

# After You

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, New York 10014  
penguin.com

First published in the United States of America by Pamela Dorman Books/Viking Penguin,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2015  
Published in Penguin Books 2016

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ISBN 9780525426592 (hc.)  
ISBN 9780143108863 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America  
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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# 1

The big man at the end of the bar is sweating. He holds his head low over his double scotch and every few minutes he glances up and out behind him toward the door, and a fine sheen of perspiration glistens under the strip lights. He lets out a long, shaky breath disguised as a sigh and turns back to his drink.

“Hey. Excuse me?”

I look up from polishing glasses.

“Can I get another one here?”

I want to tell him that it’s really not a good idea, that it won’t help. That it might even put him over the limit. But he’s a big guy and it’s fifteen minutes till closing time and according to company guidelines, I have no reason to tell him no. So I walk over and take his glass and hold it up to the optic. He nods at the bottle.

“Double,” he says, and slides a fat hand down his damp face.

“That’ll be seven pounds twenty, please.”

It is a quarter to eleven on a Tuesday night, and the Shamrock and Clover, East City Airport’s Irish-themed pub that is as Irish as Mahatma Gandhi, is winding down for the night. The bar closes ten minutes after the last plane takes off, and right now it is just me, the intense young man with the laptop, the two cackling women at table 2, and the man nursing a double Jameson’s waiting on SC107 to Stockholm and DB224 to Munich, the latter of which has been delayed for forty minutes.

I have been on since midday, as Carly had a stomachache and went home. I didn’t mind. I never mind staying late. Humming softly to the sounds of *Celtic Pipes of the Emerald Isle Vol. III*, I walk over and collect the glasses from the two women, who are peering intently at some video footage on a phone. They laugh the easy laughs of the well lubricated.

"My granddaughter. Five days old," says the blond woman, as I reach over the table for her glass.

"Lovely." I smile. All babies look like currant buns to me.

"She lives in Sweden. I've never been. But I have to go see my first grandchild, don't I?"

"We're wetting the baby's head." They burst out laughing again. "Join us in a toast? Go on, take a load off for five minutes. We'll never finish this bottle in time."

"Oops! Here we go. Come on, Dor." Alerted by a screen, they gather up their belongings, and perhaps it's only me who notices a slight stagger as they brace themselves for the walk toward security. I place their glasses on the bar, scan the room for anything else that needs washing.

"You never tempted then?" The smaller woman has turned back for her scarf.

"I'm sorry?"

"To just walk down there, at the end of a shift. Hop on a plane. I would." She laughs again. "Every bloody day."

I smile, the kind of professional smile that might convey anything at all, and turn back toward the bar.

Around me the concession stores are closing up for the night, steel shutters clattering down over the overpriced handbags and emergency-gift Toblerones. The lights flicker off at gates 3, 5, and 11, the last of the day's travelers winking their way into the night sky. Violet, the Congolese cleaner, pushes her trolley toward me, her walk a slow sway, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the shiny Marmoleum.

"Evening, darling."

"Evening, Violet."

"You shouldn't be here this late, sweetheart. You should be home with your loved ones."

She says exactly the same thing to me every night.

"Not long now." I respond with these exact words every night. Satisfied, she nods and continues on her way.

Intense Young Laptop Man and Sweaty Scotch Drinker have gone. I finish stacking the glasses and cash up, checking twice to make sure

the till roll matches what is in the till. I note everything in the ledger, check the pumps, jot down what we need to reorder. It is then that I notice the big man's coat is still over his bar stool. I walk over and glance up at the monitor. The flight to Munich would be just boarding if I felt inclined to run his coat down to him. I look again and then walk slowly over to the Gents.

"Hello? Anyone in here?"

The voice that emerges is strangled and bears a faint edge of hysteria. I push open the door. The Scotch Drinker is bent low over the sinks, splashing his face. His skin is chalk-white.

"Are they calling my flight?"

"It's only just gone up. You've probably got a few minutes."

I make to leave, but something stops me. The man is staring at me, his eyes two tight little buttons of anxiety. He shakes his head. "I can't do it." He grabs a paper towel and pats at his face. "I can't get on the plane."

I wait.

"I'm meant to be traveling over to meet my new boss, and I can't. And I haven't had the guts to tell him I'm scared of flying." He shakes his head. "Not scared. Terrified."

I let the door close behind me.

"What's your new job?"

He blinks. "Uh . . . car parts. I'm the new Senior Regional Manager bracket Spares close bracket for Hunt Motors."

"Sounds like a big job," I say. "You have . . . brackets."

"I've been working for it a long time." He swallows hard. "Which is why I don't want to die in a ball of flame. I really don't want to die in an airborne ball of flame."

I am tempted to point out that it wouldn't actually be an airborne ball of flame, more a rapidly descending one, but suspect it wouldn't really help. He splashes his face again and I hand him another paper towel.

"Thank you." He lets out another shaky breath and straightens up, attempting to pull himself together. "I bet you never saw a grown man behave like an idiot before, huh?"

"About four times a day."

His tiny eyes widen.

"About four times a day I have to fish someone out of the men's loos. And it's usually down to fear of flying."

He blinks at me.

"But you know, like I say to everyone else, no planes have ever gone down from this airport."

His neck shoots back in his collar. "Really?"

"Not one."

"Not even . . . a little crash on the runway?"

I shake my head.

"It's actually pretty boring here. People fly off, go to where they're going, come back again a few days later." I lean against the door to prop it open. These lavatories never smell any better by the evening. "And anyway, personally, I think there are worse things that can happen to you."

"Well, I suppose that's true."

He considers this, looks sideways at me. "Four a day, huh?"

"Sometimes more. Now if you wouldn't mind, I really have to get back. It's not good for me to be seen coming out of the men's loos too often."

He smiles, and for a minute I can see how he might be in other circumstances. A naturally ebullient man. A cheerful man. A man at the top of his game of continentally manufactured car parts.

"You know, I think I hear them calling your flight."

"You reckon I'll be okay?"

"You'll be okay. It's a very safe airline. And it's just a couple of hours out of your life. Look, SK491 landed five minutes ago. As you walk to your departure gate, you'll see the air stewards and stewardesses coming through on their way home and you'll see them all chatting and laughing. For them, getting on these flights is pretty much like getting on a bus. Some of them do it two, three, four times a day. And they're not stupid. If it wasn't safe, they wouldn't get on, would they?"

"Like getting on a bus," he repeats.

"Probably an awful lot safer."

"Well, that's for sure." He raises his eyebrows. "Lot of idiots on the road."

I nod.

He straightens his tie. "And it's a big job."

"Shame to miss out on it, for such a small thing. You'll be fine once you get used to being up there."

"Maybe I will. Thank you . . ."

"Louisa," I say.

"Thank you, Louisa. You're a very kind girl." He looks at me speculatively. "I don't suppose . . . you'd . . . like to go for a drink sometime?"

"I think I hear them calling your flight, sir," I say, and I open the door to allow him to pass through.

He nods, to cover his embarrassment, makes a fuss of patting his pockets. "Right. Sure. Well . . . off I go then."

"Enjoy those brackets."

It takes two minutes after he has left for me to discover he has been sick all over cubicle 3.

