

The Long Haul

A Memoir of Anorexia Nervosa

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To respect the privacy of the patients and clinicians I encountered throughout my treatment, the characters I write of are not necessarily modelled on single individuals. They are fictionalisations, inspired by the people I had the privilege of meeting. However, while their personal details have been altered, their spirit, as well as the experiences I write of, are true to my memory of them.

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The Train

There was a train that passed just beyond the border of the hospital grounds. I heard it passing as I lay awake on the first night of my admission. When I opened my curtains the following morning, I looked for signs of a railway track, but a thicket of trees veiled it from sight. They were oaks, I think, thickened at the roots with brambles and bracken, and a wrapping of brick wall that confined your eyes to the psychiatric hospital it contained.

Boxed hedgerows divided the garden into sections. There was one for the adolescents. One for us, the eating-disordered, and another for the rest. They were a mixed-up bunch of disorders, but we were kept separate, always. It scarcely mattered. I'd soon learn that fresh air was a privilege that had to be earned and it would be months before I was allowed outside. Little did I know that first morning, but, then, little did I *want* to know. New patients are like small children – naïve, eager to please and ready to believe the truths they are told.

‘If you want to go outside,’ a nurse said, stripping the blood-pressure cuff from my arm, ‘then you need to ask for a “ten-minute sit outside” in your Ward Round on Thursday, ok?’

Ok, I nodded, settling onto the edge of my bed. The mattress was thickly padded and my bare feet dangled as I watched this nurse walk away. I did not want her to leave, I realised. I was not sure where I was supposed to be. I wanted my mother, but she was not allowed to visit until the weekend. It was Monday. I pulled my cardigan sleeves over my knuckles, wiped my cheek and tried not to think of her walking past my empty bedroom when she woke up and went downstairs to take our spaniels out for their morning stroll.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Voices neared then ebbed away as a collection of girls passed my door. It was wedged ajar. I wanted it closed, but I wanted my mother more and

was not ready for the girl who hovered just outside my door. She looked frail and pale, distracted and sad. She seemed intrigued and I was too. She stepped closer and I tried not to flinch. But I must have moved, because she froze. Her hands checked the line of her skirt, her lips gathered in one corner and her brows sank into an appeal that made my nose prickle and my eyes sting.

When she walked away, I turned back to the window. The sun had begun to climb. Its rays were steadily spreading, shrinking the shadows back beneath the trees so that a sprinkling of dewy droplets twinkled across the lawn. 'Everything will become clearer as the day goes on,' that nurse had said while scribbling scores onto my chart. 'And remember, save any questions for Ward Round – Thursday. Meantime, never hurts to make a list, ok?'

Ok, I had nodded. But not just *any questions*, I had *many* questions and three days seemed a long time to have to hold onto them. What even was this thing they called 'Ward Round?' I pictured white coats and clipboards, brisk doctors, harried nurses and wailing women. I imagined cot beds, metal bars, cuffs and brass keys. After all, this red-brick building had once prided itself as being a fine Victorian asylum. How much could have changed? I looked around my small room. It was bare, but there were no bars. The pattern was uniform across the bed spread, the curtains, and the carpet, but it was colourful and the bed slim, but inviting.

If looks can be deceiving, I wasn't looking to be corrected. In the throes of disorder, there is comfort from apparent order and those hedgerows were so sturdily built, so evenly clipped that it seemed natural to relinquish the desire to wander outside. Who needed to be out there, when I had such a view from in here? Through my big bay window, I could behold that expanse of green grass, freshly mown and well tendered beneath a woolly layer of spring mist. Roses clambered up the brick walls and that freedom to grow, to breathe, just to be, was enough to distract your eye from the rack of wire fencing towering high above it. Not holding us in place, they said, it was there to keep us safe. And why not? Who was I to question their authority? Nurses are wise and I was afraid. They were sure where I was uncertain. I was here to recover and they, they said, were there to see me through the *long haul* ahead.

‘Oi Dave, look, I can see one of them lunatics! Oh mate, seriously, get a load of this. Here, through there? Can you see *it*?’

I spied two pairs of eyes vying for the gap in the hedgerow that yielded best glimpse of me – *it* – The Lunatic. Their hands harried the honey-combed fencing until Dave satisfied his curiosity enough to say, ‘*Sick.*’ There was awe to his voice and width to his eyes as he said, ‘*Sick,*’ again, just for good measure.

‘Did you hear that?’ my cousin Mimi asked when the boys’ voices had filtered into the distance. It was early summer and she’d come to spend the evening with me. We were sitting on the hospital lawn, catching up whilst half-heartedly threading a chain of daisies. Mimi picked the last of those within reach and handed one to me, the seamstress.

‘I’m mad, not deaf, Mims,’ I said, taking her offering and making a loop of its stem.

‘Tish, that’s *not* funny.’ Mimi tried not to smile, but Mimi is rarely able not to smile and this humour was too familiar to our past, yet too alien to my present for her to take for granted.

‘Well, a *bit* funny.’

‘Hmm...,’ she said, ‘D’you get that a lot though?’

‘What, the peeking or the comments?’

‘Either, I guess.’

‘Both, I guess.’

‘Unbelievable.’

‘Well not really, Mims. Don’t you think my brothers would say the same kind of thing if they found themselves walking past a loony-bin?’ I held the end of our chain up to inspect. ‘It’s natural, isn’t it? To be curious, especially about people and places that are kept so hushed up and hidden?’

Mimi was quiet. She passed me the final daisy and watched as I began to thread the needle. ‘You know,’ I said, ‘sometimes I think secrecy’s half the problem. It creates this huge divide between in here and out there. They find us scary to look at, but don’t they realise how scary it is to be on the inside, looking out?’

Mimi seemed to be searching my face for something and I determined my eyes to stay low, intent only on not pulling the stem of our final daisy apart. Eventually, she said, ‘But don’t you think your brothers would say something different now?’

‘Yes, very different. They’re amazing. But I do worry how it must be for them at school – you know, people knowing they having a real-life *lunatic* for a sister. A *sick* one at that.’

‘Ok,’ Mimi was smiling again. ‘Then you can chill, because they didn’t mean *sick in the head*, they meant *cool*.’

‘Cool?’

‘Yeah, *sick*’s just the new in-word for *cool*. So take it as a compliment,’ she nudged my arm, ‘They think Tish Goodchild is pretty cool.’

‘Mimi Wadham,’ I nudged her harder back, ‘I think it’s more likely that Tish Goodchild will be sane one day than she’ll ever be cool.’

We both laughed and it felt good to. But Mimi's cheeks soon coloured into a shade that made me wonder, was she embarrassed by her kind of intrigued outsiders? Should I, then, be embarrassed about my kind of out-casted insiders?

I'd been inside just shy of a year and yet so much had changed that Mimi and I seemed representatives of two worlds, set apart by the line of our daisies. How funny, I thought, tracing the line of treetops hanging over the brick walls, that they no longer seemed so much as a confinement as they were a comfort. Whatever lay outside felt too distant to be real – like a surreal dream that does not quite fit together, however hard you try to piece together your memory of it. The edges remain blurred and the colours so indistinct that you find yourself questioning whether it ever truly existed. Was the home of my hopes not just a figment of my imagination? And the past I remembered not just a dream – a life, a girl – that could not be recovered?

By now the sinking sun had painted the sky with a pinkened wash that was beginning to ebb away. The trees had grown taller, their shadows were creeping over the lawn with a breeze that made me shiver and pull down the sleeves of my cardigan. I began brushing off the grass gathered in my lap. 'We should probably go in, Mims,' I said, glancing up to the camera on the building's corner. The lens peered down at us, its green light flickering on and off, perceptible only now that the darkness had begun to take hold of the dusky light.

We wandered across the courtyard, rang the doorbell and waited to be buzzed back inside. Through the glass door there was a woman sitting on the floor beside the sofa. Clutching her knees, she was rocking, back and forth, with a nurse propped at an awkward angle beside her. I tried for a breath, but it caught in my throat, so I turned away and pressed my back to the glass, opening my eyes to the touch of Mimi's hand against my own.

'Hey,' she said, as if she knew. The normality she'd given me back with her presence was a goodness I was unwilling to relinquish the moment we crossed the threshold. 'Don't let all this get to you. Please, Tish, you've got stay focused, you're so nearly there.'

But nearly where, I wondered? Nearly ready to return to her world and pretend *this* world never existed? The rumble of a train passed in the distance as the sound of a key turned in the lock. Mimi took hold of my hand and I let her lead me back inside.

You didn't need to see the train to know it was there. You could hear it passing, regular as clockwork, and this murmur was enough to remind you. Time may have stopped in here, but out *there*, life was moving on.

The train had a kind of double beat, like a heartbeat, the pulse of which is faintly lulling. Soothing for its very regularity, though as it drew closer, the crescendo of noise grew to such a climax that I used to wonder how it did not topple the brick wall that separated us from it.

B'dumm-B'dumm

B'dumm-B'dumm

And then it was gone. Just like that, the snatch of reality it yielded was swept away. The beat died out in a curt diminuendo that left you with nothing save the sound of your heart beating, beating, as fast as those wheels flew over the ebony sleepers.

The sound reminded me of trips we'd taken to London as children. We'd stand, hand-in-hand, on the platform, with our toes tucked behind the thick yellow line and our tummies fluttering as we waited for the concrete to shudder, the air to swell, the metal brakes to screech and, finally, the train to tank into the station.

B'dumm-B'dumm

B'dumm-B'dumm

So, like it or not, I came to expect the train. And, helped by text messages from my father, it came to represent more than life outside. It was a connection to *my* life – my journey home, for it was the very track my father travelled once or twice a week as he wound his way between London and our home in Suffolk. He’s made the commute ever since we moved back to England, twenty years ago, from Hong Kong where we’d spent two years living for his job. As she planned our return, my mother had been too tied up with four young children to fly off house-hunting and so she had reluctantly tasked my father with the mission.

Our scout flew out and landed near the Suffolk countryside where he began his search. In his pocket, he carried a crumpled list of two (simple) instructions from my mother:

- 1) *No exception, the house must be by water.* The kind of water was left unspecified, though the sea was our preference. We settled for a muddy river that flows into the North Sea and have lived happily there, on the Butley Creek, ever since. What summers we had, messing about on the precarious pontoon, crabbing and mud sliding. We’d start on the sea wall, run down, dive onto our slippery bellies when we hit the mud slacks and glide across the slick surface until we slipped headfirst into the salty waters. Each race ended with us lying flat on our backs, panting and painted in wet mud, watching the clouds lazily reform the skyline. It stretched for miles – that sky felt like it was ours.
- 2) *The house must be down a long track ie with no one and, Harry, I mean, no one about.* The smoggy buzz of city life had made my parents long for seclusion. With a drive a mile long, Ferry Farm provided us with a home more picturesque and isolated than any of us could have dreamt of, living as we were back then, cramped in a flat in the sticky streets of Stanley, Hong Kong.

So, when my mother was shown the estate-agent’s particulars, she had eyes only for the little map at the back. Two squiggly lines. Yes, she agreed, to my father’s amazement, this *was* the home for us, thank you.

‘Really Sabina? But you haven’t even looked at the photo.’ He passed her a grainy photograph of a square red-brick house, with big white windows and roses climbing waywardly up the walls.

‘Yup, H, looks fine, but *look*,’ my mother pulled the map back and pointed to the two squiggly lines. One blue – the creek, the other was our bumpy drive, which wound its way right off the grid, neither passing nor nearing any other dwelling. There were no houses for miles, just fields, the creek and Burrow Hill, against which Ferry Farm rested.

That was that. My mother told us to pack our things, a big adventure lay ahead. And there was. For those two wiggly map lines would lead to the centre of such happiness in the following chapters of our lives.

I was nearly four when we flew back. I began pre-school and my father began his commute to London. But it wasn’t long before he found London too far from the secluded home he’d chosen and the family tentatively beginning to grow there. How we’d laugh, piled into the car on the way home from school, laden with hockey sticks and (ill-practiced) musical instruments, as we asked, *Mummy, how many times has Daddy rung today?*

Too many times, was the invariable answer. *Daddy must be bored at work*, my brother, Hugo, would say. Too young to make sense of a world beyond our own, Joss would just chuckle without unplugging the fingers he suckled in his mouth. My head would bounce in agreement with Hugo, until Big-Sister Tatiana weighed in with The Answer: ‘You guys are *such* morons,’ she’d say, sighing wearily, for, really, Tatiana was born a grown-up, ‘Daddy *obviously* just rings because he misses us.’

I’d swiftly realign my loyalties and nod in wondrous approval at Tatiana. Though my mother tended to confuse the matter, muttering something which suggested she thought Hugo’s point to be more *en pointe*.

‘Well,’ Tatiana would press, ‘what *exactly* did Daddy want?’

‘That, darling, is a jolly good question. Daddy didn’t *exactly* want anything. He was just checking, *again*.’

Yes, my father liked to check. Checking, was everything ok at home? Checking, Sabina what time are you picking up the children?

...Normal time? ...Oh, right, and what time is *normal* time?

...No, Sabina, I'm not bored, I'm actually *terribly* busy. Just checking *you're* not bored...

...Hmmm.

...By the way, when I went into to the boys' bedroom last night, Hugo was on about the Titanic again. Was it a good idea to give him that model set? The boy's obsessed, I mean, where does an eight-year-old acquire such an appreciation for statistics?

...Nine?

...Sorry, yes, *hopeless*, forgot he's nine now. But seriously, where...

...No, agreed, he didn't get it from *me*, but I don't believe he got statistics from you either.

...Hmmm.

...And that light-up globe of his, I know he's fond of the planet but... No Sabina, I'm not *about to be a bore*. Always so disloyal. It's just *always* switched on, that's all. I mean, does Hugo *need* to have a globe on all night?

...Fine, we'll agree to disagree. My girls, they ok? Yes, I know I rang an hour *or so* ago, but no harm in checking now is there?'

My sister confirmed The Harm with a sigh that suggested she couldn't help it if she was (always) right and we morons (always) wrong. 'You see? Daddy was just trying to *annoy* Mummy.'

A few years later, my mother would relish the days when my father was a phone call away. He announced, most triumphantly, that he'd decided to give up London and work from home. *From Home? H, you can't be serious? We don't even have the internet at home.* But my

father was both serious and sure, leaving my mother to break The News and field the questions batted by an array of little frowning faces:

Mummy, d'you mean Daddy will be home with you, like, all the time?

Yup.

Like, even when we get back from school?

Yup, like even then.

Oh. But where will he have his desk?

Good question, darling. Daddy seems to think he'll work in the playroom.

What? Like, in The Playroom?

Yup.

Oh. But, what about when we play farms?

That, darling, is another good question. H? The children have a few points to raise with you.

I'd say the transition was about as smooth as it was ever likely to be. My mother now found herself packed into a household of children who asked *too* many questions and a husband who asked the *same* questions, over and over again.

'No, darling, Mummy is *not* cross with Daddy, it just so happens that your father is *so* annoying.'

He still went to London, but only a few times a week. It worked in my favour during my years in hospital, for his train ran along the very track that passed just beyond the fence.

'No, Laetitia, I can't *exactly* see the building. But I think I know which ones are the trees I see – those ones, just there,' he said, sitting by my bedside one night, pointing out the window.

'Really? Those ones just there?'

'Yes, darling. Well, yes, I *think* so.'

On the days he commuted, he'd send a text in the morning.

En route to London. Passing in circa de five minutes.
Keep fighting, darling. Look out at that sky of ours.
Love you millions, Daddy

He gave me warning so I'd be ready to listen out for his train. That way I could wave and imagine him waving back. But his train would hurtle by so quickly that the rest of day would drag, interminably, until he was passing on his journey back home to my mother, Tatiana (if she was home from university), the boys and our growing collection of animals.

Evenings were hardest. Darkness has a way of strengthening nostalgia and I'd lie awake picturing us together, huddled around the open fire. With our pyjamas on and our slippers strewn somewhere beneath the armchairs in which you'd find us, sprawled on a Sunday evening. My father called it Library Club, ever-keen to promote Peace and Quiet. And, for once, we were *so* quiet that you could hear the fire crackling as we guzzled our books, until Bedtime stole us away, one by one. We'd delay (obviously) and (eventually) slip off, slipperless, upstairs, leaving my father to close Library Club with a collection of abandoned slippers. *Sabina*, he'd invariably say, *what is the point of these children having slippers if they persist in wandering around with bare feet?*

Sometimes, if I was lucky or it had been a *really* bad day, my father would catch an earlier train and stop in on his way past. He'd seem so smart, suited amongst the tide of dressing gowns that stalked the hospital corridors. His hug would take me back to being a little girl, dressed in my floral nightie, with Pappap, my blankie, tucked beneath my arm, watching as the playroom lit up with the car's headlights. There'd be a bash of the door (it never did fit its frame), another bash and in he'd walk, dressed in his heavy overcoat, carrying my grandfather's worn brief-case. He looked so serious that I'd feel timid as I got up to greet him. But he soon swept that away, scooping me into a hug where I'd feel the wintry air thaw against my warm body, like I was his home-made hot-water bottle.

In hospital, he'd sit in the easy chair bedside my bed. Sometimes we'd talk, quietly, as though we were afraid of being heard, or of disturbing the partial peace that was so peculiar

to that place. Other times we'd just sit in silence with the television light flickering, the volume dipped so low that the audience's laughter was but a distant murmur. He always chose *You've been Framed*. We loved it as children and hungrily watched it on those rare occasions when television was allowed in the Goodchild household. Saturday evening and there we'd be, piled onto our dilapidated, gold sofa, chirping in chuckles. So unknowingly content. So contently undisturbed by the life that lay ahead that I wonder whether it was this my father was trying to rekindle each time he flicked through the channels to find our programme. With the remote in one hand and my hand in his other, his thumb would gently swirl circles on my palm.

Come on darling, he'd say, catching sight of the tears that filled my eyes as the time ticked nearer to the moment he'd leave me. *We're going to win this*. He'd make a fist and I'd make one too. He'd shake his fist and I'd shake mine. *We're going to beat this darling, please try and remember that*. His hand would close around my fist, *I need you to be strong for me and your mummy. She needs you, darling, we need you back home with us, where you belong*.

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.

The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me;
I will not, cannot go.

Emily Bronte¹

¹ Emily Bronte, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Digireads.com Publishing, 2012), p. 73.

There is no right way to deal with trauma. Or so we are told, in a way that seems to excuse the madness that often becomes our way of coping.² The mind will forge its own pathway out of the darkness. Some will carve the pain of it into their flesh, while others will seek to cleanse, purge or starve it from their bodies. A therapeutic relationship with a friend, family member or professional may console some, while others will try to dull the memory with alcohol or pills. And then there are those who will be driven to mania, spending a lifetime fleeing from the mere thought of it.

I am one of these people. My mania is thought mad by others. *You need to slow down*, they say. *You're going to burn out*, they press, exhausted by the chink-less chain of activities I carry out, with no whisper of a break in between. But stopping poses too great a risk. Should the past catch me, it will engulf me and this is fear enough to accept a life on the run. Running, running, I am forever chasing those memories away, refusing to allow them centre stage in the fragile life I have formed out of that broken past.

But time is not always the great healer we like to think it. Experiences cannot so easily be erased, nor their pain entirely abated. Trauma withstands. It is patient and quite content to bide its time while you play your game of Hide and Seek. In hiding you seek some reprieve, but ultimately the memories will find you and only when they do, will you realise your mistake. Time has passed, but the past remains present in your mind. It had been hiding too, nested in some quiet corner where, unbeknown to you, it has steadily grown.

² For the duration of this thesis I will be using terms such as 'mad' and 'madness' to mean a spectrum of disorders rather than denoting a particular diagnosis. I am aware that the term is no longer applied to medical literature, and I intend no offence by using it in, what could be construed as, a flippant way. Rather it is pertinent to my understanding of my own mental health and I use it with an awareness of its problematic heritage. For more on this, see *The Female Malady*, in which Elaine Showalter explores how 'madness' has been applied as a 'historical label' to represent female protest. For instance, Showalter writes that, 'the language of psychiatric medicine... is as culturally determined and revealing in its metaphors as the language of fiction.' (p. 5.) *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987).

It is like a storm looming on the horizon. Dark clouds veil it from sight and so the rumble of thunder is left to hail its approach. You feel only the blackness of the clouds, descending. You feel only the compression of air, tightening with the promise of a storm which will only break stronger the longer its forces have been given to gather.

A trigger to trauma is like the flash of lightening which finally splits the storm clouds. A torrent of rain is unleashed – a flood of emotions – which is torrential enough to unseal your grip on reality. Unhinged, as it were, your mind is thrown into a flashback, only to re-live the past episode as though it were present again.

In her study of trauma, *Recovering from Trauma using Compassion Focused Therapy*, Deborah Lee dissects the process through which the mind ordinarily stores memories. It does so, Lee writes, by stamping events with the time and place in which they occurred, so that when they *recur* as memories, we can identify them as a part of our past. Trauma, however, disrupts this process. Unable to sustain the distress, the mind ‘shuts down’ or ‘cuts out’ in a bid to protect itself, yet it does so without binding the event to that specific moment in your history.

As a result, the emotional trauma memory remains fragmented and not integrated, so it continues to play out in our mind time and time again in a terrifyingly real way.³

‘Confusion’ is Lee’s kinder description for the sheer madness that ensues.⁴ The memory invades the sufferer, capturing their senses in such entirety that they are left, quite literally, sense-*less*, disorientated and unable to discern the wood from the trees.

Anything that triggers a reminder of them mobilizes our brains as if they were again in grave and current danger, but they don’t establish that the threat they have identified is in the past.⁵

³ Deborah Lee, *Recovering from Trauma using Compassion Focused Therapy*, with Sophie James, (London: Robinson, 2012), p. 63.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 63.

The battle to survive the ‘grave and current danger’ begins. But, as Marilee Strong proposes in her own study of trauma:

Ultimately, it is a futile struggle – like fighting an invisible enemy. The battle for control sets off a vicious cycle of intrusive thoughts that produce fear and anxiety followed by desperate attempts to achieve psychological numbing to reduce the anxiety.⁶

It is a ‘futile struggle.’ The enemy is intangible, the pain inaccessible and so the madder the body’s ‘desperate attempts’ to survive appear: cutting, crying, clawing, crawling. This is how a flashback can feel, as Lee writes, ‘as if you are losing your mind.’⁷ And this is how a young girl can find herself caught in the bewildering midst of an episode in which she cannot distinguish between *that day* and her present.

Take the beat of the train. The reality is that the track lay at a distance which would have given me but seconds to hear it passing. But in order to sustain – to escape – the distress, my mind created a world in which I could hear those wheels’ roll, with a beat as consistent as the hand that ticked each second around the clock. A clock, I realise now, that existed in my head alone.

How great is the gulf between reality and our perception of it? And why does the contrast only emerge when time has given us the space in which to breathe anew and view the past, so to speak, with hindsight? That is, without the emotional turbulence which so disturbingly affected its present.

I am unsure that I have yet accomplished the self-compassion that Lee asks her reader to have in response to their own trauma. But her words have been invaluable in reassuring me that the episodes I will unveil of my madness were, if not understandable, at least a symptom of something. The aftermath of a trauma. And I believe Lee is right to say that, ‘the brain’s foremost mission is to keep us safe.’⁸ Often this mission goes beyond our conscious control.

⁶ Marilee Strong, *A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 92.

⁷ Lee, p. 54.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 42.

For instance, although I set out to account for a single day, it is only in editing that I have realised how difficult it is to impose chronology upon memories the mind deems too volatile to articulate. I start nearer the end than the beginning and have resisted the temptation to re-order it, for this version remains a truer reflection of the *disorder* of that time.

Perhaps I am asking you to excuse the flashbacks which precede my return to *that day*. My narrative is less of a thread and more of a spiral. Like a tornado, it circulates the heart of *that day* – yielding snatches only to retreat in the relief of a wider loop – as though my mind could not contemplate the storm without first acknowledging that an aftermath existed. The assurance that a brighter day lay ahead. That *that day* did not bring the end it intended, but the beginning of a future which, if not blighted by the wreckage, was a future nonetheless.

[It] has evolved into a storm – a veritable howling tempest in the brain, which is indeed what a clinical depression resembles like nothing else.

William Styron⁹

⁹ William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 37.

Three months into my admission I was asked to move bedrooms. It came unexpected and passed unexplained. Penny, a spritely, warm healthcare assistant (HCA) I had grown close to, helped me redecorate Room Two – my new room – with my things. Together, we untacked my cards and photos from the wardrobe door and re-plastered them onto this new one. *A right kerfuffle*, she'd called it, adding a wink that gave little else away.

I'd frowned. Professionalism was not Penny's specialism and she was seldom so restrained with words. Something was up. That much had been clear from the moment Charge-Nurse Martha pulled me aside after Snack Supervision, saying we needed to have a Quiet Word. Eyebrows had risen as patients walked past, slowing their step as my heart quickened. Quiet words never brought Good News and sure enough Martha soon broke The News: I was on The Move, and right away.

That was that. Martha offered nothing more revealing. No hint of a reason. Not so much as an allusion to Bad Behaviour. No, Martha was bowing aside to let me pass through and I found myself walking, cautiously, away. But if I was relieved to have escaped with so little a punishment (I was no model of Good Behaviour), I was no less confused. Patients did not usually swap bedrooms and the last reshuffle I could recall had been due to an Unfortunate Incident involving a bath tub and shower curtain. I'd messed with no bath tub (I had no tub to mess with) and my use of the (curtain-less) shower was entirely supervised. My footsteps slowed to a halt. It was natural, I decided, turning sheepishly back towards Martha, to enquire as to why.

'Tish,' came Martha's Less Than Satisfactory reply, 'why is not always an *appropriate* question. Pack. Your. Things.'

I bent my head, packed my things and made the move. I'd expected little more from tight-lipped Martha and suspected that my decline was to blame. A closer eye was needed and next door to the nurses' office? No closer could they park me.

It's only now that I wonder if they knew that things were about to escalate? Had they forecasted how soon Room Two would become the epicentre of the brewing storm? Already the clouds had gathered above me, casting me into darkness that quite obscured the glimmer of hope – the thought of returning home – flickering on my horizon.

Morning darling. Missing my little companion, too much. Be brave for me today
and you'll be home before you know it.
Love you to the moon and back, darling.
Mummy

To the moon and back, Mummy, I love you too. But you felt further than the moon. And further the longer the months stretched, the harder the days became and the louder the Voice spoke. Vulnerability always will play to its advantage and I felt lost, Mummy, and alone. So terribly frightened by the flashes of lightning, now so swiftly followed by the sound of rumbling thunder as the storm closed in. On me, Mummy, the night was darkening round me. The storm was fast descending. And yet I could not go. On, I could not, could not go.

‘You’re stuck with me again, Tishy,’ Penny announced as she strode into Room Two. We were nearly six months into my admission and things had changed, considerably. I was on bedrest. The curtains were closed and Room Two was no longer so much of a bedroom as it was an enclosure.

That day was to blame. It redefined the battle lines and now the nurses came to do their observations in twos. Dr Miller’s instructions were clear:

Tish will be kept on a close Two to One – to start with both nurses are to be within arm 's reach, holding her wrists if necessary.

Two weeks later and here Penny was, fanning her face with the clipboard as she settled onto the edge of my bed. ‘This is another one of me Wedding Shifts, Tishy,’ she said, nudging my leg, adding, ‘Lordy, don’t have daughters, darling. Exhausting and expensive. That’s what you girls are, nothing but trouble with a capital T.’

Getting no reply, Penny squeezed my thigh before turning to face Tessa, the HCA who had arrived with her. Tessa was her partner for the afternoon, but she seemed reluctant to come in, yet uncertain of the state of play. Penny ploughed on. Penny always ploughed on.

‘What d’you reckon, Tess, I’ll do arms if you take the door?’

Penny needn’t have asked. Tessa was not about to fight over getting closer to me. As far away as possible, thank-you very much. She knew *this* one was trouble. She might look angelic now, lying quietly beneath those starched bedclothes, her little body lost somewhere inside her oversized pyjamas. But my god she could turn. And when she did? Well, Tessa had learnt it was best to keep well out the way.

‘Oh, but do take me clipboard, Tess. I can’t be doing with that faff.’ Penny held the clipboard out for Tessa to come in and fetch. But Tessa did not come in or fetch, instead she froze.

The door is to be guarded at all times.

Tish is never to have any doubt as to her confinement.

Another rustle of the red papers and Penny made Tessa’s mind up for her. She walked in, keeping her eyes on me as she took the clipboard and retreated with it back to the door.

‘Lordy,’ Penny next said (Penny rarely began without a word to her *Lordy*), ‘You know I’m no good with the writing lark. Doing them Obs every half hour is one thing – can just about cope with that. But writing “Patient breathing” every five minutes? I ask you, Tishy, the things you put your Penny through.’

'Appears to be breathing.'

'What's that Tess?'

'The Observations – it's "Appears to be breathing." Remember?' I'd suggest that Penny did not. 'Martha said in Handover, unless you can be *certain* she's breathing, you need to put "appears" or "looks as if" she's –'

'Oh *as if* I'm going to remember all that. Hey, Tishy?' Penny turned back to me with a wink. 'But for the record, Tess, I can confirm with *certainty* that, at 18:05, Tishy Goodchild *appears* to be very much alive and kicking.'

Penny was unlike most of the healthcare team. She was notorious, in fact, for being a law unto herself. She'd watched her niece suffer with the illness and applied to the job on a whim. A decade later, the whim had become a reality and she'd made herself into a kind of auntie to us all. She liked action and loathed paperwork and was pleased to hand the notes over to Tessa. And neither was Tessa displeased – most of the healthcare workers relished the task. If nothing else, it passed perhaps twenty-odd seconds of each drawn-out five-minute mark – though she sighed as she rifled through the documents. They likely confirmed her worst expectations.

16:45 Patient in bed, shows signs of breathing.

16:50 Eyes closed, signs of breathing.

Tessa lifted the top sheet. She peeked at the page below and sighed, again. With little else to report, it was unlikely to contain anything more colourful.

14:40 Appears to be breathing.

14:45 Patient still appears to be breathing.

She let the page fall and passed another sigh up towards Stacey, the HCA who was hovering in the doorway. She'd vacated her chair at the first sign of the takeover team and was just waiting now for the nod – the yes, you can go.

Stacey was a young Psychology student serving her time on placement with the mad likes of us on the ward. Documenting my breathing – breathing, ‘Patient appears to be breathing’ – was not *quite* the frontline of nursing Stacey had signed herself up for and she certainly seemed desperate. Tessa had barely finished her sigh and already Stacey had breathed her silent thank you (*Thank God*) and fled off into the relative freedom of the ward beyond.

Tessa now tried to get comfortable. She wiggled her bottom to the back of her chair and bent down to reposition her plastic cup of water by her feet. Straightening upright, she puffed her cheeks anew, letting them deflate slowly, just to make sure *I* knew that *she* knew that the following few hours would be tedious. Lordy so miserable.

A cough came from the HCA sitting at my bedside. Donna coughed again, loudly. ‘Pen,’ she said, ‘d’you mind if I go? I’ve still got to type up Katie’s notes from earlier.’ Stacey had jumped ship and Donna seemed Less Than Impressed to have been left behind.

‘Lordy Tishy, look at me getting distracted. Unusual, eh?’ Penny stopped tucking and *re*-tucking the folds of my blanket beneath my foamy mattress and sent a wink in the direction of Donna. But, if Penny was a distraction, Donna was not amused. She did not wink back. Instead she coughed, again, tightening her grip of my arm.

‘Right then Madam, are you ready for me?’ Penny turned to me, ‘Cos I’m ready for you, been looking forwards to it all afternoon, I have. Got all sorts of wedding updates to tell you. Did I mention this was another Wedding Shift?’

Donna: You did.

Penny: Lordy there’s me getting–

Donna: Distracted. Yup, we got that too.

Action was needed and so Penny made her apology in the form of a zooming noise as she whizzed over to Donna’s side of my bed. But her foot caught on a stray shoe and her body flew, sending her zooming efforts into a tremendous crash. Now Donna smiled, her fingers loosening as Penny made an elaborate performance of straightening herself up and brushing herself down.

‘Lordy,’ Penny said, ‘perhaps my Mr Duckett is right, can’t take me nowhere.’ She swooped down to retrieve the *Thinking-of-You* card which had taken flight alongside her body and began to scan the mosaic of cards tacked to my wardrobe. Finding the missing tile, she said, ‘We’re going to have to get you upgraded to a bigger room. Be no wall space left soon.’ She cleared her throat, putting on her *highly-professional* voice to say, ‘Room Two: Inappropriate for Patient’s needs. Insufficient wall space for greeting cards. Now, what d’you reckon our Martha would say about that?’

I reckoned Martha would have a *lot* to say about that. Our Charge Nurse was rarely lost for words and never when it came to what was and (more importantly) what was *not* appropriate.

Penny pushed her spectacles up the bridge of her nose and pulled the card closer. ‘Yup, lucky madam, it’s from your Monday Man,’ she said, triumphantly tacking the postcard back into place. And she was right, I *was* lucky, for a postcard arrived each and every Monday, addressed to a Miss L. Goodchild, sent from a certain Mr Rory O’Brien.

We called the O’Bs our neighbours, though the distance between their house and ours considerably stretched the definition of the term. They lived a few miles further down the Butley Creek, but we knew them as neighbours and loved them like family. The middle of their three daughters I am proud to call my best friend, Lucy. Their youngest, Imy, has been married to Joss ever since they were about four, when he plucked up the courage to pop The Question in the hay-barn after school. Perhaps Joss will one day reclaim his bride and make those vows more official. We suspect not, but it would seal our Sister Deal and so Lucy and I continue to live in hope.

In the meantime, Lucy remains my Sister from Another Mister – the Mister is my Monday Man, who made it a tradition to send a Happy-Monday message for every week I was in hospital. Had he foreseen that I’d be locked inside for a year, I suspect he’d have thought twice about his promise. But credit to him, his commitment never wavered and not a Monday did Rory miss. And, should a bank holiday threaten the delivery of his post, then the card would come attached with an apologetic note, telling me how my extended family had spent their long weekend.

‘Oh before I forget Donna, can you go and supervise Arabella’s shower? Martha asked, said she didn’t get one yesterday because of the...err...the...*kerfuffle* on Green Ward.’

‘Poor Arabella,’ Donna said, letting go of another sigh. Donna liked Arabella. Arabella ate her toast in the morning without scraping off the spread and spreading it through her hair instead. ‘I’ll go straight away,’ she said, without rising. Her head turned to check Penny’s position before her fingers began to unlock their grip of my arm. Her palms were clammy, my skin was damp and so goose-bumps prickled as her hand hovered above my wrist, testing not touching.

Penny saw the hover and drew closer. ‘It’s alright Donna,’ she said, standing behind Donna’s chair and squeezing her shoulders, ‘I’m here. Besides, Tishy’s going to be a good girl today, aren’t you darling?’

Donna’s eyebrows drifted so far up her forehead that she might as well have just tutted, so ridiculous did she consider Penny’s suggestion.

‘We *are*, aren’t we Madam?’ Penny said, flattening Donna’s frizzy hair as she tilted towards me. She was ever on the lookout for a sign from me. Recognition would have to do and so I met and held her eyes. When I closed them, it was for a moment longer than a blink. This meant yes, *my Penny*, yes.

‘Ffff,’ Donna fizzled out another sceptical sigh. But Penny was beaming. Last week, she’d have gotten nothing from me. Not a blink, let alone that moment in which our eyes had met.

‘Exactly, glad we’re agreed,’ Penny said, translating our agreement for the benefit of Donna. But The Benefit was lost on Donna, who was busy ridding her sigh of the last *fff* of its air. ‘Yes,’ Penny went on, ‘we have a deal, don’t we Madam, if you’re good today—’

Donna coughed. Penny Kept Calm, corrected herself and Carried On, ‘If Madam’s good for the *R.E.S.T* of the day, then I’m going to tell her all about my Maggie’s wedding-dress fitting.’ Penny now took such care to tut her tees, every syllable spelt out for the benefit of Donna. But it was me who reaped the benefit (lost again on Donna). For, the broken

interaction took me back to Ferry Farm, so vividly that I could almost feel the indents of our kitchen table as my finger traced its many markings.

Concentrate, my father is saying as we sit together, bent over my French homework. Just like Donna, he is intercepting and correcting my every attempt at speech. He's a perfectionist, you see, a picky one albeit and, being French himself, he picks French to perfect.

Laetitia, he is saying, pained, as though my every mis-pronunciation is a deliberate insult to his heritage, *how many times. It's not le chien, it's L-U-H chien*. I scrunch up my face to prove concentration and cock my head on one side to improve pronunciation:

Daughter: Le chien s'appelle Hippy.

Father: No, Laetitia, are you not listening to what I'm saying? L-u-h chien.

Daughter: What? le, luh: What's the difference? They sound the same. It means the same, so who even cares?

Father: The *same*? How can you *not* hear the difference? I'm going to have to speak to your French teacher. Who's your French teacher? If your grandmother could hear your accent, she wouldn't have a clue what you're saying.

Daughter: Daddy, that's a *complete* exaggeration. As if you're going to speak to my French teacher. And how many times? It's 'Granny' not 'grandmother'.

Father: Right, and it's not 'le', it's 'luh'.

Daughter: Urghh.

Father: Come on, we haven't even got to the end of the sentence, listen: le chien.

Daughter: *Le chien*.

Father: (*Places pen on the table, very carefully.*) Le chien.

(*Mother appears through the kitchen door, crosses the room and begins folding the laundry drying on the aga.*)

Mother: H, I really don't think it makes much difference, just let her speak.

