity and need for violence, but an intermittent reminder of what she finds comfort in. Gillian is also in her infancy in regards to violence, given that animal cruelty is an early indicator. In all these ways then, Gillian is a psychologically authentic murderer – something that is not established about Lise, Nadine, Manu, or Amy who all use violence as a

²⁴⁴ C.S. Barnes *Never Forget Your First* (University of Birmingham: Unpublished thesis, 2017) p. 1. Gillian incorporates a genuine curiosity to her childlike persona through these recollections. At a later point in this opening, for example, she references having kept a dead bird on her windowsill: ‘I wondered how long it would take to change.’

²⁴⁵ Dr Christopher J Kurtz and Robert D. Hunter, *Dark Truths* (London: Vintage Books Ltd, 2004). This publication – which discusses, at length, the different influences behind psychopathy and associated illnesses – proposes that ‘there is no single causative factor to which the crime of serial murder can be attributed’ (p. 1). However, investigations ‘into the childhood of practically every serial killer reveals an appalling history of abuse’, illustrating how integral this is when shaping a murderer (p. 3). These findings are supported by other investigations into this area noting that ‘Serial killers are almost invariably found to have experienced environmental problems in their early years’ (p. 40). Environmental problems are here referring to broken homes, unconventional father figures, and exposure to a general lack of discipline in their youth (Colin Wilson and Donald Seaman, *The Serial Killers: A Study in the Psychology of Violence* (London: Virgin Books, 2007) p. 40).

²⁴⁶ Wilson and Seaman make reference to a triad of behaviours that, when exhibited in youth, can be telling of violent tendencies. They cite these behaviours as bed-wetting beyond the age of twelve, arson and, as the individual ages, the specific type of arson they are attracted to, and finally cruelty, specifically towards animals at a young age and later towards people. (p. 40)

²⁴⁷ Barnes, p. 10.

response to something; significantly, something intrinsically bound to a male.²⁴⁸ Gillian, by contrast, engages in violence as a response to everyday stressors. The incidents wherein we observe her violence are not intrinsically bound to a male character at all. In fact, her most explicit display of violence is the consequence of a deep surge of emotion triggered by her mother. When Gillian intimately kills a cat in Chapter Four, this appears to be a response to her mother's behaviour at Gillian's father's funeral. Friedan describes female-to-female violence to manifest as 'hostility' and 'a few barbs', rather than explicit aggression.²⁴⁹ It is significant then that in a situation that could provoke passive-aggression, Gillian instead responds to this emotion with a physical act of violence. Furthermore, while Gillian's violence is not exclusively a response to men, it is by no means a response to female conflicts, either. In fact, like many other human behaviours, it appears to be a response to the general challenges of life.

Lise, Nadine, Manu, and Amy all interact with violence differently – both to each other and to the violence enacted by Gillian. *The Driver's Seat*, on many occasions, allows Lise to make a flirtation of her violence: consider again the police officer, the man in the hotel bar, the sexualised murder. *Rape-Me* depicts Nadine and Manu unashamedly engaging in violence, embracing their "incorrect" emotional responses, and viewing their rampage as an opportunity to leave behind a legacy: both women want to leave witnesses. Meanwhile *Gone Girl's* Amy adopts a pragmatic approach to her use of violence. It becomes a tool with which she achieves her goals: it secures her popularity in school, it allows her dominance in her marriage, and it later allows her to murder a man. The purpose of violence changes across *The*

²⁴⁸ Lise's attraction to finding an appropriate mate/murderer allows her to express her violence in the form on her own death. Nadine and Manu are attracted to violence in response to a masculine society that has repeatedly abused them both. Amy's most extreme exhibit of violence is due to her husband having committed adultery, and subsequently forced Amy into a role that she does not wish to occupy.

²⁴⁹ Friedan, p. 288.

Driver's Seat, *Rape-Me*, and *Gone Girl*, although all texts employ violence so that their protagonists may achieve something. In contrast to these examples, *Never Forget Your First* establishes a different purpose for female violence. Gillian reads as an extreme of female aggression, not dissimilar to the violent extremes performed by Nadine and Manu. However, it is Gillian's self-awareness of this violence that has the potential to prompt a deeper reader-consideration. While the above women use violence as a method to achieve something, Gillian approaches it as a deep-rooted need – something she is not only aware of, but is actively feeding in a way that her female contemporaries have not.