I arrive home at a quarter past one and let myself into the silent flat. I change out of my clothes and into my pajama bottoms and a hooded sweatshirt, then open the fridge, pulling out a bottle of white, and pouring a glass. It is lip-pursingly sour. I study the label and realize I must have opened it the previous night, and forgotten to put the top in the bottle. Then I decide it's never a good idea to think about these things too hard and slump into a chair with it.

On the mantelpiece are two cards. One is from my parents, wishing me a happy birthday. That "best wishes" from Mum is as piercing as any stab wound. The other is from my sister, suggesting she and Thom come down for the weekend. It is six months old. Two voice mails are on my phone, one from the dentist. One not.

*Hi Louisa. It's Jared here. We met in the Dirty Duck? Well, we hooked up [muffled, awkward laugh]. It was just . . . you know . . . I enjoyed it. Thought maybe we could do it again? You've got my digits . . .*

When there is nothing left in the bottle, I consider buying another one, but I don't want to go out again. I don't want Samir at the Mini Mart grocers to make one of his jokes about my endless bottles of pinot grigio. I don't want to have to talk to anyone. I am suddenly

bone-weary, but it is the kind of head-buzzing exhaustion that tells me that if I go to bed I won't sleep. I think briefly about Jared and the fact that he had oddly shaped fingernails. Am I bothered about oddly shaped fingernails? I stare at the bare walls of the living room and realize suddenly that what I actually need is air. I really need air. I open the hall window and climb unsteadily up the fire escape until I am on the roof.

The first time I'd come up, nine months earlier, the estate agent showed me how the previous tenants had made a small terrace garden, dotting around a few lead planters and a small bench. "It's not officially yours, obviously," he'd said. "But yours is the only flat with direct access to it. I think it's pretty nice. You could even have a party up here!" I had gazed at him, wondering if I really looked like the kind of person who held parties.

The plants have long since withered and died. I am apparently not very good at looking after things. Now I stand on the roof, staring out at London's winking darkness below. Around me a million people are living, breathing, eating, arguing. A million lives completely divorced from mine. It is a strange sort of peace.

The sodium lights glitter as the sounds of the city filter up into the night air, engines rev, doors slam. From several miles south comes the distant brutalist thump of a police helicopter, its beam scanning the dark for some vanished miscreant in a local park. Somewhere in the distance a siren wails. Always a siren. "Won't take much to make this feel like home," the real estate agent had said. I had almost laughed. The city feels as alien to me as it always has. But then everywhere does these days.

I hesitate, then take a step out onto the parapet, my arms lifted out to the side, a slightly drunken tightrope walker. One foot in front of the other, edging along the concrete, the breeze making the hairs on my outstretched arms prickle. When I first moved down here, when it all first hit me hardest, I would sometimes dare myself to walk from one end of my block to the other. When I reached the other end I would laugh into the night air. *You see? I am here—staying alive—right out on the edge. I am doing what you told me!*

It has become a secret habit: me, the city skyline, the comfort of the



dark, and the anonymity and the knowledge that up here nobody knows who I am.

I lift my head, feel the night breezes, hear the sound of laughter below and the muffled smash of a bottle breaking, see the traffic snaking up toward the city, the endless red stream of taillights, an automotive blood supply. It is always busy here, above the noise and chaos. Only the hours between 3 to 5 a.m. are relatively peaceful, the drunks having collapsed into bed, the restaurant chefs having peeled off their whites, the pubs having barred their doors. The silence of those hours is interrupted only sporadically, by the night tankers, the opening up of the Jewish bakery along the street, the soft thump of the newspaper delivery vans dropping their paper bales. I know the subtlest movements of the city because I no longer sleep.

Somewhere down there a lock-in is taking place in the White Horse, full of hipsters and East Enders, and a couple are arguing outside, and across the city the general hospital is picking up the pieces of the sick and the injured and those who have just barely scraped through another day. Up here is just the air and the dark and somewhere the FedEx freight flight from LHR to Beijing, and countless travelers, like Mr. Scotch Drinker, on their way to somewhere new.

"Eighteen months. Eighteen whole months. So when is it going to be enough?" I say into the darkness. And there it is, I can feel it boiling up again, this unexpected anger. I take two steps along, glancing down at my feet. "Because this doesn't feel like living. It doesn't feel like anything."

Two steps. Two more. I will go as far as the corner tonight.

"You didn't give me a bloody life, did you? Not really. You just smashed up my old one. Smashed it into little pieces. What am I meant to do with what's left? When is it going to feel—"

I stretch out my arms, feeling the cool night air against my skin, and realize I am crying again.

"Fuck you, Will," I whisper. "Fuck you for leaving me."

Grief wells up again like a sudden tide, intense, overwhelming. And just as I feel myself sinking into it, a voice says, from the shadows: "I don't think you should stand there."

I half turn, and catch a flash of a small, pale face on the fire escape, dark eyes wide open. In shock, my foot slips on the parapet, my weight suddenly on the wrong side of the drop. My heart lurches a split second before my body follows. And then, like a nightmare, I am weightless, in the abyss of the night air, my legs flailing above my head as I hear the shriek that may be my own—

*Crunch*

And then all is black.

## 2

What's your name, sweetheart?"  
A brace around my neck.

A hand feeling around my head, gently, swiftly.

I am alive. This is actually quite surprising.

"That's it. Open your eyes. Look at me, now. Look at me. Can you tell me your name?"

I want to speak, to open my mouth, but my voice emerges muffled and nonsensical. I think I have bitten my tongue. There is blood in my mouth, warm and tasting of iron. I cannot move.

"We're going to move you onto a spinal board, okay? You may be a bit uncomfortable for a minute, but I'm going to give you some morphine to make the pain a bit easier." The man's voice is calm, level, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to be lying broken on concrete, staring up at the dark sky. I want to laugh. I want to tell him how ridiculous it is that I am here. But nothing seems to work as it should.

The man's face disappears from view. A woman in a neon jacket, her dark curly hair tied back in a ponytail, looms over me, shining a thin torch abruptly in my eyes and gazing at me with detached interest as if I were a specimen, not a person.

"Do we need to bag her?"

I want to speak but I'm distracted by the pain in my legs. *Jesus*, I say, but I'm not sure if I say it aloud.

"Multiple fractures. Pupils normal and reactive. BP ninety over sixty. She's lucky she hit that awning. What are the odds of landing on a daybed, eh? . . . I don't like that bruising though." Cold air on my midriff, the light touch of warm fingers. "Internal bleeding?"

"Do we need a second team?"

"Can you step back please, sir? Right back?"

Another man's voice. "I came outside for a smoke, and she dropped onto my bloody balcony. She nearly bloody landed on me."

"Well there you go—it's your lucky day. She didn't."

"I got the shock of my life. You don't expect people to just drop out of the bloody sky. Look at my chair. That was eight hundred pounds from the Conran shop. . . . Do you think I can claim for it?"

A brief silence.

"You can do what you want, sir. Tell you what, you could charge her for cleaning the blood off your balcony while you're at it. How about that?"

The first man's eyes slide toward his colleague. Time slips, I tilt with it. I have fallen off a roof? My face is cold and I realize distantly that I have started to shake.

"She's going into shock, Sam—"

A van door slides open somewhere below. And then the board beneath me moves and briefly *the pain the pain the pain*—everything turns black.