Daughter: *(Sucks in cheeks)*

Father: *(Looks from wife to daughter, back to wife)*

Mother: What? Christ, H, I think at this stage, any French is better than no French. If you'd spoken French to them, like I *always* asked you to when they were younger, then they might have more to say than, 'The dog is called Hippy'.

Father: Sabina, as usual, I am Less Than Impressed.

The tightening of Donna's fingers brought me back to the room. She was twisting her wrist (and mine along with it) trying to look at her watch. But if her point was made, my memory was lost. Ferry Farm, French and my father had vanished. Just like that, gone as quick as the tick of her watch.

'...Honestly Tishy,' I tried to slip back into Penny's words which had gone on. And *on*, 'the cost of the thing, B.E.A. Utiful as my Maggie looks, you'd be shocked. I had a cry, *obviously*, about how gorgeous she looked. But blimey, the price! Had to have a lie down – right there in the shop. Maggie was mortified. But Lordy, Tishy, I'm going to be doing so many of these bloomin' wedding-shifts that they might as well park another bed up beside yours and I'll sleep there. Save me the drive home.'

Penny drew breath, had a think and said, 'Not sure my Mr Duckett would cope without his dinners, mind. Eh, what do you think?'

Silence.

'Eh, Donna, what do you think?'

Silence.

I suspect Donna thought a lot of things but was too practiced in the art of lip-biting to say them. She'd likely spent the entire afternoon by my bedside debating how best she'd answer that very question should opportunity arise.

Did they think I couldn't hear the whispered exchanges they passed in the doorway each time they handed over their posts? *No change*, one would whisper, unsure whether they were making a statement or posing a question. Since the storm had ruptured *that day*, I'd slipped into a comotose state of silence that no nurse seemed able to break. And rarely did they try to, for I believe they knew as well as I that this was not the calm *after* the storm. There was no end in sight, just this tortured waiting, waiting, for the winds to whip back up, the thunder to rage and the lightning to strike anew.

So could you blame Donna for thinking me impossible? 'Better-ness' seemed implausible and I believe they'd grown as drained by my existence as I was pained by it. I'd exhausted their patience and in the process, I was depriving other patients of the care they merited. The waiting list for beds was overflowing with need, so what right did I have to waste their resources with the ingratitude of my greed?

In truth, it's remarkable how our minds can project our own insecurities onto those around us. The voice of anorexia can stir this hot pot like no other, blending so smooth a mixture that the assumptions appear truths. They seem as pure and absolute as they are destructive, for so completely did I believe that Donna resented the beat of my heart as keenly as I. That she too rued *that day*, if only because I'd been bought back to the ward, alive.

But no. My determination to die had been matched by Dr Miller's determination to keep me alive. They were made to persevere with their vigil and I was given a frank warning:

There is pressure for me to have you transferred to a forensic ward, Tish. They believe you need the kind of specialist care that will mean you are held in a secure unit. Immense pressure, do you understand, Tish?

I believe we all understood the liability I was. It was the *why* we couldn't fathom. Why persevere when it would've been so simple to let them take me away? Dr Miller, what were you trying to prove? It's only as I write this that I hear you sigh as you reply that, *Proof, Tish, is precisely the point of the matter. Do you not recall what I said?*

I do, Dr Miller, I do.

We will prove to you Tish, that our care is unconditional and that you possess the worth to merit that care.

‘I *think*,’ Donna said, eventually ‘that I should leave you to it. Sounds like you’ve got it covered. So,’ she began her final hand-over, ‘Penny, she had her lunchtime meds as usual, then Dr Kate gave her some PRN Diazepam about an hour ago.’ She twisted my wrist again as she looked down at her watch. ‘Kate redressed her arm as well. Wasn’t happy. Made a right fuss, but they managed. Oh, and Martha said she might be late to give her six o’clock tube feed. She’s got to go down to the dining room with the others first. So she’ll have to wait.’

‘Well, we don’t mind. Do we Tishy?’ Penny said. But I did mind, I realised, right there and then. I did mind the way Donna spoke about me – through, under and over me, but never *to* me. And I definitely *did* mind the waiting. The breathing, breathing – five o’clock, six o’clock – *still* bloody breathing and waiting. Waiting, but waiting for what? To get *better*? Not happening. To *feel* better? Definitely not happening.

*Oh, let me go,
Just let me slip away.*

‘Yeah, well she’ll have to wait.’ The words must have felt sweet, for Donna was licking her lips with satisfaction. I shifted my weight on the bed and her fingers tightened their grip of my wrist. ‘Keep still,’ she said, ‘Tish, you know you need to keep still.’

*Still
Be still
I must stay still.*

Depression in its major stages possesses no quickly available remedy: failure of alleviation is one of the most distressing factors of the disorder as it [gradually] reveals itself to the victim.

William Styron¹⁰

I did. I tried to be still. I did. I tried to tense my muscles and block *it* out. But it was stirring. The Voice was reeling me back to it, just like it is now, so that I am back there, again. Now.

I am, I *am*

Too hot. I am buried beneath layers of blankets, tucked beneath my body, so tight that I am tied. They have me tethered to the bed, when *I must be free*. Still, *I must keep still*, but how? My legs are kicking with a will of their own. They scabble as I struggle against the tide. *I am*. *I am* losing my mind as the current strengthens. It is dragging me towards the storm and I cannot stop it. Helpless, *I am*, hopeless, *I am*, *I am*, worthless.

Donna is displeased. She tenses and I tug. I pull away but her fingers stay, twisting my skin until it burns. But *still*, she grips on, her body expanding now that she is standing. Inching closer, she is *Out to Get Me*. Her luminous eyes are like two torches, lit so close that their heat is affecting and their shine is blinding. I flinch and look away, but go? *I cannot*. *I cannot* so much as shield my eyes for my hands are not my own.

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow

¹⁰ Styron, pp. 7-8.

So suddenly they howl. This Voice has whipped me into a frenzy, tossing me into a place that is no longer foreign, but familiar. Too well I have come to know the invasion of it, but it is a foresight I long to evade. Like a tornado, it looms on the dark horizon so that I see snatches only in those brief moments when the skyline is lit by a spark of lightning. Else it is a glimmer, but a murmur of thunder, a rumble of dissent that is distant yet coming closer. It is *Out to Get Me*.

The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

Don't they know? I *must* go. I *must* be free and so my body begins to writhe. It rocks against the shackles of their steely fingers. They tighten and I toss. I roll and they call, 'Tish?'

Donna is on her feet, tiptoes as she leans over my body. And Penny is off, crossing the room, pinning my palm to the bed and whispering into my ear, 'Darling, just try and take deep breaths, can you do that?'

No
I cannot, cannot go,
On, Penny. And on. Why would you make me breathe on?

Penny's voice sharpens now, blunting only as she turns her head towards the door. 'Tessa?' she calls, but she must call again, for Tessa is flapping. The doorway is a post she must not surrender.

No
Tish must never feel she has any chance of escaping.

But Dr Miller is not here to see her break ranks. Another call and Tessa does. She delves into the foray, her fingers nimble as they fumble with the blanket, finding my knees and pressing them into the mattress.

No
Get them the Fuck off you.

The Voice is raging now with a fury that makes my torso thrash. It thrusts so violently that Penny screams, ‘Tessa, get those bloody blankets off her *now*.’

Tessa does. She ceases her fight, eases her fingers and begins to unpeel the blankets. Coolness steals the heat from my feet and I am exposed. Lungs expand, a rush of air and I am gasping. My breath is shallow, each splutter soon leading to the huff of another. Puff and another and Tessa has *backed off*. A short shuffle of a step and I am uncovered from her shadow, and blinking at the ceiling light. It is too bright, but soon Penny shifts and I am in her shelter, blinking anew so that yes I do, I see her. Penny’s eyes are blue and blinking, her lips are moving, closer to me. Yes, I think, she is speaking *to* me.

I take another breath and the colour returns to Penny’s cheeks. The flush softens into rosiness that is not hot, but warm. The pressure of her fingers is more of a fondle that makes me breathe in, and then out, too. No longer grey, her cardigan is lilac again, the wool a clearer contrast to the overlap of her yellow collar. A plastic button of her blouse has popped undone, but Penny, it is there. It is whole and I hold on. To your button, my eyes cling, watching it rising and ebbing as you draw in new breaths. Yes, I hear you. Penny, your words have now caught up with the movement of your lips and I begin to make sense of your tongue.

‘Can you see me?’ it asks and I nod. And this is gesture enough to bind me to your presence, Penny. To the present you hold for me and not the past of *that day*. ‘Tishy,’ you say, ‘can you hear me?’

I do, Penny. I hear you counting, ‘One-two-three. That’s right, Tish, in one, out two-three.’

I count, I do. I follow you, Penny, I let you lead me by the hand, as though you know. *The pressure, my pain*. Penny, I let you guide me astray. Together we wander from the darkness of my wilderness into a night that is glowing with flickering speckles of light. These stars may be sporadic, but each is shining with iridescence that is permanence to me.

‘Good,’ Penny says, ‘darling, you did so well.’

Penny is pleased with the peace we have drifted into and I am relieved by our discovery of it. ‘I’m here,’ she says. ‘You’re safe,’ she soothes and *I am. I am* so relieved that my head rolls across the pillow, the muscles in my chest loosening into a regularity that is tranquil. Each passing breath is peppered only by the faint *b’dumm-b’dumm* of my heart.

Beating

Breathing

I am, *I am* still breathing.

How long do we lie like this, I wonder? Reckless, what fools we are each time we assume the calm is an end to the storm and not just the transience of its eye. The storm was not broken it was only mustering the strength to break anew. A flash of fork-lightning, a clap of fresh thunder and we were off.

We are and I am, I am so shocked by this sudden shake that it will take a second quake to register the nature of this vibration. My phone is buried beneath Donna’s clipboard of notes on the bedside table. It vibrates again and Donna leans across to sneak a peek, as if it is *her* phone to take, not *my* message to read. But Donna should be wary. She is unknowing of her strength. She elbows the clipboard off with force that knocks the lampshade askew. Shadows shift, darkness creeps, a *Thinking-of-You* card scatters a second on its descent, landing on the carpet alongside the casing of lunchtime’s tube-feed.

But the phone is uncovered. And I find my eyes drawn towards the screen’s flash of lime-green light. For I am intrigued by the very insistence of this star, so determined it seems to lighten my darkness.

‘Oh it’s from your daddy, Tishy. Come on, you see, they’re all there waiting for you. Hey, we can do this.’ Penny wipes my forehead and squeezes my wrist, with a touch that is no longer rough or rushed but tender. And so I blink. And blink again.

Daddy? My daddy, are you coming for me?

Donna pinches my skin, adjusting her grip as she reads my message aloud.

On way home from London. Passing in circa de five minutes. Hope it's been a good day, darling. Make tomorrow even better. Mummy missing you dreadfully. Dogs out of control as usual. As are your brothers. Need you home to keep them in line. Be up to see you on Sunday. Keep fighting and don't forget, we're going to win. Wave in five. Love you millions. Daddy.

'Speaks in riddles, your dad, does he?' Donna tests a titter that titters away. 'I guess he means his train will be passing in "about" five minutes. Or maybe, does he mean "exactly" five minutes?'

All I hear is *the train*. All Penny hears is *the train* and so her brow is creased and her voice is cross and quick to say, 'Leave it Donna.'

Not quick enough, it is too late. I will *not* wait. The train is coming. It is and *I am, I am* determined, I will *never* miss it again.

Circa de five minutes

No time to waste, I must be quick and so I sit up, fighting the arms strapping my shoulders back to the bed. But I *will* get up and so I push harder, with force that is winning until I fall back on one side, only to begin my climb again.

'Ok, Tish, Ok, Donna, let her get up.'

'Penny, I'm not sure that's a good –,'

Tough. I'm up, taking a fine moment to give Donna a glare. You wait, I'd sure show her and so I give her the arch of my back, swinging my legs over to Penny's side of the bed. They dangle, one then two, dipping as they feel for the floor. *Hmm-ing*, I'm *m-mm-ing*, pressing my toes into the carpet, hard as I can, stamping out these spots that tingle in my eyes. Black and orange, I blink and they pop. Fingertips and toes, I clench and release, still popping.

Like, popped-y-pop popping

Like, *STOP* popped-y-pop popping

More blinking and the room is restored. The light returns and the colours get brighter. Now I can see. Now I can hear and yes, I remember. The train is coming. *Yes, Daddy, I'm coming.*

I am. I am.

Taking a slender moment to steady my stand, leaning against the bed. Then push, I do, shove myself up and yes, I *am* off. One step. Two, now Three. You see? I *can* walk. I *will* go. One step more and I'm at Four.

Whole.

Steps

Five

Six

Length of the bed

Seven

Now Eight

No stopping me now

Except – Wait

What?

Why are you blocking my way? Like, *Get Out of My Way*. This wall of bodies has formed, solid and *horrid*. Tessa, Penny, Donna and another.

But *who* are you?

To stop me?

How dare you try?

To stop me?

Circa de five minutes.

Four

Three

Rush I must and bash I do. *Bam*, my shin slams into the table that is *In My Way*. And now my arms are flailing for balance, knocking a plastic vase so that flowers fall, water drips, and drops seep between my toes only to trigger the pop of more spots.

Why won't you help me?

Don't you know?

I NEED to go?

And so I walk back up to the wall. But the wall does not move. The bricks do not cave. Not an inch do they give and I am confused. *I am. I am* clapping a hand to my forehead, as if I can bash *my* sense into these thick, dumb, bricks.

My appeal is to Penny. I peep into her eyes and stay there for a peer that is my plead. But her eyes shrink from mine, all swollen and puffy but why, Penny? Don't cry, we still have time. We do, I promise. *If only, if only* we go now, Penny?

No

What is this scream? It is too shrill to be human. My hands reach to cover my ears and I am distracted. I am for one second only, Daddy, just one, I promise, I tried. To push against the wall that collapsed at the sound of the alarm and the movement of my hands. They rushed towards me and dispersed only to regather into a wall that was circular. An enclosure, Daddy, they were *Out to Get Me*.

They will not have me and so I shove and I *shove*. But *still* they don't budge and now I am crying. *I am* distraught to be caught, that lapse is a split second I will regret forever. For their shadows now billow above me, bearing down upon me so darkly that I no longer see your star, Daddy. No ember, there is no glimmer, no flicker, no glow.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,

Wastes beyond wastes below;

And yet, I cannot go.

I cannot, Daddy. I can but scream and so I howl. I do. I bellow as though I could stop the progression of time. It's slipping through my fingers like dry sand released to the winds. They blow and yet, I cannot go. My daddy, how can I make it stop? This pressure, this pain, I cannot so much as touch it, and yet it burns, it throbs within and so I know it must come out.

And so I wrench, I wince and the bandage is ripped from my wrist. Like a waxing strip, it strips my arm of the frail layer of weepy wound. The tracks my fingers laid so well, they find again. They mark my shame with a rhythm that is soothing for its very intensity. The blame is mine, the fault *is* me and so my fingers pause only while they wait for the numbness to thaw, then fill with new sharpness that is wet, blood red and yellow goo.

A brick breaks ranks. It leaves a chink in the wall and drops onto the floor beside me to say, 'Tishy, please, don't listen to *it*, hear me instead.'

To this, I pause. I frown and wonder, is this brick just playing a trick? No, I decide, this brick is *my* Penny and she is on *my* side. And so I take her hand. I stand and tug her, but she makes dead weight so that I am hauling. With all my might, I am tugging, for the train is coming. *It won't wait, Penny, we can't be late.*

B'dumm-B'dumm

B'dumm-B'dumm

'Tishy,' Penny starts Tishy-ing me, but Tishy does not understand. She tugs *me* and now I am stunned. I step back, dropping her hand like it's the cold brick she's become. The traitor, who repairs the chink in the wall before reaching her arm out to me. *No*. She isn't there to save me, she is *Out to Get Me*. Too bad, I *won't* be got. I flinch from her touch, so sharply that I stumble and I tumble back to the ground, for the tears are now streaming. They blur and they whir as the pleading becomes mine, 'Penny, please, I *need* to go. Daddy, the *train*, don't make me miss it.'

Not again. Not again.

‘Don’t Tish, please, you know we can’t let you. Please, you need to trust us to keep you safe.’

No

Salty tears slip between my lips until I gulp and I gasp. My hands move to wipe my cheeks but the movement is misread and bodies tumble. They fall upon me as freely as the broken bricks of a toppling wall. And so I scream. I do, scream and scream. Then silent. For I can hear, yes, I can hear the beating pulse of the passing train.

Crescendo: B’dumm-B’dummm
 B’dumm-B’dummm

Diminuendo: B’dumm-B’dummm
 B’dumm-B’dummm

Silence

How long did I lie there, pressed against the carpet, with bodies all around and on top of me? Seconds? Minutes, perhaps? An eternity seemed to pass before a stern voice said, ‘Right, off her, everyone, out of here, *now*.’

I’d never have guessed it was Penny, but the sparkly ring on her finger gave her away, as it was this familiar diamond I saw on the hand that moved to unstick my face from the carpet. She left her palm against my cheek as others began to withdraw. One by one, they handed my limbs back to this woman, who laid them together as though she were lacing ribbons into a

bow. Straddling her bundle, she rocked me into her chest. Back and forth, the warmth of her body. Back and forth, the softness of her skin, holding me so safe that my heart began to slow, its beat tuning into the rhythm of hers as she nestled her cheek against mine to whisper, ‘I’ve got you, darling. You’re safe. I promise, we won’t let you go.’

A tear strayed from her cheek onto my own. It tickled until the fix of my stare began to sting and I blinked. A tear fell and melded with hers, the combined weight of which strayed silently down my cheek.

‘Stay with me darling,’ she said, rocking us still, ‘and one day, *one day*, I promise your daddy will come and take you back home.’

In depression this faith in deliverance, in ultimate restoration, is absent. The pain is unrelenting, and what makes the condition intolerable is the foreknowledge that no remedy will come – not in a day, an hour, a month, or a minute.

William Styron¹¹

¹¹ Styron, p. 61.

Roughly six years later and I sit here, on a crisp wintry morning in 2018, editing this piece at the kitchen table of our new family home. It is quiet, the wind is unusually soft and I can hear the waves breaking before they lap against the pebbled shore. The sun has thawed most of the frost away and is reflecting so brightly off the Shingle Street Sea that I am having to work with my back to the strip of window that spans the width of our bungalow. But I am loathe to find a darker spot as I wonder about this girl at the centre of my story.

It's the contrasts which so astound me. What disparity lay between the calmness of her despair and the madness that lived out her distress? The escalation flared so quickly that I find myself questioning how a body, as frail and sedated as hers, could so suddenly conjure the energy to pace the room and pummel against the walls which confined her and the hands which restrained her?

What madness?

Hysteria seems a trite a word, outdated and steeped in too troubled a history for use, yet it seems the only term befitting of the kind of delusory state that had captured both my body and mind. And this leads me to Charlotte Perkins Gilman. What peace I have made with the madness of that time I owe to her writing. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a blend of autobiographical and creative writing which tells the story of a young woman's descent into madness. Gilman draws upon her own breakdown and is unafraid to pass criticism upon The Rest Cure – the method of treatment she received at the hands of Doctor Silas Weir Mitchell, the leading clinician treating 'nervous exhaustion' (neurasthenia) in the late nineteenth century. For so complex a malady, Mitchell's instructions seem hauntingly simple:

Live as domestic a life as possible.

Lie down an hour after each meal.

Have but two hours' intellectual life a day.

And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.¹²

The decline is rapid. Finding herself locked within an attic bedroom, Gilman's narrator is dehumanised and seemingly condemned rather than confined. Her distress is dismissed and

¹² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (1935) (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 96.

her natural desire for freedom belittled. Neither diminishes. Rather, the two culminate into a *need* to escape – a fixation which sees the narrator gradually retreat into a world she imagines to exist in the yellow-patterned wallpaper.

The pattern is torturing...it slaps you in the face, knocks you down and tramples upon you... like some bad dream.¹³

I was struck by the similarities between this language and that which Gilman uses to describe the ‘nightmare’ of her own breakdown, in her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*.

The mental agony grew so unbearable that I would sit blankly moving my head, from side to side, to get out from the pain. Not physical pain... just mental torment, so heavy in its nightmare gloom that it seemed real enough to dodge.¹⁴

This was soothing to read, if only because it shows how the body can become embroiled in a mental battle. Psychological pain may occupy a space that cannot be physically reached, yet this inaccessibility does not lessen our experience of it. Rather, the torment is exacerbated by the realisation that there is no way to locate it – to abate, expel or escape it. Not just frustrating, this is, quite literally, excruciating.

Desperation is born and with it the kind of obsessive, primitive *need* to escape which the mind attaches onto whatever physically surrounds it. The pain may remain untouchable, but flesh? Fingers can shred. Walls? The body can fight and patterned wallpaper? Gilman *will* pursue.

I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion.¹⁵

When I first read the story, I was so determined to make sense of the ‘torturing’ patterns, that I failed to see that Gilman was more interested in exposing the sheer sense-less-ness of

¹³ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Selected Writings* (London: Virago, 2009), p 15.

¹⁴ Gilman, *Autobiography*, p. 96.

¹⁵ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 11.

madness. 'I would crawl,' she writes in her autobiography, 'into remote closets...to hide from the grinding pressure of that profound distress.'¹⁶

If it is hard to imagine this profound and prolific writer in the throes of such physically debilitating distress, then this is what madness can do. And so, Gilman tries to refocus our gaze by asking us to scrutinise the treatment.

The *real* purpose of my story was to reach Dr S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways.¹⁷

It is remarkable. How courageous was Gilman to address the very clinicians to whom her story so clearly expresses such an acute fear of?

He does not believe I am sick.¹⁸

He knows that there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him.¹⁹

It does not do to trust too much.²⁰

I shan't tell this time.²¹

But Gilman does dare to tell. And if her expectation was to be dismissed, then so much greater is the success with which *The Yellow Wallpaper* was eventually received. She elicited no public response from Mitchell, but years later she learnt that he had altered his 'treatment of nervous prostration.'

If this is a fact, I have not lived in vain.²²

Gilman's testament was far from written in vain. Yet its success, I believe, lies in the creative way she chose to write. Her fictionalised account took the reader where diagnostic or explanative language never could. Too often patients find themselves unable to articulate their distress with words that can feel impersonal, abstract and ill-fitting of a reality that

¹⁶ Gilman, *Autobiography*, p. 96.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁸ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 4.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 20.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Gilman, *Autobiography*, p. 121.

evades definition. Like an incomplete jigsaw, words piece together a picture which leaves too many gaps left open to interpretation, or *mis*interpretation.

Gilman's account is truly unique because she isn't asking to be diagnosed or even understood. Sometimes seeing is enough and this *The Yellow Wallpaper* is proof of. The reality speaks for itself and the lens Gilman gives us to view it is not one that is obscured by broader intent nor creative flair. It is just a lens that captures the artless, uncompromising and utterly senseless depravity of madness.

I will never fully understand why I was driven towards the train *that day*, just as Gilman likely never understood her *need* to 'follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion.'²³ It's a conclusion in itself. A sense of an ending which is, perhaps, precisely what belies the madness. A need for finality – an escape that does not prolong the suffering, but offers the mind the peace of an ending.

And so, may we reserve judgement of the madness we see in others. Sometimes it's the last sanity we have to cling to. The madness may be temporary. It may return and forever haunt us with flashbacks of it. But it need not confine us and it certainly should not define us. Gilman's spirit is my proof. This woman can, not only survive, this woman can thrive.

In spite of the wallpaper.
Perhaps because of the wallpaper.²⁴

²³ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, p. 11.

²⁴ *ibid.*

‘Oh Lordy, Tishy it’s so dark in here,’ Penny said, striding back into my room. A month had now passed since *that day* and if things were not ‘better’, we had made tentative baby-steps in that direction. I was still confined to my room, but only one nurse now kept her vigil by my bedside, watching as I tried to adjust myself to the eerie calm the storm had left us with. It was as though I’d relinquished that *need* to die, just not yet surrendered myself to living. I just lay in darkness, day after day, in this vacuous state, despondent and unresponsive, wanting only to sleep. To be utterly unconscious of the world and undisturbed by the Voice that murmured on in my head.

‘Honestly, Tishy, how long are we going to keep this gloomy thing going, hey?’ Penny nodded towards the closed curtains, gathering the pleats of her skirt as she settled onto the edge of my bed. ‘And it’s so bright out there today. Even managed to get the group outside for Supervision after lunch.’

‘Oh *how* lovely,’ Pam said, stretching as she got up from her chair.

‘Blooming hot, mind,’ Penny went on, blowing air into her face so that her fringe took flight. ‘I tell you ladies, I can’t be doing with this summer heat. Think I’m having one of em’ hot flushes.’

‘Pen, you do spout a load of rubbish. Just cos you’ve joined me at fifty doesn’t mean you can be using flushes as your every excuse.’

‘Oh I absolutely can.’

‘You absolutely cannot. It’s called one drink too many last night, I did tell you to behave.’

‘You did,’ Penny confirmed, having long since accepted that Pam (always) knew best. But if Pam (always) liked to know best, Penny liked to be told. For Penny and Pam were a Double Act who’d been friends for long over the decade they’d each dedicated to the hospital’s services. It was quite normal to hear one finish the other’s sentences, as they told no end of tales about *the jolly good old days*, when Maggie and Iris had been babies in

tummies as their mummies sat, rolling about on yoga balls, practicing the art of giving birth, in a room full of women and a handful of diligent husbands. Pam had *persuaded* hers to be present. But Penny's Mr Duckett? Persuaded to be absent. 'Lordy no,' she'd said of The Birth, 'just the thought of me shoving our Maggie out made him queasy. Easier, I tell you, Tishy, to get The Job done without him there causing trouble. And mind you remember your Mrs Duckett's Wise Words,' she said, as though she were Miss Jean Brodie, recalling her *Prime* for the sole purpose of my education: 'When you start laying your brood, don't forget: Keep the Cockerel *well* away, thank-you kindly. Don't let him sneak a peek until the thing's fully hatched.'

Babies were the goal, you see. Penny's Instructions were clear: *When you flee this nest, darling, I don't want to see you until the day you surprise your Mrs Duckett by walking up this ward with a flock of your ducklings waddling behind you. Do we have a deal?*

Deal.

Our dream, dear Penny, is mine still.

Where Pam could be prickly, Penny was soft all over. She was short and plump, with a round face crinkled by soft laughter lines. Pam was taller, her slender body elegant and sharp. But they were as blonde as each other, dyed (naturally) and cut in bobs that fell just below their ears. Naturally straight, but straightened (naturally) with irons all the same. We were in Essex after all and throughout the months of my confinement, I learnt more about hairstyles, shellac nails and *The Only Way is Essex* than you could believe possible.

'Anyway,' Penny said, now using the clipboard as a fan, 'Was lovely out there, won't bother booking Benidorm if it stays hot like this. That said, we've got to find a way to get Lily out of that baggy hoody. Thought she was going to fry out there, her face all splotchy and red. You girls and your ways, hey? Be the end of me.'

'Bless her,' Pam blessed Lily, 'and she wears such pretty dresses underneath,' she added, as though it were the dress Lily sought to conceal. 'Mind you, she's not the only one that needs a little persuading out of *her ways*.' Pam peered down her spectacles at me. An eyebrow rose.

‘What, Pamela-a? You calling my Tishy stubborn?’ Penny tried not to smile as she wagged a finger at me. ‘I’d never have *ever* believed it.’

‘Yeah, well, *I* can, Pen. Your madam says she’s not going to have the curtains open at all today. Hence...’ Pam splayed her palms, ‘The Darkness.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘You see?’

‘I see.’ Penny saw, but still she said, ‘Nonsense. Can’t be dealing with all that kerfuffle today, Tishy. Fran’s given me enough trouble for one day and ask no blooming more.’ They shared the roll of an eye. ‘Right then, how many minutes of open curtains are we up to now?’

‘Thirty minutes,’ said Pam, (naturally) knowing best.

‘Lordy.’

‘Yup, that’s half an hour.’

‘That is. But consider it done. By the time Winnifred takes over after Handover, Madam and I will’ve managed half an hour of sunshine.’

‘Well, you can try. But she’s pretty A-Da-ManT.’ Pam’s pronunciation here made clear that by adamant she meant STUBBORN. ‘Sara tried to open the curtains earlier but Tish got right up and closed them back. And then, well, you know...started to do...’ she nodded in the direction of my left wrist, ‘...*You-Know-What*.’

‘I see.’

‘You see. So we tried the New Tactic, you know?’

Blink.

‘The elastic bands?’

Blink.

‘Come on Pen, Martha talked about it in Handover, remember?’

Blink.

‘Pen, *how many times* am I going to have to tell you? Handover’s for listening, not for faffing about finding pens. Dr Miller said she’s got to use the elastic bands instead of *You-Know-What-ing*.’ Pam fluttered her shellac nails in a scratch-like fashion as she nodded towards my wrist.

My fingers twitched. My skin itched, buried beneath layers of Melolin bandage. I was fast-becoming mummified, *to prevent infection*, they claimed, though it was more my ease of access they sought to prevent – a preventive the Voice did *not* so much appreciate.

‘Anyway Pen, you needn’t bother with the elastic bands. They’ve been banned. Martha said they were inappropriate.’

‘Ah yes, naturally. Inappropriate. Of course,’ Penny couldn’t resist sending another wink my way, in praise of The Inappropriate.

‘Yeah well, the whole point was to *stop* her drawing blood. But she just pinged the ruddy things so hard that she drew blood anyway.’ Pam nodded towards my right wrist, now mummified too. ‘You see?’

‘I see.’ Penny saw.

Pam said, ‘So it’s onto Plan B.’

‘Well, praise the Lordy for that then. Just love a Plan B.’

I had bristled the moment Dr Miller mentioned Plan B. We needed, he said, to have a discussion about my scratching. In hospital, *discussion* tended to mean battle and so I prepared the launch of my defence. But to my surprise, I found it was not needed. Dr Miller’s voice was not accusatory, but compassionate, measured and assured in its quiet determination to be heard.

Tish, let me be absolutely clear: this isn’t about denying you your pain. I believe in it as well as your need of it. But it has spiralled out of control and the episodes are highly distressing, for you and the nurses. So what I’m proposing is that we find a way for you to feel your pain without those around you getting hurt by it too.

Dr Miller, let me be *absolutely clear*: it was your willingness, both to attest to my pain and to accept me in spite of it, that made it possible for me to invest in your Plan B. You spoke of my self-harm as a *need* and, in this simplicity, you overwrought the Voice’s resistance and enabled me to hear your warning as the reality of your concern and not a threat to be wrestled between us.

Things have to change Tish. If it continues to escalate to the point where blood is drawn, alarms are pressed and restraint is used, I’ll have no option but to let them transfer you to a secure unit. That’s the last thing I want for you, Tish. But I need you to be aware of it.

It isn’t easy to self-harm without drawing *excessive blood*, but this was our Pain-Pact: if it remained *containable*, the nurses would not intervene. And so Dr Miller got creative, shipping into the office an assortment of instruments ready to implement our plan. First came

the elastic bands. A short-lived experiment. It was soon discovered that flesh is tender and tends to break soon after you begin to ping (and *ping*) elastic against the skin.

Moving Swiftly On.

And a mini freezer arrived. A delivery that aroused the deepest suspicion from the prying eyes of other patients. *What trick was this?* Lethal-looking package which was not from Bunzl's Clinical Supplies, nor Boots Pharmaceuticals, but *Amazon Prime*.

'You mean to say it came the very next day?' Penny consulted The Oracle.

'Yes Pen,' Pam replied, 'it's called The Modern World.'

That was that. My world was hit by the Modern World, in a smashing collision that supplied Dr Miller's next method of pain: 'Ice cubes?'

'Yes, Tish, ice cubes. Whenever you need them, you just ask. And, I mean, *before* it reaches that stage where you can't communicate. In fact,' he said, now thinking aloud, 'perhaps this can work in our favour. Having to ask might help you recognise when you're beginning to feel distressed. I suspect we aren't quite ready yet, but ultimately that could help us understand why and how we can begin to challenge that need. What do you think?'

I think we weren't quite ready for that challenge either. You'd placed an *ultimate* before us that was too distant to deal with presently. And perhaps that's why the ice-cubes only ever worked in theory. The pain was not immediate or sharp enough to satisfy the Voice. It was impatient and no matter how hard you squeezed ice-cubes, the pain remained too distant – more of an ache than an ouch, a throb, not a pang, that was too slow to spread up your arm.

'Well, bottom line is we decided we'd better leave the curtains for today.' Pam was back on her Curtain Campaign and a lecture was lurking. 'But don't *you* worry,' she said, with the suggestion that if I wasn't already worrying, now might be The Time to start, 'I've already reminded her, *twice*,' (I can confirm, this made *thrice*), that it's Ward Round

tomorrow and Dr Miller won't be impressed if she hasn't managed the curtains. Not much to ask, is it? Half an hour of daylight?'

It was a *lot* to ask and this Pam (naturally) knew. We'd hit a stalemate: Pam thought I should have a *little* think about my actions and I thought Pam could Think Again.

'Well, supposing we ask Madam herself?' Penny said, standing up and tilting her head as she looked down at me. 'Oh *interesting*, Pam, take a look.'

Pam's face joined Penny's overhead. 'Oh so we *are* listening, are we, Tishy?' Penny went on, 'Funny, I could hardly see you for all this darkness. Now, let's see,' she peered in closer, 'Yup, still breathing – Pam, have you got that?' Penny checked her watch, '16:35: Awake, all present and correct.' The dimples deepened on Penny's cheeks as she winked and said, 'Got to do my Obs bit for the team, hey?' She tapped my nose and whispered closer, just for me, 'Hello darling, lovely to see you.'

It wasn't until Pam had gone that Penny flung the curtains wide. Standing back, she admired the sun pouring into the room, as though the Angel Gabriel had arrived in all his splendid, shining glory.

'See, Tishy, I told you so,' Penny said, stretching her arms as wide as the window behind her, 'B.E.A.U.Tiful day.'

We'd had a chat about the light and the dark. Penny had insisted she needed to understand this *funny business about keeping them curtains shut*. And, in time, I told her, how the light struck too stark a contrast to the darkness of my mind. How it hurt to see a world I was not part of. A world I was not allowed to be a living part of.

Why, though, Tishy?

Because light was life. And life I was unworthy of.

But why, Tishy? It STILL makes no sense.

Senseless, maybe, but logic was irrelevant when I *knew* there was a sickness in me. A badness root deep within me that *needed* to be punished, starved and scratched out of me. School hadn't just unearthed it, the judgement it passed had taught me I did not warrant a place in *its* world. So how could I possibly be worthy of a life in *the* world?

Penny did her best to contradict me. But I believe she knew that the Voice spoke louder. It was more insistent, like an incantation that gains traction with repetition. *Worthless, useless, hopeless.* It spun a spiral of less-less-ness through my mind so forcibly that its suggestions quickly became my own convictions. The consequence of which was felt in the itch of my fingers as they began to agitate with *need*. To scratch the shame into my skin. To release this pain locked-up within.

Your need for pain, Tish, I accept.

But your need for punishment? I will continue to challenge.

This is about us fighting together to forge a pathway through this darkness.

Penny fought alongside me that day by predicting the spiral. She promised that *just for today*, we'd forgo the half-hour and aim instead for *five minutes, Tish. That way Dr Miller will know you're trying.* And besides, she added, we had work to do – a crossword, which she'd ripped from an old magazine and, she said, she couldn't *possibly* be expected to work in darkness. 'With an eyesight as hopeless as mine and a crossword as complex as this, Tishy, you need all the light of inspiration you can get.'

'Penny Duckett,' I told her right back, 'eat more carrots and your eyesight will manage just fine.' At that, she muttered something about the eating of carrots being cheap coming from me. But her eyes had squinted with a smile, that was as surprised by my engagement with her humour as it was broad and bright as the light outside.

‘So, you going to read me a clue then?’ I asked, keen to move on. The sunlight was strong and my mind not yet used to its rays.

‘Right, yes, first clue,’ Penny coughed, blinking to contain the dampness glistening in her eyes. ‘One Across: five letters. Lordy, what a surprise, this one’s for you and not for me.’

Penny handed most clues to me. She called me her *Personal Bookworm*, who’d better get a wriggle on with this *recovery lark*. The world, she said, was awaiting the spread of my wings, so could I please stop *fannying about* with crosswords torn out the back of *Woman’s Weekly*?

‘Is it a book clue then, Penny?’

‘Well, no, not books.’

‘History?’

‘No, not history either, thank you.’ She cocked her head slightly, chewing the pen lid as she re-read the clue under her breath.

‘Penny Duckett, what appears to be the confusion?’

‘Lordy, I don’t know: does politics count as history?’

Funnily enough, our first five-minute marker passed before we got to the bottom of the history-could-be-politics clue. Frankly, neither of us had a clue but we did have time. So Penny chattered on, livened by each new clue, stopping only occasionally as she caught me glancing towards the window. The curtains were still open and, if the Voice was mad, I found myself glad to see the light filling the room, with a Penny shaped shadow falling across the middle of my bed.

‘You tired, Tishy?’ she asked, her face twisting as she fought her own yawn. ‘We sort of *nearly* finished it.’ She held the crossword up for us both to inspect. ‘Well, nearly *half* of it.’ She dropped the clipboard and crossword to the floor before stretching her arms tall above

her. Catching the last of her yawn with the back of her hand she said, ‘All these wedding shifts, darling. Exhausting. Don’t tell my Maggie, but I’ll be relieved when the wedding’s all done. I’m too old for all these hours. I should be sipping a cuppa, dunking biccies and watching *Countdown* all afternoon. Not running around after you naughty things.’

‘It’s ok Penny,’ I said, my eyelids drooping lower, ‘I’ll add it to our list of Little Secrets. Collecting quite a few.’ I felt her smile in the looseness of her fingers as they laced themselves with mine.