An appropriate point of comparison here is how this violence sits alongside that of male serial killers. A both popular and relevant example of this comes from Jeff Lindsay's *Dexter* series. These books allow for a psychopath to explore his own thoughts and feelings with regard to his need for violence. Dexter makes reference to a Dark Passenger – his need to kill – as an autonomous individual housed within him. Throughout the series, Dexter goes to great lengths to try and understand the intricacies of this need.²⁵⁰ Similarly, Gillian too goes to great lengths in order to understand her violence. We learn early on that she knows it is not socially acceptable behaviour: 'despite my desire to normalise it, my growing intelligence hindered my adoption of that belief with any real conviction.'²⁵¹ Chapters Five and Nineteen are devoted to Gillian analysing her feelings and behaviours, too. In Chapter Five, Gillian goes as far as to compare her violent urges to entirely normal behaviours, such as over-eating or smoking. Through this she opens a dialogue with her reader wherein she does not necessarily endeavour to normalise the behaviour but rather to explain it through more approachable comparisons, which at the very least serves towards rationalising it (to herself).

²⁵⁰ Jeff Lindsay, *The Dexter Series* (London: Orion, 2005 – 2015)

²⁵¹ Barnes, p. 2.

She also opens a dialogue with her therapist about her aggression, commenting: ‘I have these urges.’²⁵² While their conversations are cryptic, it is still apparent that Gillian has an awareness of what is housed within her. Furthermore, her acknowledgement of the necessity for hiding this behaviour is telling also; she is aware of the immorality of her actions. This provides another departure between Gillian and her contemporaries. Neither Lise nor Amy acknowledge their violence as immoral, while Nadine and Manu do, but refuse to either hide or change their behaviours.

While *Never Forget Your First* attempts an alternative narration of female violence, it is, naturally, not without its problems. With regards to female violence, there is potential for Gillian’s aggression to be read as a re-distribution of the aggression harboured by her mother. The decision to explore domestic violence through Gillian’s parents was a deliberate one. As such, while Gillian observes abuse, it is significant that she is never physically harmed herself, thus minimising her victimhood. However, Friedan discusses female aggression in relation to ‘the maternal instinct’ and as such Gillian’s violence could be considered an inversion of this.²⁵³ Alternatively, when Gillian kills her father, this may create a space in which Gillian is committing violence as a transferred form of self-defence, performing an act that her mother is not able to engage in. Admittedly, there is some ambiguity in what triggers Gillian’s violence in the incident of her father’s death. The comment made by her father – ‘You’re hardly as experienced as your mum.’ – appears to encourage Gillian’s violent outburst.²⁵⁴ However, her father’s death is something Gillian has been attracted to for some time: ‘This scenario had been constructed and re-imagined repeatedly.’²⁵⁵ The implication here is that her father’s comment, whilst encouraging her aggression, was not the original

²⁵² *Ibid*, p. 128.

²⁵³ Friedan, p. 160.

²⁵⁴ Barnes, p. 13.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 14.

catalyst for it, as Gillian's desire to kill him outdates this exchange taking place. Furthermore, Gillian's propensity for violence does not dissipate after killing her father, but rather, it establishes her newfound interest in killing humans.

To offer a further critique of the novel – and the Domestic Noir genre as a whole – Daniel's role within plot must be addressed here, too. All Domestic Noir publications have a central male character, and this male character provides the central foil for female action/violence; he motivates their aggression.²⁵⁶ In support of how deeply engrained this has become, it is note-worthy that in early drafts of *Never Forget Your First*, Gillian's first murder hinged on an argument with Daniel. Originally Daniel ordered Gillian out of the house, after finding her with Emily's body. Gillian experienced a moment of emotional intimacy with Emily's corpse that read as reminiscent of her relationship with her experiments. However, when Daniel discovered Gillian, he reacted poorly and dismissed her before Gillian had time to adequately explain. Gillian then engaged in her violent outburst as a way of processing this incident. It was not until editing this that serious questions appeared with regard to what this incident said about female violence, and how female violence was initiated. In tying Gillian's outburst to a negative emotional experience with Daniel, Timothy's murder became reactive to that; it was as though she was killing one boy to take revenge on another. It is interesting to note how "natural" these genre conventions are, given that I had set out to defy their patterns but still reproduced them. So integral is the male stimulus to the violent woman, it felt only logical to rely on this as Gillian's motivation in moving the plot forwards. This reliance on Daniel as a negative stimulus reinforced the

²⁵⁶ However, this is not only presented through a romantic relationship, as in Flynn's *Gone Girl*. Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2005) provides an interesting example wherein it is not the husband but rather the son that triggers aggression in the mother. Another variation can be found in Renee Knight's *Disclaimer* (2015). Here the female is pitted against not one but three male figures, all of whom dictate her behaviour, albeit to varying degrees. These influential men are so much relied upon to drive plot and motivation that they are as central a convention of the Domestic Noir as the deviant women.

vengeful nature of female violence and therefore supported the governance of “conventional” female behaviours. If this was to become a feminist novel then, the violence needed to be achieved not through a male figure but in spite of one.