A siren and a swirl of blue. Always a siren in London. We are moving. Neon slides across the interior of the ambulance, hiccups and repeats, illuminating the unexpectedly packed interior. The man in the green uniform is tapping something into his phone, before turning to adjust the drip above my head. The pain has lessened—morphine?—but with consciousness comes a growing terror. It is a giant airbag inflating slowly inside me, steadily blocking out everything else. *Oh, no. Oh, no.*

"Egcuse nge?"

It takes two goes for the man, his arm braced against the back of the cab, to hear me. He turns and stoops toward my face. He smells of lemons and has missed a bit when shaving.

"You okay there?"

"Ang I—"

He leans down. "Sorry. Hard to hear over the siren. We'll be at the hospital soon." He places a hand on mine. It is dry and warm and reassuring. I am suddenly panicked in case he decides to let go. "Just hang in there. What's our ETA, Donna?"

I can't say the words. My tongue fills my mouth. My thoughts are muddled, overlapping. Did I move my arms when they picked me up? I lifted my right hand, didn't I?

"Ang I garalysed?" It emerges as a whisper.

"What?" He drops his ear to somewhere near my mouth.

"Garalysed? Ang I garalysed?"

"Paralyzed?" He hesitates, his eyes on mine, then turns and looks down at my legs. "Can you wiggle your toes?"

I try to remember how to move my feet. It seems to require several more leaps of concentration than it used to. He reaches down and lightly touches my toe, as if to remind me where they are. "Try again. There you go."

Pain shoots up both my legs. A gasp, possibly a sob. Mine.

"You're all right. Pain is good. I can't say for sure, but I don't think there's any spinal injury. You've done your hip, and a few other bits besides."

His eyes are on mine. Kind eyes. He seems to understand how much I need convincing. I feel his hand close on mine. I have never needed a human touch more.

"Really. I'm pretty sure you're not paralyzed."

"Oh, thang Gog," I hear my voice, as if from afar. My eyes brim with tears. "Please don leggo og me," I whisper.

He moves his face closer. "I am not letting go of you."

I want to speak, but his face blurs, and I am gone again.

Afterward they tell me I fell two floors of the five, bursting through an awning, breaking my fall on a top-of-the-line, outsized, canvas-and-wicker-effect, waterproof-cushioned sun lounger on the balcony of Mr. Antony Gardiner, a copyright lawyer and neighbor I have never met. My hip smashes into two pieces and two of my ribs and my collarbone snap straight through. I break two fingers on my left hand, and a metatarsal, which pokes through the skin of my foot and causes one of the medical students to faint. My X-rays are a source of some fascination.

I keep hearing the voice of the paramedic who treated me: *You never know what will happen when you fall from a great height.* I am apparently very

lucky. They tell me this and wait, smiling, as if I should respond with a huge grin, or perhaps a little tap dance. I don't feel lucky. I don't feel anything. I doze and wake and sometimes the view is the bright lights of an operating theater and then it is a quiet, still room. A nurse's face. Snatches of conversation.

*Did you see the mess the old woman on D4 made? That's some end of a shift, eh?*

*You work up at the Princess Elizabeth, right? You can tell them we know how to run an ER. Hahahahaha.*

*You just rest now, Louisa. We're taking care of everything. Just rest now.*

The morphine makes me sleepy. They up my dose and it's a welcome, cold trickle of oblivion.

I open my eyes to find my mother at the end of my bed.

*"She's awake. Bernard, she's awake. Do we need to get the nurse?"*

*She's changed the color of her hair, I think distantly. And then: Oh. It's my mother. My mother doesn't talk to me anymore.*

*"Oh, thank God. Thank God."* My mother reaches up and touches the crucifix around her neck. It reminds me of someone but I cannot think who. She leans forward and lightly strokes my cheek. For some reason this makes my eyes fill immediately with tears.

*"Oh, my little girl."* She is leaning over me, as if to shelter me from further damage. I smell her perfume, as familiar as my own. *"Oh, Lou."*

*She mops my tears with a tissue.*

*"I got the fright of my life when they called. Are you in pain? Do you need anything? Are you comfortable? What can I get you?"*

She talks so fast that I cannot answer. *"We came as soon as they said. Treena's looking after Granddad. He sends his love. Well, he sort of made that noise, you know, but we all know what he means. Oh, love, how on earth did you get yourself into this mess? What on earth were you thinking?"*

She does not seem to require an answer. All I have to do is lie there. My mother dabs at her eyes, and then again at mine.

*"You're still my daughter. And . . . and I couldn't bear it if something happened to you and we weren't . . . you know."*

"Ngung—" I swallow over the words. My tongue feels ridiculous. I sound drunk. "I ngever wanged—"

"I know. But you made it so hard for me, Lou. I couldn't—"

"Not now, love, eh?" Dad touches her shoulder.

Her words tail off. She looks away into the middle distance and takes my hand. "When we got the call. Oh. I thought—I didn't know—" She is sniffing again, her handkerchief pressed to her lips. "Thank God she's okay, Bernard."

"Of course she is. Made of rubber, this one, eh?"

Dad looms over me. We had last spoken on the telephone two months earlier, but I have not seen him in person for the eighteen months since I left my hometown. He looks enormous and familiar and desperately, desperately tired.

"Shorry," I whisper. I can't think what else to say.

"Don't be daft. We're just glad you're okay. Even if you do look like you've done six rounds with Mike Tyson. Have you actually looked in a mirror since you got here?"

I shake my head.

"Maybe . . . I might just hold off a bit longer. You know Terry Nicholls, that time he went right over his handlebars by the Mini Mart? Well, take off the mustache, and that's pretty much what you look like. Actually"—he peers closer at my face—"now that you mention it . . ."

"Bernard."

"We'll bring you some tweezers tomorrow. Anyway, the next time you decide you want flying lessons, let's head down the ol' airstrip, yes? Jumping and flapping your arms is plainly not working for you."

I try to smile.

They both bend over me. Their faces are strained, anxious. My parents.

"She's got thin, Bernard. Don't you think she's got thin?"

Dad leans closer, and then I see how his eyes have grown a little watery. How his smile is a bit wobblier than usual.

"Ah . . . she looks beautiful, love. Believe me. You look bloody beautiful." He squeezes my hand, then lifts it to his mouth and kisses it. My dad has never done anything like that to me in my whole life.

It is then that I realize they thought I was going to die and a sob

bursts unannounced from my chest. I shut my eyes against the hot tears and feel his large, wood-roughened palm around mine.

“We’re here, sweetheart. It’s all right now. It’s all going to be okay.”

They make the fifty-mile journey every day for two weeks, catching the early train down, and then after that, come every few days. Dad gets special dispensation from work because Mum won’t travel by herself. There are, after all, all sorts in London. This is said more than once and always accompanied by a furtive glance behind her, as if a knife-wielding hoodlum is even now sneaking into the ward. Treena is staying over to keep an eye on Granddad. There is an edge to the way Mum says it that makes me think this might not be my sister’s first choice of arrangements.

Mum has brought homemade food to the hospital ever since the day we all stared at my lunch and, despite five whole minutes of intense speculation couldn’t work out what it actually was. “And in plastic trays, Bernard. Like a prison.” She prodded it sadly with a fork, then sniffed the residue. She now arrives daily with enormous sandwiches—thick slices of ham or cheese in white bloomer bread—and homemade soups in flasks (“Food you can recognize”) and feeds me like a baby. My tongue slowly returns to its normal size. Apparently I’d almost bitten through it when I landed. It’s not unusual, they tell me.