‘And Penny?’

‘Yes Tishy?’

‘However old you get, I don’t think *Countdown* will ever be the programme for you.’

We lay there for what felt hours. The sun warmed the room, lulling me towards a sleep that promised not to be disturbed. It was peaceful, with Penny beside me, her elbows propping her head against my bed, her eyes as sleepy as mine.

‘Can you hear them?’ she asked, eventually, turning towards the distant voices drifting through the open window. ‘Good Lordy, Tishy, someone best call the police: The adolescents are out – troubles bound to be about.’ She nudged my leg with a *hey* that made me smile and pull my knees closer into my chest, curled as I finally was, cosily on my side, with the blankets loosely gathered about me.

Penny shifted her chair to unblock my view of the window. I blinked, adjusting to the loss of her shadow, my legs outstretching so that Penny could lay our pile of hands back on-top of

my tummy. And, like this, we watched a world that was not inside, but neither was it truly outside either. It lay somewhere in between – beyond the locked hospital doors, yet within the parameters of its red-brick walls.

A cluster of boys chased a football across the lawn, a few girls joined them. Others were strewn in groups across the grass, as sporadically placed as the scattered daisies with which they were threading into a chain, as unbroken as they. How good was it to hear their voices? A trill of tones that was artless, yet melodic, with an undercurrent of laughter that rarely wavered. Funny, it seemed so strange to think that a storm could possibly have stolen their lives, when not a care in the world did they seem here to bear. Like harm could not hurt them.

One group of girls chattered away, with their pale arms exposed to the orange light. The sun was dipping, the skyline darkening as the light began to take the last of the day. Another girl jogged over to join them, propped herself onto her knees and began to tell a tale that saw the rest of them fall about laughing. One of her arms was bandaged, as heavily mummified as my own so that *wow* is what I thought, drawing my eyes away from her bandage, exposed to the bare light of day, to mine, hidden away in a darkness of my own making.

What life could be, should I choose to live it without the shadow of shame. What courage she had, such fierce determination not to be contained by the cuts that marked her skin. Not with pride, she wore these scars like clothes that weren't making a statement of her, so much as they were speaking of the person that she was, the pain she'd endured, the battles she'd faced to get to this place where she sat now, alive and content to be breathing.

A ball was kicked into the bushes and she jumped up to retrieve it. I followed her footsteps until she disappeared into the bushes, leaving me to wonder whether she'd still have that spring to her step when she re-emerged into the world which existed beyond the hospital grounds? Would her peers welcome her back or would she be met with the same faces of contempt which had, perhaps, lead to her admission here? Reproof can so easily become the sole proof a girl needs to relapse back into the conviction that she is unworthy of care. And shame can be cruel in how quick it is to return. School had taught me as much. One narrowed look could be enough to cause this girl to pull sleeves over her scars and make secrets of her stories, when I wanted her never to feel ashamed, again.

She reappeared from the bushes, cradling the ball in both hands. Twigs had made mischief of her hair and her shoulder rose to sweep it off her face as she kicked the ball onto the pitch. Rather than follow it, she watched from the side-line as the game reformed. A glaze had fixed her eyes and her fingers began to fiddle with the frayed chords of her bandage.

It took a second call from the group for the girl to be pulled from her trance. Her face brightened as readily as it had darkened and she skipped back to re-join her friends. But the circle had closed and she was too quick to settle on the outskirts. She was a listener now and though her smile was sincere, it lacked the depth of certainty that had made it so bonny.

I looked away and closed my eyes. I did not want to see her frailty. It was too plain when I wanted to hold onto the part of this girl that imagined herself as carefree as a child should be.

‘Emily?’ Her name was, ‘*Emily!*’ A younger girl was calling her and I opened my eyes to see this bossy little-thing pulling at her Emily’s hand. ‘Come sit *here,*’ she said, tugging until Emily began to crawl back into the circle which now broadened its loop to receive her.

‘Don’t they look...,’ Penny said, squeezing my hand.

‘Happy? So happy.’

‘I know,’ she said, ‘it’s...’

‘Pretty wonderful.’

‘It is, Tishy. Just shows you,’ she said, her voice no more than a whisper, ‘Life does go on, darling. It *does*, but it goes on out there. In here? It’s just the beginning.’

Remember, Remember

If they survive the storm itself, its fury almost always fades and then disappears. Mysterious in its coming, mysterious in its going, the affliction runs its course, and one finds peace.

William Styron²⁵

It was snack time. That much I remember about *that day*, because I could hear the other patients beginning to gather in the ward area just outside my room. The murmuring tones of their chatter shifted each time the group dispersed as the next patient was beckoned into the kitchenette to prepare their snack. Martha was supervising that morning, whilst Stacey set about rounding the rest of us stragglers up.

‘Tish, come on.’ Stacey was flustered, her knock sharp. ‘This is the last time I’m going to ask. Get up *now* or I’ll get Martha and we both know she *will* get you up.’

I shuffled my body, just a little. Just enough to show that I *had* heard, thank you, Stacey, you can Back Off now. And usually Stacey did disappear, if only to pester the next girl out of bed. The Round-Up was a well-practiced routine we performed each time a meal time reared its head. Like, *six* tiresome times a day.

²⁵Styron, p. 73.

There was a gentler knock and I turned to the door, fearing Martha but finding Penny. ‘Got your chariot here, darling,’ she said, ‘want you enthroned by the time I get back from tugging that Lily out of her bed.’

It must have been a Monday or Thursday if Penny had joined Stacey in the Round-Up. They were Weigh Days and the only certainty those days promised was to stir reluctance into full-scale resistance, hence the extra tugging of patients from their beds. And Lily was a linger-er like no other, so I knew I had time to lie a little longer, thinking, thinking, *over*-thinking my snack – a cereal bar, the nuts of which I’d spend the half hour of allocated munching time picking off, only to slip down the arm of the sofa, or up the sleeve of my own.

What was the point?

But The Point, Dr Miller had taken to telling me, was not always the best path to pursue. *It’s point-less, in fact, Tish*, such avenues tended to take a long time to lead to a Dead End. *Better altogether*, he said, *to stick to The Plan*.

Our plan had altered considerably over the past month. Instead of pushing weight gain via the tube, Dr Miller had proposed we agree to maintaining whilst we focused on stabilising my mood. The tube would remain in place, but he hoped a reduced meal-plan would encourage me to manage my intake orally. A temporary cease fire, if you like, which lead to as much relief on my part as it did scrutiny on his, not least from my perplexed parents who found themselves questioning the man they’d placed their faith in.

How can her mood possibly improve if her weight remains so low?

It was a good question, though I believe Dr Miller partially withheld his answer. Is the truth not sometimes too much for a parent to hear when the survival of their child is not yet a certainty a doctor can promise? Just now improvement was a hope too high to hold. Weight gain risked causing long-term dependency upon a tube for survival and, ultimately, Dr Miller had a bigger picture in mind. But stabilisation had to be the first step. For, is stability not the only foundation upon which true recovery can be built? And, until we achieved it – until I

accepted the *possibility of living*, as Dr Miller later called it, the furnishings which make a house a home – which make a life *living* – could wait.

But let me be clear Tish. If your weight drops further, there'll be no option but to tube-feed you. Whatever that takes, Tish. You understand what I mean by that, don't you?

Yes. I understood, both what you dared make explicit and the implication of force that you withheld. Simply, we couldn't afford to lose any more weight or we'd find ourselves without a life to save. If this was never intended as a threat, his caution was nevertheless prevalent in my mind that day, looming thick and black. Because, in spite of our deal, my weight *had* slipped further that morning and so it was that I was fractious, fearful and utterly unable to tug myself from bed and join the queue for a snack I would not manage.

Despair... comes to resemble the diabolical discomfort of being imprisoned in a fiercely overheated room. And because no breeze stirs this cauldron, because there is no escape from this smothering confinement, it is entirely natural that the victim begins to think ceaselessly of oblivion.

William Styron²⁶

²⁶ Styron, pp. 49-50.

‘Who’s next in the kitchen? Girls? Is *that* Tish out there yet?’

No. I can confirm that *this* Tish was far from out of bed, her fingers were tucking the hem of her floral dress tighter under her toes. She had shut-down and was thinking only of the coming Ward Round, knowing that all it promised was the confirmation of her failure. The battle Dr Miller had made theirs, she’d lost and it was a kind of grieving she felt at the prospect of the disappointment that would reflect in his face, as plainly as it would glisten in her mother’s eyes.

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.

On

I cannot, cannot go.

My body ached. I turned towards the window, looking for air to breathe, just to be. Finding none, I rolled onto my knees and pressed my forehead into the pillow. There was comfort to the darkness, to the stillness and the silence, until my body jumped to the sharp shake of my phone. It vibrated again as I picked it up to read the message *sent now*.

<p>Be brave and keep those curtains open for me, darling. And remember, look up at that sky. Gift of life, Laetitia. It’s all out there, waiting. Passing in circa de five, darling. I’ll be waving. Love you millions. Daddy.</p>
--

Oh Daddy, I love you too. *Millions and billions*, I promise I do. Yet I felt so far from you that my eyes began to blur. I folded my legs back beneath my body and pressed the phone between my knees and chest, holding you, Daddy, hugging you tight.

But still the tears would not stop creeping down my cheeks, paving a path that quickened the journey of those that followed. They tickled, these tears. They flowed, these tears seeped into the pillow until it was so wet that it felt cold against my skin. I opened my mouth, to breathe, just to be, but it stretched itself so wide that I had but seconds to push my fist inside and smother the breath that became a scream. It was silent, this scream, save for the rasping sound of my outward breath clawing the back of my throat. My teeth sunk into my fist until my lungs were drained of breath and my hand withdrew. My lips closed and my hand flew to my cheek to harness the pull of the tube as it slid back down my throat.

*This pain, this pain
No longer can I take this pain*

I smoothed the tape against my cheek, rippling my fingers over the thin tube strapped there, wondering, *what to do*. Daddy, this tube was tethering me to a life I could no longer endure. I promise I tried, to think away *these* thoughts, but they pricked and they pulsed. These thoughts pounded so forcefully that my wet fingers scratched a tangled pathway down my scalp, reaching the nape of my neck and there resting as I screamed anew. But for who, Daddy? Who could help me? Who could save me from myself?

The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

*On
I cannot, cannot go.*

I could not, Daddy, I could not go on. It was too late to save what I'd destroyed. Your brave Laetitia had fled and it was too late to find her. It was *too late*, my body was shaking now, rocking as I looked at what I'd just done. One tug and the tube had yielded to my touch. Ripped from my cheek, it had slithered up my throat as weightlessly as a fishing-line pulled from murky waters. Slimy and wet, it was so repulsive to me that I threw it across the room and closed my eyes to the mere thought of it. As though I could hide from it, Daddy. As

though I could hide my disgrace from you, Mummy, willing you may never feel the shame of my defeat.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me;
I will not, cannot go.

On

I will not, cannot go.

I found my phone, pressed buttons and restored life to the screen. *Message sent one minute ago.* The train was coming. The time was ticking. Against me, it was *Out to Get Me*, but it would not catch me. *No*, not now the pace of my heart had begun to race – beating, beating, it was hammering so hard in my chest for the hope it had found, the freedom I'd felt in that first tube-less swallow. No acid had refluxed, there had been no pain, just light, Daddy. I had seen *the light* and it was emerging clearer now. *Yes*, you were coming to get me, you were passing to save me and I *would* go, Daddy, I would, I *will*.

Passing in circa de five minutes, darling.

Message sent two minutes ago. Three left for me, so *quick* I must be. And I was, Daddy, I could move so freely now that no Voice questioned my actions. Its silence was sign enough that we were united in our purpose and the resolution we shared was suddenly so *simple* that I clapped a hand to my forehead. How blind had I been? How deaf to its call? The sound of its wheels, the drum of its beat.

B'dumm-B'dumm

B'dumm-B'dumm

Mummy missing you dreadfully, darling. Please come home to us.

Missing you, Mummy, so *dreadfully* that I cradled my phone to my chest as if it were you I was feeling in my arms another time. A final time, I wanted to feel your skin nestle against

mine, warm and smooth. *Can you hear me, Mummy?* I whispered and wondered, would you forgive me? Would you know how sorry I am? *Mummy, I am, but I am too tired to be your Little Warrior any longer. Your Laetitia has flown, somewhere safe, I am sure. I am, I am, so sorry, Daddy. My mummy, I am so sorry for killing your beautiful baby girl.*

My mind moved before my body. My limbs seemed to linger, like they were caught, momentarily unsure of the route they were about to tread. They soon fell into step, slipping me off the bed and onto the floor. Tiptoes to the door, I peered around to see the others, whispering in huddled groups, too intent to notice me stealing silently towards the ward door, through which I next passed. Weightless as a ghost, I glided down the corridor, as quickly as though the Voice were behind me, chasing me. It was forever *Out to Get Me*.

It would *not* have me. *No*, I'd reached the door and began hammering against the release button until the electrics began to open. Slowly, it took its time, giving me time to think of you, Mummy. I was so suddenly struck by the thought of you – your cheeks flushed, your blue eyes filled, that mine closed. Mummy, I was trying to think you away, but I was crying. Your pain was too plain, your terror too raw that my body folded, convulsing in chokes I could not stifle.

Oh Mummy, will I still be able to miss you when I'm gone?

Never do I want to lose the mere thought of you, Daddy, will you hold them tight for me?

Mummy, Tatiana, Hugo, my Joss?

I breathed. And blinked, the door lay open. It began to close, the time was ticking, the train was coming and so I flew. Through the door, I winced with each step my bare feet paced across the pebbled courtyard. On, I ran down the drive, dark with trees. On, through the white-washed gates and into the light. *No pain*, just light.

Three

Two

One minute, no more. Strides stretching longer, legs running quicker, pavement, grass, wet between my toes then road, concrete cutting into feet but the bridge was in sight. And yes,

yes, there was *the* light. The train was coming, yellow front and getting bigger, steaming closer, the screech so loud that my ears were deafened to doubt. And deaf to the screams that were gathering force behind me. Closing in on me, they were *Out to Get Me*. But they would *not* have me, Daddy, not now I was yours.

I was and *am*, Daddy, *I am* back on that bridge. *I am* throwing my body against the wall. But the bricks do not give, not an inch do they move. And so I do. I clamber and clench, I clamber and clench, my fingers gripping now, one knee hooking now, until I'm up. Yes, *I am* up here and I see you, Daddy, I do. Your train is *fast approaching*. It is hurtling towards me but you need not fear. You need not even miss me, Daddy, for I will be up here, *I am*, always and forever I will be watching down over you as you hold them for me, Daddy. You must keep them safe – my Mummy, Tatiana, Hugo, my Joss. Keep them growing and forever glowing like stars glistening in my darkness. *To the moon and back*, Mummy, I love you, Daddy, I do, *millions and billions*.

Remember, Remember

The pain of severe depression is quite unimaginable to those who have not suffered it, and it kills in many instances because its anguish can no longer be borne.

To the tragic legion who are compelled to destroy themselves, there should be no more reproof.

William Styron²⁷

²⁷Styron, p. 32.

Nausea swept through her body as it rolled right off the wall and into thin air. Elation replaced it, relief and release in the flood of air that billowed through her hair. Her dress was so buoyed that her body would descend slowly. So slowly that you'd be forgiven for thinking she was not falling, but floating, like a balloon drifting serenely across the horizon to whim of the gentle breeze.

Her arms were raised above her, with her fingers outstretched as though she was reaching for something. Reaching for what, I wonder? The lines that had marked her face and dug a crater between her eyes now smoothed over. Rosiness gave colour back to her cheeks, the sun glowed in her eyes and her face softened into the smile it had once worn so well. It quite became her and deepened with the memories it returned to her, so that she unsealed her lips and tasted the saltiness of the sea air. No longer longing, she was where she'd always longed to be. Her eyes had opened and now she could see, now she could breath, now she could be. Finally, so long to have been in darkness. So long, farewell to that, she was home, now, you see. She was not falling, she was lying on-top of Burrow Hill, with nothing but blue above her and long grass beneath her. Wispy strands of rye were tickling her cheeks as she lay with siblings flanked either side of her. Tatiana was plaiting a thread of her hair, Joss was humming faintly, with his little fingers plugged into his mouth as, together, they followed Hugo's finger tracing the line of a heron as it flew across the sky.

Yes, she was home, you see. She was free of life and free from death, for her lungs were filled with another kind of life. One with no sadness, no voices, no pressure, no pain and no regret. And so she let herself go, she let herself fall, leaving it to the sun to seal her eyes over, the salty air to breathe for her and those siblings of hers to live on for her.

Like this she was content. She was so happy that she would not feel the brittle rocks that would pierce her skin as she landed. Neither would she feel the sleeper of the track as it cracked her back clean in two. No, I promise, she would not even feel the wheels of the train as they swept the last of her body clear of the tracks.

She was home, you see.

She was free

Where she would forever be.

The Tube

It's time to talk about the tube. Medically, they call that thin, plastic thing the nasogastric tube, but I was first introduced to it by Dr Miller as my 'safety-net.' On reflection, I suspect he should have called it *his* safety-net, more like my father, who always assured me it was *his* friend. I remain unsure.

I know only that since it was last pulled from me, I've lived in constant fear of remembering those months in which it lived inside me. And, if I suspected that *one day* I'd have to process those memories, I never expected them to resurface in the autumn of 2015, two years after my final discharge, as I watched this beautiful A-List actress perform her own version of my distress. And I certainly hadn't envisioned my first re-encounter to be in a cinema full of (mostly) women, all seemingly unaware of the reality of tube feeding. Because that's what they seemed: unaware. And blissfully so.

But that is where all this began, with the film, *Suffragette*. Ordinarily, I am not a cinema girl – films are long and I am restless. But that film was different – *it* moved me. It made me want to put pen to paper and not just sometime either. The seductive plea of its slogan told me:

The Time is Now.

Here goes. Clinical guidelines in relation to tube feeding are sparse and frustratingly inexact. NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) offer their recommendations for the 'treatment of anorexia' via an 'interactive flowchart', which appears simple to navigate and is, I would add, somewhat simplistic in content.²⁸ Anorexia is an illness that resists the slightest movement towards recovery and yet NICE scarcely recognises the potential need for compulsory treatments. They pass the buck, so to speak, by referring you onto MARSIPAN

²⁸ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Pathways, 'Managing Eating Disorders', (March 2019) <<https://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/eating-disorders/managing-anorexia-nervosa#content=view-index>> [accessed June 2019].

(the spoof-like acronym for the ‘Management of Really Sick Patients with Anorexia Nervosa’).²⁹ These guidelines come as part of a report, written in 2010, following concerns raised about a number of young, anorexic patients, all of whom died whilst receiving in-patient care. Although the deaths are not explicitly labelled as ‘avoidable’, the report clearly indicates failings which it partly ascribes to the insufficient guidelines available to clinicians.³⁰

It is unsurprising. What makes anorexia so unique, so cruel and so fatal, is the way it deprives you of your will to *want* to get better. Resistance to treatment can leave clinicians powerless and often the only way to restore their power is to make use of the Mental Health Act. But medicine is ordinarily about restoring health not *enforcing* survival and nobody wants to acknowledge the removal of rights, let alone the force which quietly underpins the law.

So the literature is limited and the guidelines elusive. They tiptoe around language that could sound as ‘degrading and inhumane’ as, often, the treatments pan out.³¹ But things are changing. And, if MARSIPAN proves that guidelines need to be bolder in reflecting the brutal nature of this illness, then the Care Quality Commission (CQC) begin to show how this might be done. Reviewing the use of the Mental Health Act (MHA 1983) in the treatment of anorexia, the CQC are more explicit about the difficulty in obtaining ‘valid consent’ from patients whose ‘capacity’ is severely ‘compromised.’³² In doing so, they recognise how clinicians are often left in an ethically grey area, unsure how to interpret an act which states that ‘consent’ is not needed to administer ‘medical treatment,’ but fails to list ‘feeding’ in the examples provided.³³

²⁹ MARSIPAN: College Report 189, 2nd Edition, (2014) 1-60, in The Royal Colleges of Psychiatrists, Physicians and Pathologists Online <www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/collegereports.aspx> [accessed June 2019].

³⁰ MARSIPAN claimed that a lack of clinical guidance lead to ‘worrying variations of practices.’ MARSIPAN’s stated intention is: ‘to clarify the situation and provide unambiguous advice.’ (2014), p. 8.

³¹ Care Quality Commission, ‘Guidance on the treatment of anorexia nervosa under the Mental Health Act 1983’, (2008) in CQC.org <www.CQC%20GN%20the_treatment_of_anorexia_nervosa_under_the_mental_health_act_1983_updated.pdf> [accessed June 2019] p. 5.

See also: Care Quality Commission, ‘Review of the Mental Health Act (1983) Code of Practice Consultation’, (2014) in CQC.org <www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20140911_mental_health_act_code_of_practice_detailed_consultation_return_1.pdf> [accessed June 2019].

³² CQC, 2008, p. 5.

³³ The latest amendment (03/11/2008) to Section 63 of the MHA 1983 states that: ‘The consent of a patient shall not be required for any medical treatment given to him for the mental disorder from which he is suffering.’ (The National Archives, 2019) <www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1983/20/section/63> [accessed October 2019].

Here, the CQC equally disappoint, insofar as they highlight the problem without offering a clear solution. In certain ‘circumstances,’ it writes, ‘it might be reasonable to regard artificial means of providing nutrition as medical treatment.’³⁴ But, what use is *might* in the mayhem of the moment? What clarity does a *maybe* offer?³⁵

If medicine is treatment and essential to survival, then food is medicine and needs to be listed. Tube feeding is fundamentally a ‘compulsory treatment’ and clinicians need to feel secure in their right to use it. That said, it should be used sparingly, and on this, the guidelines are unanimous. Tube feeding, the CQC state, should only be used to treat the ‘most severe manifestations of anorexia.’³⁶ It should ‘only be used when all other interventions have been tried.’³⁷ Given it will likely cause, not only immediate distress, but lasting friction between patients and clinicians, it would be ‘counter-productive’ to use it long term, and thus, it should never be relied upon for weight restoration. Rather, it ‘must be carefully and regularly reviewed to ensure that it represents the least restrictive alternative.’ And it must, the CQC make repeatedly clear, ‘be discontinued as soon as is practicable.’³⁸

The reality is different. Tube feeding *is* a ‘last resort,’ but with that finality comes a desperation which sweeps aside guideline niceties.³⁹ It is invasive. It is ‘intrusive and

³⁴ CQC, 2008, p. 7.

³⁵ Care Quality Commission, ‘Mental Health Act Code of Practice 2015: An evaluation of how the Code is being used’, (2018), in CQC.org <https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20190625_mhacop-report.pdf> [accessed August 2019]. This follow-up report reviews how well the ‘guiding principles,’ recommended to services in the CQC’s 2014 Report, have been implemented. They found: ‘The Code of Practice is still not being used as it was intended to be, with variations in providers’ understanding of how it should be applied.’ (p. 3.) Further, the ‘guidance and best practice expectations are not well understood or consistently being translated into practice.’ (p.16.)

³⁶ CQC, 2008, p. 1.

³⁷ CQC, 2014, p. 34.

³⁸ CQC, 2008, p. 7.

³⁹ CQC, 2014, p. 34.

coercive.’⁴⁰ And it *is* torturous, both for the feeders and the fed.⁴¹ And, if it is rarely used, it is rarely used temporarily, and it is seldom used with consent.

It was raining that day. Little unusual there, for this is Norwich and Norwich does rain in quite the spectacular fashion. I’d spent the morning writing in a cubicle of the university library, quite content to be hidden away.

But now I was exposed, cold and breathless as I huddled beneath the leaking bus-shelter. The wind was up. The bus was late and I had no umbrella. So by the time the double-decker’s shadow passed across me, raindrops were gliding quite freely down my cheeks. I looked up and was surprised to find Carey Mulligan’s beguiling eyes peering down plaintively into my own.

The Time is Now.

⁴⁰ Jacinta Tan, Tony Hope, Fran Stewart, Raymond Fitzpatrick, ‘Competence to Make Treatment Decisions in Anorexia Nervosa: Thinking Processes and Values’, *Philos, Psychiatr, Psychol*, 13.4, (2006), p. 3, in PubMed Central <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2121578/pdf/nihms5623.pdf>> [accessed September 2018].

See also: Rosalind Ramsay, Fran Ward, Janet Treasure, and Gerald Russell, ‘Compulsory Treatment in Anorexia Nervosa: Short-Term Benefits and Long-Term Mortality’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 175.2, (1999), 147-153, in Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/compulsory-treatment-in-anorexia-nervosa/8801E6D4A7CFFDEB8A15E13299D795C2>> [accessed March 2018].

Jane Tiller, Ulrike Schmidt, Janet Treasure, ‘Compulsory Treatment for Anorexia Nervosa: Compassion or Coercion?’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 162, (1993), 679-680, in Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/compulsory-treatment-for-anorexia-nervosa-compassion-or-coercion/90685564EB6304A34A4E7E6707BEC1C9>> [accessed March 2018].

⁴¹ For more on the impact force-feeding has upon staff members, see Dr Richard Sly, ‘Holding them down: the lived experience of mental health nurses when force-feeding patients with eating disorders’, (2015), in Benjamin Trust <<http://www.richardbenjamintrust.co.uk/uploads/finalreports/2014/RSLY%20finalreport.pdf>> [accessed January 2019]. Sly reiterates the need for ‘clear, specific training and guidelines to create a protocol to protect staff and patients alike.’ (p.17.) The trauma of carrying out the ‘murky practices of forced treatments’ was clear. Staff reported a reliance upon techniques such as dehumanising patients in order ‘to dissociate themselves from the psychological difficulties of delivering forced care.’ (p. 13) As stated by one interviewee (RMN2): ‘It’s violent. It’s tough. If someone gets hurt, can we say we did it by the book, safely? Well – there is no book. It’s unsafe for all of us.’ (p. 12.)

Yes, the time *was* now. I was decided. I was going to the cinema and right away. No matter that I was not a cinema-girl, I was a feminist-in-the-making and this was my chance to shine at something as extraordinarily mundane as going to *the movies*. Yes, this was the kind of ‘Student Tish’ I’d been looking for throughout my undergraduate degree. If a little (like three years) late to the party, she’d nevertheless arrived in all her spontaneous (if sodden) glory. She was beaming, even, at the prospect of spending an afternoon in the company of the very women she considers herself permanently indebted to.

This enthusiasm had petered out by the time the film started. Having rushed across town, I arrived to find that films don’t necessarily start on your arrival. There was a schedule, apparently. ‘Next showing is at five-thirty,’ the younger-woman-than-me confirmed from behind the counter, her plastic nails clacking against her laminated screen. ‘That’s in an hour and a half,’ she added, evidently deciding that she was not only dealing with a Cinema Virgin, but a General Moron.

I bought my ticket and declined her offer of popcorn.

‘Are you sure?’

Yes, I’m sure.

‘Really? Because on Tuesdays we have this sweet deal where students can upgrade from our Regular size (she picked up a paper bucket) to our Large size for just 10p.’ She produced a cardboard cauldron, her pencilled eyebrows rising as I declined, again. How could I *not* want to consume enough popcorn to Feed the Five Thousand? She scanned my profile and her eyes narrowed. Yes, she seemed decided, I must be one of them: *precious skinny girls*.

Moving on. I joined the queue of ladies waiting to be ushered in and found my spirits uplifted by the trio of women in front of me. They were dressed so immaculately – their silver hair was pinned back with refined elegance that was matched by the string of pearls looped around their necks. They smiled warmly as I neared, edging forwards for no apparent reason

other than to invite me into the queue. I was charmed and not, it seemed, the only novice at *Cinema City* this afternoon.

‘You’re at the cinema?’ My mother was surprised. An hour’s wait is ample time for a Pep Talk and I was dearly in need of her. Having made it into Screen-Four, I’d felt a pang of loneliness with each sorry I’d repeated to the line of students seated between me and the furthest, darkest corner of the cinema. Like raucous children, they seemed oblivious to their surroundings as they playfully tossed flakes of popcorn at one another. In truth, they were little younger than me, though the distance between us was so stark that I reached for my phone and dialled my mother’s number. She is my constant companion and I tend to take her with me, wherever I may go.

‘Well done, darling,’ she said, ‘I’m *so* impressed. Only wish I was there with you.’

‘Wish you were too.’

‘No wobbling, darling. Next time,’ she said, her certainty wavering as the tide of her next thought emerged, ‘But I think you should know, well, it’s just that... the girls at work said...you know...’

I think I did know, though I said nothing. And, ever undeterred by her daughter’s constant hesitation, my mother went on. ‘There’s a... tube-feeding scene. Quite horrible, they said. Just thought I’d warn you, darling. Maybe... it’s not such a good idea.’

This *maybe* was my mother’s tentative way of suggesting that this was definitely *not* such a good idea. But if we both knew this, we also knew that no warning would see me walk away from the film, nor the distress its scenes would likely incur. Not until Carey Mulligan’s name headed the closing credits in celebration that it was over. All over.

The door to Screen Four is hooked open. A line of women pass through. Three teenage-girls are among the last, their footsteps crunch over the spilled flakes of popcorn littering the corridor. A girl trails a little way behind, walking absently with her eyes to the floor.

Girl One: Oh my God! I can't believe they like, actually did that tube thing to women in those days!

Girl Two: I know, right? As if that was actually legal! They, like, properly beat her up and stuff.

Girl Three: Well, I've heard they *still* do it to girls that refuse to eat. You know, like – what them girls called?

Girl Two: Anorexics?

Girl Three: Yeah, *them*.

Girl One: Oh Becca, *please*. You're *so* flipping gullible, course they don't. Who told you that?

Girl Three: No, it's true. Amy Phillips said so. You know, the one that went out with Luke from Chemistry? Anyway, she's got this friend from Dance that knows a girl from Swimming, who said her mum's friend had this weird daughter that didn't like eating. So they sent her to this, like – what do you call it? Asylum thing. Like, for months and *months* apparently. And they had to like, force her to eat and stuff. Like with the whole tube thing.

Girl One: No, seriously? That's gross, they're having you on. *As if* they do that.

Girl Three: No, honestly, Liv said her mum told her that it was true, so it *must* be.

Girl One: Oh man, really? Why didn't they just shove some cake in front of her? I'd have eaten it. Like chocolate-fudge cake – that'd soon fatten her up.

Girl Two: Yeah that'd do the trick. Hardly rocket science. My mum says girls like that just need a jolly good slapping. Soon sort them out.

Girls together: *Laughter*

Girls together: *More laughter.*

Girls disappear into the Ladies to the sound of more laughter.

The notion of it being illegal to force-feed women was a cry I once very much advocated. But that was then and this is now, with the years in between long enough to teach me that the battle against anorexia is one that requires every weapon available in the armoury. For it is nothing short of a battle between life and death. It is that simple – quite as fatal as that.

On two counts, those girls had struck me:

- 1) The Sheer Disbelief.
- 2) The Jolly-Good Slapping.

As to Number One: Those girls were shocked by what they'd seen. To the point where they had disbelieved it possible for a woman to be flung about the room while thick piping was applied to her face. And, their sheer disbelief both shocked and saddened me. Mostly because it made me question what is and what is not 'normal'. And, having spent four of my formative years in psychiatric hospitals, most of what I encountered (and always considered to be normal) is quite shocking. Most *abnormal* in fact. And, very definitely, incredibly sad.

But what did those girls expect, I find myself wondering. Women to lie down and submit themselves at the first sign of force? It was a battle those suffragettes faced and it was precisely a 'battle' that became the metaphor through which Emmeline Pankhurst sought to convey the fight women had in convincing the world of their right to equal enfranchisement.

'I am here as a soldier,' Pankhurst declared, in a speech delivered in 1913, 'who has temporarily left the battle in order to explain... what civil war is like when civil war is waged by women.'⁴² Pankhurst underestimates her role, for it was that of a general, spurring her troops into a 'militant movement' who were prepared to 'fight for themselves,' with that 'terrible weapon' known as hunger striking.⁴³ 'The keenest weapon,' Pankhurst rightly underlined, 'is powerless unless it is courageously wielded.'⁴⁴

⁴² Emmeline Pankhurst, 'Freedom or Death (1913)', in *21 Speeches that Shaped Our World*, ed. Chris Abbott, (London: Rider Books, 2012), p. 12.

⁴³ Emmeline Pankhurst, *Suffragette: My Own Story* (London: Vintage Books, 2015) p. 272.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 55.

We must put the enemy in the position where they will have to choose between giving us freedom or giving us death.⁴⁵

Anorexia nervosa is not political. There is no agenda which, once reached, will cease the hunger-strike nor the disorder. But it *is* a battle – a civil war of sorts, insofar as it is waged within one mind. Those girls had not been *so flipping gullible* so much as they had been *so flipping naïve*. But was this, I asked myself, just another occasion where ignorance is bliss? Is it better they remain ignorant of the truth if they'd been so horrified by the slightest glimpse of it? Should the reality of in-patient life, then, also be kept within the very walls that keep psychiatric patients locked in place?

No. Easier maybe, but not better. Speaking may be no remedy, but neither is silence a solution to trauma. Silence is secretive and secrecy is destructive. It causes disbelief, shock and misunderstanding. And it keeps that *weird daughter*, who is, after all, just someone's daughter, banished to the fringes of society. A position which, I assure you, will only ever serve to amplify the vigour and volume of the voice in her head. It doesn't just tell her that nourishing herself is shameful, this voice tells her that it is forbidden. Utterly unacceptable.

The truth is that life does not always pan out as we expect. It can stray from our dreams and lead us down pathways that don't necessarily stick to NICE Guidelines. Sometimes Things Do Fall Apart and if or when they do, courteous niceties are soon cast aside, rights are lost and consent becomes irrelevant. Life is at stake and sometimes, girls, the only thing left to save it is force. The tube, my worst nightmare, Dr Miller's safety-net, my father's friend – his supple lifeline piping goodness into his broken girl.

So this is my reason for writing, not so much to sound a warning as to paint a picture of anorexia nervosa that is unvarnished and honest about the destruction it causes. How can we expect others to understand if we aren't prepared to share our trials? It was unkind to resent those girls when I was complicit in the very ignorance that offended me. Why should they know about the men, women and children who are locked up across the world and tube-fed daily? How *could* they know, that Carey Mulligan's performance was but a polished version of what it's actually like to be force-fed? To have your head pinned down and your limbs

⁴⁵ Pankhurst, Freedom or Death, p. 23.

taken, as yards of tubing is threaded through your nose, your gullet, right down into the pit of your stomach.

You wouldn't believe it, would you?

You couldn't believe it, could you?

For the first years of her clinical practice, renowned psychotherapist and writer, Susie Orbach, worked with sufferers of compulsive eating disorder. Asked to extend her practice to treat anorexic women, Orbach writes of how she 'discovered I was loathe to engage with such work.' What follows her confession is a courageous and compassionate illustration of the 'stereotypic image' of anorexia which had left her, and many other therapists, reluctant to treat those suffering from it.⁴⁶

We feel... a kind of coldness emanating from the anorectic. A frigid shield creates an almost physical boundary that we dare not, or know not how to, penetrate.⁴⁷

This stung. No illness should elicit such a negative reaction, especially from specialists in that field. But Orbach does not stop here. With candid self-examination, she tells us that it took years before she recognised that she was 'carrying around a set of prejudicial attitudes towards anorectic women,' which were preventing her from extending her expertise to treat a condition that bred women she considered too 'highly distressed and hard to work with.'⁴⁸

However, soon after taking on her first long-term client, Orbach 'began to see beyond the stereotype.'⁴⁹ Her hostility softened and she found that 'compassionate attitude [which] is

⁴⁶ Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), p. 110.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

essential to the therapy process.⁵⁰ Behind that frigid, defensive shield, Orbach realised there existed nothing more sinister than a terrified, shattered, lost individual.

I intend no criticism of Orbach. Far from it. Prior to my own experience, and without knowledge of anyone directly affected, I too unconsciously made assumptions that grossly underestimated the true nature of anorexia. Yet, although I identify with what Orbach terms, the anorectic ‘recoil’ – the aversion, the perversion – I am saddened by it.⁵¹ I am dismayed that though mental health is finally a growing conversation, anorexia still seems to be considered less of an illness than an inconvenience, a waste of precious NHS resources spent on teenage girls who’ve taken the dieting culture a step too far. Those kind of *precious skinny girls*, we are quick to assume, are not in need of sympathy or expensive treatments, just a *jolly-good slapping*.

Why is it that we think we can slap the sense into her and bash the diet out of her? I ask you, why are we so quick to question the integrity of her illness? Is it because anorexia is visibly repulsive to the naked eye? Such blatant starvation, to be crass, is enough to put you off your food, is it not?

Or is it more sinister? The anorectic becomes abject not because of her un-womanly, unsightly body, but because we suspect she has cultivated her own malady. Would it not only *add* to the madness, to invest in the belief that something other than stubbornness could bely her food-refusal? Yes, we convince ourselves, sceptically scanning an eye over her angular body, this is just another cry for attention.

Funny, how self-destruction can be mistaken for self-absorption. How self-hatred can be misconstrued as self-obsession, when, in truth, the anorectic sees herself as far from sublime. ‘Low self-esteem,’ even, is a description Orbach renders ‘too mild’ insofar as it fails to:

...conjure up a sufficiently strong image of the brutality of the anorectic’s internal life.⁵²

⁵⁰ Orbach, p. 110.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 112.

She feels herself to be deeply unentitled, rejected, inadequate, bad, impure and sullied.⁵³

And so Orbach seeks to give life to the woman behind the illness, by likening her struggle to the hunger-striking protests of the Suffragette Movement. I was sceptical at first. Striking heavily implies the defiance of resistance and anorexia is not, for me, about proving or protesting a point. However, Orbach's comparison is invaluable for the way it functions, 'to begin a process of humanizing her actions.'⁵⁴ A fundamental process which, I would add, is too often overlooked in our readiness to judge.