Thus, in editing, it was essential that alternative narrative tropes – such as those associated with serial killer fiction – remained at the forefront, rather than tropes for the violent woman. Timothy’s murder eventually followed Gillian having sex for the first time. Prior to this she expressed an influx of new ‘urges’ to Louise, who told her to act appropriately on these feelings. Following this sexual encounter, Gillian then expresses something equally natural as her sexual desire: her desire for violence: ‘my body ached, and I couldn’t believe that that was anything to do with what Daniel and I had done. It was far too familiar a feeling for that.’²⁵⁷ Sex and violence have historically been bound together in literature – *The Driver’s Seat* itself is one such example of this – and this coupling is something that has carried through to serial killer fiction. However, in serial killer fiction sex and violence often manifest through the trope of a male killer murdering for some kind of sexual gratification. While Gillian introduces sex and violence through her relationship with Daniel and murder of Timothy, she does so in a way that subverts this serial killer trope. Timothy’s murder is not a substitute for sex, nor is it a stimulus for it. On the contrary, sex and violence, to Gillian, are viewed as equal urges. Through her discussions with Louise it is established that if sexual feelings and subsequently sex are permitted, then violent feelings, and behaviours, are justifiable also. Thus, the ‘triggering factor which drives the serial killer to commit murder’ was not sexual for Gillian, but rather logical.²⁵⁸ It is worth noting then that

²⁵⁷ Barnes, p. 131.

²⁵⁸ Wilson and Seaman, p. 63. In addition to this, Wilson and Seaman also allude to a ‘transferred-aggression syndrome’ wherein the serial killer, emotionally touched by one thing or another in their day to day life, will then communicate this emotion through violence, often inflicted on a total stranger, rather than the individual that they are emotionally involved with.

while serial killer fiction provides a number of worthy tropes, there are certainly elements of this fiction that have been critiqued by the novel, too.

A (female) serial killer by their very nature will conjure a distinct set of genre expectations from readers. In other words the book may be read not as an exploration of representations of female violence but as no more than a “twist” on a specific sub-genre. Nevertheless, *Never Forget Your First* was written with specific intentions in mind. I wanted to deviate from traditional narratives of female violence, and to give Gillian violent behaviours that were less constrained than those narrated before her. Arguably, while female violence has previously been narrated as reactive, it is noteworthy that *all* violence is reactive to some extent. The problematic element with regard to tropes for female violence is that fictional women are limited in what they can react to. Violence becomes a female tool only in certain parameters. These parameters are often set by the surrounding male characters. Through my edits I have endeavoured to change this pattern. Far from a response to the leading male, Gillian murders because she is inclined to do so – and, significantly, because she is capable of it. She reacts to her own feelings and operates within her own parameters, rather than any that have been set for her. It is here that Gillian becomes a feminist figure and it is my hope that she will be recognised as such.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER: A CONCLUSION

‘Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves?’ is a question that has framed much of this discussion.²⁵⁹ Representations of female violence may seem a peculiar starting point in this search for freedom. However, gender equality strives to identify and abolish gendered biases and, in discussions of aggression, these biases are very much still present. Domestic Noir has attempted to provide answers to Friedan’s question above, although its responses are often underpinned by ‘sombre asides on postpartum depression’ and stories about ‘the Man Who Made Her Do It’.²⁶⁰ Arguably, this may be because these stories have become ‘our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence’.²⁶¹ Somewhat ironically, however, the call to rid ourselves from these storylines comes from Gillian Flynn. Her protagonist is not an accomplice to a man but rather the violent response to one – but as I have shown this framework appears just as limiting. There is space here in which to argue that, far from authors blindly adhering to violent women tropes, it may be a lack of accurate knowledge that has helped to support these representations. As far as female psychopathy is concerned, little is known nor openly discussed, which has perhaps led to some ignorance when this psychopathy is depicted in literature. Consequently, authors have employed violent women tropes to shape their work, rather than the broader tropes for violent humans. While a gendered view of violence has dominated society and literature, society *is* changing. Thus, perhaps it is time that literature moved to appropriately reflect this.