I have two operations to pin my hip, and my left foot and left arm are in plaster up to my joints. Keith, one of the porters, asks if he can sign my casts—apparently it’s bad luck to have them virgin white—and promptly writes a comment so filthy that Eveline, the Filipina nurse, has to put a plaster on it before the consultant comes around. When Keith pushes me to X-ray or to the pharmacy, he tells me the gossip from around the hospital. I could do without hearing about the patients who die slow and horrible deaths, of which there seem to be an endless number, but it keeps him happy. I sometimes wonder what he tells people about me. I am the girl who fell off a five-story building and lived. In hospital status, this apparently puts me some way above the compacted bowel in C ward, or That Daft Bint Who Accidentally Took Her Thumb Off With Pruning Shears.



It is amazing how quickly you become institutionalized. I wake, accept the ministrations of a handful of people whose faces I now recognize, try to say the right thing to the consultants, and wait for my parents to arrive. My parents keep busy with small tasks in my room and become uncharacteristically deferential in the face of the doctors. Dad apologizes repeatedly for my inability to bounce, until Mum kicks him, quite hard, in the ankle.

After the rounds are finished, Mum usually has a walk around the concourse shops downstairs and returns exclaiming in hushed tones at the number of fast-food outlets. "That one-legged man from the cardio ward, Bernard. Sitting down there stuffing his face with cheeseburgers and chips, like you wouldn't believe."

Dad sits and reads the local paper in the chair at the end of my bed. The first week he keeps checking it for reports of my accident. I try to tell him that in this part of the city even the double murders barely merit a News In Brief, but in Stortfold the previous week the local paper's front page ran with "Supermarket Trolleys Left in Wrong Area of Car Park." The week before that it was "Schoolboys Sad at State of Duck Pond," so he is yet to be convinced.

On the Friday after the final operation to pin my hip, my mother brings a dressing gown that is one size too big for me, and a large brown paper bag of egg sandwiches. I don't have to ask what they are; the sulfurous smell floods the room as soon as she opens the bag. My father mouths an apology, waving his hand in front of his nose. "The nurses'll be blaming me, Josie," he says, closing the door of my room.

"Eggs will build her up. She's too thin. And besides, you can't talk. You were blaming the dog for your awful smells two years after he'd died."

"Just keeping the romance alive, love."

Mum lowers her voice. "Treena says her last fellow put the blankets over her head when he broke wind. Can you imagine!"

Dad turns to me. "When I do it, your mother won't even stay in the same postcode."

There is tension in the air, even as they laugh. I can feel it. When your whole world shrinks to four walls, you become acutely attuned to slight

variations in atmosphere. It's in the way consultants turn away slightly when they are examining X-rays, or the way the nurses cover their mouths when they're talking about someone who has just died nearby.

"What?" I say. "What is it?"

They look awkwardly at each other.

"So . . ." Mum sits on the end of my bed. "The doctor said . . . the consultant said . . . it's not clear how you fell."

I bite into an egg sandwich. I can pick things up with my left hand now. "Oh, that. I got distracted."

"While walking around a roof."

I chew for a minute.

"Is there any chance you were sleepwalking, sweetheart?"

"Dad—I've never sleepwalked in my life."

"Yes, you have. There was that time when you were thirteen and you sleepwalked downstairs and ate half of Treena's birthday cake."

"Um. I may not have actually been asleep."

"And there's your blood-alcohol level. They said . . . you had drunk . . . an awful lot."

"I had a tough night at work, and I had a drink or two and I just went up on the roof to get some air. And then I got distracted by a voice."

"You heard a *voice*."

"I was just standing on the top—looking out. I do it sometimes. And there was this girl's voice behind me and it gave me a shock and I lost my footing."

"A girl?"

"I only really heard her voice."

Dad leans forward. "You're sure it was an actual girl? Not an imaginary . . ."

"It's my hip that's mashed up, Dad, not my brain."

"They did say it was a girl who called the ambulance." Mum touches Dad's arm.

"So you're saying it really *was* an accident," he says.

I stop eating. They look away from each other guiltily.

"What? You . . . you think I jumped off?"

"We're not saying anything." Dad scratches his head. "It's just—well—things had all gone so wrong since . . . and we hadn't seen you for so long . . . and we were a bit surprised that you'd be up walking on the roof of a building in the wee small hours. You used to be afraid of heights."

"I used to be engaged to a man who thought it was normal to calculate how many calories he'd burned while he slept. Jesus. This is why you've been so nice to me? You think I tried to kill myself?"

"It's just he was asking us all sorts. . . ."

"Who was asking what?"

"The psychiatrist bloke. They just want to make sure you're okay, love. We know things have been all—well, you know—since—"

"Psychiatrist?"

"They're putting you on the waiting list to see someone. To talk, you know. And we've had a long chat with the doctors and you're coming home with us. Just while you recover. You can't stay by yourself in that flat of yours. It's—"

"You've been in my flat?"

"Well, we had to fetch your things."

There is a long silence. I think of them standing in my doorway, my mother's hands tight on her bag as she surveys the unwashed bed linen, the empty wine bottles lined up in a row on the mantelpiece, the solitary half-bar of Fruit and Nut in the fridge. I picture them shaking their heads, looking at each other. *Are you sure we've got the right place, Bernard?*

"Right now you need to be with your family. Just till you're back on your feet."

I want to say I'll be fine in my flat, no matter what they think of it. I want to do my job and come home and not think until my next shift. I want to say I can't go back to Stortfold and be That Girl again, The One Who. I don't want to have to feel the weight of my mother's carefully disguised disapproval, of my father's cheerful determination that *it's all okay, everything is just fine*, as if saying it enough times will actually make it okay. I don't want to pass Will's house every day, to think about what I was part of, the thing that will always be there.

But I don't say any of it. Because suddenly I'm tired and everything hurts and I just can't fight anymore.

Dad brings me home two weeks later in his work van. There is only room for two in the front, so Mum has stayed behind to prepare the house, and as the motorway speeds by beneath us, I find my stomach tightening nervously.

The cheerful streets of my hometown feel foreign to me now. I look at them with a distant, analytical eye, noting how small everything appears, how tired, how *twee*. Even the castle looks smaller, perched on top of the hill. I realize this is how Will must have seen it when he first came home after his accident, and push the thought away. As we drive down our street, I find myself sinking slightly in my seat. I don't want to make polite conversation with neighbors, to explain myself. I don't want to be judged for what I did.

"You okay?" Dad turns, as if he guesses something of what's going through my head.

"Fine."

"Good girl." He puts a hand briefly on my shoulder.

Mum is already at the door as we pull up. I suspect she has actually been standing by the window for the past half hour. Dad puts one of my bags on the step and then comes back to help me out, hoisting the other over his shoulder.

I place my cane carefully on the paving stones, and I feel the twitching of curtains behind me as I make my way slowly up the path. *Look who it is*, I can hear them whispering. *What do you think she's done now?*

Dad steers me forward, watching my feet carefully, as if they might suddenly shoot out and go somewhere they shouldn't. "Okay there?" he keeps saying. "Not too fast now."