Suffragette illustrates this. The director, Sarah Gavron, orchestrated a transition in our perception of the suffragettes by making the political personal. We followed Carey Mulligan's character until we believed in her plight so absolutely that it became our own. No longer faceless women in the crowd, no longer moaning women in ageing textbooks, burning bras or cursing deprecating men, we recognised they were just women – women with names, voices and rights of their very own.

And with this very own-ness Carey Mulligan bought the people's identification, replacing our alienation from feminism with a sense of unification. A desire to understand their cause, to right their wrongs and share in their brighter vision of our emancipated future.

So too the anorectic is just human. We each have a name, a past and we even have the possibility of a fulfilling future. But our story is often one plagued by battle. For we do, I assure you, face one hell of a battle each day. And, even if, as Orbach writes:

We do not yet fully understand her cause, we nevertheless [must] open ourselves up to the possibility of understanding that there is a cause she is fighting for.⁵⁵

This cause may remain imperceptible and undetected. We need only remember that her seemingly 'relentless pursuit of slimness'⁵⁶ is likely more than meets the eye. An injustice likely belies it. Unhappiness, certainly, fuels it. As Pankhurst wrote:

⁵³ Orbach, p. 84.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 91.

There are very few... who would be prepared to adopt a 'hunger strike' for any cause. It is only people who feel an intolerable sense of oppression who would adopt a means of that kind.⁵⁷

My plight is not political. It is personal, peculiar and yet all too common. It is not so fussy as to affect a particular demographic – anorexia crosses cultures, genders, ages and classes. And the suffering it inflicts is worsened by the shame spawned by misunderstanding. Writing may offer no cure, but words, I believe, can break the false assumptions which make the illness harder to bear. And Orbach's contribution to this cause is brave and worthy of celebration. It is owing to the honesty she demonstrated in confessing to her 'highly prejudiced' attitude that the reader is better prepared to invest in the 'new light' she seeks to shine.⁵⁸ This light is fundamental. It is fresh, perceptive and proof that an open mind alone can begin to get closer to an understanding of the suffering others face.

It seems to me that the artist's business is to take a willing mind and guide it to hope or despair, contributing not his interpretations, but a glimpse of his honestly earned scars of battle and its rewards.

Zelda Fitzgerald, 1934⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Pankhurst, *Freedom or Death*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ In *Hunger Strike*, Orbach writes: 'To situate the act of not eating in the realm of the political is *to shed a new light* on both the activity and the plight of the anorectic woman.' p. 83.

⁵⁹ Zelda Fitzgerald, *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*, ed. by J. Bryer and C. Barks, (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 205.

Fran glanced from her rack of Scrabble tiles to the board on the table between us. She stretched herself tall on her sofa-arm perch, and arched her spine until her shoulder blades clicked into place. Satisfied (Arabella had winced), Fran turned back to the board and raised a hand to her face, stroking a finger across her cheek in thought.

Somebody yawned. It was late. *That day* of the train had not yet passed, so I wasn't being held in Room Two. I still moved and ate with the group, and took comfort from being but one of many.

Somebody else yawned. It was getting later. We'd finished Evening Snack and had only intended to gather on the ward while our night meds were being dispensed. But if we were tired, Fran was not. In fact, she announced, it was a Fine Time to finish that game of Scrabble we'd abandoned earlier.

It was not, in fact, a Fine Time. It was Bedtime, but across the four months I'd been an in-patient, I'd learnt that Fran is not someone you argue with (twice). Her expectation was for you to nod and accept that her decision had been made, to use Fran's words, for the Good of the Group.

So there we were, reluctantly split between the two sofas, clad in a colourful assortment of pyjamas, tired and awaiting Fran's next move. But Fran ran at Fran's speed only. She liked to tease and tonight was no exception.

'Well,' she said, eventually, keeping her eyes fixed on the board while her fingers tapped a tune across her tiles, 'I heard Martha talking about the Impala today. *Apparently*, he's paying us a little visit tomorrow.' An eyebrow strayed up her forehead where it was held – suspense was Fran's greatest asset and so she stretched the silence into a warning:

Beady-Eyes was up and on The Prowl.

Her spindly fingers fluttered another fanfare of tile taps, then stilled to a sudden halt above two letters. She picked these up. One. Then. Two, she drew out the moment (this being *her* moment), then dropped her catch. Just like that, the vice of her fingers released the tiles. Clitter, they clattered onto the board, shaking the other tiles into disorder which she savoured with a short, sharp, inward gasp. One. Then. Two, she positioned her pieces. A pause. A breath. A sideways glance. Audience still spellbound? Yes, then Three, she pushed her third tile into place: a *W* and *H* were now lined above her intended *O*.

‘What I want to know,’ Fran wanted to know, ‘is...,’ she ran her forefinger down the line of her word, like a paintbrush stroking on the final lick of varnish:

‘W.H.O. is being sectioned tomorrow?’

I should have known I had it coming. And I guess I had known since Ward-Round that morning. I’d waited (and waited) for questioning to rear its ugly head, ducking and diving my way through the morning’s groups – Psycho Ed and Body Image. And I’d survived each munching session, relatively unscathed, only by steering well clear of Fran.

I’d confided in Safiya alone. We’d grown close since she moved into the bedroom next door, almost two months ago. She’d shown scant surprise by the news of my pending sectioning assessment, drawing me into a hug which pressed her baby-bump of a tummy between us. ‘It will be ok,’ she’d whispered before clasping my face in front of my own. Her expression had faltered fractionally so that she was smiling wryly as she added, ‘So long as you keep *well* out the way of that Skipper.’

True but *how*?

Fran Skipper was the Miss Marple of our pack. She followed Trouble like no other and had quite the knack of stirring it should she find the ward going through a rare spell without. It was a question of rights, you see. Fran had decided that she had the *right* to know everything that was to be known about each of our individual care plans. Confidentiality was not so much an obstacle as it was a challenge she relished. It raised the stakes, you see. And, the higher the stakes, the greater the capacity for Fran’s Antics.

‘And?’

Beady-Eyes was waiting. She rummaged a hand around the felt Scrabble-bag and chose two new tiles. She disliked one, tossed it back, shrugged, took another and shelved both on her rack. The stiff sofa cushions crinkled as she leant back and sighed. Fran liked a reaction and was Less Than Impressed with our efforts. No matter, she had time. She had tension and so her eyes went for a second sweep of her prey, lined up as we were before her.

Doug sniggered from over in his corner. Doug always sniggered from over in his corner. Slumped across his beanbag, he looked more a boy of eight than eighteen, with bulky headphones looped over his head. They were unattached to any music, but Doug was attached to them and so they sat there, framing his face that was, more often than not, busy, sniggering.

The snigger ruled Doug right out. Fran turned her attention to Tom, a timid young man who liked neither the accusation nor the attention. He coughed once, twice, tucking his fingers beneath the bristle of his beard which had grown. And *grown*, his wife, Molly had groaned when she’d visited the previous evening. Bestowing a peck on her husband’s cheek, she’d backed away to allow the hungry arms of their eldest daughter to wrap themselves around his slender waist. Tom’s body had folded to her touch, crouching over her as she slipped her hands into his back pockets.

When Tom next found his wife’s eyes, hers had lit the twinkle back into his – a sight more precious for the fact it was so seldom found. ‘It seems,’ Molly had said, with a roll of her eyes, ‘that Daddy’s beard has grown, sweetheart.’ Scooping-up the toddler coiled around her left leg, she’d added, ‘Pity that’s the *only* bit of Daddy that seems to have grown.’

To this, little Lottie had babbled away, clapping her hands together as Molly held her towards her daddy. Taking his daughter, Tom had rocked her into the crook of his arm where she’d soon fallen asleep, contently suckling her thumb as her parents chattered on.

But without his brood, Tom was lost. He scarcely spoke unless we found ourselves alone together. Then he’d talk, with wisdom, kindness and surety, even, that I was unworthy of the punishment I caused myself. If only you’d believed that you were too, Tom, worthy of more

than an illness which separated you from the family who were growing up quicker with every day they learnt to be without you.

Fran was not convinced. Tom was not her target. She moved onto Safiya. And, for Tom, Safiya was willing to accept the deflection. For Safiya was lovely. Thirty-odd years young, she was a woman too slender for the baby steadily blooming inside her belly. With two months to go, she'd been admitted in the hope that hospital could make up for lost time and feed her enough sustenance for the bean to blossom into a baby.

With the heat of Fran's gaze now upon her, Safiya pulled her stretched sleeves over her knuckles. She wriggled her body closer to mine and crossed her arms so that the squeeze she gave me went unseen. Lily was her sacrifice. The poor-unsuspecting thing was sitting beside Fran, who caught Safiya's brief glance and leant back to squeeze the all of little Lily into her beady eyes. Lily buckled with a shrug that was slighted by her reluctance to betray another. For Lily was as sweet as she was no fool: Trouble was heading my way. Only Katie and I remained in the line-up and Katie, long since sectioned already, left me.

Alone

'Look, you load of miseries,' Fran gnawed her bottom lip. 'I have my suspicions.' She flashed me a beady-eyed look which saw me look, decidedly, away. 'But I thought I'd be the *bigger* person.' Fran here hmph-ed at her own expense, knowing the *bigger* person she'd never morally, mentally nor physically ever be, 'You, know, give *you* the chance to *fess* up.'

Oh God. I gulped.

'Fran Skipper!' *Thank God.* The office door swung open behind us. Nurse Nneka emerged, surveyed the scene and swiftly said, 'Are you terrorising my patients, *again?*'

'Nneka,' was Fran's rapid reply: 'Do I ever? Would I ever?'

'Yes,' the firm comeback, 'And definitely yes.'

‘Oh Nneka, always so sceptical. We’re just playing Scrabble, that’s *all*. I mean, someone’s got to liven this *load of miseries* up. Cos let’s face it,’ Fran shook the Scrabble bag, ‘there’s hardly a bundle of fun to be found in here.’

‘Umm hmm,’ Nneka hmm-ed her I-think-not hmm. ‘Is that right girls? Tom? Doug? Having fun are we? Looks to me more of an inquisition than a game.’

Doug soon gave The Game away, with a snigger that saw Fran throw him a glare. Hooking an arm onto her hip, Nneka raised an eyebrow at Fran.

‘Uh, well if you *must* know, Nneka, I was just asking *your* patients who the Impala is coming to see on his visit to the ward tomorrow?’

‘What is this?’ Nneka’s eyebrows sank. ‘Who is this Im-pa-la?’

‘Oh Nneka. *P.Lease* don’t tell me you don’t know who the Impala is?’ Fran was delighted, ‘The I.M.P.H.A?’

The initials did the trick. Nneka slapped her thighs and laughed loud. ‘You mean the Independent Mental Health thing-y? Oh my dear Fran, what are we going to do with you?’

‘With me?’ Fran stretched herself upright, ‘It’s not *me* you need to worry about. The Impala’s not out to get me this time. It’s –’

‘– absolutely none of your business who this “Impala” is coming to see tomorrow, Fran, that’s what it is.’ Nneka retracted her sharpness, ‘And it’s bedtime too. So you’re to leave my patients in peace. I’m going to the pharmacy to dispense Meds.’ She jingled the weighty bunch of keys in her hands, ‘Want you all lined up there in five. Got it?’

Fran did *not* get it. Fran never gets it. But Fran did know it was pounce now or never upon this final opportunity to execute me publically, so quickly did the words, ‘It’s *her!*’ tumble out of her beak.

I looked up to see an outstretched arm channelling a spindly finger at me. And, *as if* this weren't accusatory enough, Fran added, 'I *know* it's you Goodchild.'

Fran had me and she knew it. She'd known it all along so that *Jesus Christ* is what I thought.

Jesus actual Christ.

'Oh Fran,' Nneka sighed, the smile she wore so well fading from her lips as surely as the colour was draining from my cheeks. 'Couldn't leave it, could you?' She perched herself back onto the sofa-arm beside me, pulled me under her wing and began to stroke my arm. 'Some people,' she coughed, '*most* people prefer not to talk about their Care-Plans.'

'Fair enough, Nneka,' began Fran's reply, 'And I'd never dream of asking about Goodchild's Care-Plan, but let's face it, Nneka, being sectioned is hardly part of *The Plan*.'

To this, Nneka could but giggle, though she increased the pressure of her stroke, up and down my arm.

'So, *if* you'd let me finish, Nneka,' Fran began to mouth her more (Fran *always* had scope for more), 'you'd see that actually I'm just trying to offer my services. You know, use my experience to the good. Kind like that, me.'

'Umm hmm,' Nneka hmm-ed her I-think-not hmm, turning to me with a lasting look that told me she'd come and have a quieter chat with me later.

'Well, Goodchild, are you ready for the Impala?'

Goodchild gulped. For Goodchild was anything *but* ready.

'Evidently,' Fran paused, '*not*.' Satisfaction licked its way right round her lips. 'Excellent. In that case, Goodchild, I think I'll take the opportunity... if I may... to bless you with a few Wise Words.'

So that was that. The Scrabble board was swept aside for Fran had found a new game – Defence Against the Impala. I was the pawn and the rules were twofold and simple: Listen and Learn.

Surviving a sectioning assessment was an art, apparently, according to our resident expert, Professor Skipper, who appointed poor-unsuspecting Lily as her scribe. ‘So for heaven’s sake, *try* and look lively.’ She gave Lily a poke with her pen, as though it were a wand that might spark life into her huddled shoulders. It did not. Lily reluctantly took the offered pencil and pad and began flicking through the pages in search of a clean sheet. Scrabble scores lined most, scribbled in an illegible scrawl that Fran (self-appointed Scorer) alone could decipher.

Nneka was soon dismissed. Fran claimed she was a distraction her pupils could ill-afford. In response, Nneka set a ten-minute mark before she wanted us all lined up outside the Pharmacy. But this mark was lost on Fran, who was fond of selective hearing and loathe to lose so much as a moment of this – *her* moment.

‘Now, Goodchild, I’m assuming they’re currently holding you under Section 5.2?’ She awaited my nod and bowed graciously as she received it. ‘As I feared. And you understand what that means?’

‘Umm, I think...’

‘...Not, Goodchild, I think not. Good, basically, it’s like Dr Miller putting you under house arrest. It lasts 72 hours, giving you time to panic and then time to faff – gathering evidence, writing reports etc. for when the assessors arrive. Which,’ she paused, ‘I imagine is happening tomorrow?’

Nod.

‘Morning?’

Gulp.

‘Good God then Goodchild, we have much work to do.’

If Fran’s intention was to showcase her wisdom by exposing my ignorance, then she triumphed. I’d grown up thinking of sectioning as part of that archaic, almost mythical tradition of madwomen brought to life by the likes of Charlotte Bronte’s Bertha Mason. And, despite being surrounded by sectioned patients, I’d clung to this version of madness and avoided any scenario that threatened the safety of it. Yes, I might be non-compliant, but, no, my madness was not of that extremity which merited detention. That right, I was *sure*, was reserved for wailing women – the Bertha Masons of the world, who broke free of derelict attics only to find themselves slapped into straitjackets and thrown (headlong) into padded cells where they could wail (I will forever imagine these women wailing) to their hearts’ content.

I wore no straitjacket. My room was not padded. I did not wail. Therefore: I was *fine*.

‘*That Goodchild*,’ Fran’s eyebrows were raised, ‘is a classic example of the kind of zoned-out look that will get you sectioned quicker than you can say *I am sane*.’

We moved on. Fran whittled through the likely members of the jury, crossing off her fingers as she did so. ‘The Impala will sit centre stage,’ she said, ‘He’s the judge, if you like.’ (I did not.) ‘Then there’ll be an approved mental health professional, a second opinion – some dubious social-worker. Oh and your advocate. Have you met him yet?’

‘My advocate?’

‘Yeah, like your lawyer?’

‘No.’

‘Naturally not. Suspect you’ll be introduced in the corridor while you wait to go in. But don’t fret, he’s a *marvel*. He’ll claim, most convincingly, to know and *understand* your case inside out. Our Miller, I’ve learnt, is wrong: we are not complex, Goodchild, we are *cases*. A single, same and simple case at that.’

For a moment, her tongue stilled and a shadow seemed to flicker over her face. Lines rippled across her forehead and I found myself blushing and looking away. Vulnerability is harder to behold in those that rarely reveal it and Fran seemed torn. But, with a double blink, she was back, focusing her beady-eyes with a breath that saw her striding thoroughly back into her own, Area of Expertise.

‘It’s all about appearances, Goodchild. Confidence is a fine balance. You need to look less terrified: sit up, look up and *stop* jiggling that leg of yours. And will you *p-lease* lose that baby-ish voice of yours.’ She cast her eyes skywards, as though the Lord were up there, awaiting her plea. He was not. ‘You’re an adult, a *competent* one at that. But never *over* confident, Goodchild. Remember, these men like to feel their power. So look helpless but not hopeless. Got it?’

Fran scanned my profile, saw I did *not* get it and blew bubbles through her outward breath. Not magic, she needed a full-blown-bloody miracle.

We moved on. And credit where credit is due, Fran taught me more than I’d managed to glean from the nurses, all of whom had skidded and skirted around my questions like melted cheese on an anorectic’s plate. What transpired was the importance of bargaining: Give (a little) in order to save (a lot). Negotiation: ‘You must show them you understand that you’re...you know,’ Fran said, ‘basically, doing badly. They have the reports remember, so denial is out of the question. I tried *that* before and won’t be again.’

It was at this point I questioned whether Fran’s creative flair in this field was not so much artful as *artless*, given her expertise had been amassed on account of her spending the past decade of her life detained under the Mental Health Act. She was not, perhaps, who Dr Miller had had in mind when he’d encouraged me to seek the counsel of others.

No time to think. Fran's climax was coming. We were told to listen up and a sharp look was thrown Doug's way, for his very sniggers were threatening to spoil this, her crowning moment:

‘Differentiation.’

Silence fell. Fran's eyebrows soared. This was a Big Word to come from our Beady-Eyed Queen of Clogging-Up the Scrabble board with her three-lettered crap. Glowing golden, Fran folded her arms and reclined back into the cushions, bathing in the sheer glory of watching her feat unfold. Yes, she caught my sideways glance at Safiya, whose eyes had expanded. And, yes, she even spied the wink Safiya turned to give Tom, along with a nudge that said, *Did-Fran-Seriously-Just-Say-That?*

Fran basked a little longer before deigning us a nonchalant shrug. ‘Yes, *that's* right, Diff-er-en-ti-a-tion. You must differentiate between what you *want* to say and what you *actually* say, aka what the Impala wants to hear. And, this, Goodchild, you stick to, like glue.’

Fran proposed we role-played an example. We declined. She conceded and proceeded to role-play all the voices involved with a variety of questionable accents. ‘No matter how many times he asks you what you think,’ she said, ‘at *all* costs, resist the temptation to tell him *exactly* what you think. Not your voice, Goodchild, he wants to hear an echo of his own.’

‘Hang on a minute, Miss Skipper,’ Nneka ceased proceedings. She'd returned from the Pharmacy just in time to watch Fran crowing her way through this, The Finale. ‘How do you *know* the Impala will be a he?’

‘Nneka, isn't it obvious? There is power involved. There is a weak-willed woman,’ she nodded at me (the weak-willed woman), ‘It *will* be a man. *T-Rust me.*’

Trust was not something to invest in Fran and her coy smile told us she knew this well. But Nneka called time. Meds were ready. Beds were waiting and so Fran summarised with a recap: ‘Keywords then people, please. Safiya?’

Safiya's sleepy eyes opened wide. ‘Capacity?’ She finished her yawn.

‘Very good. Really, it’s all about Capacity. Show awareness of your weaknesses as well as the illness’s strengths. Followed by a B.I.G. underlining of your will to overcome.’

Fran took the pad from Lily and cocked her head to one side as she said, ‘What does that say? Honestly, Lily, how hard is it to put pen to paper?’ Lily was given another poke. She pulled her hair back, leant towards Fran and read aloud:

‘Engagement.’

‘Right, yes. Good. Tom, your turn?’

Tom had no answer. And neither was Fran altogether impressed when it materialised with that raised edge of a question:

‘Confidence?’

Tom passed. ‘Goodchild, your turn? Come on, this whole charade was for you.’

‘Ummm...’

‘Ummm? Goodchild, have I not been clear? “Ummm” like that and you can kiss goodbye to America.’

‘Oh my days,’ for Nneka, this was too much. ‘What is this about America, Miss Skipper?’

‘Nneka, you are a Lost Cause. No American Dream for those who’ve been sectioned. They don’t want so much as a *slim* piece of you. No, sectioned once, I tell you, and you’re good as branded for life.’

‘What nonsense,’ Nneka laughed. We did not. ‘Wait,’ she said, no longer laughing, ‘it *is* nonsense, isn’t it?’

Fran gave the silence time to speak for itself. ‘Not nonsense, Nneka, but no biggie. Best they ban us altogether. Americans have a thing for big fat-fries, you see. And we, you might also see,’ she said, giving a wave to the *miserable lot of us*, ‘quite simply, do not.’

Nneka did see. Enough was enough, she said, not without smiling. ‘Meds then bed, it’s been a long old day.’

Nneka wasn’t wrong. Weeks had packed themselves into that single day. It began with a five-thirty knock on my door. It was not yet light outside, but I was already awake and watching as the door opened fractionally to reveal the outline of HCA Dot’s face, her features shadowed by the corridor light.

‘Time to get up, lovey,’ she said, ‘It’s weigh morning.’ Dot’s voice was sombre (Weighing was a Sombre Occasion) and she waited until I showed signs of stirring. I stirred. Dot was satisfied and left me to listen as she carried on rap-a-tap-tapping her way down the corridor, knocking with a firmness that depended on the number of knocks each patient had already had.

‘Fran, *please* don’t make me pull you out of bed again. This is the fourth and *last* time I’m going to ask nicely: get yourself down to the clinic, Nneka is waiting.’

Two nurses did the Round-Up. They’d wake us, unlock and supervise our use of the bathroom, before escorting us down to the clinic where we’d form a bleary-eyed, fractious queue. It was an in-out policy. The door would open, one patient filed out (head bowed, eyes wet) as the next was called in (head prone, eyes wide).

Inside it was always cold and eerily quiet. The nurse would close the door (lock the door), ask us to strip down to our undies (or less, if needed) and step *carefully* onto the scales. A nudge (or more, if needed) was given to those reluctant to step on and a tug for those refusing to step off, not liking the fate they'd been dealt. There were no winners, you see. We were all losers.

‘Safiya, lovey, it’s Dot. Need to get up, careful as you go. Well done, finally someone’s listening. Three times I’ve tried Lily. And don’t get me started on that Fran.’ Safiya did not get Dot started on *that* Fran. And neither did she entirely thank Dot for her reminder that, ‘when baby comes, you’ll be up at this hour every night.’ A shadow crossed my doorway, Safiya slunk on past and Dot was back. ‘Tish, you awake?’

I blinked. And blinked again, watching Dot’s face soften into a smile we shared. I liked Dot a lot and not just because she was so incredibly lax. She was a quirky, elder lady, who wore tie-dye t-shirts and home-knitted cardigans. Her short, purple hair was highlighted (unintentionally) with streaks of silver which matched the heavy array of rings on each of her fingers. She had this pensive presence which was as inoffensive as it seemed utterly oblivious to our antics. I could happily soak two-hundred millilitres of milk into my pyjamas with Dot sat resolutely beside me, her eyes fixed upon the tray on which each patient returned their empty mugs. She’d wheel me back to my room and help me clamber into bed, never questioning the sodden state of my pyjamas.

‘Well done Tish.’ The rattle to Dot’s breath grew louder as she drew closer to the bed (Dot did not breathe, Dot purred, like a content cat). She let her glasses fall onto the string looped about her neck and used her fingers to tease the duvet from mine. ‘Let’s get it over with. Always better to know than not to, hey?’

Seven hours later it was Dr Miller's face searching mine. Finding my eyes unwilling to meet his, he said, 'Tish, how long have we known each other now?'

A long time, is what I thought, unsure of the exactness, for time has a speed of its own in hospital. It flows too freely at times and stalls completely at others. It is impossible to pin down and so I left Dr Dawson, Kate, to answer for me. She was the hospital's general doctor, who accompanied Dr Miller through ward rounds as both his scribe and loyal sidekick. The rest of her time, she busied herself bustling to and from the latest emergency. Her gait was short but her pace was quick and so the jingle of her keys incessant. She was highly efficient in her own disorganised way, with a manner that was practical without being clinical, and maternal, only insofar as she was protective of her patients being remembered as people, not illnesses.

And she had a way with Dr Miller. The humour which flitted between them was infectious in that it was genuine. They both saw anorexia as a mental battle which heavily implicated the body. In distress the mind may unravel, but in the madness of that desperation, it is often the body which is scarred. And so they were united as a team and divided only by the roles they played. Dr Miller tended to the psychological effects and left Kate to nurse the war-wounds, which she did without showing the slightest reproach for the patient who had self-inflicted them.

'Well,' Kate said, 'two years, if we're counting Tish's last admissions?'

'No, just this one, while I've been her consultant.'

'Then, I make it roughly four months so far. Sound about right?'

'Yup. And in that time, Tish, have I ever done anything that has made you doubt my judgement?'

Dr Dawson left me to answer this one. So I thought back to our first meeting. It felt like years not months ago, but I remembered my surprise. I'd liked Dr Miller from the start and this is rare. More often you feel suspicion as Dr So-and-So introduces himself, telling you not to worry your *small* self, for you are safe now, *in their care*. In their power, is what they mean,

for you sacrifice the right to your own the moment you walked into their office. Abuses of power are not uncommon and you know this – have experienced it even, as I had that first time Dr Miller held his hand out to shake mine.

But it had been warmth which passed through his gentle shake. He'd looked almost as disgruntled for the need of such formality as I did. Rather than directing me, he offered me the choice of seating myself on any chair I should choose, and did not rush me as I looked behind me to the four empty chairs, feeling overwhelmed already for the part in my own care that this man would evidently ensure I played. Whilst he fiddled with his tie (not straightening it, but further loosening it), I chose the chair opposite his.

This too was unusual. Closest to the door and furthest from the doctor's action was my usual preference. Perhaps it was desperation – relief, even. Or maybe it was just the warmth – his warmth and the lack of my own.

'I know,' Dr Miller now said, knowing my mind had wandered, 'I've made some decisions that you've not exactly... *liked*.'

Kate made no effort to contain the snort that trumpeted its way out of her nose. 'Huh, you can say that again, Doctor!'

'Well, thank you *Doctor*,' came Dr Miller's fond return, 'Yes, I do recall that taking cheese off your Dislikes List was, well... let's just say, less than appreciated by you, Tish.'

I almost smiled, recalling my reaction to what I'd believed to be his totally *un-called* for action. My voice had hit a John-McEnroe note as I'd said (more shrieked), *You cannot be serious*. I'd said (more shrieked), *you cannot be serious*, again, leaping up from my chair as hot tears sprung to my eyes.

'What I mean Tish, is have I ever done anything that you've truly believed hasn't been in your best interests?'

I shook my head, fractionally. But it was enough to give Dr Miller the green light to go down a route I knew I would not like.

‘Right, so what I’m about to suggest will be... you won’t...,’ he paused, his mouth closed. Dr Miller was rarely stretched for words and this wanting wasn’t helping. I remember it so clearly – that silence was so still, so fraught with tension that I feel myself drawn back to the moment of its present. As though I am watching this girl unfolding as she waits for her doctor to speak. As though I can feel the butterflies fluttering in her chest as his voice falls to that which is scarcely more than a whisper.

‘Tish,’ he says, ‘we have, haven’t we?’

Tish nods. She needs no words. She knows.

‘Reached an impasse?’

Tish nods.

‘And we can’t go on like this. We just can’t, can we?’

Tish shakes her head.

‘I know this is hard. I know it is. I know you’re exhausted. But I know too that home is where you want to be. Where you should be. And the longer this goes on, the more you’re missing. I want you to have a life – *the* life you want. But we’re losing it, Tish. We’re letting it slip through our fingers and I can’t watch it anymore. So it’s time, Tish, isn’t it?’

Tish nods and begins to blink.

‘So what I’m about to suggest is going to be hard to hear. But I think maybe you’ve known it was coming.’

Tish nods. She must keep blinking, blinking.

‘Ok. So here’s my plan. I need you to listen, not react, but go away and think about it.’ He pauses and leans forwards. The leather of his shoes squeaks as he scrunches his toes.

He always scrunches his toes, she thinks and blinks, looking at his shoes that are no longer black and intact, but crinkled and worn. One lace has come undone and has been left astray, as haphazardly as the colours that stripe across his odd socks. She blinks and the stripes blur, the blue bleeds into the purple. She blinks, swallows and thinks that this plan of his is likely to be the divide which will come between them.

‘This plan,’ he says, ‘won’t be actioned until we’ve spoken again, ok? Do you understand what I’m saying, Tish? Now is not the time for panicking. Ok?’

Tish needs him not to ask. Every ‘ok’ swells the lump rising in her throat. It throbs. It thickens, constricting her breath that is no longer even, but arduous, heavy and heaving. Her eyes wander back to his shoes as she latches onto this man – to his belief in her – to his hopes for her. But her eyes are unable to look any higher and so she blinks again. And perhaps he knows the prevarication to her gaze, its neediness and its resistance, for he scrunches his toes as if in acceptance of both. Her little toes do the same, though the twitch makes no scrunch for she is wearing no shoes, just tights.

He unlaces his fingers and she feels the return of his smile ‘D’you hear me, Tish?’ he says, and she does. ‘You’re to listen. Process. Not get your usual huffy with me.’ He passes a smile to Kate, who catches it with a swallow that dips her lips as they turn back towards the frightened girl sitting before them, latching tight and holding still as he says, ‘And then, we’ll talk it through together, Tish, ok?’

How can so little a word carry so heavy a load? Tish tries to nod. She tries to smile and make a fist of her fingers but the effort is too much. The cost is carried by the silent tear now feeling its way down her sunken cheek.

‘Good, because this is scary stuff, Tish. And I’ll need you to be brave and remember. It will change nothing: still fighting together, Tish. Not against each other. Yes?’

Tish nods. Her head slopes slightly to one side as she inhales a breath that tells her to remember this moment. To savour this trust, this faith she has in this man, for she suspects it is soon to be tested. Strange, she is thinking, how he holds all the power over her, yet never

has he made her feel the threat of it. His care is careful. It is considered and he shares it with her in a way no other doctor has ever dared to.

But Tish is unable to share her appreciation with the smile he craves. For her heart is thumping in that onerous way which signals the approach of something greater than any one of this trio can stave off.

She swallows. He says, 'It's really important you understand Tish, that this is not about punishment. I am not nor ever will punish you. There is no pass or fail here, there is no good or bad. We have a battle on our hands and we have to do whatever it takes to win it. Ok?'

Tish nods anew, though her eyes close over. She wants to show him that she is listening to him, but she can't. She wants to tell him that she believes in him, but she can't. And so greatly does she fear he does not know. She takes him not for granted. And this she *needs* him now to know. For she has seen it, that wedge. It has been placed between their feet and too soon she knows it will drive them far apart.

'Tish, you still with me?'

Now or never. Tish knows it's now or never and so she holds her breath. She counts, One, Two, *be brave*, Three: Tish digs her nails into her skin and does, yes *does*, raise her eyes up. She wrenches them from that wedge to the bottom of his shoes, then up each stripe of his socks. She climbs up and up until her eyes find his. For he is looking, so long has he been waiting for the moment in which she will dare to trust in him enough to show him.

He does not flinch, though he is surprised. He does not blink, though the crinkles in the corners of his eyes smooth over. She does not blink, she just holds onto his eyes. And on she holds, for as long as her breath will allow her, until her will collapses, her breath dies out and her eyes close over, releasing the tears that had been prickling and now are trickling down through the dark lashes that clamp her eyes shut. She thinks of her father's eyes, as blue as this man's and draws her fingers into her palms, making her father's *we're-going-to-fight-this-together* fist. In her fists, she is clinging to that feeling, clasping to that same compassion that had filled her eyes when she held this doctor's.

It is a while before Dr Miller speaks. The silence is heavy, weighted by a pain, a desperation that is hers and, perhaps, a little his too. Her need to be told it will be ok is overbearing, for she fears now that it will not be.

‘Tish, let’s think practically for a second. Your weight dropped again this morning?’ He turns to Kate, who begins rifling through the pages scattered over her desk.

‘Uh huh, got it,’ she pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose and pulls the weight-chart closer. ‘Um, hang on, today? Ddd-ddd-ddd, yes, yup. Dropped 0.6kg since Monday.’

‘0.6 Tish. In *two* days. I just can’t let this happen. And Martha tells me that *despite* that loss, you *still* didn’t manage Breakfast this morning?’ He isn’t looking for an answer. Instead he says with unusual firmness, ‘Tish, this is *not* about punishing you. You know that, don’t you?’ He searches her face and finds a need to say, ‘This is about getting you home. Can you remember that, Tish? I need you to hold onto that, ok?’

Tish tries to nod.

‘Right, so Martha said you didn’t stay through Protocol?’

Tish shrugs.

‘You left the table?’

Tish nods.

‘Yup. I think and this is *absolutely* to be kept between us, but I think probably that was for the best. Martha tells me the rest of the group are giving you a bit of grief. Is that right?’

Tish shrugs.

‘It’s not fair on them: the staff or the other patients. And it’s not fair on you, Tish. It’s asking too much of you. You can’t manage your Meal-Plan and no, that’s *not* a failure.’

It's just a sign of where we're at – that the battle is too much right now. So it's time to put our heads together, like we're doing now, and come up with a new strategy. Arm ourselves with new weapons, so to speak. Ok?'

Tish nods. She knows now exactly what is coming. She tries to firm her lips. She is needing but unable to stem the flow of her tears. No longer trickling, they are tumbling down her cheeks, dropping into her lap as he says:

'The tube, Tish. I think you know, I'm talking about the tube.'

I think I must have known the tube was heading my way. Things had been spiralling in a gradual decline. I'd been an inpatient for four months and, according to the scales that morning, I weighed too many kilos less than I had on my admission.

'How is that even possible?' I held the phone away from my ear, for the shrill voice on the line was my mother's and the desperation to her pitch was hard to hear. And sad, for we did not recover the silence, only eventually did she say she had to go, those brothers of mine needed feeding. *Sorry, darling*, she'd said, so quietly that the distance between us seemed to stretch longer, 'I've just had enough, not sure I can do this anymore.'

Enough *was* enough, Mummy, I couldn't bear doing this to you anymore. But never is ever anything enough for the Voice who rejoiced in the exasperated sighs that sounded around me. And who could blame them? I ask you, who wouldn't get fed up of trying to feed a girl who would *not* be fed? I was now confined to my bed, save mealtimes which saw the arrival of the wheelchair to whisk me down to the dining-room table. I'd just sit there, vacantly staring beyond my plate, waiting until the nurses' soft-soothing voices strengthened into pleas, punctuated by outbursts of frustration. But their efforts to coax me into complying were as futile as their furious bids to back me into a shameful corner.

I offered no excuses. I had no explanations. I was too tired to argue. The Voice was too loud to ignore. I craved simplicity, nothing but silence and the Voice alone was seductive in its promise to grant me both, *if only* I would surrender to it, *if only* I would obey its simple commands:

- 1) Don't munch *anything*.
- 2) Don't sip *anything*.
- 3) Don't listen to *anyone*.

Need I mention the Voice was strict? And by the time the tube was discussed, it had gained the absolutism of a true tyrant. No morsel of food would touch my lips. No single sip of water would slip down my throat. And no soft-soothing voice would seep through the defences the Voice had plugged into my ears. It had my tongue bound to a silence I was too ashamed to break. Alone, it knew my secret – my repulsive craving to gratify my hunger, to quench my thirst and, most of all, to bathe in the comfort the nurses continued to offer me.

If Only. If Only.

Their soft-soothing voices were all I – yes, *I* – wanted to hear. The Voice had isolated me from human touch and I longed to talk to them about it – to explain how it had me tangled into a tight-knit net, the rope of which cut into my mind with pain so acute and prolonged that no will of my own could ever hope to break free.

If Only. If Only.

Their antidote was too remote. I could not reach their remedy and the Voice could not bear their care. It was growing impatient and its wishes were too clear to go unheeded. *I needed to die*. What other way was there to relieve the suffering my family endured for my sake?

In truth, it is remarkable how well your mind seeks to cater for your body's needs. They say you can survive without food for longer than you can without water and this, I can avow with certainty. For it was not food, but water I craved, day after night after day. Longing would nibble at my parched lips as I stared at the glass before me and wondered how the plain

purity of this colourless liquid could be so callous as to sit there, unmoved by my longing, unmoved by the desperation of my *need*, until the nurses conceded defeat and laid me back into bed.

‘Tish, are you going to get up and brush your teeth?’ Belinda, another HCA asked, standing over my bed one evening. ‘Nneka will be here with your meds in five so we might as well get you ready for bed.’

Belinda hadn’t been pleased to come on shift and find me lying, coiled in the pyjamas I’d worn all day. She liked me up and dressed, if only for a few hours. But what was the point? The motions of the day were a rigmarole that promised only the torment of counting down the hours to be endured before sleep could reclaim me. Tomorrow would only bring another, so what was the point in bothering with today?

Belinda disagreed. Each morning she’d tickle my neck until I opened my eyes. Hers would squint into a smile that spread across her face as she found and squeezed my hand beneath the duvet. We’d repeat the routine at the end of her shift. She’d badger me to my feet and we’d shuffle the few steps to the bathroom. I was weary so she was wary, hovering by the sink until she was satisfied I was standing well enough without her. But she needn’t have worried. Secretly, I was so relieved that Teeth-Brushing had come that I was extra-specially careful. It meant two things.