²⁵⁹ Friedan, p. 309.

²⁶⁰ Flynn.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The women discussed within this thesis are violent, deviant, and “unwomanly” – but they are often shaped by (their) men. Lise is so driven by her limited aggression that she pursues violence in a manner that secures her own death, inflicted by a man. Nadine and Manu are “deviants”, enthusiastically engaging in violence as a response to the violence inflicted on them by men. Amy is independent, intelligent, and desirable, and yet her violence only fully manifests when she is humiliated by a man. It would be unfair to state that the above women do not represent novel ways of writing female aggression and hence can be classed as feminist. They depict females who are not inherently moral and caring, and provide a springboard for contemporary authors to create ‘complex, evil female characters with interesting motivations’.²⁶² It cannot go unnoticed though that their depictions are problematic, in that their violence is still inextricably bound to gendered tropes. It is my believe that we must move away from gendered representations of violence and do so by imagining women whose aggression is not dependent on standard, reactive tropes of female violence.

When considering these gendered behaviours, it is imperative that we remember gender is essentially a social category. Acknowledging this ‘makes it possible to understand these [genders] are constructions that, therefore, can again be deconstructed’.²⁶³ In this deconstruction we will widen our perceptions of what both women and men are capable of, and lessen the importance of gender when considering human capabilities. Gender theorists have just recently suggested that ‘aggression is fluid and exists along a continuum’.²⁶⁴ This is

²⁶² Dockerman.

²⁶³ Tanja Nusser, ‘Are Feminism and Gender Studies Really Growing Old? Reassessments of a Discourse’, *Women in German Yearbook*, 30, (2014), 138 – 148 (p. 144), in <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/womqeryearbook/30.2014.0138> [Accessed 2 June 2016]

²⁶⁴ Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men and the Rise of Women* (London: Penguin, 2012) p. 183. In a continuation of this discussion, Rosin suggests that far from female violence being exclusively reactive towards male behaviour, women in contemporary society have increasingly different approaches to expressions of physical aggression: ‘Women these days are more likely to defend themselves or fight back, and sometimes they may be taking the

surely a factor that needs to be reflected in our fictional women, rather than exclusively in our fictional men. Violence and physical aggression are unattractive aspects of human beings and they have, traditionally, been regarded as primarily male. However, if we are truly striving for equality, it is imperative that we acknowledge what women are capable of. We must stop assuring ourselves that violence is not a female behaviour. Not only is this essential for social equality, but this shift could initiate an interesting change in perceptions of male behaviours also. It is problematic to acknowledge that women can be immoral, aggressive and violent, of course. It would be more problematic still if our depictions of violent women became merely simplistic, misogynist portraits – such as Flynn is accused of creating. Still, in the interest of achieving the equality that feminism calls for, it should be remembered: ‘we cannot kick back against the portrayal of women as emotional, empathetic creatures and as victims’ only to then ‘fall back on that cliché when confronted with a cold-eyed psychopathic female’.²⁶⁵

Never Forget Your First is hardly a definitive response to this need. The novel, like all works of fiction, will be problematic to some readers and enjoyable to others. However, the novel – or rather, the narration of female violence within the novel – is illustrative of a shift in narratives of female violence. The novels previously discussed in this paper are illustrative of problems with this endeavour to date. Regardless of how we read these problems, and the conclusions we ultimately draw from them, writing against traditional depictions of violent women remains a worthwhile endeavour – one that I am sincerely pleased to have been a part of.

first punch.’ (p. 183). Rosin also makes reference to ‘the new wave of female violence’ that ‘pop culture is tuning into’ (p. 189). This acknowledgement of the shift in how audiences view displays of female aggression could be indicative of not only the space which Domestic Noir has created for female violence, but the potential to open this space further still with future publications within the genre.

²⁶⁵ Cosslet. The likes of Ellie Levenson (*The Noughtie Girl’s Guide to Feminism*), Gillian Flynn, Eliana Dockerman (*Is Gone Girl Feminist or Misogynist?*), amongst many other contemporary feminist authors, have been moved to echo this sentiment in support of this style of equality.

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