I can see Granddad hovering behind Mum in the hall, wearing his checked shirt and his good blue jumper. Nothing has changed. The wallpaper is the same. The hall carpet is the same, the lines in the worn pile visible from where Mum must have vacuumed that morning. I can see my old blue anorak hanging on the hook. Eighteen months. I feel as if I have been away for a decade.

"Don't rush her," Mum says, her hands pressed together. "You're going too fast, Bernard."

"She's hardly flipping Mo Farah. If she goes any slower we'll be moonwalking."

"Watch those steps. Should you stand behind her, Bernard, coming up the steps? You know, in case she falls backward?"

"I know where the steps are," I say through gritted teeth. "I only lived here for twenty-six years."

"Watch she doesn't catch herself on that lip there, Bernard. You don't want her to smash the other hip."

*Oh, God, I think. Is this what it was like for you, Will? Every single day?*

And then my sister is in the doorway, pushing past Mum. "Oh, for God's sake, Mum. Come on, Hopalong. You're turning us into a freakin' sideshow."

Treena wedges her arm under my armpit and turns briefly to glare at the neighbors, her eyebrows raised as if to say *really?* I can almost hear the swishing of curtains as they close.

"Bunch of bloody rubbernecks. Anyway, hurry up. I promised Thomas he could see your scars before I take him to youth club. God, how much weight have you lost? Your boobs must look like two tangerines in a pair of socks."

It is hard to laugh and walk at the same time. Thomas runs to hug me so that I have to stop and put a hand out against the wall to keep my balance as we collide. "Did they really cut you open and put you back together?" he says. His head comes up to my chest. He is missing four front teeth. "Grandpa says they probably put you back together all the wrong way. And God only knows how we'll tell the difference."

"Bernard!"

"I was *joking*."

"Louisa." Granddad's voice is thick and hesitant. He reaches forward unsteadily and hugs me and I hug him back. He pulls away, his old hands gripping my arms surprisingly tightly, and frowns at me, a mock anger.

"I know, Daddy. I know. But she's home now," says Mum.

"You're back in your old room," says Dad. "I'm afraid we redecorated

with Transformers wallpaper for Thom. You don't mind the odd Autobot and Predacon, right?"

"I had worms in my bottom," says Thomas. "Mum says I'm not to talk about it outside the house. Or put my fingers up my—"

"Oh, good Lord," says Mum.

"Welcome home, Lou," says Dad, and promptly drops my bag on my foot.

# 3

Looking back, for the first nine months after Will's death I was in a kind of daze. I went straight to Paris and simply didn't go home, giddy with freedom, with the appetites that Will had stirred in me. I got a job at a bar favored by expats where they didn't mind my terrible French, and I grew better at it. I rented a tiny attic room in the 16th, above a Middle Eastern restaurant, and I would lie awake at night and listen to the sound of the late drinkers and the early morning deliveries and every day I felt like I was living someone else's life.

Those early months, it was as if I had lost a layer of skin—I woke up laughing, or crying. I felt everything more intensely, saw everything as if a filter had been removed. I ate new foods, walked strange streets, spoke to people in a language that wasn't mine.

Sometimes I felt haunted by him, as if I were seeing it all through his eyes, hearing his voice in my ear.

*What do you think of that, then, Clark?*

*I told you you'd love this.*

*Eat it! Try it! Go on!*

I felt lost without our daily routines. It took weeks for my hands not to feel useless without daily contact with his body: the soft shirt I would button; the warm, motionless hands I would wash gently; the silky hair I could still feel between my fingers. I missed his voice, his abrupt, hard-earned laugh, the feel of his lips against my fingers, the way his eyelids would lower when he was about to drop off to sleep. My mother, still aghast at what I had been part of, had told me that while she loved me, she could not reconcile this Louisa with the daughter she had raised. So with the loss of my family as well as the man I had loved, every thread that had linked me to who I was had been abruptly cut. I felt as if I had simply floated off, untethered, to some unknown universe.

So I acted out a new life. I made casual, arm's-length friendships with other travelers: young English students on gap years; Americans retracing the steps of literary heroes, certain that they would never return to the Midwest; wealthy young bankers; day-trippers; a constantly changing cast that drifted in and through and past, escapees from other lives. I smiled and I chatted and I worked and I told myself I was doing what he had wanted. I had to take some comfort, at least, in that. Didn't I?

Winter loosened its grip and the spring was beautiful. Then almost overnight I woke up one morning and realized I had fallen out of love with the city. Or, at least, I didn't feel Parisian enough to stay. The stories of the expats began to sound wearily similar, the Parisians started to seem unfriendly, or, at least, I noticed, several times a day, the myriad ways in which I would never quite fit in. The city, compelling as it was, felt like a glamorous couture dress I had bought in haste but that didn't quite fit me after all. I handed in my notice and went traveling around Europe.

No two months had ever left me feeling more inadequate. I was lonely almost all the time. I hated not knowing where I was going to sleep each night, was permanently anxious about train timetables and currency, and had difficulty making friends when I didn't trust anyone I met. And what could I say about myself, anyway? When people asked me, I could give them only the most cursory details. All the stuff that was important or interesting about me was what I couldn't share. Without someone to talk to, every sight I saw—whether it was the Trevi Fountain or a canal in Amsterdam—felt simply like a name on a list that I needed to check off. I spent the last week on a beach in Greece that reminded me too much of a beach I had been on with Will only months before, and finally after a week of sitting on the sand fending off bronzed men who all seemed to be called Dmitri and trying to tell myself I was actually having a good time I gave up and returned to Paris. Mostly because that was the first time it had occurred to me that I had nowhere else to go.

For two weeks I slept on the sofa of a girl I'd worked with at the bar, while I tried to figure out what to do next. Recalling a conversation I'd had with Will about careers, I wrote to several colleges about fashion



courses, but I had no portfolio of work to show them and they rebuffed me politely. The course I had originally won after Will died was awarded to someone else because I had failed to defer. I could apply again next year, the administrator said, in the tones of someone who knew I wouldn't.

I looked online at jobs websites and realized that, despite everything I had been through, I was still unqualified for any of the kinds of jobs I might actually be interested in doing. And then by chance, just as I was wondering what to do next, Michael Lawler, Will's lawyer, rang me and suggested it was time to do something with the money Will had left me. It was the excuse to move that I needed. He helped me negotiate a deal on a scarily overpriced two-bedroom flat on the edge of the Square Mile—a neighborhood I chose largely because I remembered Will once talking about the wine bar on the corner and it made me feel a bit closer to him—and there was enough money left over with which to furnish it. Then six weeks later I came back to England, got a job at the Shamrock and Clover, slept with a man called Phil whom I would never see again, and waited to feel as if I had really started living.

Nine months on I was still waiting.

I didn't go out much that first week home. I was sore and grew tired quickly, so it was easy to lie in bed and doze, wiped out by extrastrength painkillers, and tell myself that letting my body recover was all that mattered. In a weird way, being back in our little family house suited me; it was the first place I had managed to sleep more than four hours at a stretch since I had left; it was small enough that I could always reach out for a wall to support myself. Mum fed me, Granddad kept me company (Treena had gone back to college, taking Thom with her), and I watched a lot of daytime television, marveling at its never-ending advertisements for loan companies and stairlifts, and its preoccupation with minor celebrities whom the better part of a year abroad had left me unable to recognize. It was like being in a little cocoon, one that, admittedly, had a whacking great elephant squatting in its corner.