Number One was the knowledge that the meds to knock me out for the night were being dispensed and soon to be dispatched straight into my system. Number Two was the prospect of the water. That gushing, rushing sound that would wash over my tongue as the wet toothbrush passed my lips. I’d been waiting all day and so I’d eke this moment out. Let the tap run and run, with one hand firmly holding the sink as I bowed so close that the sodden sound could flood through my ears. Like this I could imagine the wetness slipping down my throat with no thought as to stopping.

If only. If only.

Belinda would call time. Pulling my hair from my shoulders and coiling it down my back, she’d lean over and ask, *Tish, are you brushing or not, because you need to be back in bed?*

That's when I'd wet the toothbrush and open my eyes. The moment was coming and I wouldn't want any part of me to miss it. The tap would be running so fast that the teeny-tiny lump of toothpaste would get dislodged, but no matter. Better even, for it was the purity of the water that was coming and my body had now tensed, a-quivering with awaiting.

Uh

Oh

The pleasure. Brushing barely happened. It proved too great a distraction to the cold wetness I wanted to savour. That is, until the Voice grew too loud to ignore. Did I not know, that *Enough was E-fucking-NOUGH?*

My tummy would contort, retching with grief as I spat the water out. How it teased me, swirling and slurping around the ceramic basin until satisfaction sounded in a gleeful glug. Gone, it had been swallowed down the plug.

I'd step back, head spinning, mind reeling, teeth jarring, the Voice knowing just how close I'd come. What a liberty I'd taken? The very intemperance of my temptation, lingering as I had *gorged* myself with the imaginative pleasure. How disgusting to be so greedy? But *oh*, I could but think on, replaying the satisfaction of that glug. Gallons of ice-cold water, I imagined, ga-ga-gargling in my mouth. And then Glug.

Glug

Glug

Glug

GONE

The End. The Voice put a stop to that. If brushing was allowed, then it was with hot water. Why? Because, what thirst has ever been pleasurably quenched with lukewarm water? Or, as became the case, water hot enough to burn a fuzzy layer on my tongue? The Voice now governed the tap, forcing me to listen without so much as a drip touching my tongue. The toothbrush scratched so hard that the taste was not minty, but that metallic flavour of bleeding gums. It was a staunch reminder that the Voice would *not* tolerate such base temptations.

‘Right. That’s it,’ Belinda was Less Than Impressed. ‘Either *I* run the *cold* tap for you or we give up with brushing altogether. The choice, Tish, is yours?’

The Choice, Tish made, opting for the loss of Teeth-Brushing. And into mourning she went, lying in bed unable to think of anything beyond her unquenched thirst. Should she try to stand, postural hypotension would now collapse her body to the floor in blackouts that soon lead to rushed trips to A&E. The General Nurses were generally unimpressed to have their time wasted by the nuisance I was, again and *again*. Three items were listed on my prescription: One: Food. Two: Fluids (lots of, preferably). Number Three was kept strictly unsaid, spoken only through their shrewd, askance glances:

A Jolly-Good Slapping.

This Madam needs a Mother Mary of a Slapping.

‘Sharp scratch,’ they’d say instead, digging a needle into the crook of my arm, taking satisfaction from seeing me wince. ‘You’re *impossible...*,’ they’d next say, leaving a *long* pause before finishing, ‘...to bleed.’ This was owing to that lack of fluid and so they dug on, and on, taking aim at the blackest of bruises, hoping to find a cooperative vein beneath. ‘Uh-huh, got you.’ Invariably, they *got* me. Their triumph was my torment. The punishment of which was to watch their drip inflate my body with life, drip by *bleeding* drop.

Perhaps it shouldn’t have been so surprising, then, that we’d reached Dr Miller’s impasse? Hindsight has its advantages. It allows us the kind of objectivity which the turbulence of the moment has a way of discarding in favour of us believing that we are *fine*.

This problem is so frequently encountered with eating disorders that a distinction is made between ‘factual belief’ (the logical/objective truth) and its opposite, ‘salient belief.’⁶⁰ This latter, false-belief system is validated by our emotions and, where facts remain distant, arbitrary and seemingly inapplicable to your situation, feelings are raw, inescapable and directly affecting. And so, however irrational it may appear, the mind prioritises the salient belief, to the extent that an individual can find themselves in complete (and convincing) denial of their illness.

Inevitably, this complicates the sectioning process. Mental health assessors need to measure a patient’s awareness of their illness and, thus, their capacity to make informed, rational decisions about their treatment. But, with an illness as intractable as anorexia, nothing is as simple or clear cut. Studies endlessly highlight how anorectics demonstrate, ‘excellent understanding, reasoning, and ability to express choice.’⁶¹ This we do. We live on. We soldier on undeterred by, or unable to recognise that, ‘the facts of the disorder and the associated physical risks’ are wreaking havoc upon our bodies.⁶²

For instance, you know that factually speaking, starvation will kill the body, just not yours. Others can point out the obvious contradiction, but there exists a voice in your head that deafens you to their logic. It manipulates their facts into foolery, distorting your perception until you fully believe that you are *not* ill or suffering madness, you are just guilty of badness. You deserve punishment not nourishment, because you are greedy, not starving. And neither are you dying – *they* are lying, merely trying to trick you into complying with a Meal-Plan that you do not deserve, let alone *need*.

So, even back then, I knew that anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. That, statistically speaking, around ten percent of those receiving in-patient treatment will die prematurely from complications caused by anorexia.⁶³ In our ward of ten patients, this equated to one of us.

⁶⁰ Tan, Hope, Stewart, Fitzpatrick, ‘Competence to Make Treatment Decisions in Anorexia Nervosa: Thinking Processes and Values’, *Philos, Psychiatr, Psychol*, 13.4, (2006), p. 7, in PubMed Central <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2121578/pdf/nihms5623.pdf>> [accessed September 2018].

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶³ Fotios Papadopoulos, et al., ‘Excess mortality, Causes of Death and Prognostic Factors in Anorexia Nervosa’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 194.1, (2009), 10-17, in Cambridge Core <www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/excess-mortality-causes-of-death-and-prognostic-factors-in-anorexia>

A Fran

A Tom

A Tish or a Lily

Wasted away, just like that. Yet, despite *that* knowledge, I believed that my body would not be the one to succumb. How could it be? Feelings trump facts and I felt *fine*. The blackouts were no proof and their soft-soothing appeals spoke no truths: not desperately *out* of control, I was capable, competent and entitled to my right to refuse treatment.

In the certainty of this conviction I believed I could bargain my way out of being sectioned. The cost would be consenting to the tube, but in exchange I believed I could maintain my freedom. *Simple*. What madness? How foolish I was to believe I would consent when the time came. How deluded I was to believe I *could* consent when the time came.

And the time *was* now.

It was time to talk about the tube.

It's ghastly losing your mind and not being able to see clearly, literally or figuratively – and knowing that you can't think and that nothing is right, not even your comprehension of concrete things, like how old you are or what you look like.

Zelda Fitzgerald⁶⁴

nervosa> [accessed January 2019]. Statistics are hard to obtain. Anorexia is not always written as the main cause of death. These figures are taken from a study of in-patient women only.

⁶⁴ Fitzgerald, p. 89.

Dr Miller and I spoke again a few days later. And it was only then that it became clear that the tube was part of a two-point plan. Taking care to stick to the less obtrusive ‘would’ words of theoretically speaking, he explained that the tube would be our safety-net. It would be inserted, but only used when I couldn’t manage my intake orally.

‘It would, I hope, relieve you of some of the responsibility, Tish. That’s all.’
But that wasn’t all. There was a condition to his plan that he seemed reluctant to share. Leaning forwards in his chair, he made a temple of his fingertips, as though he were trying to construct his words into a sentence less unsightly than the truth.

‘To implement this plan, though Tish, I’d have no option but to call a sectioning assessment.’

The truth laid bare, his temple collapsed. His fingers laced together and there was silence, save the scrunch of his toes and the click of Tish’s ankle as it began its jiggle.

‘Right. Tish,’ he said, breaking his words with breaths that seemed to be asking her to do the same, ‘Just, stop, and, hear, me, out.’

Tish did not stop. She was quite busy, panicking. But if Tish could raise panic (like no other), then Dr Miller could foresee Tish’s panic (like no other). And so he was quick to move on.

‘Before you ask, Tish, ethics is why. Because ethics rightly come into play when we are – and we are – dealing with a treatment that is highly likely to involve force. I think you know that, Tish.’

I think Tish did know that, somewhere deep inside. Just like she’d suspected his plan would come with conditions. Never had he yet spared her the truth. However controversial she

deemed it, he believed in her right to hear it. She relied upon this integrity of his and, in turn, he knew his ability to treat her depended upon maintaining this faith of hers.

And so Dr Miller spoke openly of his reservations. In principle, he told her, he resented the suspension of rights which sectioning imposed. But ultimately he regarded it as a ‘safety-net’ that gave him access to extended powers, rigorous treatments only through which he could begin to disempower the illness.

‘Think about it as our battle, Tish. When the enemy ups their game, do we surrender? Or do we do everything we can to ensure the survival of our troops? I assure you no general wants to see his men suffer. He considers it his *duty of care* to enlist whatever extra resources are required. And, this, I need you to remember: he does not view the escalation as a failure of his troops, Tish. Ultimately, he knows it’s their bravery that will win the battle, their strength. His role is solely to provide whatever protection he can to support them through their darkest hours of need.’

There was a long silence. Her leg had stilled and his toes rested in peace. In time, Tish opened her mouth. It closed. Dr Miller waited a while longer, his eyes not leaving her face even as he appealed to Kate. ‘Uh-oh, Doctor Dawson,’ he said, ‘prepare yourself. Tish has a “but” brewing for us.’

Tish always had a ‘but’ brewing for them. Dr Miller’s statements were often suspended while he awaited their brew. And Tish had harboured this one for Two. Whole. Days. And so she summoned her most reasonable voice to say, ‘But what if I give my consent to being tube-fed?’

‘Right, Tish. Why have I got the feeling I’m not going to like this?’

‘Hmm. Then would I *still* have to be sectioned?’

‘You mean, if you consent to the tube, can you avoid being sectioned altogether?’

Tish looked left, then right, ‘Um, yes.’

‘Oh Tish,’ he ran his fingers through his short blonde hair, ‘Never straightforward are you?’

Tish shrugged.

‘Is she?’

Kate was already nodding, readily in reply.

‘Tish, things just aren’t as simple as that.’

Things are never just *as simple as that*.

‘I mean, for a start, I don’t think we’ve ever had a patient being tube-fed that hasn’t been on a section. Have we?’

‘No,’ Kate removed her glasses and rubbed an eye. ‘I mean,’ Kate meant, ‘no.’

‘But *why* not?’

‘Because Tish..., I *guess* it’s just not seen as ethical.’

Tish was pleased. She had uncovered a *guess* that she could work with. ‘So technically,’ she said, ‘it *is* possible?’

Dr Miller was less pleased. His shoes creaked as he scrunched his toes. ‘Well yes, I suppose it’s *theoretically* possible, Tish. But the *reality* remains that it’s highly unlikely to work out as simply as that.’

But Tish was too pleased with the shifting likelihoods to note his warning. It was looking likely she’d struck upon the kind of gold that she could use to barter her way out of being sectioned. Yes, she decided, she’d *finally* stumbled onto the Straight-and-Narrow Path which lead to Victory alone.

‘It’s just that [with Tish it was always *just that*], I think the section would be, like a...’ A what? she wondered, ‘...a failure. Like losing control, just when I should be trying to take it.’

‘Tish, what did I tell you?’ he asked, seeking no answer. He’d known all along that he’d have to tell her again. And again, ‘This isn’t about passing, failing or punishment, Tish. This is about us taking control of the situation. Together.’

‘But...’

‘No more Buts Tish. I can’t ethically tube-feed you without calling a sectioning assessment first. It’s just not do-able. And I certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that to you. But – and yes, I’ll give you *this* but – that doesn’t mean you can’t tell them exactly what you’ve just told me. In the assessment, that’s your chance to talk to them – to go wild for all your butts as to why you don’t need to be sectioned. In fact, that’s exactly what I *want* you to do, if you can – don’t do your quiet thing. And if they agree with you? Well, I’d be delighted. Really, I would. Sections are the last thing I want, for any of you. Sometimes, though Tish, it’s the *right* thing for you.’

He waited. It was her turn to speak but she needed time. She wasn’t sure how to tell him it was his approval she needed, now more than ever. Without it, what hope had she of believing in her right to fight for this – her final strand of freedom? Her fingers had been picking the hem of her dress, but now she pulled them away, laid them onto her lap and took in a long breath to say, ‘So it’s ok, to try?’

Perhaps he knew the neediness that belied her appeal, for his voice softened to say, ‘Of course you can try, Tish. I’d expect nothing less of you.’

Kate here breathed a huh in praise of Tish’s capacity to Defend the Indefensible. And the humour she supplied was welcome, for it eased the tension and enabled Dr Miller to draw the session to a close. ‘Try and think about it Tish, that’s all I ask. Try and separate what *it* is wanting and what *you* are wanting. Or needing. There’s a difference, however hard it sometimes is to see. The tube is not about negotiating your way out of something,’ he added, seeing that Tish was thinking this was *exactly* what it was all about, ‘It is a safety-net, Tish,

about us finding a way of moving forwards. Because things need to change, Tish, don't they?'

They did, Dr Miller, you were right, they did.

Yet when Tish was wheeled back to her room, she was filled with relief that was false. Belief in the slim possibility she could avoid the section by consenting to be tube-fed. Yes, she believed, she'd make a weapon of Dr Miller's safety-net. She'd wow the assessors with it, demonstrating her capacity to recognise the gravity of the situation as well as her resolution to get better. Tube, if tube need be. Things Were Not Falling Apart. No, she'd assure them, as surely as she'd assured herself, she would comply. She would consent. She *could* consent, you see. She was not *out* of control. She was definitely *in* control.

If only, If only.

Things did not, quite, work out as simply as that.

It was the Voice, of course, that had found an avenue through which it could maintain its control over me.

'So Goodchild, we all set for the Impala?'

It was Fran, of course. Penny had been *all set* to wheel me down the corridor when she clapped a hand to her forehead and muttered a flurried apology. Before disappearing into the office to retrieve what she'd (naturally) forgotten, Penny parked me by the ward sofas and there caught sight of Fran. *Be two secs*, she'd added, less as a promise to me as it seemed a warning for Fran, for whom Penny knew *two secs* to be ample time to stir Trouble. And her Tishy did not need Trouble. The morning of the assessment had arrived, though the night had lasted so long.

Martha had already lead the procession of assessors down to the Ward-Round room. Suited and booted, with briefcases swinging and clipboards in hand, they'd passed our sofas with purposeful strides that lightened only as their eyes turned inquisitively towards us – wondering which one was *the* one they were here to judge?

I left Fran to do her beady-eyed thing. And Fran did go *all* out, giving them a beady-eyed glare that soon saw their heads drop and their footsteps quicken.

‘Look, Goodchild,’ Fran then said, her voice lacking its usual impatience. ‘You’ll be fine, you just need to be brave in there.’

I tried to smile, but the plaintive note to her appeal seemed only to drain what strength was propping my shoulders upright. Her eyes did not flicker away. They held onto mine as her thin lips pulled themselves into a gesture that was not so much a smile as it was a recognition of the pickle I was in.

With a gentle sigh, she folded the page she'd been working on and closed the tome (*Jumbo World of Word-Searches: Lose Yourself*). Pocketing her pen (unlikely to leave a thing as precious as that lying about for Penny to pick up and put in *her* pocket later), she slipped down from her perch and crawled across the sofa towards me. Ordinarily so angular and abrupt, her limbs now moved with such languor that goosebumps prickled on my forearms. I pulled my sleeves further down, wondering how to respond to this Fran, who was no longer crowing but creeping her way into my heart.

‘Look, I know the Impala looked all formal and frightening. But that’s his game. Don’t let him win before you begin. You got The Plan last night, yes?’ She awaited my nod, ‘Right, well, like glue, Goodchild, and I mean *superglue* – you stick to that plan. It’s fool-proof, I tell you. Fool-blooming-proof.’

The Plan had been delivered late last night. We should’ve been sleeping, but in hospital everyone sleeps when they shouldn’t and never when they should. There’d been the faintest

tapping against my door, which was ajar, followed by a shuffle as something was slipped across the carpet.

By the time I peered into the corridor, my postwoman had tiptoed her way back to her own room. So stealthily that not even Nurse Winnifred noticed the delivery. She was installed on the sofa with *Women's Weekly* draped across her lap. She looked ready to flick the page when she spotted a headline that broke her yawn into giggles. Downing her mug, she pulled the magazine to her face and said, 'Oo chim, chim, what is this? Five oozbands? My days, one oozband is trouble plenty for me.'

I left Winnifred to the thought of *five oozbands* and tiptoed back to bed with my delivery. *Tish xx* was written in the lush bubbly-letters of a hand too refined to have been Fran's, but her loyal scribe. Poor-unsuspecting Lily, whose work I pressed to my chest as I buried myself beneath the duvet, wriggling into a position that allowed the corridor light to reflect onto the page.

Defence Against The Impala

DO's

DO: Dress to Impress *i.e. Look Less of a Patient, More of a Person.*

DO: Wear Shoes *(for a change)*

DO: Engage and answer ALL questions. *i.e. Speak for once Goodchild, look convinced, balanced aka SANE.*

DO: Be Confident. *(But At All Times show Willingness to SUBMIT i.e. DO let him feel in Control of you. He is.)*

DO: Articulate. *i.e. DON'T do your inaudible mumble thing and none of that baby voice: You are a Competent Young Woman so for God's sake start showing it.*

DO: Show Gratitude. *i.e. IMMENSE appreciation for the excellent care you're receiving in this time of hardship – DO show that you Recognise that although you miss home (NEVER hurts to show a little emotion) you UNDERSTAND that hospital is the BEST and ONLY place for you. The Impala MUST know that Self-Discharge And/Or Absconion is Out of The Question. And for God's sake DO: Allow him his Sense of Superiority when Contradiction will serve you NO Obvious Purpose.*

DO: Look lively. *i.e. Alert but not Alarming. Balanced. At All Costs aim for BALANCE.*

NB LAST RESORT: Feminine Charm *(Believe it or not Goodchild, you can smile so if Things Begin to Fall Apart then DO SMILE. Charm. Remember: You have LITERALLY nothing left to lose.)*

Signed: Professor Fran Skipper.

And PS Good Luck Goodchild, I fear you'll need it. But STICK TO THE PLAN (Fool-proof this plan) and you'll be fine. Trust me.

DON'Ts

DON'T: Get Distracted. *i.e. Don't do your usual vacant, zone-out thing.*

DON'T: Be afraid to BARGAIN. *i.e. DON'T expect to get off scot-free. You must be prepared to Barter – Give A LITTLE in order to Save A LOT. This is about SACRIFICE, Goodchild, DON'T Forget that.*

DON'T: Stray too far from the script. *i.e. What the Impala WANTS to hear. DO Differentiate: Let slip what you ACTUALLY think of him and you are Done For.*

DON'T: Flat Out Deny *(No Point. They have evidence, you have NOTHING.)*

DON'T: Be afraid to Compare the Ward-Market.com. *(I have checked with everyone on the ward and we are all willing to sacrifice our misbehaviours for your cause. So use and abuse us to your good: e.g. 'Unlike Lily, who pockets her potatoes – up sleeves, down socks, (be specific – details are more convincing) I leave them on my plate, wanting to Confront my problem rather than conceal it.' NB God I'm Good: The Impala will LOVE that. Concession can be Priceless.*

DON'T: Run out. *At this stage, Fleeing will achieve NOTHING*

DON'T: DO ANYTHING STUPID

The office door opened and out Charge Nurse Martha came. ‘Alright girls? Nearly time Tish, going up there now to check if they’re ready for you.’

Ready for me?
Was I ready for them?

‘Dearie me,’ Martha spotted Fran, who’d reclaimed her sofa-arm perch at first sight of Martha. ‘Miss Skipper, why do I always sense trouble when you’re about?’

Martha left me with the Trouble Maker who wasted no time. ‘*P.Lease* tell me,’ she said, ‘you did hide The Plan didn’t you, Goodchild? Gawd knows I’ll get it in the neck if Martha finds it. I’m on my “last chance” apparently. Meant to be on “Straight and Narrow” these days.’

‘Don’t you worry,’ I said, suspecting it unlikely that Martha ever expected Fran to find her way onto the Straight and Narrow Road of Recovery. ‘It’s safely hidden. We’ll give it to the Impala’s next victim.’

‘Agreed, not the first Goodchild and you won’t be the last, either. In it together, I mean, up to our necks, but nonetheless.’

‘Thanks Fran. Genuinely, The List, I mean, was really sweet of you.’

‘Me, sweet? You must be mad, Goodchild. But,’ she paused, her eyes briefly scanning my profile as though she were – and she was – summing up whether now was too inappropriate a moment to be mocking my madness. I tried to smile, but the effort was costly,

for Fran's response was a smile that threatened to unravel me just when Things Must Not Fall Apart.

Perhaps Fran sensed the danger, for she made a distracting show of rolling-up and clapping *Jumbo* into her palm. 'No, Goodchild, it's my scribe you should be thanking. Her handy work.'

'Yes, but it wasn't *all* Lily, was it?'

Fran's cheeks began twitching. 'Well, the *i.e.*'s might have been my additions.'

'I *might* have guessed that.'

'Thought you'd enjoy those. Besides, Lily *basically* stuck to the basics. Extra mile, Goodchild, you've got to go the extra mile today.'

There was a pause, soon replaced by the flutter of pages as Fran began flicking through *Jumbo*. 'Speaking of The Scribe, nearly forgot, promised her I'd give you this.' A tiny pastel-pink card slipped out of *Jumbo*. 'She's over in the Day Hospital, stuck in that deeply-depressing 'Depression Group' I got banned from. So she asked me to give it to you. Think she painted it this morning, *before* breakfast. Something about paint on bedsheets and cross housekeepers was all the gossip I got. Anyway, heaven knows why she trusted me with it, but it's all yours.'

Heaven only knows, Fran. But it was mine, dear Lily. I traced the letters you'd made of my name, coming to rest on the butterfly you'd drawn to dot the i. A little misshapen, perhaps, but it was water-coloured with pinks and purples that seeped your love into the page.

I looked up to see Safiya approaching. She must have just finished speaking to her two little boys on the phone, for her eyes were red, her nose a little swollen. Sensing potential jeopardy afoot – Fran, seemingly up and on the prowl with Tish stranded in her wheelchair – she quickened her step, braced her burdened back and lowered down to kneel in front of me. One then two, she took my hands, making them three then four with her own.

‘Is it time, love?’

I nodded and looked down at our hands, returning the squeeze she’d given our bundle.

‘Hey, no tears. Got to be strong. Just go in there and remember what you’re fighting for...’ She looked down, ‘to get home to that family of yours. And sooner the better hey?’

I squeezed her fingers and nodded. Needed to remember: *Home, Mummy, I want to go home.* Safiya’s fingers went limp and a tear strayed down her cheek. I untethered one of my hands and stemmed it with my thumb. She smiled and her fist regained its clasp of mine.

‘And for *Gawd’s* sake,’ Fran was back in Beady-Eyed Action, ‘Remember what we rehearsed. *Don’t* let me down, Goodchild. *Do* stick to The Plan and you’ll be fine. And, well... *if* Things Begin to Fall Apart, *Do* resort to the Last Resort. Which is?’

Silence.

‘Which is?’

‘Feminine charm.’

‘Marvellous,’ Fran was pleased, ‘Failing that, Goodchild, and Things Do *Actually* Fall Apart, the *good* news is we’ll *still* all be here to pick up your pieces.’

The office door opened and out Penny strode. ‘All set, darling?’

‘She’s all ready,’ Safiya said, ‘aren’t you love?’

I nodded. Fran clapped her hands and said, ‘And she’s going to Stick to The Plan.’

‘Well our work is done then, hey?’

The pitter-patter of wings fluttered in my tummy. I unfolded the card in my lap. Swallow.

Breathe. Dear Lily, how could you know? ⁶⁵

‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers
–
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the
words –
And never stops – at all

Without further delay, Penny wheeled me away, stopping my chair short of the Ward Round room so that we could whisper without being heard.

‘Right then madam,’ she said, wincing at her knees which creaked as she knelt onto the floor before me. ‘Are you absolutely sure you don’t want me to come in with you? You know you’re allowed someone in there to support you?’

I nodded.

‘I don’t need to say anything – I mean,’ she brushed down the folds of my dress, ‘I’m not *allowed* to say anything.’ She winked, knowing well that a non-speaking Penny was a non-Penny speciality.

I nodded again. And tried hard to keep nodding, for I did so dearly want her in there beside me. ‘I have to do this on my own Penny, show them that I *can* do this on my own.’

⁶⁵ Emily Dickenson, ‘Hope’, in *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickenson*, ed. by J. Brownell, (New York: Book Sales, 2016), p. 61.

‘I know darling,’ she said, making a heap of our hands. ‘But no one is expecting you to. This isn’t what this little thing-y,’ she nodded towards the shut door, ‘is about. Whatever the outcome, we’ll still be fighting together.’

‘I know,’ I said, though really, I was thinking that the eradication of my rights would turn the battle from one we fought alongside each other, into one we fought against each other.

‘Nuh-uh Mrs, no tears, stop that right now.’

‘Better?’

‘Tishy, if that’s your idea of a smile then you better try again. Look frightful you do. Did you actually brush your hair this morning?’ She tried to flatten the curls that continued to bounce, wild and unruly about my face.

‘Right, now look at me and try that smile again. Cos worst comes to worst in there, you flash them a smile: sweetly, saintly, whatever-ly. Just make sure you blooming smile.’

Now I truly smiled, for Penny’s palms were pressed together in a silent prayer for the miracle we both knew I needed.

‘How did you know? Fran’s Secret Last Resort?’

‘Tishy, darling, did you really think our Saint Francis came up with that one all by herself? Really, Smarty Pants, I expected more sense from you.’

‘You? Oh Penny, should’ve known it was you.’

‘Yes and mind you shhh-up about it. Lordy would Martha throw me onto the Inappropriate List if she knew I was making you girls use your feminine charm. But you see, a proper whooper of a smile, like that one you’re wearing now, will do you wonders in there. Trust me, darling.’ She squeezed my thigh. ‘Right, are we ready?’

‘Ready.’

‘Then may the Lordy be with us as we go.’

Much as I’d delight in saying Fran was wrong in her predictions, I cannot. The assessment was a trial. Quite the performance and one I’d have been all the more unprepared for without Fran’s lesson, valuable as it turned out to be.

When Penny parked me outside, I let her knock and open the door for me. I let her lead me inside, like the fragile thing they firmly believed me to be. I felt the halo hover above my head as I thanked Penny graciously for her assistance, smiled sweetly, saintly, whatever-ly and swallowed the wink that spoke of her approval at the ease with which I’d slipped into an embodiment of Fran’s craft.

When the door clicked closed, the room was silent. I took the empty seat, pulled my dress firmly beneath me and let my eyes fall to the floor. I sure didn’t like what I saw. The shoes pointing towards me were not scuffed, with laces cast astray as they invariably were when Dr Miller was sitting there. No half-munched packet of Oreos lay open at the foot of his chair, nor was there sign of his *mahoosive* mug of half-drunk-going-cold-and-filmy coffee. Just shiny shoes. Leather, big and black, with laces looped in bows of equal length. Double crossed and so meticulously polished that the light from between the blinds caught the shine with a sharpness that made me wince, until the Impala uncrossed his legs. Making ready.

He was getting steady. He tilted his weight towards me and outstretched his arm in an afterthought that fell short of me. He leant back, brushed his thigh with his palm and said,

‘Welcome Laetitia.’ As if he was truly delighted to be meeting me, he said, ‘welcome,’ again and I nodded, as if I was pleased too.

The introductions began. Three men and one woman made for a sombre panel of grey that was broken only by a flash of red. Lipstick? Yes, *lipstick*, glossy and wet, with a shine as garish as her patent heels. Yes, I mean, *high-heels* in a mental hospital. Was *she* mad? I wondered, making a mental note to ask Martha if high-heels should feature on the Inappropriate List.

Goodchild: DON'T Get Distracted

High Heels introduced herself as Dr Someone, the Second Opinion. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘how about that, Laetitia, does that sound ok?’

No. *That* did not sound ok. I was not ok and neither was she the female ally I’d faintly hoped she might prove. Her speech was rehearsed, her lips emphasising each word with a forced softness that seemed to reduce me from the age of nineteen to nine, in one fell swoop.

‘Laetitia?’ I nodded. ‘Great,’ she said, and our introduction was complete. She was best pleased and I was sure: this was not the woman to turn to should Things Begin to Fall Apart.

‘Now, Laetitia,’ Shiny Shoes cut to the chase: ‘You’re currently detained under Section 5.2 of the Mental Health Act. Is that clear?’

So blatantly clear and carefully enunciated that I wondered whether he was not as confused as High Heels, thinking me, not mad, but deaf. Or just Plain Stupid.

‘What that means is that your Responsible Clinician – your psychiatrist,’ he paused and stole a glance at me, as though to gauge whether the simplification of his language was enough to get through to me – The Simpleton. ‘I mean,’ he meant, ‘Dr Miller. He believes it might be in your *best interests* to be held under Section 3. To stabilise your treatment, you know?’

He waited, I nodded.

‘Excellent. Well, I assure you it’s absolutely nothing to worry about. *Nothing* at all.’

As If

Shiny Shoes could Think Again if he believed this casual dismissal could allay the *all* of my worries. My fingers began to pull at the hem of my dress, unpicking a thread and teasing it loose. It gave as I tugged, lengthening as the stitch ran along the underside of my hem. I anchored it in a coil around my forefinger and pulled tighter. As tight as taut could go.

‘...Laetitia?’

I tuned in. Too late, for Shiny Shoes was looking at me, directly and expectant. Yet he was unlikely to garner an answer for I’d missed this, his very first question. My pinkening finger swelled. A bulbous balloon formed at the tip as I pulled tighter. And tighter.

‘Laetitia, if you could try and...’

Focus Goodchild, for God’s sake don’t do your vacant zone-out thing.

I released the thread. The coil loosened. The blood rushed. The balloon deflated as the thread unravelled in a spin of relief until I brushed it away and gave Shiny Shoes all I had to hand:

‘Umm...’

‘Hmm,’ Shiny Shoes returned my Umm with a Hmm, his thick eyebrows becoming a bushy frown that rose only as he looked left then right, to the members of his jury. Checking they *were* tuned in and noting Patient’s inability to engage?

Yes. There was a consensus of solemn, knowing nods. Their expectations fulfilled. A neat tick was placed into box Number One on the Sectioning Check-List:

Engagement	• Does Patient partake in the discussion regarding his/her treatment?	Yes/No
	• Does Patient show signs of impaired thinking?	Yes/No
	• Is Patient responsive to questioning? - If 'Yes', are those responses delayed?	Yes/No

'I asked,' Shiny Shoes asked *again*, 'how do you feel about your current treatment?' And there it was, Fran. The dilemma of your *differentiation*. You'd made it sound so simple. For every possible question, you had ready an answer I lacked. And, in that moment, I realised every question Shiny Shoes posed would contain so many variations that I did not know how to give a single answer. How I felt, for instance, was entirely different to how I *ought* to feel. That is, how *he* wanted me to be feeling.

Prioritise Goodchild: Stick to what the Impala wants to hear.

But what was more important, Fran? To stick to The Plan and comply with his expectations or speak my plain, unvarnished truth? Tell him that I was scared. *So frightfully afraid of this Voice that speaks inside my head. For it will not be silenced, it will not be stopped and I have neither the strength nor courage left to endure it.*

Whatever you do in there, Goodchild, DON'T Lose The Plot.

Not just The Plot, Fran, I'd lost The Point. With dismay, my eyes shrank away from his Shiny Shoes to my own, shoes. *No shoes*. Oh Fran, how could I have forgotten my shoes?

DO: Dress to Impress. i.e. Less of a patient, more of a person.

NB Wear Shoes.

I closed my eyes and prayed to Penny's Lordy, knowing well that I was doing badly. Shiny Shoes looked left to High Heels and, taking final umbrage over my failure to reply, cast his

eye over the rest of the jury. I felt his eyebrows rise with his chest, his nostrils flaring as he re-crossed his legs. Final chance to speak?

No. This patient still had nothing. Fine, there was a flourish of his fountain pen as he pressed it to his papers, his levitating shiny-shoe stilling as he wrote against his crossed thigh. He paused, an eye rose. Checking, just checking Patient was not trying to sneak a peek at his notes?

No. This patient did not need to see to know the kind of judgment being written:

Patient presents as a distracted young girl. Unkempt with small regard for her appearance. Makes no eye contact, unwilling or unable to engage with basic questions put to her by the panel, even when pressed. Despondent in outlook, anxious. Delayed responses. Lacks clarity. Lacks confidence. Lacks shoes.

I couldn't tell you how long the inquisition continued. Defeat is often drawn out and I was fighting what my father would call a Losing Battle. They had the evidence. I had but my word and few at that, for Fran's Art of Articulation failed to materialise. Besides, Shiny Shoes seemed to have chosen his destination and steered his questions towards it. He journeyed us through the nursing reports, covering flying potatoes, jam-crusting hair, Cornflake Crises and milk-stained sofas. Actions are known to speak louder than words and thus I was offered little opportunity to defend myself – his allusions to my many misdemeanours were evidence enough to persuade the jury of his verdict. And a forgone conclusion it seemed, as inevitable as it was unavoidable. This charade was, perhaps, little more than a formal way of ticking the Moral Medicine Box – the NICE Guidelines which suggest that, where possible, the patient should be made respectfully aware of the process through which they come to be detained under the Mental Health Act.⁶⁶ And 'detention' is the word used and it was punishment Shiny Shoes implied I needed. Guilty, as I was, of being, of breathing, breathing, why am I still breathing?

⁶⁶ Under '1.4 Assessment of Mental Capacity', NICE Guidelines state that, 'The assessor should be clear about: How to introduce the assessment and conduct it in a way that is respectful, collaborative, non-judgemental and preserves the person's dignity.' (1.4.12) NICE Guideline 108, (October 2018) <www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng108/chapter/recommendations#assessment-of-mental-capacity> [accessed June 2019].

‘Do you recognise,’ he asked, making no effort to conceal the fact that he suspected I did not, ‘that this kind of behaviour is *anorexic*?’ That kind of cheating, deceit and disregard of rules was a sign of the illness’s strength and – yes, you guessed it – ‘it’s highly *inappropriate* to behave in that way?’

Yes, I nodded, now he’d so kindly highlighted my faults, I could *suddenly* see the error of my ways. And I would, I was *sure*, right my anorexic wrongs from here on. If only he’d give me the chance to prove it. ‘Prove it to *myself*,’ I was careful to specify, lest he should consider it wrong for me to want to vindicate his attempts to retain possession of my rights.

‘Good,’ he said, though his scepticism resurfaced as he lifted the top page of his notes to read, in lasting remonstrance that, ‘I quote, “mashing new potatoes in her fists and throwing them on the ground” is really, *really* inappropriate.’

We moved on.

‘Now Laetitia, I wonder if you could tell me how you view your body?’ Shiny Shoes next asked. And I gasped, inwardly of course, for his change of tack was as sudden as it was strange. I blinked, incredulous. He went on, unfazed, ‘I mean, when you look in the mirror every day, do you see someone who is underweight, or...’

I blinked. And blinked, resisting every urge to tell him:

- a) There are NO mirrors in this hospital, so looking at my reflection is thankfully OUT of the question. Therefore:
- b) I have not seen my reflection for four months and previous to that barely, if at all, given that I am NOT a Mirror Girl. And:
- c) Really? Since 1873, when Sir William Gull first reported a case of anorexia, the illness has been subject to such intense research and, nearly 150 years later, *this* is the best Shiny Shoes can come up with: reducing it – me – to a general type of

hysterical woman who suffers nothing more than a perverse aversion to being fat?⁶⁷

Really? Was this font of anorexic knowledge about to strip me of my rights on the basis, not of expertise, but base conjectures? Gross generalisations through which he could tick off his check-list? Because yes, with one hell of a smack, we'd hit his final box:

Does Patient demonstrate awareness of his/her disorder?	Yes/No
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Capacity

Does Patient have a clear understanding of the associated physical risks of their disorder?	Yes/No
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'I mean, when you look in the mirror, do you see a woman who is thin? Or... or...?' Or what? *Fat?* I blinked, swallowing the need to tell this man that fatness was so far down my Reasons to Panic that it was amusing he should find it so hard to utter. What could a mirror possibly reflect about my capacity to recognise the disorder for the hideous, insidious monster that it is?

'Laetitia?'

Goodchild: Do (for Gawd's sake) SPEAK.

'Umm, I guess...,' I said, 'Thing is, we don't actually have any mirrors in this place. But, I mean, you're right...obviously...when I *do* look in the mirror I find it hard to see that I'm underweight. I feel the opposite. Huge. But, then, I know that's *just* the eating disorder talking. That it's irrational.'

'Good, good. I'm pleased you recognise this.'

⁶⁷ For more on the existence of these kind of misconceptions within clinical environments see, Andrée Dignon, *All of Me: A Fuller Picture of Anorexia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007). Dignon deconstructs the 'anorexic stereotype' with a view to broadening our perspective. The illness, Dignon argues, affects a wider demographic than is commonly thought, as stated in her introduction: 'I argue that medicine has constructed a "stereotype" of the anorexic, as [female], young, bright and middle class. According to this stereotype, this bright affluent youngster becomes anorexic because she is afraid of fatness and afraid to grow up.' (p. 11.)

Yet so far from good did it feel to comply with his expectations of me that my eyes narrowed in spite of myself. Defiance flamed in my cheeks, rising closer to my lips as Shiny Shoes licked his lips. Satisfied by my surrender, he smoothed over a crease gathering at the knee of his pressed trousers and said, ‘Tell me, Laetitia, what exactly is it that you want?’

What a question. I was stunned. What end was there to that question? *Home, Mummy, I want to go home.* I want to wake up to the sound of you sipping your coffee in the garden, with all three spaniels rolling about your ankles, sneezing as they pull the grass loose. I want to hear my father sigh as he hovers in the open doorway, *Sabina, will you get Elba OUT of the flowerbed. My roses.*

What roses? will be my mother’s reply, as she smiles in the knowledge that gardening never will come naturally to either of them. But neither will Dog Control and so this has become their morning routine. To this simplicity, I want to awaken. I want to *want* to open the curtains, with longing that is not blighted by the dread that I must endure another day.

‘Laetitia?’

‘I just want to go home.’

Hot tears sprung to my eyes. The sharp edges of his Shiny Shoes blurred. I blinked and blinked, knowing that should these tears spill over, my defence would too collapse, ‘No,’ I said, ‘I *need* to go home.’

Perhaps Shiny Shoes realised he’d stumbled upon the object that drove me on. For he used it as the springboard to launch his next assault, assuring me he understood just how hard it must be. But *how*, I wondered, could he know, when he did not know what it was like to have a family at home awaiting your return. To hear your brother’s voice wobble at the end of the phone-line as he pleads with his big sister to keep fighting. To hold on and come home, *Tish, we just want you back with us.*

‘That’s *all* we want, Laetitia. And it really *is* that simple: we’re here to make sure you go home as soon as possible, you see?’

Yes, I saw, how quickly Simple would encounter Trouble. Sure enough, ‘The *trouble* is that Dr Miller feels,’ he coughed, ‘*we* feel that things have reached a stage where intervention is necessary in order to help you get to that place where you’re safe enough to return home. The section would be... a way of safeguarding you... And, on the basis of the evidence submitted to us – your non-compliance, your resistance to treatment, to your Meal Plan. Physically, these black-outs, your trips to A&E... Need I go on?’

I shook my head. He went on, ‘No. It’s not sustainable, for anyone. Least of all you. And aside from that, your mood, it’s highly problematic. Your self-harm, suicidality. It’s no good, is it?’

I shrugged.

‘But I understand you have a good relationship with Dr Miller?’

I froze.

‘And you *trust* Dr Miller, I assume?’

He waited. I withheld, digging my thumbnail into the palm of my hand, knowing that this trust – so carefully fostered, so tirelessly tried – was about to be abused, mis-used to serve against me.

‘So on that same basis I’m hoping that you will also trust that our decision will be in your best interests. You understand that, don’t you?’

Silence.

‘Good, I think that was a nod. We mean you no harm, Laetitia, do we?’

‘No.’ High Heels was invited into the frame. Her shoulders rose, her legs uncrossed, the soles of her shoes swinging slightly as she leant back into her heels. ‘We only want what’s *best* for you so that *one day* you can go back home.’

One day. *Some* day.

Just not today.

Too much. Too vague. That day was too far away that I closed my eyes, breathed in, breathed out and spoke, Out Loud and in the Air: 'I don't want to be sectioned.'

'Oh, umm... err... sorry, that wasn't really the question.'

No

But

Tough

'I just don't think sectioning me will help.'

'Um, if you would just wait, Laetitia, I wasn't quite finished.'

No

But

Tough

'Please, just let me speak. I don't have your answers. I'm no good with mirrors. They're not *me*. My body is *just* my body.' *A vessel only for my mental pain*. 'But...'

'No, perhaps so, but Laetitia...'

No

But

Tough

Enough is *Enough*

'You don't actually understand what it's like. *To wake each morning to a nightmare you cannot escape*. You can't know how hard it is. *For your mind to be ruled by an unruly Voice that wants only to destroy you*. To keep fighting. *Day on day. Night after night with no*

end in sight. The energy. The pain. How much it hurts. To be wrenched from your family. The pain.’ The pressure. The pain.

‘Laetitia, we understand.’

‘But how? Can you *possibly* know what it’s like to be like this?’

Silence.

‘To be trapped in here... no, you don’t know – I mean, trapped in *here*.’ My fingers tapped my forehead, sliding across the blotches that dampened my skin. I rubbed my eyes and the wetness melded together as I gathered a breath and wiped my hand over my dress. Scrunching the fabric in my fist, I let it go only as I broke the silence with a voice that was quieter. ‘But no, I know it’s not as simple as that. Homesickness is no cure. *Anorexia is far crueller than that*. Wanting recovery for my family doesn’t make the motions any easier to carry out. But wanting is something. It’s all I have and I want to use it. I want to get “better”. *To be better*. I want to find a way forwards.’ *Home, Mummy, I want to come home.*

‘But Laetitia, you just said it yourself: Unfortunately, “wanting” isn’t enough.’

No

But

‘Isn’t it a start? A basis? *The only foundation*. What good will the force of your section do? Its threat, its pressure? *My pain*. I’m just asking you, *I am begging you*, to let me try. Please, just give me a chance. *To make the desperation of my will my founding step*. I can do it. *I can*. I just need you to believe *for me* that I can do it too.’

He did not answer. I kept my eyes closed. But if I was resigned, Shiny Shoes seemed impressed. I believe he believed in the integrity of my speech – that I’d had enough and that *that* could be spark enough to turn me from guilty assailant into competent individual. A young woman who knew well that the odds were stacked heavily against her, that anorexia was riddled through her, but a woman who nevertheless remained determined to fight her way back home.

And so the assessment moved from the onerous talk of feelings onto practicalities. The transition enabled me to strengthen my voice and conjure my inner Fran, just in time for the arrival of the tube.

‘Part of the reason we’re here is that Dr Miller feels it might be time to use *other* forms of treatment. The nasogastric tube, for instance. Have you heard of it before?’

DO: Allow him his Sense of Superiority when contradiction will serve you NO obvious purpose

I shrugged.

‘No? Of course not. None of the other patients have been tube-fed?’

I shook my head.

‘No, well, it’s somewhat unusual. Somewhat invasive, so we prefer to avoid it. But in some cases, tube feeding is necessary. Last resort, short term of course. It’s not intended to replace oral intake, rather to encourage it. A helping hand, if you like?’

I did not.

‘Now, it’s a little tube which passes through your nose and into your stomach. Just a *little* thing, ok? It shouldn’t hurt. Well, a *little* uncomfortable *perhaps*...,’ he paused. I shuddered, he coughed, discomfited, perhaps, by his expectation of my pain. ‘So tell me, Laetitia, how would you *feel* about being tube fed?’

I felt that this shiny-shoed man had work to do before he earned the right to a share of my feelings. But the moment had come to demonstrate my *willingness to change*. Yes, it was time to play my trump card and use the tube to my advantage.

‘Hang on, Laetitia,’ Shiny Shoes said, soon after I’d finished speaking, evidently confused by my apparent turnaround. Planting both feet on the floor, he sat forwards and said, ‘Let me just clarify this, Laetitia, you *want* to consent to being tube-fed?’

He tilted his head towards High Heels. Had he misheard? Could this patient, who had RESISTANCE written so brazenly across her forehead, truly be the same, seemingly sane and sensible young woman sitting opposite him now?

‘Yes,’ I thought best to confirm. ‘I really think it could help. Be a spur. A safety net, that’s what Dr Miller called it. Like, for it to be there, just in case.’

‘Well, I have to say I am...’ Shiny Shoes was, ‘impressed. You know, it’s no failure to need help Laetitia. We encourage it.’

‘Yes, but,’ here began the bargaining, ‘I’d prefer to try the tube without being sectioned.’

‘What, you mean, to be *electively* tube fed?’

‘Yes, I guess. I just want to feel like I’m not giving up. If I’ve chosen to accept the tube, then it’s like I’m *taking* control. You know [he still did not], not *losing* control.’

Oh I had done well. I’d positively dazzled Shiny Shoes with my insight – my capacity – mastered, as I had, the art of convincing the jury that the tube would be better used with my consent. Without it, resistance would likely be encountered and I pressed my point with such conviction that it sounded, almost, reasonable.

So Fran was right. The assessment was about negotiation and I survived relatively unscathed only because I was willing to barter. I offered my cooperation and in return their verdict was conditional: I was offered a trial basis. The tube would be electively passed, but I’d remain an ‘informal’ patient, though Shiny Shoes was clear: should I show the slightest resistance, this deal would be revoked with immediate and far more lasting penal effects.

Call it blackmail if you will. Certainly, my compliance came readier given the corner I was backed into. But there was integrity to my speech. There was sincerity to my actions. And there was relief in the dizziness I felt, walking out of that room, believing myself one step closer to the home of my goal.

‘So, America is off the cards then?’ This was Fran’s version of commiseration. Seeing me approach, she’d bounced down the corridor like Tigger on a pogo-stick.

‘Oh Miss Skipper, you’ll be the end of me. America is the last thing on anyone’s mind right now. But no,’ Penny said, ‘you’ll be pleased to hear your lesson last night worked its magic for this one. She’s not been sectioned, have you darling?’

‘No.’

‘What was that?’ Fran said, ‘Speak up, Goodchild, what do you mean, *no*?’

‘No,’ Penny said, smiling, ‘means no.’

‘*No*?’ Fran’s beady-eyes swelled, her jaw dropped. ‘Goodchild, what can I say? This, not even *I* could have predicted. I am...’

Astonished?

Bewildered?

Confused?

‘Delighted. Goodchild, I am *actually* really pleased for you.’

But was it good news? I found myself wondering late into the night, my answer swinging from yes to no. Yes, it *was* good news, I told myself, again and again, drawing my eyes back shut for the contrary thoughts kept throwing them open. I’d done enough to get through the day without being sectioned and that’s all that mattered, wasn’t it?

If only I could have warned myself. *If only* I could have seen that my victory was nothing more than defeat in disguise. But I did not. I closed my eyes to the truth and contented myself

by curling my knees beneath me and pulling the blanket over me. Butterflies flickered in the pit of my tummy, so it was you I thought of, Mummy, Daddy, Tatiana, Hugo and my Joss. As if the repetition could make the sentiment true, I told myself, over and over again, that I was one step closer to returning home to you.

If only, If only

Things did not, quite, work out like that.

‘Tish?’

Belinda seems nervous. She is plaiting the frayed chords of her scarf as she sits opposite me, in Room Two, where we’ve been enclosed together for the past few hours. In the few months since the assessment, *that* train has passed and with it, decisions have been upturned. The curtains are now closed, though outside, Belinda assures me, the sun is gently sinking and the skyline is lit with a rainbow of pinks which is well worthy of us sneaking a peek?

No. Belinda will push no further. She settles for the bedside lamp and blinks as her eyes adjust to the gentle glow it gives the room. It isn’t bright enough to take away the gloom and seems only to add to the rare and eerie quiet in which the ward rests this afternoon. There is no one about. The other patients have traipsed reluctantly down to the Supervision Room to have their snacks. Tubes and trains have separated us and I miss them.

‘Tish?’

Belinda runs her fingers through her dark brown, greying hair. She reaches across and nudges my knee, drawing my eyes to hers. Her brows furrow and her lips part to release a sigh. My family are expected and we are running out of time before they are due to arrive. Dropping my eyes, Belinda glances towards the plastic beaker which sits on the slab of table dividing

us. Hugging her knitted cardigan closer around her shoulders, she uncrosses her knees, edges forwards and tilts the cup towards her: *How much have I drunk?* Two sips? Three? And even those were just pretend.

Belinda withdraws her hand, shuffles back and tries anew. ‘Come on Tish, remember what Martha said: You can see your family *after* you’ve finished your snack.’

Remember, Remember

How could I forget?

Charge-Nurse Martha walking into the room an hour ago, armed with a couple of plastic cups and a bottle of Ensure. She was not there to feed me, only to deliver Belinda with the goods to carry out the task:

‘It’s banana flavour Tish, that ok?’ Martha asks, as though it *not* being ok is a viable option. ‘I checked both Pharmacy fridges but we’ve run out of vanilla. I’ve ordered some, should come in tomorrow.’ She shakes the bottle and twists the lid. It snatches a snappy sound as the plastic seal breaks. The smell of banana wafts through the room. It is artificial, slick and so sickly sweet that Tish pales, her tummy turning as queasy as Belinda looks uneasy. Her lips have curled and her nostrils are flaring as she holds onto her breath.

Martha is unmoved. She downs the rest of her tools – a straw too narrow for the syrupy substance and three cups. The first is the flimsy disposable-cup (which all patients drink from). The second is a replica of the first (for just in case) and the third is a smaller translucent beaker with measurements running up one side. On this, Tish and Martha are agreed:

Martha: Tish will be having one-hundred millilitres and not one drop *less*.

Tish: Will be having one-hundred millilitres and not one drop *more*.

Martha pulls at her black skirt as she squats down to the floor. She props herself onto one knee, steeling herself in steady proposal: Are you Ready? The Pour is about to begin. Yes, Martha’s gaze swings towards Tish, who flings herself off the bed and onto the floor. Not

likely to miss this, The Pour, Tish must make absolutely sure that Martha measures one-hundred millilitres and not one drop more.

Martha has raised the bottle and is hovering it above the cup while she waits for Tish to fold herself onto the scratchy carpet. Levelling her head against the table, Tish presses her nose against the cold surface. It jigs. It jogs and her head jolts back, willing the table to settle before Martha begins The Pour. But the liquid is too thick, it is congealed together and only oozes out slowly. Tish knows this trickle is but a trick – the cup *will* fill with ease and yes, a plume of yellow goo strikes the centre and spreads to the edges, climbing far too quickly.

The Pour is paused. Lungs expand, deflate slowly. Martha reduces the Threat Level by lowering the bottle and only then does Tish dare to meet her eyes, though she knows better than to relax. The Pour has but begun. There will be more and the mere thought of The More is enough to close Tish's eyes. Her head rolls back, then flips forwards: Bash against the table.

First bash is soft: Thud.

Second is harder: Thump.

Third is sharp: Thwack. *Hell* of a thwack.

Thwack has the intended effect: Tish is hurt and Martha's hand swings the bottle swiftly up and Out-of-Harm's-Way. The Harm is Tish, who has by now found rhythm and is practicing a rendition of bingo-bongo drums with her forehead against the table:

Thud-Thump-Thwack *THWACK*

Thud-Thump-Thwack *THWACK*

Tish is buying time. The Voice is biding time and Martha is not happy to be wasting time.

'Stop that, Tish,' Martha says, 'It's inappropriate to bang your head like that whilst I'm trying to measure this out for you.'

Tish ceases to bang her head. For a split second, she wonders (with mild amusement) under what conditions Martha would deem head-drumming to be an appropriate exercise.

Thud-Thump-Thwack. Extra *hell-of-a-THWACK*

Tish lets Martha think the final thwack is sheer obstinacy. Pure protest. And Martha readily believes it, pursing her lips in a pout that says, *really-this-is-just-getting-silly, Tish.*

But really, Martha is wrong. It was not obstinacy, it was the Voice. It is flaming furious with the dangerous lapse Tish allowed herself: humour sparks dialogue – dialogue invites intimacy and the Voice forbids intimacy of *any* kind, especially at a time when it needs Martha and Tish to stay the archest of enemies.

And besides, Ensure is *not* a Laughing Matter. Ensure ensures nourishment is given to Tish and the Voice is not amused to find Tish forgetting that she deserves *nothing* of the sort. No matter, she has been reminded, her jawline is now contracting and her eyes have closed. She is willing the Voice to let her Keep Calm and Carry On. For a swarm of butterflies has taken flight in her tummy. A storm is brewing. Their wings are beating against the lining of her stomach. They need to flee. They *must* be free. But where can they go? How can they escape? The heat is pressing them closer together and so they fly faster. A cluster. A mass, their beating has risen to a battering that rams against her chest.

Thud-Thump-Thwack *THWACK*

Tish remembers to breathe. She stills her nose against the table and opens her eyes to look at the cup. Nestling her face closer, she thinks, takes her chances and nudges the table, hoping it will make the liquid clamber up the cup *without* the need for one drop more.

Martha is displeased. Her pencilled eyebrows rise. Tut, she tuts as creases paint disapproval across her forehead. Less Than Impressed, this trick has been tried before. And, ‘Tish,’ she says, ‘let’s not do this again. Was boring last time. Unlikely to be fun this time.’ She waits for the table to still, the syrup to settle and then resumes The Pour.

Tish can’t watch anymore. She clamps her eyes shut and tries not to sneak a peek. But with this cowardice, the Voice is not best pleased. Not just see, Tish must *oversee* The Pour.

Check, she must make absolutely sure that she is not being duped by Martha into having so much as one drop more.

*How dare you look away?
How could you be so disgusting?*

The Voice has Lost It with Tish and Tish has just plain Lost It. She plugs her fingers into her ears, but the wailing comes from within and the realisation contorts Tish's features into wrinkles of distress – revulsion of herself so putrid as to propel her eyes back open. They will remain wide now, in pure abeyance to the Voice. Its conviction has proved effective and Tish is now convinced that her eyes are a more accurate measurement of millilitres than those etched onto the edges of that measuring beaker. Science lies, you see, that beaker is part and parcel of Martha's Conspiracy. Tish's eyes, however, are definitely *not*.

When Tish opens her eyes she is surprised to find that Martha has paused The Pour. Has she called time? Enough being enough? Un-bleeding-likely, Tish is thinking, daring not to breathe so much as a whiff of relief. Martha's hand quivers and sags, she lowers the bottle and Tish seeks her eyes, intending only a glance. But Martha is quick. She catches and keeps Tish's gaze with a nod that is signal enough: The More of her pour is about to begin.

Tish lurches towards the cup, but Martha is quick. She beats Tish to it, bats her hand away and says, 'Tish, that's *enough*.'

Martha is right. Tish has had *more* than enough and so she is sure: Martha's Conspiracy is to *Over-pour* – yes, this is a *deliberate* attempt to torture Tish. But Tish thinks Martha can Think Again if she thinks that kind of wanton sabotage will fool her.

A fresh whimper from Tish sets Martha off counting, 'Ninety-two mills...(Drip) Ninety-three...(Drip) Tish, I make that (Drip) ninety-four... (Drop)'

Tish claps a hand to her forehead. Is Martha Barking Mad? Or just Plain Evil? Likely the latter, and yes, 'Let's see,' Martha says. She pauses, she sighs, she says, 'I make that...ninety-eight?'

No. Tish makes that One-Hundred. No, Tish gulps, she makes that *more* than one hundred. Tish is done – like *over*-done and burning fast.

‘Umm, shall I take over from here, Martha?’

We jump. We blink. We’d forgotten Belinda was there. She shuffles her chair out from behind Martha’s bottom which wiggles as she turns and says, ‘Right, yes. Ok.’ But before upping herself out the way, Martha’s body sways, the bottle swings with her hand still poised above the cup so that the spare drops that drip, drop *into* the cup.

Right.

‘I saw that.’

‘Saw what, Tish?’

‘Do I look stupid?’

‘No-one is accusing you of being stupid, Tish.’

‘It was at one-hundred and you dropped *more* in. You did it on purpose.’

Does Martha smirk? The Voice says a Big-Fat Yes – Martha is Tri-*bloody*-umphant. She feigns a sigh, deigns her audience with a shrug and says, ‘It’s *exactly* right, Tish, you watched me pour it.’

‘Yes, I watched you *over*-pour it. I’m not blind.’

‘And neither am I, Tish. And I’m not in the mood to mess about with your games today. We haven’t got time – your family are coming to visit, aren’t they?’

Tish bites her tongue, steels her lips and narrows her eyes in a glare she gives to Martha. Tish has learnt better than to argue, but she hates Martha’s talk of games. Does it look like she’s

having fun? She tries to breathe, but knows she's caught. The rules to Martha's game are clear:

Drink *all* of that or you'll be seeing none of your family.

'Belinda,' Martha next says, 'her family are on their way. Should be here by half-four.' She glances at her watch, 'so that gives *her*,' Martha turns to Tish, '*you*, forty-five minutes to finish your Ensure.'

Tish looks down. Her nose prickles as tears tickle in her eyes. 'Now, Tish, I've told Belinda,' Martha says, as if they've spoken in advance, 'that your family can sit with you during your supervision. But only *after* you've finished your snack. Understood?'

'Yup.' Belinda understood, not *after*, Martha meant *only if* Tish finishes her snack.

If Only. If Only.

'Tish, got it?'

Tish has got it, though it is not her head that nods, but her jaw that drops as if to speak. But Martha is quick. 'No buts Tish, no arguments. You know the rules.'

Tish frowns. Belinda sighs. Martha nods, smiles, turns and walks away.

Belinda touches my hand. It's an hour later and her fingers close into a clench of my fist as she asks me to let go. The tension, let it out. The anger, must come out. *It will do us no good, Tish. We need to be working together to fight this. Hey?*

Belinda releases my hand and I feel cold. Goosebumps pimple up my arms and my eyes open, appealing to hers as I say, 'I can't Belinda.'

Her cheeks colour and her eyes swell in receipt of mine. She seems relieved to hear my voice. For silence quite defeats her, but words she can work with – a voice she can seek to embolden with the strength of her own. And so she says, ‘Oh Tish, you *can*. It’s not *too* much, it’s exactly right. I promise.’ She tilts the cup towards her, as though some miracle may have sucked up the fluid for me.

Nope. She returns her fingers to her hair. Drawing it back from her shoulders, she twists it behind her neck in a ponytail that only uncoils as she releases it. She tucks a wisp back behind her ear and tries again, ‘I know how strong you are, Tish. Right little madam, headstrong enough to fight the lot of us put together. But it’s time to channel that strength against the enemy, isn’t it, Tish? The *real* enemy.’

No Stop

‘Come on, Tish, try one sip, for me. You can, I just so *know* you can.’

No Please

Stop

I begin to rock, back and forth, the mmm of my hmmm beginning. I need Belinda to *stop* telling me I can, because, ‘No, Belinda, I can’t. I just *can’t*.’ My voice grows shriller with every *can’t* Belinda continues to reject by defiantly shaking her head. ‘*Please*, Belinda, you’re just *not* listening, I CAN’T.’

‘I hear you, I do, but I need you to hear *me* too, Tish. You need to listen to *my* voice, believing in you and telling you that you can.’

‘No, please, don’t say that, Belinda.’ *The Pressure*. The thought of disappointing this woman is too much to bear that I shrink away and jam my fingers into my ears. But *nothing*, no soft-soothing voices, no smothering hands, sympathetic squeezes nor strength of mine will ever silence the Voice now raging within.

My breath heavies. It quickens, it breaks – a sure fine sign that things aren't fine and so Belinda wrestles my hands away from my ears. She cuffs my wrists until she feels the tension ease and the sharpness of my breath begin to emulate the rhythm of her own.

Like this, our fight stills. Silence fills the room and is broken only by the distant tones of my family outside, crunching their way across the pebbled courtyard.

*Please
Please let me see them.*

'Oh Tish, please don't go looking at me like that. You know I can't.'

'But *I* can't, Belinda, I can't not see them.'

'I know, sweetheart. That's why I *need* you to be brave and drink this, Tish. They're out there, waiting. Can't wait to see you, can they?'

Does she think I don't know? How eager and expectantly they are depending on me? Does she think I haven't thought of *the* thought of my mother's glowing face clouding over in the dark knowledge of her daughter's defeat? The disappointment. *The pressure. The pain.*

'Apart from the fact that your body needs this Tish, Martha would actually kill me.'

*Kill me
This is killing me*

My fingers creep up my sleeve. They tremble as they fumble around the edges of the dressing lying beneath. Looking, they are searching for a loose corner of plaster, but they find none. The gauze has stuck to the broken skin and blood and goo is the glue that has gone dry. But I *need* it off me.

NOW

The urge for pain is sudden and so urgent that I am quick to pick and pick. *The pressure.* I dig and dig deeper until the scab unsticks, the pain releases and wetness fills the wound so that my fingers no longer pick, they glide.

They slide, slippery still as nails sink into skin. I scratch and scratch until the patch detaches. The air stings and the wound burns, so sharply that my head rolls and my body swoons in a spiral of dizziness that forces my eyes shut.

But it is not over. I am not done. This pain must *not* stop and yet it is easing. The pain is ebbing. It dulls, it dims, but this burn must not thaw. I must make it raw and so I claw harder, faster, deeper, sucking in a sharp breath that is held. I *must* hold on. I *must* go on but how? *The pressure. The pain.* Someone tell me how to carry on?

‘Make it stop, Belinda, *please*. Don’t make me miss them. Please, I *can’t* not see them.’

The plaster is loose now. Belinda is close now. She whispers some words. One is Tish. ‘Tish, please stop, don’t do this. Tish, let go. Hey,’ she heys me, ‘hold me instead. My hand,’ she says, ‘here, can you see it?’

No, I can’t. My eyes are shut, but her fingers wriggle. Her wrist jiggles. ‘Here,’ she says, ‘can you feel my hand?’

Feel it? Yes, I do, if that’s you, Belinda, is that you?

‘Yes,’ she says, she has got me. ‘Darling, I’ve got you.’

And she has. Her hands anchor mine as she says, ‘Tish, I won’t let you go, you hear me?’ Yes, I nod, yes, I hear you. ‘Good,’ she says, ‘I need you to do just one thing, Tish, can you let that go?’

My lips twitch, my fingers are not yet done. But neither is Belinda. Like feelers her fingers sneak between my rigid own. ‘Let go,’ she says some more. ‘Yes, that’s right,’ she feels my fingers loosen. ‘Well done, Tish.’

And yes, the deed *is* done, the pain is out. And so my soiled fingers slip out from my sleeve. They leave a trail of blood as Belinda pulls them onto her lap where they lay, warmed by her palm. Clinging with one hand, she nestles her other under my chin. She nudges until my face yields and rises. I open my eyes and squint. The light is bright and I take time to make sense of Belinda's face in front of my own and waiting still.

'Tish,' she says, 'it's me, Belinda, can you see me?'

Yes, I nod. I do and I am so relieved to recognise her that my eyes stray across her face. As if they have never seen this familiar person before. She draws a breath so deep that I do too. And, with this air, I wander afresh, bewildered to find in her face a reflection of my pain. But Belinda holds onto my eyes and so I see her. I see her grief in the dark shadows that burden the bags beneath her eyes. I spy her longing and I share her need to feel the love of those too distant for the remembrance of them to offer true comfort.

But if my loved ones are outside, waiting to come in here, Belinda's are not. I know her husband is not long lost to a riddle of cancer which has left this woman a widow – a mother of twins, no older than I, who feel the loss as keenly as she. If she hasn't the words to explain the injustice, her pain is plain. It swims before me in the glossy wetness welling beneath her eyes. As if she knows her confession, her nose twitches, but she does not retreat. She swallows and allows my hand to creep across and covers hers. I squeeze and her fingers relax as I say, 'Ok.'

'Ok?' she sniffs and smiles a little.

'Ok,' I say, releasing her hand and taking the cup. My sip is slight, yet the smile it garners is a reward the Voice could never reap. It will always be an imposter, loud and aggressive in its relentless pursuit to shape and shame the person that I am. But it will never be humane and Belinda's empathy wins me to her. She takes the cup from me, puts it down, pushes the table aside and waits for me to lift my feet from the floor so she can pull my chair closer to hers. That's when I break. My body folds and my head falls into Belinda's lap until she scoops it up and lays it against her shoulder.

My muscles stiffen, resisting her embrace. But my lungs soon fill with a need to howl, so great that my palm smothers across my mouth. My family must not know and so Belinda's cardigan stifles the sound of my sobs while she paints my palms with circles that are calming. *Stroke on stroke*, she rubs my sobs away and I find the breath to say, 'Mummy,' I say louder, 'Belinda, please just give me back to my mummy.'

'Knock, knock,' a voice says in beat with two light knocks. I draw away from Belinda and sit up in time to see Martha's round face appear in the doorway. She squints towards the cup, trying to make out the line of the liquid. Still full of Ensure? Yes, Martha tries not to look displeased and I wonder why she is so defiantly blocking the doorway.

'Ok,' she says, with an uncertain smile, 'Well your family have arrived, Tish. They're...um... waiting.' She glances at Belinda, 'So how are we doing?'

Belinda slides her arm hastily across the table where she leaves it adrift. The cup and its contents are now firmly beyond the reach of Martha's prying eyes and so Belinda says, 'Well, we're getting there, aren't we Tish?'

I nod. Martha is Less Than Convinced, but, 'Great,' she says, 'well done, Tish.'

Great? What trick is this? I look at Belinda, but she looks down. The door creaks and Martha moves her arm to reveal The Problem – my mother, who is quick to rush forwards. But Martha is quicker, outstretching her arm to hold my mother in place.

No matter, my mother is *here*. Crisp, autumnal air is rosy in her cheeks and her sapphire-blue eyes are aglow with a twinkle that spreads into a smile she gives me as she studies my face, my body, then back to my eyes.

‘You know the deal, Tish. You can see your family properly *after* you’ve finished your snack.’ Martha nods tentatively towards my mother, waiting for her to step back before closing the door and stealing her from me.

Belinda and I are left to a silence we know not how to fill. She seems reluctant to look at me and I guess she is wondering what to do. I ask you, what is the right thing to do? Deny parents their right to see their daughter? And rid that daughter of her chance to be surrounded by the family who, alone, supply her with the strength she needs to fight on?

What to do?

Belinda can’t decide. Time is ticking and so she appeals to the lifeline we can hear in the corridor. It is Penny, no doubt chatting up my family while they wait. Penny is one who barely draws breath and so Belinda must raise her voice to be heard. ‘Penny,’ she calls, but she must call again, ‘Penny?’

The door is thrown open and Penny appears with a whoosh of warm air. She hooks an arm onto each of her hips, her lips parting into a beam that breaks as the scene swims into place. She needs no second moment to grasp the pickle we are in. They share a long look before Penny begins to close the door behind her, stopping it short of the frame so that the click is no more than a muted thud.

‘Ok, ok,’ Penny turns back to us, her red fingernails tracing the lines across her forehead, ‘Tishy, how much have you managed?’

I shrug.

‘Bee?’

‘None. Few sips, maybe.’

‘Oh Tishy, what the Lordy are we going to do with you?’ Penny begins to nod, ‘Ok, well, if they have to use the tube, she’ll never get to see them.’ She bites her lip, ‘I think

Martha's gone down to check that the others have started Group, so maybe....' Penny stops nodding and begins flapping her arms, 'just you know...'

But Belinda does not seem to know just how to interpret the wayward waving of Penny's arms.

'I mean,' Penny means, 'just pretend.' She turns to me, 'Just this once, Tish, ok?'

I nod.

'Good girl. But get yourself into bed Madam. And mind you stay there, Lordy don't be giving Martha any excuse to come in here.' With this, Penny bends down and tugs a bunch of her nylon tights from her shins, then her thighs, before straightening up to pull the waistband higher. Sorted, she says, 'Right, I've got to go and supervise... Lily's desperate for a tinkle.' She jingles her keys, 'You be alright, Bee? Give you a few minutes to get sorted and I'll send her family in.'

Penny's footsteps have barely died away before Belinda wipes the table with her palm. Pushing it against the wall, she plucks a tissue from the box and reaches across to wriggle my sleeve clear of the wound. She dabs the wetness surrounding it and, knowing there isn't time to source another, patches the old dressing to my skin. It will not last, but it will do.

'Tish, you don't need to do that, you know,' she says, tugging my sleeve back down before pressing it gently. 'I know you think it helps. The hurt, it relieves it – the guilt. I get that, but you don't need to punish yourself. No guilt should come from struggling. This is an illness, Tish. A horrible illness but you? *You* are ok. Tish, you are so ok, just as you are.'

I am. I am.

‘You are, I promise.’ She plucks another tissue and brushes it against my cheek. ‘But family, Tish. Family are... they’re worth more than...they’ll give you more happiness – more life, more peace – than that cruel monster inside you. You need to try and let it go and hold onto them instead. That wonderful family of yours, Tish, believe in them to pull you through.’

She straightens herself and says, ‘Right, wipe those tears, blow that nose, and forget about the Ensure. Ok?’ Belinda takes my nod and asks for nothing more. She smiles warmly and says simply that she knows. And she does. She stands, walks towards the door, turning only to say, ‘If you need me... I’ll be right by the door, ok? You know you still have to be within eyesight? So just give me the nod if it gets too much. Deal?’

I nod and seal our deal.

‘Ready?’

‘Ready.’

Belinda opens the door. ‘Mrs Goodchild, Sabina, isn’t it? And those the rest of them? I think someone in here’s pretty keen to see you all.’

There they were. The herd of my family rushed into the room, bounding up to the bed with their varying degrees of hugs. Hugo lead the way, pressing my body firmly into his chest before handing me over to Tatiana. Her offering was just as brief, though no less special. She has always claimed not to be a ‘huggy person’, but occasionally she is willing to make allowances for the needy sister that she has. And I am, both needy and demanding and so she hugged me tightly before stepping aside. Joss crept closer. I swallowed. He looked so much

taller. His lips twitched and he swallowed too. His blonde curls still bounced high above his head, but his eyes had lowered and his glances were fleeting and uncertain. I smiled and his reservation fell away. He rushed forwards, slipped his arms beneath mine and drew me into a hug that was dearer for the slight hesitation before which his body stiffened and began to pull away.

My mother was next. She cloaked herself around me and squeezed me into the nooks of her body so snugly that I never wanted to reform the angular shape I made without her. So long, she clung on, giving me time to smell the coastal air, freshly blown through her clothes, no doubt un-pegged from her precarious but oh-so precious washing line. It's funny, I thought, how the smell of home only becomes detectable once it has grown unfamiliar. And I smelt Ferry Farm – the sweet musk of hay, the horses and the salty sea air – so clearly that my body began to tremble in hers.

Could five months truly have passed since that evening my mother and I wound our way down the bumpy drive, destined for this hospital? It was dark and I remember watching the light from my parent's bedroom shrinking further into the distance as we drove on. My neck cricked as I twisted around and the seat belt cut into my shoulder blade until the glow of their bedroom dwindled into a flicker between trees. When I looked back ahead, the windscreen wipers were working hard to fend off the gathering spits of rain as my mother slipped her hand down from the gear stick to squeeze mine. Just like she was now, with a nudge that asked me to budge over on the bed so she could lie down beside me.

'Tish?' Tatiana said, 'As usual you can blame the boys.'

'Yeah, of course, but for what?'

'For being late. Bet you can guess who was first in the car?'

'You, obviously.'

'Well, *obviously*, and who was last?'

'The boys.'

‘Yeah, obviously, but which one?’

‘Tricky... but at a guess, I’d say *last* last was...,’ I turned from Tatiana to eye up Hugo, who smiled as he looked across to Joss. Joss pinched the smile from his lips before looking sideways. ‘...Joss.’

‘Yup, forgot his sweets,’ Tatiana said through a sigh. ‘You know, those disgusting sour ones that turn his tongue blue?’

Joss stuck out his teal tongue. ‘Yeah, but,’ he said, ‘didn’t stop you stealing one, Tatiana.’

Tatiana stuck out her teal-tinged tongue. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘never again, they literally burn your tongue, Tish. And then he had the cheek to try and make *me* sit in the middle seat.’

‘Suspect he didn’t manage though.’

‘No, obviously not,’ Joss was quickest to confirm, ‘Queen Bee, Tish, your sister continues to be. Queen Blooming Bee.’

“‘Your sister?’” I’m *your* sister too, you moron. Your Big Sister at that. And until you figure out how to be on time, you’ll continue to learn that *If you...*’

‘*Snooze you lose.*’ Our mother finished the saying that has become our family mantra. And Tatiana was pleased to take this as victory, withdrawing to the windowsill to inspect my latest *Get-Well-Soon* cards. Beneath her dark eyebrows, her bright blue eyes flitted from card to card, her fingers distracted only as they looped a stray strand of hair behind her ears. It is silky and smooth and soon fell back across her face, for Tatiana possesses an effortless grace that the rest of our curls will never match. She is our bundle of energy, as bright, quietly bold, blooming and buzzing as a bumble bee.

‘I like your dress, Tatiana,’ I said, watching as she spun towards me in a semi-pirouette that flared the skirt of her yellow dress. She gave it a humbler brush down and I caught a coy smile pass between my brothers. Tatiana was blushing and so I was sure: I’d

struck upon, what my father calls, a Contentious Point. Tatiana's response was meek. She met my eye and smiled in a way that made me wonder whether she'd been missing this sister sensitivity too.

'Thanks Tish,' she said, quietly, 'But the boys said I looked like a bumble-bee. Said Shiv was unlikely to be able to lose me in it. Even if he tried.'

'What?' Hugo said, not without smiling, 'Come on Tish, don't pretend the bumble-bee thought hadn't crossed your mind?'

'Nuh-uh, I think you look just lovely, Tatiana,' I said, hoping more than ever that Beady-Eyed Skipper had been on the Look Out when my family arrived.

My father had taken the rear and was still hovering in the doorway, like the watchful shepherd that he is, ever in pursuit of his flighty flock. He now glanced uncertainly towards Belinda, as if to ask whether he was allowed to close the door?

Belinda soon solved his conundrum with an apologetic look: No. One to One Observations meant I must be within eyesight at all times. And so my father bowed aside and passed Belinda the door for her to pin back as she saw fit. In turn, she – this woman who had taken charge of the welfare of his lamb – seemed to read his thoughts, for she pushed her chair fractionally back in the doorway, so that she could see without trespassing too keenly on the privacy we craved.