We did not talk about anything that might upset this delicate equilibrium. I would watch whatever celebrity news that daytime television served up and then say at supper, "Well, what about that Shayna West,

then, eh?" And Mum and Dad would leap on the topic gratefully, remarking that she was a trollop or had nice hair or that she was no better than she should be. We covered *Bargains That Could Be Found in Your Attic* ("I always wonder what that Victorian planter of your mother's would have been worth . . . ugly old thing") and *Ideal Homes in the Country* ("I wouldn't wash a dog in that bathroom"). I did not think beyond each mealtime, beyond the basic challenges of getting dressed and brushing my teeth and completing whatever tiny tasks my mother set me ("You know, love, when I'm out, if you could sort out your washing, I'll do it with my coloreds").

But like a creeping tide, the outside world steadily insisted on intruding. I heard the neighbors asking questions of my mother as she hung out the washing. "Your Lou home, then, is she?" And Mum's uncharacteristically curt response: "She is."

I found myself avoiding the rooms in the house from which I could see the castle. But I knew it was there, the people in it living, breathing links to Will. Sometimes I wondered what had happened to them. While in Paris I had been forwarded a letter from Mrs. Traynor, thanking me formally for everything I had done for her son. "I am conscious that you did everything you could." But that was it. That family had gone from being my whole life to a ghostly remnant of a time I wouldn't allow myself to remember.

Now, as our street sat moored in the shadow of the castle for several hours every evening, I felt the Traynors' presence like a rebuke.

I'd been there for two weeks before I realized that Mum and Dad no longer went to their social club. "Isn't it Tuesday?" I asked on the third week as we sat around the dinner table. "Shouldn't you be gone by now?"

They glanced at each other. "Ah, no. We're fine here," Dad said, chewing on a piece of his pork chop.

"I'm fine by myself, honestly," I told them. "I'm much better now. And I'm quite happy watching television." I secretly longed to sit, unobserved, with nobody else in the room. I had barely been left alone for more than half an hour at a time since I'd come home. "Really. Go out and enjoy yourselves. Don't mind me."

"We . . . we don't really go to the club anymore," said Mum, not looking at me as she sliced through a potato.

"People . . . they had a lot to say. About what went on." Dad shrugged. "In the end it was easier just to stay out of it." The silence that followed this disclosure lasted a full six minutes.

And there were other, more concrete reminders of the life I had left behind. Ones that wore skin-tight running pants with special wicking properties.

It was on the fourth morning that Patrick jogged past our house when I realized it might be more than coincidence. I had heard his voice the first day and limped blearily to the window, peering through the blind. And there he was below me, stretching out his hamstrings while talking to a girl with a blond ponytail and clad in matching blue Lycra so tight I could pretty much figure out what she'd had for breakfast. They looked like two Olympians missing a bobsled. I stood back from the window in case he looked up and saw me, and within a minute they were gone again, jogging down the road, backs erect, legs pumping, like a pair of glossy turquoise carriage ponies.

Two days later I was getting dressed when I heard them again. Patrick was saying something loudly about carb loading, and this time the girl flicked a suspicious gaze toward my house, as if she were wondering why they had stopped in exactly the same place twice.

On the third day I was in the front room with Granddad when they arrived. "We should practice sprints," Patrick was saying loudly. "Tell you what, you go to the fourth lamppost and back and I'll time you. Two-minute intervals. Go!"

Granddad looked at me, and then rolled his eyes meaningfully.

"Has he been doing this the whole time I've been back?"

Granddad's eyes rolled pretty much into the back of his head.

I watched through the net curtains as Patrick fixed his eyes on his stopwatch, his best side presented to my window. He was wearing a black fleece zip-up top and matching Lycra shorts, and as he stood, a few feet from the other side of the curtain, I was able to gaze at him, quietly amazed that this was someone I had been sure, for so long, I'd loved.

"Keep going!" he yelled, looking up from his stopwatch. And like an

obedient gun dog, the girl touched the lamppost beside him and bolted away again. "Forty-two point three-eight seconds," he said approvingly when she returned, panting. "I reckon you could shave another point five of a second off that."

"That's for your benefit," said my mother, who had walked in bearing two mugs.

"I did wonder."

"His mother asked me in the supermarket were you back and I said yes, you were. Don't look at me like that—I could hardly lie to the woman." She nodded toward the window. "That one's had her boobs done. They're the talk of Stortfold. Apparently you could rest two cups of tea on them." She stood beside me for a moment. "You know they're engaged?"

I waited for the pang, but it was so mild it could have been wind. "They look . . . well suited."

My mother stood there for a moment, watching him. "He's not a bad sort, Lou. You just . . . changed." She handed me a mug and turned away.

Finally, on the morning he stopped to do push-ups on the pavement outside the house, I opened the front door and stepped out. I leaned against the porch, my arms folded across my chest, watching until he looked up.

"I wouldn't stop there for too long. Next door's dog is a bit partial to that bit of pavement."

"Lou!" he exclaimed, as if I were the very last person he expected to see standing outside my own house, which he had visited several times a week for the seven years we had been together. "Well. I . . . I'm surprised to see you back. I thought you were off to conquer the big wide world!"

His fiancée, who was doing push-ups beside him, looked up and then back down at the pavement. It might have been my imagination, but her buttocks may have clenched even more tightly. Up, down, she bobbed, furiously. Up and down. I found myself worrying slightly for the welfare of her new bosom.

He bounced to his feet. "This is Caroline, my fiancée." He kept his eyes on me, perhaps waiting for some kind of reaction. "We're training for the next Ironman. We've done two together already."

"How . . . romantic," I said.

"Well, Caroline and I feel it's good to do things together," he said.

"So I see," I replied. "And his and hers turquoise Lycra!"

"Oh. Yeah. Team colors."

There was a short silence.

I gave a little air punch. "Go, team!"

Caroline sprang to her feet and began to stretch out her thigh muscles, folding her leg behind her like a stork. She nodded toward me, the least civility she could reasonably get away with.

"You've lost weight," he said.

"Yeah, well. A saline-drip diet will do that to you."

"I heard you had an . . . accident." He cocked his head sideways, sympathetically.

"News travels fast."

"Still. I'm glad you're okay." He sniffed, looked down the road. "It must have been hard for you this past year. You know. Doing what you did and all."

And there it was. I tried to keep control of my breathing. Caroline resolutely refused to look at me, extending her leg in a hamstring stretch.

"Anyway . . . congratulations on the marriage."

He surveyed his future wife proudly, lost in admiration of her sinewy leg. "Well, it's like they say—you just know when you know." He gave me a faux-apologetic smile. And that was what finished me off.

"I'm sure you did. And I guess you've got plenty put aside to pay for the wedding? They're not cheap, are they?"

They both looked up at me.

"What with selling my story to the newspapers. What did they pay you, Pat? A couple of thousand? Treena never could find out the exact figure. Still, Will's death should be good for a few matching Lycra onesies, right?"

The way Caroline's face shot toward his told me this was one particular part of Patrick's history that he had not yet gotten around to sharing.

He stared at me, two pinpricks of color bleeding onto his face. "That was nothing to do with me."

"Of course not. Nice to see you, anyway, Pat. Good luck with the wedding, Caroline! I'm sure you'll be the . . . the . . . firmest bride around." I turned and walked slowly back inside. I closed the door, resting against it, my heart thumping, until I could be sure that they had both finally jogged on.

"Arse," said Granddad as I limped back into the living room, and then again, glancing dismissively at the window: "Arse." He chuckled.

I stared at him. And then, completely unexpectedly, I found I had started to laugh, for the first time in as long as I could remember.

"So did you decide what you're going to do? When you're better?"

I was lying on my bed. Treena was calling from college, while she waited for Thomas to come out of his football club. I stared up at the ceiling, on which Thomas had stuck a whole galaxy of Day-Glo stickers that apparently nobody could remove without bringing half the ceiling with them.

"Not really."

"You've got to do something. You can't sit around here on your backside for all eternity."

"I won't sit on my backside. Besides, my hip still hurts. The physio said I'm better off lying down."

"Mum and Dad are wondering what you're going to do. There are no jobs in Stortfold."

"Treen, I just fell off a building. I'm recuperating."

"And before that you were wafting around traveling. And then you were working in a bar until you knew what you wanted to do. You'll have to sort out your head at some point. If you're not going back to school, then you have to figure out what it is you're actually going to do with your life. I'm just saying. Anyway, if you're going to stay in Stortfold, you need to rent out that London flat. Mum and Dad can't support you forever."

"This from the woman who has been supported by the Bank of Mum and Dad for the past eight years."

"I'm in full-time education. That's different. So anyway, I went through your bank statements while you were in hospital and after I

paid all your bills, I worked out that you've got about fifteen hundred pounds left, including statutory sick pay. By the way, what the hell were all those transatlantic phone calls? They cost you a fortune."

"None of your business."

"So I made you a list of estate agents in the area who do rentals. And then I thought maybe we could take another look at college applications. Someone might have dropped out of that course you wanted."

"Treen. You're making me tired."

"No point hanging around. You'll feel better once you've got some focus."

For all that it was annoying, there was also something reassuring about my sister nagging at me. Nobody else dared to. It was as if my parents still believed there was something very wrong at the heart of me, and that I must be treated with kid gloves. Mum laid out my washing, neatly folded, on the end of my bed and cooked me three meals a day, and when I caught her watching me she would smile, an awkward half smile, which covered everything we didn't want to say to each other. Dad took me to my physio appointments and sat beside me on the sofa to watch television and didn't even take the Mickey out of me. Treen was the only one who treated me like she always had.

"You know what I'm going to say, don't you?"

I turned over onto my side, wincing.

"I do. And don't."

"Well, you know what Will would have said. You had a deal. You can't back out of it."

"Okay. That's it, Treen. We're done with this conversation."

"Fine. Thom's just coming out of the changing rooms. See you Friday!" she said, as if we had just been talking about music or where she was going on holiday, or soap.

And I was left staring at the ceiling.

*You had a deal.*

Yeah. And look how that turned out.

For all Treen moaned at me, in the weeks that had passed since I'd come home I had made some progress. I'd stopped using the cane,

which had made me feel around eighty-nine years old, and which I had managed to leave behind in almost every place I'd visited since coming home. Most mornings I took Granddad for a walk around the park, at Mum's request. The doctor had instructed him to take daily exercise but when she had followed him one day she had found he was simply walking to the corner shop to buy a bumper pack of pork rinds and then eating them on a slow walk home again.

We walked slowly, both of us with a limp, and neither of us with any real place to be.

Mum kept suggesting we do the grounds of the castle "for a change of scene," but I ignored her, and as the gate shut behind us each morning Granddad nodded firmly in the direction of the park anyway. It wasn't just because this way was shorter, or closer to the betting shop. I think he knew I didn't want to go back there. I wasn't ready. I wasn't sure I would ever be ready.

We did two slow circuits of the duck pond, and sat on a bench in the watery spring sunshine and watched the toddlers and their parents feeding the fat ducks, and the teenagers smoking and yelling and whacking each other in the helpless combat of early courtship. We took a stroll over to the bookies so Granddad could lose three pounds on an each-way bet on a horse called Wag the Dog. Then as he crumpled up his betting slip and threw it in the bin, I said I'd buy him a jam doughnut from the supermarket.

"Oh fat," he said, as we stood in the bakery section.

I frowned at him.

"Oh fat," he said, pointing at our doughnuts, and laughed.

"Oh. Yup. That's what we'll tell Mum. Low-fat doughnuts."

Mum said his new medication made him giggly. I had decided there were worse things that could happen to you.

Granddad was still giggling at his own joke as we queued up at the checkout. I kept my head down, digging in my pockets for change. I was thinking about whether I would help Dad with the garden that weekend. So it took a minute to grasp what was being said in whispers behind me.

"It's the guilt. They say she tried to jump off a block of flats."



"Well, you would, wouldn't you? I know I couldn't live with myself."

"I'm surprised she can show her face around here."

I stood very still, my hands rigid in my pockets.

"You know poor Josie Clark is still mortified. She takes confession every single week and you know that woman is as blameless as a line of clean laundry."

Granddad was pointing at the doughnuts and mouthing *oh fat* at the checkout girl.

She smiled politely. "Eighty-six pence, please."

"The Traynors have never been the same."

"Well, it destroyed them, didn't it?"

"Eighty-six pence, please."

It took me several seconds to register that the checkout girl was looking at me, waiting. I pulled a handful of coins from my pocket. My fingers fumbled as I tried to sort through them.

"You'd think Josie wouldn't dare leave her in sole charge of her granddaddy, wouldn't you?"

"You don't think she'd—"

"Well, you don't know. She's done it the once, after all . . ."

My cheeks were flaming. My money clattered onto the counter. Granddad was still repeating, "Oh fat. Oh fat." at the bemused checkout girl, waiting for her to get the joke. I pulled at his sleeve. "Come on, Granddad, we have to go."

"Oh fat," he insisted, again.

"Right." She said, and smiled kindly.

"Please, Granddad." I felt hot and dizzy, like I might faint. They might have still been talking but my ears were ringing so loudly I couldn't tell.

"Bye-bye," he said.

"Bye then," said the girl.

"Nice," said Granddad as we emerged into the sunlight. Then, looking at me: "Why you crying?"

So here is the thing about being involved in a catastrophic, life-changing event. You think it's just the catastrophic, life-changing event that you're going to have to deal with: the flashbacks, the sleepless nights, the

endless running back over events in your head, asking yourself if you had done the right thing, said the things you should have said, whether you could have changed things had you done them even a degree differently.

My mother had told me that being there with Will at the end would affect the rest of my life, and I had thought she meant me, psychologically. I thought she meant the guilt I would have to learn to get over, the grief, the insomnia, the weird, inappropriate bursts of anger, the endless internal dialogue with someone who wasn't even there. But what I now discovered is that it wasn't just me. I had become *that* person and in a digital age I would be that person forever. It was in that faint swivel of heads when you walked through a busy street—"Is that—?" Even if I managed to wipe the whole thing from my memory, I would never be allowed to disassociate from Will's death. My name would always be tied to his. People would form judgments about me based on the most cursory knowledge—or sometimes no knowledge at all—and there was nothing I could do about it.