Making his way up to the bed, my father looked down at me and smiled. He planted a kiss on the crown of my head and, tucking the newspaper under his arm, retreated towards the easy chair which was enjoying the final heat of the sun. Its rays bathed the room with pinkish light, for Belinda had pinned back the curtains just in time to give my family the impression they'd been open all day.

My father called it *his* chair. He is a creature of ingrained and unyielding habit and was Less Than Impressed to find Joss seemed temporarily to have forgotten. For Joss was currently installed in the chair, knees crossed, cosy and – as always – yawning.

‘Seriously?’ Joss said, his mouth stretched wide. ‘Seriously?’ he tried again, ‘The whole journey here I was squished between those guys,’ he looked from Hugo to Tatiana, who buzzed on in spite of (or precisely *because* of) Joss’s grumble. ‘And now you’re going to kick me onto the floor too?’

My father refrained from comment, but a raise of his left eyebrow was enough to remind Joss of the MacDonald’s that was to be had if he towed the line and absented himself from my father’s throne. MacDonald’s (naturally) worked a treat. Joss slumped onto the floor and held out his hand to catch the cushion my mother began to wrestle out from behind us. She lobbed it towards him, but her aim was out and she knocked a photo frame onto the carpet alongside the cushion. From over the headlines of his newspaper, my father set his eyes on the culprit, who smiled as he frowned. *Really*, he all but said, *you’re worse than the children, Sabina*.

Joss was busy nesting, so it was my father who bent down to retrieve the fallen photo. He held it in his lap and used the side of his palm to dust the glass. His eyes settled on the beaming figures of two of his children: Hugo and I, aged somewhere between five and eight, with eighteen months between us. You can spy the print of our pyjamas beneath the matching red dressing-gowns we are wearing. They are proper little robes, with ladybird buttons and frilly lapels. Our curls are not yet dry, so it must have been taken on a Sunday evening. That was Hair Wash Night in the Goodchild bath-tub and all four of us would be squeezed in, making a production line of hair-washing. It was my father who carried out the operation, overseen (naturally) by my mother. She’d sit on the lid of the loo, ready with an open towel, relishing this rarer spectacle of her husband sinking into the mayhem she’d long since learnt how to stay afloat in.

The photo captures that dusky orange colour that gives such depth to the countryside colours. The sky is pinkening. The sand-tracks are golden. The surrounding stubble-fields are no longer a browning yellow, but bright chestnut and it is against a straw-bale of this colour that Hugo and I are resting. We are propped up on our elbows and our blue eyes are sparkling with the knowledge that it’s *way* past our bedtime. We are not looking at the camera, but at our father, who stands behind the lens, capturing this shot – this moment in which two of his children have fled their beds and are chasing each other instead, across and over the fresh straw bales which pepper the fields.

I watched my father and wondered what he saw. Was he, too, letting himself relive the memory? To remember can be to render the loss anew and perhaps it was too painful to look back. Who could have known how the lives of those children would pan out? Daddy, I saw your inward tussle from your eyes as they glanced away only to return and rest back in the peace that photo was proof of. You looked from me to Hugo and I followed your gaze. Hugo was too content with *The Week* to notice and I smiled, for that is Hugo. His compassion is quiet, understated and often overlooked. But his sensitivity is silently as raw as mine and his indefatigable interest in – well? – *everything* is infectious. Traits far richer, Hugo, than I believe you could ever know.

My father propped the photo back on the table and looked about the small room, presently packed so full of his children. ‘Honestly, you lot, I can’t take your mother anywhere. Sabina, do you have to throw things everywhere we go?’

But he cut his own inquiry short with another yawn. Need I say that Joss’s tendency to yawning comes directly from our father, who was now basking in the pure joy of it. ‘Huh,’ he said, ‘I slept so badly last night.’

‘Dad,’ Tatiana said, ‘you *always* say you “slept so badly.”’

‘Tuh, you lot are always so hard on your father. It’s Mummy you should be blaming.’

My mother did not need to respond. This conversation has been had before.

‘Like a fog horn, her snoring,’ my father continued, catching the next cushion my mother threw and handing it down to Joss.

My mother rolled her eyes. ‘It is extraordinary,’ she said, ‘your father’s capacity to exaggerate.’

‘No exaggeration I’m afraid,’ my father ploughed on, ‘So loud, Laetitia, that you may well find Mummy’s been shipped into a tent in the garden by the time you come home. It’s simple: The Fog Horn cannot go on.’

To this, my mother muttered something about it being highly unlikely she'd end up in a tent given the practicalities involved in tent construction (my father being a Non-Practical Man). And besides the problem was likely to be solved of its own accord. My father, she said, was driving her so mad these days, that I might find her being admitted into bed beside me, *permanently*.

'I wish,' was my father's closing comment. He crossed his legs and unfolded the newspaper. He extracted the Sports' Section and handed down to Joss in a controversial exchange that saw Hugo's face cloud over. My brothers are not only in constant competition about the extent of their knowledge, but also by the order in which they acquire that very knowledge.

Hugo let it go. When it comes to Joss, Hugo rarely lets it go and so I was pleased, if surprised. Were they growing up after all?

Or?

No. I pushed *that* thought away. It returned. Had I been away that long that familiarity had to be forced into something more formal? Was this them on their Best Behaviour? Had they had The Talk before they'd arrived? Like my mother used to give us on the doorstep before ringing the bell, brushing us down and asking if we could *please, just try and behave*.

I looked at my brothers. Their heads were bent in concentration, their eyes intent on their reading material. Joss was scouring the sports' headlines with his mouth stretched wide. And Hugo was lost in *The Week*, drinking in the contents like that boy's brain can absorb information like no other. His eyes rested only as he flicked the page, as in, as loud as flick-ably possible, just to show his brother that he was *not* bothered that he'd be second to receive the sporting news.

'Again?' My father had got no further than the front-page. A peach of a picture of Pippa Middleton's bottom was brazen in the centre, sleek beneath her silky-white bridesmaid's dress. 'Again?' he said, *again*. 'Really, isn't there anything else going on in the world? Third day running. Third day.'

‘Oh, ignore your father, darling,’ my mother said, ‘he’s been Mr Grumpy-Pumpy all morning. It’s cos’ he can’t do any of the Crossword and I’ve finished it.’

‘Ignore your mother, darling,’ my father said, lost behind the broadsheets, ‘She insists on talking complete nonsense.’ His face temporarily reappeared as he refolded the paper. ‘Now, you lot, I’m asking you nicely for a few minutes’ peace and quiet so can you please—,’

‘Yeah, yeah right fine,’ Tatiana was done being quiet. Having read all my cards, she was looking to place her next move. Settling herself onto the end of the bed, she said, ‘Tish, out there... we met your...,’ she glanced towards the door, ‘your... *friend*.’ She blushed, turned to my mother with a sheepish look and said, ‘You know the one I mean? The scary one that’s just, like, always sitting out there?’

‘Yeah,’ Hugo shut *The Week* and edged closer to the bed, ‘you know, the *really* skinny, tall one?’

‘Oh come on Hugo, “really skinny” hardly narrows it down in this place,’ Joss said. Tatiana tried not to smile, but my mother was now looking at me, laughing.

‘True,’ Hugo said, ‘we mean, the one that just... stares. Is she, like... You know?’ His eyebrows could rise no further, waiting as he was hoping that I’d voice the Inappropriate for him.

‘You mean the one perched on the sofa arm?’

They nodded. I said, ‘That would be Fran Skipper. But go on, is she, like, you-know-what?’

‘Sabina,’ my father said, ‘why do your children insist on saying “like” all the—’

‘Dad, this is not The Time.’ Tatiana’s rolled eyes returned to me, ‘Tish, we mean,’ she tried. And bailed.

‘Is she...’ Hugo tried. And failed.

‘Mad,’ Joss said through a yawn.

‘Joss, you *can*’t say that!’

‘Oh would you just chillax a bit Tatiana. It was you and Hugo who asked.’ Joss yawned again, crumpling the entire newspaper up as he turned the page – a blow Hugo couldn’t quite swallow. ‘Joss,’ he said, ‘Are you literally serious? What are you doing? Apart from scrunching that paper up? Some of us actually want to read it.’

Hugo’s concern remained his own. Joss was too content with his latest yawn.

‘Anyway, Tish?’

‘Yes, Tatiana?’

‘This Fran, is she the one who smashed the windows with the garden chairs?’ Tatiana nodded towards the courtyard, the centre of which was decked with a fresh array of garden furniture, newly *glued* to the ground.

‘No, that was Collette. Can’t work her out, she’s all quiet, no warning signs, no nothing, then *smash*, she’s properly *lost* it.’ I shrugged.

Hugo shrugged. ‘Fair,’ he said, ‘So Fran must be the one that got tazered by the police?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘that was one of the adolescents upstairs. Gone AWOL, hasn’t been seen for a while.’

‘Right,’ Joss said, ‘so she must be the one that... started the riot?’

‘Nope, again upstairs. They are,’ I said, ‘like, *bonkers* up there.’

‘Oh, *I* know,’ Tatiana said, ‘then she must be the one who threw her milk out of the window onto that Doctor...Doctor someone?’

‘Doctor Lethal?’ I said, ‘And yup, that’s our Fran.’

It had been my first breakfast at the hospital and I had found myself sandwiched between two nurses. Twenty-minutes in, I had got no further with my refeeding portion than poking and prodding the three slippery pieces of tinned-peach. Quietly using the clunky spoon to spread the yogurt (as high up the bowl as spread-ably possible), I’d wondered why that tall, beady eyed-girl (who utterly *terrified* me) had made such ado over sitting next to the window. As a breed, us anorexics are (always) cold, so it was quite contrary to witness this *scary* girl insist the nurses leave the window open. A tussle of tongues had (naturally) flared into a ‘discussion’ that ended with a shrewd glance in my direction. Disturbances (in the form of *further* discussion), it seemed, must be avoided to optimise the likelihood of the New-Recruit munching her first meal. The rule, however, was made plain – open windows were forbidden. The probability of risk was too great for an equation as simple as the following:

Coldness = Shivering
Shivering = Muscle Movement
Muscle Movement = Exercise
Exercise = Inappropriate
Inappropriate = Forbidden

Exposure to fresh air was a right that had to be earned – a privilege granted to patients by their psychiatrist, alone. But Fran had a way of bending every situation to her advantage and so she’d had her way with the window that morning. The mystery as to why was soon solved when, in the slickest of well-honed movements, Fran sent her milk flying out of the window. Masterful? Yes. And successful this antic would have proved save for the unfortunate timing. For, who should be striding past the window at that very moment? Not only *the* Hospital Director, but Fran’s own psychiatrist, Dr Steel (Renamed ‘Dr Lethal’ by Fran, for the sole reason that he *was* lethal). And, where Dr Miller would have seen the funny side, Dr Lethal did not. And he revealed no hidden humour as his body buckled, as though winded by the milk that was presently seeping into his shirt and staining his leather briefcase with an array of darkened speckles. Using his cuff-linked sleeve to dab at the drips dropping beneath the sharp contours of his chin, his eyes had risen, slowly, to find Fran Beady-Eyed Skipper.

‘Well,’ Tatiana decided, ‘No need to worry about her getting bored, Mum. Entertainment doesn’t do justice to what goes on in this place. Tish, you’ll have to write a book about it one day.’

‘I’ve told her,’ my mother had told me, too priceless were these antics to go unknown. She nudged me and I hmm-ed a show of reluctance. Given that writing about the antics would require me to absent myself from any involvement *in* such antics, the likelihood was looking? Less Than Likely.

‘The milk though,’ I moved us on, ‘not entirely priceless, Tatiana. It cost Fran dearly. In Ward Round, Dr Lethal stripped her of *all* her “privileges”: No home-leave, she wasn’t allowed out on Rehab that week – no real loss – and her walk was downgraded from a Hug-of-the-Building to a Duck Pond. And *that*, I tell you, is a heavy comeuppance to pay.’

Interruption came in the form of my father. He stood up, dropped the newspaper onto the chair and stretched his arms above his head. His face slanted into (another) yawn, which he finished before walking towards the bathroom door. He tried the handle. Pushed, he pulled. Locked. Again, my father tried the handle. Pushed, he pulled. Locked. *Still* locked. And so the ensemble of his children chipped in:

Tatiana: Dad, you KNOW it’s locked.
Tish: It’s ALWAYS locked.
Hugo: You do this every time we come.
Joss: Like, EVERY SINGLE TIME.

My father garnered little sympathy as he looked from one face to the next. ‘What did I say, H?’ My mother was delighted to repeat, ‘You’re *worse than the children*. I told you to go before we came, but did you listen?’

No. The answer was no. But two knocks saved my father from hearing it. Penny appeared in the doorway. ‘Blimey, standing room only in here. Hello Team Goodchild.’ She searched the swarm of bodies and found mine, ‘Tishy, if there’s room for one more, I’ve got rather a hunk of a man here to see you.’

The hunk was Shiv, Tatiana's soon to be husband, who walked in with an overnight bag slung over one shoulder and a bunch of daffodils in his other hand.

'I mean, if there's no room, I don't mind keeping him for me-self...'

'Thanks, Penny, but I *think* we'll just about squeeze him in.'

'Tuh, Mrs Goodchild, your Little Miss Tish can be a right kill-joy. In that case, I might bugger off and maybe find you another chair?'

Several hopeful heads propped up, my father's included, who added, 'Oh and the key?'

'The key?'

'The bathroom...'

'Oh, *the* key.' Penny smiled, 'Yes, I'll go hunt it down.'

'No, just ignore him,' my mother said, 'he's got to learn.'

Penny joined my mother's laughter. 'Just like my Mr Duckett,' she said, taking off her glasses and spinning them in her hand, 'can't take him nowhere without a fuss.'

'Hear that, H? You're being a fuss.'

It was all this fuss that I missed. I sidled closer into my mother's side and perhaps she felt me latching, for she told Penny not to worry about the chairs. The rest of them were fine as they were on the floor.

The rest of them did their sudden best to look *not* fine as they were on the floor. Penny took pity, enlisting Belinda who stood up, pushed her own chair apologetically aside so that the passage was clear for Penny to drive the wheelchair through. A parallel-park later, Penny picked a brother. 'Got 50:50 chance,' she said, 'but I might have to phone-a-friend and all. Tishy, is this one Joss?'

‘Yup.’

Joss peered up at Penny who said, ‘Now Joss, if you Keep Quiet and Don’t Tell Martha, then I reckon you can sit in this.’

‘Oh um, thanks err –,’ Joss stood up, holding out for a name with his arm outstretching for Penny to take.

Rising to his ceremony, Penny took and shook his hand firmly. ‘Well, bless me cotton socks,’ she said, ‘Mrs Goodchild, your boy’s not just beautiful – as in, B.E.A.Utiful, but Lordy so polite!’ She blew her fringe off her forehead, remembering as she did so, ‘Penny, I’m Mrs Duckett.’

Blushing, with his hand still held hostage, Joss looked towards his brother, as though to gauge whether Hugo considered ‘beautiful’ a compliment worthy of claiming with pride. Hugo shrugged. And Joss was pleased for the shrug was vague enough for him to assume success.

‘Oh,’ said Tatiana, ‘so *this* is Penny?’

‘Yup, Tatiana, this is *the* Penny Duckett,’ I said, pleased to see Penny redden with the recognition that she’d done enough to merit her name being spread around my family. When her smile returned, it was unusually timid. She glanced at me, bunched her lips on one side before bowing out the door with the assurance that she’d be back soon, with that key.

Shiv now stepped forwards. Laying down the daffodils, he apologised for being late. The train was delayed, he began to explain.

‘Delayed?’ Tatiana cut in. Less Than Convinced, she was Less Than Impressed, for Shiv has picked the only Goodchild for whom lateness will never come naturally. Tatiana raised an eyebrow with the suggestion that the ‘delay’ might have had more to do with a hangover – last night’s meeting followed by a debrief with friends, not colleagues. And fuelled with enough wine to make Shiv a Late Starter this morning.

Shiv shook his head, but did not entirely disagree. He gave his glasses a nudge, unbuttoned his duffle coat and stepped back, not without sending a knowing nod to the allies he has made of my brothers. Tatiana caught the exchange (my sister never misses a trick) and adjusted her smile into disapproval as she gave Shiv's ribs an elbow. Taking his bag, she laid it on the bed and began rummaging around, tutting as she pulled at the strands of unfolded clothing. Several phone chargers were tangled with jumper sleeves. And then – *what was this?*

'Oh yeah,' Shiv said, 'Um Tish. I know you always used to love them, so I thought... I don't know. Maybe it might give you a distraction. Maybe not...' He glanced at Tatiana, who was smiling as uncertainly as he. Tatiana is rarely speechless. But she was, for the daffodils he'd brought were doubtless her idea. She'd reminded him to pack the chargers and she'd sent him warning of the cold. But this? This was his doing and so she stepped back as he stepped forwards to hand me a heavy brick-like block. Pre-empting the fall, he slipped his hands beneath mine so that he caught and held the DVD boxset while I propped myself onto my knees.

'Oh Tish, you love *Friends*. It's perfect, isn't it? You're not going to get lonel–,' Tatiana swallowed, side-stepping closer to Shiv. I tried to swallow, but my throat felt swollen. I tried to speak, but my nose prickled and my cheeks twitched as my mother's fingers began to rub the small of my back. My thumbnail dug into my palm and I began to blink. How could I possibly thank them for the strength they gave me?

'Come on darling,' my mother pulled at my elbow, 'Come here.' She plumped the pillow behind us and laid herself back into this nest, opening her arm out for me to fall into. And I did. Mummy, I always do. I nestle as close as possible, with the nape of my neck resting in the crook of your arm as my legs bend and rest against your tummy. I am safe there, with my eyes closed and the feel of your arm clasping me closer still. I am your limpet, clingy and clinging to the rock that keeps me alive. I am home there. Mummy, with you, I am where I belong.

It's funny how slowly the clock ticks when you are watching and willing it to tock on. But when the present is made precious by the presence of loved ones, it flies by. Just blink and it's gone. Time has run your present into the past, leaving you with scraps of memories which only deplete further with time, and longing which only grows stronger with time.

This pining can be dangerous. Neediness has a way of forgetting hardship and shaping our memories into an ideal that is more super-real than real – dreamlike, even. But it's instinctive, isn't it? A kind of self-soothing that happens unconsciously. In darkness, we relish that first glimmer of light and in distress, our minds naturally crave that past haven which still offers us the surest shelter from our present affliction.

My haven was home and my family are my shelter. In hospital, I was lost. My mind was broken and I was frightened. But at home I was a segment of something complete. I was loved. I belonged and so it was my parent's bedroom lamp that glowed so brightly in my mind. Seen from the end of the drive, that flicker of light between the trees was my lantern, aglow with the reverie that I could return to them.

It wasn't just a dream, though. That's what I'm trying to say. Doubtless, my memories are viewed through rose-tinted spectacles, but the depictions of my family remain true and my position back with them now is testament to this reality. Yes, we banter and we bicker. Like any other family, we seem unable to debate a point without it rupturing into an argument. Short lived? Yes, but lived through all the same. Not so much unconditional, love can sometimes feel sparse and tremendously testing. And no, their love is no antidote to my mental health. The Voice does not cease to haunt me just because I am returned to them. But home, my family, remain a remedy of sorts. Not miraculous or final, it is a remedy more lasting in that it is consistent.

So, if truth be told, there was little extraordinary to speak of in those family visits. But in the ordinariness of things familiar, they were – my family are – extraordinary to me. Those short hours they packed themselves into Room Two were the only hours I spent in hospital without aching to be back home. Lying, entangled with my mother's body, I did not miss her hugs. I

did not miss the smell of her windy washing-line, for I breathed it in. I breathed it out in a calmness that was soothed further by the buzzing of my bumble-bee, the grounding wonder that is her now husband, my naughty brothers and our sturdy father, for whom we always will make too much noise. Surrounded by them, I did not feel broken. I felt a wholeness that left me needing nothing more. I was *at home* and loved in a way I could not question.

If only. If only.

It was getting harder to remember. The two-hour drive separating us was a distance that gave strength to the Voice. By then it was the *only* voice I could hear with any consistency, all through the night, day after day. Without my mother's arms wrapped around me, I could not feel her love. I could not feel certain of it and my imagination had lost the strength to conjure it. I began to pander to the Voice. Where I was weary, it was incessant and its suggestions soon became statements – resolute and absolute in their condemnation of me.

How can you possibly believe you are worthy of their love?

How shameful, to be so presumptive.

A slippery slope. The thoughts cascaded in a progressive decline. Gravity is a predictable force and one that cannot be reckoned with. The fall is inevitable and perhaps that very sense of inevitability was the reason my fingers had gripped hold of my mother's cardigan that day? Danger was fast approaching and the butterfly wings had begun to beat. They thrashed so tightly in my chest that my breath had quickened by the time Martha flung the door wide.

I blame the alarm. It began to howl in the corridor. Tatiana moved first, breaking our abrupt silence by nervously whispering to Shiv, 'Did you bring the, you know, *the thing*?' He nodded and they began to rummage around in his bag. The rest of us watched, as glad of the distraction as we were determined not to listen to the torrent of footsteps now thundering down stairwells. Locked doors were thrown wide as nurses rushed towards the next ward – Room 28 named as the epicentre of the sudden storm.

'Just ignore it,' I found myself saying. 'It's normal,' I kept saying, as though this plea could veil the suffering lying behind each wail. It could not and neither did my cry of

normalcy offer any reassurance. But I resented it. This intrusion had impinged upon the haven we'd created and I was panicked by the thought of losing it.

'Please,' I cried, 'I promise it's *normal*.' But is it normal? I ask you, why did the word catch on my tongue and suddenly sound so peculiar – so abnormal? Should a teenager think it normal to hear shrieking so shrill that the cries pierce her skin and eventually become her own? Should it be normal for her body to begin to quake as she inhales that metallic smell of burnt flesh? Wounds she has re-cut open in her desperate search for an outlet to the tempest raging within her.

If this is not normal, then this is how it becomes normal – commonplace, in a place like that, where mental torment is the common feature which has brought its inhabitants together. The abject distress lying behind the alarm that day did not warrant my casual dismissal. Yet, there I was, pleading in the hope of holding onto the people who, alone, were helping me to understand that my own self-suffering was anything *but* normal. Pleading, as though my life depended upon their believing it.

And perhaps it did. When pain becomes so acute that it grips the body, there is a primitive, almost animalistic need to escape it. Because the failure of alleviation is crippling. It is like a migraine with no end, or a storm with no promise of a rainbow to hail its passing. And it is, quite literally, excruciating to realise that there is no light at the end of your tunnel. No pill will relieve your pain and no one, despite their benign intentions, can ultimately save you from yourself. You are alone, afraid and imprisoned by your mental scars, which have both the steel and permanence of metal bars.

The nurses returned from Room 28 in dribs and drabs. The drama was spent. Their footsteps had lightened and it was then that Martha spotted the cup of un-sipped Ensure sitting beneath Belinda's chair, where she'd hastily hidden it earlier. I can picture Martha's footsteps

stalling, her tongue stalling as dark lines creased her brow. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Surely that cup wasn't *still* full of Ensure?

I doubt Belinda sensed the invasion of her presence until it was too late. Martha would have approached from behind, startling Belinda with a curt question that would have left her unable to conjure an excuse on my behalf. I know she would have tried. And perhaps that's why her arm was outstretched as the two burst into the room – Belinda thought she could stop Martha?

Who knows. But Martha knew that Protocol must be followed. In the absence of rules, anarchy reigns and this lawlessness, no eating-disorder ward needs more of. No, rules are not made to be broken and so what alternative to intervention was there?

It's like I knew. I barely flinched as the door was flung wide and the two came to an abrupt halt before us. Belinda's outstretched arm fell to her side and my knuckles whitened as my fingers tightened their grip of my mother's cardigan, her small button imprinting itself onto my closed palm. But I clung on, shrinking back and shaking with sudden chill. I wriggled closer into the warmth of my mother, but her body had hardened against mine. She was silent and still and seemed suddenly to see through me, straight across the room to Martha – this unknown woman who held greater power over her daughter than she.

'I'm afraid,' Martha began to bear her bad news, 'I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Mr, Mrs Goodchild.' Unable to hold my mother's gaze, Martha stepped fractionally back and sent her next appeal to my father. But the sadness in his eyes was so plain that she was forced into a retraction of sorts. She looked down and began fiddling with her pen. She pulled off the cap, pushed it back on, smoothing over the crack with her thumb.

'I'm sorry,' Martha said, eventually, 'but we have strict protocols in place.' She swallowed, 'It's to protect our patients, you see, it's the...only way.'

Belinda now stepped to Martha's side, 'I know it's hard but it's...'

‘...it’s important,’ Martha finished. Rallied, she looked at me, as if looks could shift the blame. But if my loss was her victory, then she did not seem triumphant. There was diffidence to her voice that was harder to place. It was neither cold nor entirely warm.

‘Tish, I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but you know what we agreed. You had to finish your snack to see your family. And I’m afraid,’ Martha turned to my mother, ‘Tish didn’t manage to finish her Ensure. So, we’ll need you to.... you see, we need to tube... to feed her, *ourselves.*’

My mother ceased looking at Martha and turned to me. Cold air now separated our bodies as she leant back to fit me into her disbelieving eyes. Blood drained from her cheeks and stained mine a burnt shade of red. Her jaw dropped and I tried to swallow. But my throat was swollen and so the tube tightened, cutting into my nostril like wire, so sharply that my hand flew to my cheek to brace it better in place.

‘But you *knew*, darling,’ my mother said, ‘you *knew* we were coming so why...’

Please, Mummy, don’t.

‘*Why* darling, I don’t understand – if you knew, why couldn’t you just...’

Don’t ask it

Don’t think it

Please, Mummy

Don’t you ever believe it

‘...Darling, why couldn’t you just drink that tiny bit of Ensure for *us*?’

There is a cruelty to anorexia in the way it divides families. Loved ones become collateral damage in that they suffer with you. They are made to watch you disappear, unable to intervene, for their very attempts only rupture such extreme reactions that it's not worth the potential consequences.

In the desperation of this position an ultimatum forms. Almost inevitably, although every effort is made to avoid any allusion to it. But there is a limit to how long can you skirt around a question which does not disappear. It is there, haunting the hugs you share. It is there, lurking beneath every expression of love that is spoken. It is a question – a condition – that threatens the very unconditional nature of familial love.

If you truly loved us, you'd be able to this.

Sip Sip Sip

That's it

Three sips are all it would have taken to prove my love for them was greater than my loyalty to the Voice. And how simple is sipping? So natural an action that it is no wonder they felt themselves betrayed. But it was grief I saw reflected in their faces as they peered down at the feeble body lying in that hospital bed. That shrunken shell of a girl bore no resemblance to their Laetitia. Where was her laughter, once so ready and now so absent? She had been so full of life – replete with potential I had wasted away. How could I do this to them? How could I be so cruel as to deprive them of their daughter?

There is no reason why. No pardon could excuse the suffering my starvation inflicted upon them. But that is precisely *why* anorexia is so cruel. You cannot bargain with it. Logic is no defence and love is no weapon that can so simply defeat it. Quite simply, the Voice defies reason. It deprives you of your ability to rationalise yourself out of a situation so blindingly obvious that ultimately, it denies your family their belief that you *want* to get better.

Like this, the Voice twists love into a source of guilt so gushing that you are only driven back to the same self-punitive ways. *Don't you see*, the Voice begins, *how they suffer for your sake?* Yes, I see, too plainly.

I cause their pain

I am their grief

I am, I am

Guilty

Chip

Chip

The Voice chips away until its leading questions have gathered enough conviction to be spoken by you. Only then will it fall silent. It need lead you no further. It has won the battle. The prospect of getting ‘better’ has become as far-fetched as the possibility of you being a better person. *Never*. The solution is simple.

They are *better off without me*.

It is a vicious cycle of suffering. Too often we remain as defeated by it as we were that day, though the time in between has given me the hindsight to appreciate that it was unintentional. Their suffering was bound with mine by a love that too defies rationality. And it is testament to the depth of their love that they still stand beside me today. Fatigued? Yes. Exasperated? Yes. And yes, their expectations of the future I have ahead have shrunk in line with my diminished frame. Perhaps my father no longer sees his daughter an enigmatic writer, eccentric professor or human-rights activist (perhaps the combination of all three always was a little ambitious – but is a devoted father not entitled to dream?) Yet, I hope that where our aspirations have been tempered by the brutal storm of this illness, my family are still able to envisage an aftermath that is peaceful. That is hopeful and possible, with or without our ever understanding why.

*Nobody has ever been able to understand what they experienced until they have reached a detachment that renders them incapable of repeating this experience.*⁶⁸

In my copy of the correspondence between the novelists, F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda*, there is a sticky note which singles out this letter. A blunt pencil underlines Zelda's words, with a question scrawled in the margin: *Have I reached this stage? Have I achieved that level of detachment that renders me stable enough to revisit those dark memories? That is, without triggering a relapse back into the depths of that past I have worked so hard to crawl myself out of.*

Yes, is my small yet decisive answer scribbled, like an afterthought, at the bottom of the page. It seems somewhat simplistic, naïve, even. Or perhaps it's just optimistic – hopeful that writing could provide me with a way of navigating through those murky waters without the tide pulling me too far astray?

Zelda believed so. The letters to her husband show her experimenting with ways of communicating the nature and degree of her distress – mental-illness, madness or 'battle', as Zelda chooses to describe her efforts to defend a united sense of herself. Interestingly, Zelda seems unconcerned with the cause. Rather, she seems to have put pen to paper in the simple belief that writing could help us to acknowledge – and in doing so, to appreciate – the struggles others face. The purpose, Zelda writes, is to give the reader 'a glimpse of [the writer's] honestly earned scars of battle and its rewards.'⁶⁹

Zelda was diagnosed and treated for schizophrenia for the best part of her short adult life. It may seem far-fetched that I am bringing her into a conversation about anorexia, but this is precisely what I want to say. Diagnostic language is often inadequate in relation to mental health. Where a physical ailment can be localised to a specific area of the body, mental health refuses to be confined to such definite parameters. It is fluid and our perception of it ever-changing as the conversation latches from one understanding onto the next. The mind wonders and it wanders and in this wonderful way it trespasses beyond the borders medicine seeks to contain it within.

⁶⁸ Fitzgerald, p. 155.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 205.

Zelda's battlefield may have been located within her mind, but her letters show how the body inevitably becomes embroiled. She describes the fight 'straining so completely every fibre of [her] being.'⁷⁰ As her mental reserves diminish, they drain her physical resources until there is quite literally *nothing* left. She is bereft and left as physically exhausted as she is mentally exasperated. Is it any wonder then, that her will to go on wavers?

It is ghastly, losing your mind and not being able to see clearly, literally or figuratively – and knowing that you can't think and that nothing is right, not even your comprehension of concrete things.⁷¹

It is ghastly. And utterly debilitating to find yourself – an intellectual young woman – struck dumb of logic, unable to fend off the disorder that has broken your mind. Because when you lose your mind you lose perhaps the most vital weapon with which anyone can hope to win any battle. Clarity is lost to haze and in this blindness rationality becomes indiscernible, too far off a concept to make a defensive reality. Floundering, that's the word that best evokes that nonsensical, erratic behaviour which unfolds as the minds unravel. Desperate, it seeks something to grip hold of – anything that can restore calm. Composure. Even just stillness. For the battle is truly relentless, unyielding and seemingly interminable.

Ultimately, the division does it. Disorder – be it anorexia, schizophrenia or any other – is heightened if not caused by the existence of two conflicting sides. Your 'self' is divided by black-and-white thinking – extreme binaries which offer no sanctifying space in between.

Sanity/Madness Goodness/Badness Freedom/Capture

Master one and you are struck by its other. Grab hold of that other, slip, lose your grip and realise you have neither. Defeated, you are stranded in an internal, eternal no-man's land. And it is from out of this wasteland that Zelda composes her letters to Scott. Communication was no solution, but writing of that raging 'thing in my head'⁷² clearly offered her the consolation she was in dire need of.

⁷⁰ Fitzgerald, p. 82.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 89.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 96.

I suppose that I will spend the rest of my life torn between the desire to master life and a feeling that it is – au fond – a contemptuous enemy.⁷³

When life becomes the enemy, is it not only natural that death becomes the ally? The only means through which the inward torture can be escaped?

Every day more of me dies with this bitter and incessant beating I am taking.⁷⁴

I want to get better, but can't it seems. And if I could, what's going to take away the thing in my head that sees so clearly into the past.⁷⁵

You cannot forget. There is no way to paste over broken pieces without leaving traces of the cracks that saw it fall apart. Determination withers. Defeatism closes ranks. Resignation takes hold and you retreat into the belief that you have no value worth saving. The battle has spread. Innocent bystanders have been caught in the assault and whose fault is their suffering, save yours?

You feel an obligation to surrender. To free them. To save them. And you determine your surrender not to be passive. Your lasting wish. This will be *active* withdrawal.

My attitude is simply this. I do not consider it worthwhile to pass any more time in a questionable attempt at remaking a figure that would always be humpbacked.⁷⁶

The same resignation that stole the mind now steels through the body. The battle subsides, seeming to 'settle into a persistent gloom, punctuated by moments of bombastic hysteria.'⁷⁷

I can see no possibility of escape from here. For months [now] I have lived with my sole desire of death.⁷⁸

⁷³ Fitzgerald, p. 153.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 96.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 97.

This desire is not selfish, nor should suicide ever seem so. The *desire for death* is a desire to find the kind of peace which life has proved implausible. Mental health is not as simple as wanting to get better, to appease others or mollify their distress. *If only* it were that simple. *If only* it weren't so intractable. But it is. Anorexia has cast its net over you long before you become aware of the mesh cutting into your flesh. Like rough binder-twine, it only cuts deeper as you begin to thrash in resistance to its pull.

And it knows no bounds. Anorexia pulls tighter until it has squeezed every semblance of life from you. Without an anchor, your skeletal frame is light enough to be dragged by its unremitting pull. And it *does* pull you. It steadily reels you closer to the darkness of its core.

The end. No light. The *only* end in sight.

The room is empty. It seems bigger, stiller, now they've gone. Once too small for two entwined, the limpet girl now lies on a bed too big for one. The duvet sprawled beneath her body is slipping down one side of the bed – the same side her mother slid down from once their limbs were untangled and one became two.

The pillow on which Hugo rested lies abandoned on the floor. The shape of his weight is now nothing more than a hollow crevice, with no body left to fill. Her father no longer sits, yawning, cross-legged in his chair. He's taken the newspaper with him, though he tore off the back page to leave his daughter with the Quick Crossword to try later. And a note scribbled onto the thin, greying paper for *Darling Laetitia*,

*Be good for your Daddy. Keep fighting and come home to us.
Love you millions, darling.*

She pictures her father driving them further away. Her breath quickens and her eyes open. Rolling onto her side, she cradles her knees into her tummy and thinks of her sister. The yellow folds of Tatiana's dress had crumpled between the two sisters as they prepared to part. Tatiana gave Laetitia time to lay her head upon her shoulder, and clasp her fingers behind her neck, willing that she would not let go.

And Tatiana does not – she lets her sister cling and like that she lets her know: She loves her. She will hug and be back for her. *If only* she can hold on. *If only* she will get better, for them if not for her. Yes, it's this pledge – to better herself for *them* that the limpet-girl whispers into her sister's ear.

Tatiana stands back into Shiv's outstretched arm. He is ever-ready to catch her when she falls and she is falling now, though her thumbs are up. His are too, a smile twitching on their lips as Tatiana says, *Be strong Tish, I know you can do this*. She turns to Shiv, who now holds *the thing* in his hands, but he passes the parcel to his Bumble-Bee so that she is the one who straightens the pink ribbon and hands it to her sister.

'Made you this,' Tatiana says, shrugging one shoulder as though her wrapped-up craft is nothing. Shiv takes over, 'It's to remind you, Tish,' he says, giving another nudge to his glasses, 'to remind you how much we all love you.'

Belinda stands up. The time has come. She pushes her chair clear of their pathway and hovers, looking this way, looking that way – looking anyway that is away. But the limpet-girl is determined to look. She must see their faces. She must remember them within the walls of this room, for the memory will soon be her company, alone.

Does she suspect? I wonder if she knows that Things are About to Fall Apart, for she takes time to study the creases at the corners of Hugo's mouth, his face intent on maintaining a lasting smile. Joss's eyes are red. His hands wring the Sports' Section into the tightest of coils as he backs behind their mother.

It's for the best, this mother has been told. She begins to busy herself by rummaging around in her handbag for her daughter's socks and knickers, freshly laundered and blown dry on that windy washing-line. The nurses have offered, but this mother insists. This, she will continue

to do for her daughter. And her limpet is glad. She takes the bundle and lets it tumble over the bed as she raises her head to receive her mother's parting kiss.

When her mother backs away, she finds her daughter weeping. Her father is holding the door open and the siblings begin to pass beneath his arm. Funny, he is perhaps thinking, how it's only in turmoil that we find a way to express what otherwise remains assumed. Love is too often taken for granted and his turn has come to offer it to the lamb he must leave. Her eyes sting as he draws up to her bed. She doesn't know how to look at him. She knows she must be strong, *bee strong*, but she is relying on her father to be stronger. And he is. He pecks a kiss upon the crown of her head, squeezes the bones that used to be her shoulder and folds her into his arms. Holding her to him, he ruffles her curls, smoothens them over and pulls away. The last to leave, it is always hard to leave, his little limpet-lamb.

Daddy, my daddy, how I love you so.