I cut my hair into a bob. I changed the way I dressed, bagged up everything that had ever made me distinctive, and stuffed those bags into the back of my wardrobe. I adopted Treena's uniform of jeans and a generic tee. Now, when I read newspaper stories about the bank teller who had stolen a fortune, the woman who had killed her child, the sibling who had disappeared, I found myself not shuddering in horror, as I once might have, but wondering instead at the part of the story that hadn't made it into print.

What I felt with them was a weird kinship. I was tainted. The world around me knew it. Worse, I had started to know it too.

I tucked what remained of my dark hair into a beanie and put on my sunglasses and then I walked to the library, doing everything I could not to let my limp show, even though it made my jaw ache with concentration.

I made my way past the singing-toddler group in the children's corner, and the silent genealogy enthusiasts trying to confirm that, yes,

they were distantly connected to King Richard III, and I sat down in the corner with the archived files of the local papers. It wasn't hard to locate August 2009. I took a breath, then I opened them halfway, and flicked through the headlines.

### **LOCAL MAN ENDS HIS LIFE AT SWISS CLINIC**

#### **Traynor Family Asks for Privacy at "Difficult Time"**

The 35-year-old son of Steven Traynor, custodian of Stortfold Castle, has ended his life at Dignitas, the controversial center for assisted suicide. Mr. Traynor was left quadriplegic after a traffic accident in 2007. He apparently traveled to the clinic with his family and his caregiver, Louisa Clark, 27, also from Stortfold.

Police are investigating the circumstances surrounding the death. Sources say they have not ruled out the possibility that a prosecution may arise.

Louisa Clark's parents, Bernard and Josephine Clark, of Renfrew Road, refused to comment.

Camilla Traynor, a Justice of the Peace, is understood to have stood down from the bench following her son's suicide. A local source said her position, given the actions of the family, had become "untenable."

"And then there it was—Will's face, looking out from the grainy newspaper photograph. That slightly sardonic smile, that direct gaze. I felt, briefly, winded.

Mr. Traynor's death ends a successful career in the City, where he was known as a ruthless asset stripper, but also as someone with a sure eye for a corporate bargain. His colleagues yesterday lined up to pay tribute to a man they described as

I closed the newspaper, and let out a breath. When I could be sure that I had got my face under control, I looked up. Around me the library

hummed with quiet industry. The toddlers kept singing, their reedy voices chaotic and meandering, their mothers clapping fondly around them. Behind me, the librarian and a colleague were discussing, sotto voce, the best way to make Thai curry. The man beside me ran his finger down an ancient electoral roll, murmuring: "Fisher, Fitzgibbon, Fitzwilliam."

I had done nothing. It was more than eighteen months and I had done nothing but tend bar in two different countries and feel sorry for myself. And now, after four weeks back in the house I grew up in, I could feel Stortfold reaching out to suck me in, to reassure me that I could be fine here. It would be all right. There might be no great adventures, sure, and a bit of discomfort as people adjusted to my presence here again. But there were worse things, right? Than to be with your family, loved and secure? Safe?

I looked down at the pile of newspapers in front of me. The most recent front page headline read:

**ROW OVER DISABLED PARKING SPACE  
IN FRONT OF POST OFFICE**

I thought back to Dad, sitting on my hospital bed, looking in vain for a report of an extraordinary accident.

*I failed you, Will. I failed you in every way possible.*

You could hear the shouting all the way up the street when I finally arrived home. As I opened the door my ears were filled with the sound of Thomas wailing. My sister, her finger wagging, was scolding him in the corner of the living room. Mum was leaning over Granddad with a washing-up bowl of water and a scouring pad, while Granddad politely batted her away.

"What's going on?"

Mum moved to the side and I saw Granddad's face clearly for the first time. He was sporting a new set of jet black eyebrows and a thick black, slightly uneven mustache.

"Permanent pen," said Mum. "From now on nobody is to leave Granddad napping in the same room as Thomas."

"You have to stop drawing on things!" Treena was yelling. "Paper only, okay? Not walls. Not faces. Not Mrs. Reynolds's dog. Not my pants."

"I was doing you days of the week!"

"I don't need days-of-the-week pants!" she shouted. "And if I did I would spell Wednesday correctly!"

"Don't scold him, Treen," said Mum, leaning back to see if she'd had any effect. "It could be a lot worse."

In our little house Dad's footsteps coming down the stairs sounded like a particularly emphatic roll of thunder. He barreled his way into the front room, his shoulders hunched in frustration, his hair standing up on one side. "Can't a man get a nap in his own house on his day off? This place is like a ruddy madhouse."

We all stopped and stared at him.

"What? What did I say?"

"Bernard—"

"Ah, come on. Our Lou doesn't think I mean *her*—"

"Oh, my sweet Lord." Mum's hand flew to her face.

My sister had started to push Thomas out of the room. "Oh, boy," she hissed. "Thomas, you better get out of here right now. Because I swear when your granddaddy gets hold of you—"

"What?" Dad frowned. "What's the matter?"

Granddad barked a laugh. He held up a shaking finger.

It was almost magnificent. Thomas had colored in the whole of Dad's face with blue marker pen. His eyes emerged like two gooseberries from a sea of cobalt blue. "What?"

Thomas's voice, as he disappeared down the corridor, was a wail of protest. "We were watching *Avatar*! He said he wouldn't mind being an Avatar!"

Dad's eyes widened. He strode to the mirror over the mantelpiece.

There was a brief silence.

"Oh, my God."

"Bernard—don't take the Lord's name in vain."

"He's turned me bloody blue, Josie. I think I'm entitled to take the Lord's name to Butlins in a flipping wheelbarrow. Is this permanent pen? THOMMO? IS THIS PERMANENT PEN?"

"We'll get it off, Dad." My sister closed the door to the garden behind her. Beyond it you could just make out the sound of Thomas wailing.

"I'm meant to be overseeing the new fencing at the castle tomorrow. I have contractors coming. How the hell am I meant to deal with contractors if I'm *blue*?"

Dad spat on his hand and started to rub at his face. The faintest smudging appeared, but mostly the ink seemed to spread onto his palm.

"It's not coming off. Josie, it's not coming off!"

Mum shifted her attention from Granddad and set about Dad with the scouring pad. "Just stay still, Bernard. I'm doing what I can."

Treena went for her laptop bag. "I'll go on the Internet. I'm sure there's something. Toothpaste or nail polish remover or bleach or—"

"You are not putting bleach on my ruddy face!" Dad roared. Granddad, with his new pirate mustache, sat giggling in the corner of the room.

I began to edge past them.

Mum was holding Dad's face with her left hand as she scrubbed. She turned, as if she'd only just seen me.

"Lou! I didn't ask—are you okay, love? Did you have a nice walk?" Everyone stopped, abruptly, to smile at me; a smile that said *Everything's okay here, Lou. You don't have to worry*. I realized I hated that smile.

"Fine."

It was the answer they all wanted. Mum turned to Dad.

"That's grand. Isn't it grand, Bernard?"

"It is. Great news."

"If you sort out your whites, love, I'll pop them in the wash with Daddy's later."

"Actually," I said, "don't bother. I've been thinking. It's time for me to go home."

Nobody spoke. Mum glanced at Dad. Granddad let out another little giggle and clamped his hand over his mouth.

"Fair enough," said Dad, with as much dignity as a middle-aged, blueberry-colored man could muster. "But if you go back to that flat, Louisa, you go on one condition . . ."