What does Martha see when she returns from escorting the girl's family out? Victory? Or is it defeat she feels as she looks at the girl? She lies flat with her eyes fixed in a glossy stare that doesn't seem to register the presence of the charge-nurse. She scarcely blinks and seems not to breathe. Her hand passes languorously over the ripples of her ribcage, as though she's unconsciously searching for something to hold. To cradle. Finding nothing, she casts this limb astray only to find it brushing the package left by her sister. Without so much as a blink, she pulls this into her chest, curling her knees around the angular package. It remains unopened, but it is hers to hold – a piece of her family which this woman cannot steal from her.

Because, yes, the girl *has* seen Martha. She is just not yet ready to acknowledge her. Martha must move first and she does. She steps into the line of the girl's gaze and, finding her eyes

refusing to blink, Martha levels her face so that the girl is watching as she adjusts her features into an appeal.

But the girl can make little sense of the snatches she hears. It's as though one of her naughty brothers has been playing with the remote. Has Joss pressed mute or is Hugo just teasing her by lowering the volume? Not even Martha's dark lips reveal the code, for they too have slowed to a rate which makes the communication impossible to fathom. She relents the effort. She resents this woman's intrusion and besides, she is tired. And grateful to find her eyes draw to their own close.

Something nudges my shoulder. I open my eyes to see Martha's face. When did she get so close? I blink and she says, 'You know how things work, Tish: have your snack, *then* see your family. What part of that wasn't clear?'

Pressing her knuckles into the carpet, Martha steadies herself onto her knees. I blink, she says, 'What message would it send to you if we reward that *kind of behaviour*?'

Blink.

'The *trouble* is Tish, if you don't follow your Care-Plan, then you can't expect to be rewarded with privileges like seeing your family.'

Blink.

'What would be the *good* of that?'

Blink. Blink.

'You *must* understand, Tish, this is about doing the *right* thing. You were warned: Drink your Ensure or have it through the tube. A simple choice, Tish, one I gave you plenty of opportunity to make for yourself.'

Blink. Blink. Blank.

‘Haven’t you got *anything* to say for yourself? Tish, are you even listening to me?’

Blink. Blink. Blank.

‘*Fine*. Well, I guess you *chose* the tube, Tish. So I’ll go now and get your feed ready. I don’t know. What did you expect?’

Blink. Blink. Blank.

‘You know, Tish, this isn’t easy for me either. You can hate me – but I don’t take any pleasure from seeing you suffer. But...never mind, right now all that matters is we get that feed into you, ok?’

I blink, she sighs. She leaves.

Would speaking have helped? I wonder, would it have altered the chain of events that were to follow? Do words possess such power? In distress, they lack clarity, however purposefully they are spoken. *My fault* was the sole meaning I took from Martha’s monologue. Like an incantation, the Voice repeated the accusations and deafened me to the appeal which I hear in Martha’s voice now.

If only. If only.

I’d found the strength to speak. I came close and it is perhaps owing to a sensitivity, which I too often overlooked in Martha, that my thwarted efforts were noted. I believe she was relieved to see my eyes falter. Just a flicker that was not sparked by her words, but the slight movement of her body as she made to stand. I did not want her to leave, I realised. I could not cope with the loss of being alone.

Martha hesitates. The wetness of an unspilt tear blurs her outline so I close my eyes and listen to her heels click as she kneels back down. Her brow softens when I open my eyes, she is searching my face and I feel the tear sting as it gathers. I blink and it falls, silently feeling a pathway down my cheek. There is a tranquillity to its journey that seems to placate the

resistance between us. Martha makes the connection tacit, touching my arm, as if she's blessing our détente. We can ill-afford to lose it and I find myself willing that this woman will never let me go.

'It's ok, Tish,' she says, 'it *will* be ok.'

Does she believe it? The alteration of her phrase is so slight, yet the gulf it places between the ok-ness of her promise and the hardship of our present is plain. My outward breath sinks in my chest and I find myself unable to take another.

Did you know, Martha? The tide was changing. The storm was brewing. The butterfly wings were pulsing their dull, leaden beat in my chest. A thumping. A heaving. A knowing. Martha, did you feel the Voice, stirring? Did you hear it, awakening? Or did you just see a girl, breaking?

Martha, you take hold of my shoulders and my hands rise to close around your wrists, like it's me holding you. How pale my skin looks against the radiance of your mahogany skin. Yours shines with the lustre mine lacks. My head tilts and I try to make sense of your expression. Your nose twitches and your pert lips part, the dimples on your cheeks redolent as your mouth yields something between a grimace and a smile. Perhaps it's nothing more than the acknowledgement I am withholding. Or maybe it's just your way of pleading me to hear you as you say, 'Tish, it's ok, we can fix all of this, hey?'

Why did you have to say that? Martha, your words sever the thread holding us together so that it's my turn to plead. My fingers begin to work at your skin, as though I can knead you into a retraction, Martha. I *need* you to retreat.

You do not. Instead you say, 'We can fix all of this by feeding you, Tish.'

No

Just Stop.

You do not.

'Did you hear me Tish? Everything will be ok if you let us feed you.'

No

Just Stop

You do not.

‘That’s why the tube’s in place, Tish. Like Dr Miller said, it’s a safety net. There to fix times like this.’

Fix this?

How can you *fix* me?

Bad

I am, I am

Unworthy of the sustenance that makes life *living*.

A shell

I am, I am

Hollow as a limpet cast from its rock,

I am

Drifting weightlessly across the ocean floor.

Fix me?

No

Feed me?

No

How could you *possibly* fill this?

Gaping void in me.

‘Tish? Open your eyes.’

No.

My head shakes. It swings from side to side as my fingers begin to tremble and tussle against the shackles that Martha’s grip has become. Not holding me.

No

She is holding me down. I am like a butterfly that *won’t* be pinned into place. Still, Martha says, ‘Tish, you *need* to keep still.’

No

‘Please, Tish, just keep still.’

No

‘Tish, please, I *need* you to calm down.’

No

‘Can I have some help in here?’

Martha pulls our bodies sideways. Throwing her arm to the wall, she strikes the alarm that now rings. How it howls, triggering my hmmm-ing and the renewal of her begging, ‘Come back to me, Tish.’ But she’s looking at the door, when Tish is right here, *Martha, why can’t you ever see me?*

‘Tish, *stop* fighting me. I *need* you to stay still, please.’

No. I need *you* to let me go.

Slip away.

‘*Tish!*’ Martha’s scream is so sharp that I look and I see. The whites of her eyes are round and glossy, slick with a shine that is stark against dark pupils. Jet-black. They slice through me so that my eyes dip down to watch her lips, but her voice is too quiet, *Martha, I can’t hear you.* The Voice is too loud. It is drowning your voice in a flood with a current too strong for me to resist.

Don’t let her near you.

Don’t let her feed.

Don’t you see?

Not fix you.

No

She is trying to fool you.

Not here to save you.

NO

She is

Out to Get Me.

My whimper becomes a moan. My body begins to writhe. It rocks and Martha's shackles tighten into rusty chains that scratch my flesh, my wound, my arm. She hurts my harm and so I wail. But she grips on and so I know: she *is* the enemy. Yes, she is *Out to Get Me* and *I am* caught. *I am* so suddenly revolted by the union which has locked our limbs together, that my fingers splay. Like a vice, they flay open and drop her arms. My shoulders shrug, my body writhes and then it dies. Just like that, it freezes and I am still as a statue that will not be moved.

We are both taken by surprise. Is it over, we wonder? Or is this just the eye of the storm – a reprieve that will last only as long as the lightning takes to rupture the clouds? I touch Martha's arm and am impelled with new ferocity that is fuelled by the Voice. My limbs are contorting now – I am bending to its will, for it is the *only* way to ease the pain. It throbs and I thrash. It throbs and I am thrown headlong into the tide, my thoughts lashing like waves.

Wave on wave, they pummel, they pound until I am struck by the thought of you, Joss. I see you growing up. Baby to boy, small to tall, chub to slender. I see you casting aside those goalie gloves you sported for so long, as you reach for a mobile phone which will connect you to a world beyond the shelter of our own. Too soon, Joss, there is no rush. This wilderness is better at taking than it is at giving and you must be ready. Hugo, don't swim too fast away. Your strokes are bold but there remains a timidity to your curiosity that I feel as acutely as if it were my own. So alike we are, and I worry, *these waves*. I worry, *these waves* do make hard work and we are stronger together, my brothers, my boys.

Wave on wave, these thoughts ebb, they gather, they grow. They flow anew and now it's you, Tatiana. I see you buzzing above the splashes my body makes of these waters. How funny that one sister should fly so well over the same current in which her sister cannot so much as tread water? But you do, Tatiana, you soar with that elegance which is yours and I am pained only to see a tremor of reluctance clip the lace of your wings. You seem unwilling to leave me and I am afraid to lose you. But a bumble-bee hasn't the strength to carry another and you must fly on, my sister, and trust that your little sister will relish every moment in which she can see your horizons expand and your own family grow.

Wave on wave, the current carries me away from our past, Daddy, where did it go? Where is that battered vehicle in which we'd roam together on a Sunday evening? *Wave on wave*, I see

you buttoning my coat over my pink nightie, waiting while I tuck my blankie beneath my arm, before pulling me snugly onto your lap. My bathed feet are bare beneath my wellies and they dangle and move with the bumpiness of the sand tracks. But, sandwiched between your body and the steering wheel, I am happy, Daddy. *I am, I am* so content to watch your finger point out the shapes the clouds make of the sky. *It is ours*, you tell me, *Darling, never forget your daddy telling you to look up at the sky.*

Wave on wave, a flare of white and the sea throws the next wave against the shingle. It roars, it breaks, it withdraws and it's you, Mummy, I crave with each wave that rolls beneath me. Perhaps a baby will always seek comfort from the arms which first bore it. You carried me for so long, yet in an instant the tide has swept me from you and I long only to swim back. To latch back onto your body and begin again. Can I, Mummy? Your baby deserved a brighter future than I have given her and with this loss my body is now rocking, back and forth on this hospital bed. The alarms howl, but it's the waves I hear. *Wave on wave*. They crash, they drag. They gather, they grow. They crash, they drag. They gather, they grow and I am taken by this tide. My body is yielding to its pull with each flash I see of your pain, Mummy. It shines through those blue eyes you gave me, glowing like beacons that guide me back to the shore – to you, Mummy, can you reach me?

Wave on wave. The tide repels me and its current is strong when I am weak. Daddy, it's dragging me closer towards the surest solution. And the nearer I get, the clearer it dawns – it is the *only* solution in sight and now I hear you, Mummy. Your voice rises above the waves as you ask me,

Why, darling, I just don't understand?

You knew we were coming.

Bewilderment is the fresh wave that rolls your question along. Your tongue is now so stung that I find myself flinching away before you even say,

Darling, are we not enough for you?

Enough. No more. Mummy, your daughter I no longer embody. Her strength I no longer possess. I have sapped her of spirit and left her with a body that is hollow of hope. Mummy, I

will give this shell to the tide and seek no rescue from the end it is carrying me towards. A haven, Daddy, it holds both the promise of your freedom and the tranquillity of my peace.

By the time the nurses come running into Room Two, armed with the medication to calm her, the hands to still her and the syringe to feed her, it is too late. Things have Fallen Apart. The limpet girl lies on her bed, wide-eyed, unblinking and unthinking. No butterfly wings are beating. The storm has passed. The danger is spent. The damage is done. Only the wreckage remains. The tube no longer anchors her to life, for she has ripped it from her nose. Her body heaved and her throat retched as the wrenching turned pain to nausea. But the slippery line slithered through her body, sliding out her nose so seamlessly that it seemed to hurl itself onto the carpet where it lays strewn now, loosely coiled, like her limbs, limply lying around her body.

It was not a safety net, you see. It proved no friend. It abused her mind and soiled her body, leaving her no more than a spoiled shape that is barely a ripple on the bed. Once too small for two entwined, this bed is far too big for one lamb, who has lost its shepherd. No bedroom light shines a pathway back to her flock. Her parents sleep in darkness, you see, and though she is grieved, she is also relieved. For the darkness is the blessing she has long sought in order to relinquish her search to find her way back to them.

And so she settles herself into the silence. No Voice torments her. No nurse disturbs her and no tube invades her. They have left her, she believes, they will no longer try to save her. Their surrender is a sign that they know, as truly as she believes, that she is underserving of love and unworthy of life. Turning onto her side, she pulls the blanket over her, knowing sleep will soon claim her. Forever she will slumber and so she closes her eyes and feels peace spread through her. She need not strive to remember it. They will not go on fighting her for it. This freedom is hers. She truly believes, this peace will never be stolen from her.

If only, If only

Things did not, quite, work out like that.

[Diary Extract]

Dear Dr Miller,

I decided I'd never be able to find the words to tell you how I feel, so writing was the only way. I don't know how to describe it, other than to say that there's this dull, constant pain inside me. It's relentless, exhausting and overwhelming. And growing so excruciating that I can't bear it anymore. I just can't and I'm sorry. I wish I could be stronger, but I can't. I can't. All I want now is for you to let me die, please. I have thought of nothing else and see no other way to end this. It's the best outcome, for everyone. Pain and misery is all I cause my family and I love them too much to make them suffer any longer. They deserve the happiness I deny them, just by being. By breathing. Dr Miller, they love me too much to abandon me, so you must let me do it for them.

Please, Dr Miller. I grieve the very day they brought their baby Laetitia into the world and carried her into their home, wondering who she'd grow into. Their dreams, all that potential wrapped up in a swaddling blanket, I destroyed. I've stolen their gift. I've killed their girl and the shell you now see is all that remains. I cannot carry this guilt any longer. So please don't feed me. Stop trying to save me and stop telling me I am worthy of life when I deserve only to die.

You told me that you'd fight for me until I was ready to fight for myself. But I am not now and won't ever be ready. You promised me that you'd make sure I never felt unsafe. But I am trapped in your safety. Don't you see how your protection is smothering me? I am dying in it and want only for it to stop. Please, let me make it stop. I will make it stop, Dr Miller, I am just asking you not to make me fight you for this end anymore.

Know that I will always be sorry, Tish.

It's 2019, nearly six years on, and I find myself drawn to an essay called, 'The Death of the Moth,' written by Virginia Woolf in 1942. Woolf's moth somehow captures the fragility of life in a way I'd thought impossible. With poignant delicacy, she writes of that 'pure bead of life' which runs through us all.⁷⁹ This 'thread of vital life' is so narrow that the balance it measures between life and death is scarcely distinguishable.⁸⁰ It is so slight, in fact, that it seems to take a dicing with death to appreciate the myriad dangers which underpin this complex thing we call life.

Woolf's moth is my butterfly. Though, at the time of my hospitalisation, the vibrancy of its wings undoubtedly resembled the hazier hue of a moth. Their colour has faded. Its beauty is jaded and the future which looked so prosperous seems to have withered into something truly arduous. Woolf spies her 'hay-coloured' moth early one wintry evening:

Soaring round the tree tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it had been cast up into the air; which, after a few moments sank slowly down upon the trees until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it.⁸¹

Busily buzzing about its business, the moth seems unconscious of the encroaching danger. The net has been cast but it is yet to be reeled in and so it flies on. Flitter, it flutters and perhaps its wing brushes the fibres of the mesh, for they beat faster now. 'Fluttering from side to side of the square window pane,' it seems suddenly fuelled by need.⁸²

Warmth glows within. The room is imbued with shadowy light flickering from the hearth. Bodies are draped cosily in armchairs. The night may be cold but the window is closed. They are warm, they are together and they are content. The moth longs for this tranquillity, so dearly that its 'frail and diminutive body' begins to tremble.⁸³ Yet, you shan't see it so much

⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Death of the Moth' in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, (London: Read Books Ltd, 2012), p. 40.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸³ *ibid.*

as quiver, for the vibration appears nothing more than its efforts to thrash a way through the window pane. It is a barrier it will be unable to overcome and perhaps this truth is beginning to dawn, for there is a kind of wilted desperation to the struggle of its agitated legs. And, roused to pity by the very ‘helplessness of his attitude,’ Woolf writes.⁸⁴

One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom.⁸⁵

The effort is futile. The moth ‘struggles in vain.’⁸⁶ No matter the force of its flutter, it knows, as surely as we, the cruel reality: those pummelling wings are but a faint tapping on the glass. The window is impervious to its touch and the insiders utterly unconscious of its existence. ‘Against a power of such magnitude,’ Woolf asks plainly, what chance does it have?⁸⁷

If only. If only their chatter would cease and their heads would turn from the fire to the sound of the moth, knocking. But it should know better. In a world as wide and fast as our own, you must shout loud to be heard. And its beat is but feeble and so it’s no wonder it goes unheard. Why should those insiders hear it? And, even should they spy it, who could blame them for looking swiftly away? Distress is unsightly. I mean, what right does such an ‘insignificant creature’ have to intrude upon the peace others have laboured to create?⁸⁸

The thought of all that life might have been.
Nothing, I knew, had any chance against death.⁸⁹

Its wings cease to thrash. ‘The unmistakable tokens of death showed now.’⁹⁰ The window latch remains locked against it and – how could we forget? – that net which was cast over it? Death now reels it in and, almost willingly, the moth succumbs to its pull.

The insignificant creature now knew death.⁹¹

⁸⁴ Woolf, p. 41.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

The moth no longer wants to fight for a place in a world that seems to consider it unworthy of life. After all, it is 'little or nothing' at all, and so it feels only the weight of exhaustion now. It feels only a need to embrace the ally others seem so sure is the enemy. To the moth, it is not. The conditions have changed, you see. Its values have reversed. Its battle for life has become a victory in death.

The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff.

The struggle was over.⁹²

⁹² Woolf, p. 42.

Hospital Care Plan - Laetitia Goodchild (09/10/1991)

Risk Level: High.

Physical Risk: Bed-rest, constant.

Obs Level: Red - 2:1 (One nurse, Arm's Reach; Second, Within Eyesight)

Laetitia was re-assessed under the Mental Health Act 1983 due to her escalating risk as an informal patient. Laetitia was placed on a Section 3. Prior to this, Laetitia was assessed but remained an informal patient. The latest assessment was called due to a number of escalating risk factors. This included two absconsions from hospital, one resulting in restraint by staff in the hospital grounds and another where a distressed member of public bought Laetitia back to the ward. Laetitia has expressed increasing suicidal intent, both thoughts and plans and reported this as motivation for her absconsion. Laetitia's self-harm has escalated in frequency and extent, involving restraint to make her stop.

Since Laetitia was placed on Section 3, she has been non-compliant with her meal plan and has frequently pulled out her NG tube. Following this, staff attempted to encourage Laetitia to manage an oral diet of Ensure supplement drinks, however she continually refused and was unable to

manage Ensure or water. An NG tube was therefore passed again under restraint as Laetitia was resistant to this. Laetitia later pulled this NG tube out. Dr Miller has written a management plan regarding Laetitia's NG Tube and any restraint that may be needed in order to pass the tube, to give feed or medication.

Laetitia remains a high absconsion risk and has been advised that should this continue, the hospital will be forced to consider transferring her to a secure unit. Dr Miller is keen for this to be avoided, but has had to express this to Laetitia as a possible option. She remains on 2:1 Observations during the day, when access to the hospital requires the doors to be temporarily unlocked. One nurse on Constant A observations (within arm's length) and one nurse on Constant B, (within eyesight - chair to be positioned in doorway of her room at all times). At night, when hospital is locked down, Laetitia's Observations to be 1:1 (Constant A, within arm's length) ONLY if Laetitia is deemed by Staff Nurse to be appropriately settled.

Restraint agreed for certain situations, including:

1. If Laetitia attempts to abscond from the hospital.
2. If Laetitia needs a NG tube re-inserted and is resistant to this.
3. If Laetitia needs a NG tube-feed and is resistant to this.
4. If Laetitia refuses to allow staff to take her physical observations and is deemed critical by nurse in charge.
5. If Laetitia requires sedation and is refusing to accept this.

Staff to use control and restraint as a last resort and only when absolutely necessary to maintain safety of patient and staff.

Laetitia to be given PRN sedation when required - either orally or via IM injection.

All staff on observations with Laetitia MUST WEAR A PERSONAL ALARM at all times.

Staff to comply with Hospital policy restraint techniques (Managing Violence and Aggression course) Staff to encourage Laetitia to use self-harm techniques agreed by Dr Miller, intention is to stop her scratching by offering lesser alternatives - Laetitia is allowed elastic bands and ice cubes - staff not to intervene in her self-harm (agreed by Dr Miller) unless excessive blood is drawn, in which case restraint is to be exercised.

For insertion of the NG Tube and administering of the feed - Five nurses minimum required. Team to discuss their specific roles prior to the intervention.

1. Person to hold head of patient.
2. Person to hold feet/legs
3. 2xPersons to hold arms
4. Person to insert tube and administer feed.

Staff to give Laetitia reassurance throughout any restraint. The rationale behind the procedure should be fully explained to Laetitia, as should her rights as stated in Mental Health Act. Staff should attempt to maintain Laetitia's dignity where possible. Staff must adhere to use holds appropriate to MVA training and must use reasonable force at all times.

Laetitia's parents have been informed of current state of crisis intervention. Staff to contact parents in emergency or if Laetitia deteriorates. Next of kin is father - Harry Goodchild. Copy of this Care Plan has been given to patient but no signature obtained due to her current level of distress. Laetitia to be read plan when key-worker feels Laetitia's imminent risk is deemed to be less critical.

It is conquerable.

E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stele.

And so we came forth, and once again beheld the stars.

William Styron ⁹³

⁹³ Styron, p. 85.

The office was bare. Perhaps that's why it seemed so big. A computer desk stood under the only window, with a swivel chair tucked beneath the plywood surface. Other than a clunky keyboard and ceramic pot – boasting a handful of chewed pens – there were no signs of life to speak of. No pile of files, diary, photo-frames or Thank-You cards. Just a pair of digital scales in the far corner and two grey armchairs, cushioned in plastic lamination, which yielded little comfort as I perched myself onto the very edge.

Melissa suggested I make myself more comfortable, but comfort was not the object of this meeting and she did not push. The clock on the wall was ticking and so we moved on. It is 2018, five years after my final discharge, and I was at the Norwich Eating-Disorders Services to meet Melissa, my latest care-coordinator. You have to keep up. Staff turnover is quick – a revolving door, in fact, and Melissa has made her impermanence plain from her reluctance to get to know me.

In the absence of trained clinicians, I am learning, care-coordinators are doled out like dummies to babies. Their mere presence is instantly effective in appeasing desperate parents. But their title is misleading and the soothing fades as soon as the façade slips. A lack of NHS resources mean that there is no 'care' for Melissa to coordinate and the assurance that *we are recruiting* proves little consolation. In the (long) meantime, Melissa is bridging the gap (void) by weighing me, documenting my weight-loss and booking me in for a repeat the following week

Full Stop

Boxes ticked, I nod once (many thanks) and hastily scoop up my book-laden bag. I nod twice (au revoir) before rushing off to catch the next bus heading towards the city centre. It will be raining (we are back in Norwich). And, with no umbrella (obviously), I will get wet (naturally). But I will be so relieved to be done, that I won't care that I am drenched, nor that I have wasted another two hours travelling to and from a 'session' that lasts, at best, no more than ten minutes.

That day, I was nervous. We'd hit the two-minute mark, the scales had tipped me firmly out of favour and Melissa, if unsurprised by my weight-loss, was displeased. When I was discharged from hospital, I was placed onto a Community Treatment Order which dictates

that I maintain my weight within a target range three-kilos wide. It remains a goal I seem unable to score, no matter the width of the posts and that afternoon my attempt came about as close as a (any) penalty England depend upon to win their way to a World Cup Final.

‘So, Laetitia, I checked your notes this morning and it says you’re due to have your Rights read to you again. Were you aware of that?’ Melissa tossed her ponytail behind her shoulder and crossed her booted leg, poising her pen in readiness for my answer.

‘But that can’t be right,’ came my wrong kind of answer, ‘I can’t be due again, I’m sure I had them read only the other week?’

Melissa was ready. ‘Like I said, I *checked* your notes, says they were last read in June, by Dr Indra, yes?’

‘Yes, *but* we’re only in July.’ And to me, this is not a long time in between readings of Rights, the literature of which has not changed in the five years I’ve lived under them.

‘Look, Laetitia, I share your frustration, they’re quite long-winded, aren’t they? But there really isn’t any choice. It’s a legal requirement, I’m *afraid*.’

‘No, I’m not frustrated,’ *I’m afraid, I’m afraid*, ‘I just find them really distressing.’

‘I *understand*,’ she glanced at the clock. It ticked, she said, ‘But the trouble is, it’s a *legal* requirement.’

‘You said that, but isn’t it my “right” to say I’d rather *not* have my Rights read *again*?’

‘Look Laetitia, let me be completely straight with you,’ Melissa edged forwards in her chair, ‘If you refuse today, I’ll have no choice but to document it as Non-Compliance. And think about it, a “Refusal” at something as trivial as this wouldn’t look good at your upcoming tribunal, now would it? It’s booked for next month, isn’t it?’

It is

She had me.

‘Besides, if we don’t read them today, then your new psychiatrist (there is always a *new* psychiatrist) will just have to do it with you when you meet him next week. And,’ she sighed, ‘I don’t know,’ she paused, ‘I’m sure you’ve got more important things you’d like to talk to him about. Would be a shame, wouldn’t it, to waste that time when we could just get it over and done with now?’

*It would
She had me
Backed into a corner.*

‘So what’s it to be, Laetitia: Now or then?’

Was it my fault? Should I have been firmer in my warning, clearer with the reasons behind my resistance? I am not an easy patient and Melissa is (mostly) a patient woman. That day, however, she was quick to assume that this belligerent anorectic merely needed a Jolly-Good Slapping. And, in turn, this anorectic failed to conjure the courage needed to correct her. Had she read my case notes, I suspect Melissa wouldn’t have persevered. I suspect she’d have put a ready tick in the ‘Refused’ box and breathed us both a sigh of relief.

She did not.

‘Laetitia,’ Melissa began to read, ‘You’re currently being held on a Community Treatment Order, under section 17A of the Mental Health Act. This is in place because your Responsible Clinician believes you are well enough to leave hospital but is concerned you may need to be admitted again at short notice.’ Melissa glanced up from the documents on her lap and said, ‘You do know who your Responsible Clinician is, don’t you, Laetitia?’

‘Yes,’ I said, eyes closed, head bowed. ‘Dr Miller.’

‘Dr Who? No, um... It’s Dr Malik. Dr Silva’s replacement, remember?’

Remember, Remember

How could I forget?

That time had stolen you from me, Dr Miller. The tide had swept me away yet there I was, feeling myself back there as plainly as I felt the loss of finding myself without you. Dr Miller, you were my Responsible Clinician and how safe did I feel in your care? You were the harness that was not there to restrain me, but to catch me – to hold me safe should the tide swell and once again engulf me.

You will never have to fight this on your own, Tish, I promise.

You promised, Dr Miller, but where were you? I was alone. *I am, I am* so alone and exposed that I found my toes clenching, as though they could fend off the mere thought of yours scrunching. I closed my eyes, Melissa read on:

‘If you are recalled to hospital, you can be detained there, against your will, for up to 72 hours, whilst arrangements are made for your assessment...’

My hand flew to my cheek, as though it expected to find the tube strapped there. When I returned it to my lap, I saw the hairband on my wrist. I pulled off a loose strand of hair coiled about the elastic and then stretched the band back. Tautened, it cut into my skin until *ping*, I fired it back. Melissa pressed on. *Ping*, I repeated the pull, the ping. The pull, the ping.

Ping

Ping

‘If you fail to keep your conditions, your Responsible Clinician has the right to consider your immediate recall to hospital...’

Each ping, a pang. Flash, a reminder:

Dark room, closed curtains, locked windows

No air, No light

Pacing, pacing, pacing

Ping-Ping

Ping

‘Right,’ Martha is Less Than Impressed, ‘that’s enough, hand those bands over, Tish. All of them, *now*. The whole point is to *stop* you drawing blood. Penny, take them away from her, look Tish, huh? You’re getting blood everywhere. Just stop.’

Stop, Melissa, why won’t you just stop?

She did not. She paused only as she broke her incantation to say, ‘If there’s any words you don’t understand, just stop me, ok Laetitia? Can be a bit complicated, this legal jargon, I’m afraid.’

Afraid, Afraid. I was afraid of you taking me back there, Melissa. You were leading me back into the darkness of Room Two with no plan as to how to pull me back. Memory is a dangerous current and I have learnt to be wary of it, but you seemed oblivious, Melissa. How couldn’t you see? My very vulnerability?

My eyes were wet, my forehead damp. I blinked and blinked, but still the tears stung. They gathered. They spilt. They glided silently down my cheeks, with timidity at first and then with a flow. Salty as the sea, they slipped between my lips. Down, these drips now dropped into my lap but still you didn’t see, Melissa. My past. *The pressure, the pain.*

Remember, Remember

How could I forget?

‘You have the right to refuse treatment, but you should be aware that it will be documented as non-compliance and, should it go against your conditions, then your

Responsible Clinician has the right to use your refusal as evidence in a tribunal as grounds for your need to be detained...?’

That’s when I saw it. The red scar on the inside of my wrist that is *little or nothing* more than a suggestion. But it was there, like an invitation awaiting my response. Partial remembrance is full of uncertainty and my fingers seemed timid – wistful even – as they began to reintroduce themselves to the history that mark is proof of. With a will of their own they began to rub at the darkened pigment, and I wondered, were they trying to erase the discolouration? Or could the blemish only be deepened, its colour darkened? Yes, my fingers grew with urgency, fingertips turning inwards so that nails now scratched skin.

Scratching, Scratching

Pacing, Pacing

Dark room, closed curtains, locked windows

Wrestling bodies

No air, No light

And then you, Dr Miller. A flash of your face lit my darkness. It yielded only a flicker but I saw you, as plainly as I saw you that day my family was stolen from me. Martha had fled to prepare my feed, leaving Belinda to guard the door. But it was propped wide and who should I spy walking by? You, Dr Miller, do you remember?

If only, If only

How could I forget?

Your tie was hanging low beneath your top button. It was undone. One side of your shirt had come untucked at the front and you lacked a jacket to conceal it. It was late. The sun had given into the moon and some of the night-staff had begun to gather in the office next-door. You looked tired. Your face was flushed a deep shade of red, which was inflamed, perhaps, by the violence of my screams?

Step

Step

Step

You had to walk three steps towards me before you turned away. You took your first and I breathed your name in relief. *Dr Miller*, didn't you hear me? *Dr Miller*, I called louder as you slipped one hand into your pocket, the other covering your mouth to catch your cough. You kept your eyes lowered and it was like you'd slapped me clean across the cheek. *Dr Miller*, was this your way of showing me you weren't infallible? You warned me not to place you on a pedestal but desperation does this. It makes us cling to what little hope we have and I clung to you, *Dr Miller*, believing you were the *only* person left who could save me.

Step

Step

You took your second step and my whisper swelled into a whimper that fast became a wailing. Why couldn't you hear me, *Dr Miller*? Why were you so hasty to walk away when only one step stood between me and the freedom the corridor gave you to turn your back on me? *Dr Miller*, I screamed and for a split second I thought you'd give me your gaze. You did not. You would not. Your look was for Belinda and the nod you passed her seemed to release her, for she abandoned her post by the door and drew up to the bed. I shouted louder and her arms rushed faster to catch mine. *Stop Tish, please, it's ok, its ok, I've got you*, she said, as though she was speaking for you, *Dr Miller*. Is that the message your nod had sent her? *Take her, Belinda, do whatever it takes to keep that girl alive.*

Step

Step

Step

Gone. There were no steps left to tread. You disappeared, leaving me to make sense of the fumbled sounds of the handle as you tried the office door. The door swung open, amplifying the voices of those nurses inside. Their hissing tones died and I figured you'd shut the door behind you. But you hadn't, had you? It was just you, *Dr Miller*, they turned to you for direction as singly as I looked to you for protection. But if they were relieved by your presence, I was drowning in your absence.

Seconds became minutes. But still my screams would not stop. Belinda pulled my hands from my head and held them on the bed between us, her body rocking with mine as she begged me to, ‘Stop, Tish, he’s not coming sweetheart, you need to stop screaming.’

But how could I, Belinda? What hope had I? *There was no light, there was no air* and so I screamed on. And on as Belinda spread her palm over my mouth, smothering my breath as her other hand cupped the back of my neck. I tried to pull back, but found myself locked by the pressure of her gag. I gasped, *no air*. I coughed, *no air*. I gasped anew and Belinda withdrew. Her hands moved to cover my ears, ‘Oh Tish, I’m so sorry,’ she said, ‘I just don’t know what to do, please just stop.’

No

Please, Please

Don’t do this. Don’t feed me.

It will kill me, Dr Miller, how this is killing me.

A procession of nurses file into the room. The bodies of men and women *Out to Get Me*. Here to feed me but I will *not* be touched. I will *not* be fed and so I steel myself as they approach the bed. They grab, I pull back. They grab, I fall back. They grab and I am *got*.

My body slams to the ground. *Thump*, I pound and *pound* my fist into the carpet until my pummel is smothered by the cover of another’s palm. It locks my fist to the floor so that I can but slam my forehead, *thump*. I *thump*, wetness stringing from my mouth as my lips part to relinquish a scream. *Dr Miller*, I scream your name again, *Dr Miller*, why is it in vain?

Big-Man steps forwards. He wraps his body around mine. He scoops it up and carries kicking legs to the chair. He puts me down in my father's chair and pushes my body against the back as he slides himself behind. His hands tie around my tummy, locking me into an embrace that makes me wail. My limbs flail, my head lurches back and one leg is taken. Another body presses its weight against my thigh but, *who are you to do this to me?* Her hair slips back and Belinda's face is revealed. Not holding me, *No*, Belinda is *holding me down*. She is a *traitor* and now *I hate her*. *Do you hear me? I will never let you feed me.*

My screams subside. I cannot thrash. I cannot move. A sob breaks through. *Wave on wave*, defeat floods through me. *I am* caught. *I am* a butterfly pinned to a board, my wings stilled by the pierce of a needle and *yes*, here she comes. *The Ultimate Evil*. Martha steps forward and I am cast into the darkness of her shadow as she unburdens her arms of the weapons to feed me. She lays them on the bed and snaps on a second glove. The latex is so bright a blue against her dark skin. It is *not* right. Her fingers tremble. They fumble as they slip a pH strip from the cylinder. The syringe rattles against the edge of the plastic pallet until she stills it, pins the tube beneath her thumb and steps forwards.

Step

A fisherwoman, Martha is drawing in the line of her net and *I am* her prey. *I am* caught, wide-eyed with terror as I watch her lubricate the tip. She squirts too much gel and so Kate stands to hold the tube while Martha wipes the excess onto the duvet. She closes her eyes, Kate squeezes her shoulder, 'Ok?' Kate whispers. Martha's answer is affirmative. She is ready, she knows she must be steady and so she is bolder with her next step.

Step

Kate sinks back onto her knees and crawls towards me. She nudges my left-leg's jailor aside so that she can be the one to hold it. And she does. She squeezes my thigh with pressure that is smooth and consistent. She is there and the sight of her is enough to make me whimper. I peep into her eyes and begin to weep as she says, 'Tish, we *have* to do this, so please don't fight us, ok? We don't want to hurt you.'

Step

Martha pauses. Her fingers struggle to grip the slippery tip of the tube. But Kate turns my cheek towards her as she says, ‘Listen, this is us fighting alongside you, ok? “However hard you fight us, Tish, we will fight harder to keep you alive. Whatever it takes, Tish, I promise we will keep you safe.” Do you remember, Tish, Dr Miller telling you that?’

Remember, Remember
How could I forget?

I whimper, I weep. I wonder, where are you? *Dr Miller, I need you to take my pain, to make it stop.* ‘Please just stop,’ I say. I do, I plead for them to stop. ‘Don’t do this,’ I say, I scream so loud that Penny’s hand slackens its grip and I turn to face her. Her eyes are red and swollen and shrink from mine as Big-Man says from behind, ‘Penny, you need to be taking hold of her forehead. Like that, yes, and keep your other hand on her chin. Martha needs her to be still.’

No, Penny, please, I need you more. But Penny’s palm spreads across my forehead with pressure that is matched by her fingers buckling under my chin. And, like this, *I am* caught. Like this, *I am* frozen, watching and waiting for an eternity to pass before Martha takes her final step forwards.

Step

She coughs and clears her throat of the last dregs of doubt. *No doubt* this was the *right* thing to do. And so no further falter will alter the course of her tongue as it speaks that which *must* be said. *I’m afraid, I’m afraid.* This *must* be done.

‘Under Section Three of the Mental Health Act, we have the right to pass this NG-tube. Dr Miller has prescribed a feed of 200mls of bolus Ensure, and 50mls flush. With or without your consent, Tish, but I’m advising you to stay still. We don’t want to hurt you. We are doing this for your own good.’

The tube is cold against my skin. The tip is wet with gel that prods against my nostril. Struggling to find entry, it paints its gloss across my cheek as I wrestle against it. Hands tighten their grip. The tip catches my nostril and that's when my body stiffens. As if stunned, I am stilled for a second only. But it is time enough for the slippery thread to slither its way inside me. Inner skin is tender and the tip is un-blunted by the gel. It scores a pathway up so high that I think it will pierce through the bridge between my eyes.

I groan. I try to contort, but my body is unable to contract. It is not my own, they have *got* me and are not willing to spare me so much as inch as the sewer continues to thread her needle. My breath breaks, *no air*. I splutter, *there is no light*. I gasp, I gulp. Martha says, 'Good girl, that's right Tish, swallow. And again, I need you to swallow the tube down.'

Right, now I know, I must *not* swallow. And so I steel my jaw against the fingers trying to prise my lips open, determined for me to swallow the sips being tipped from a beaker somewhere above. Water splashes, tears leak and swallow, I do. I do *hate* myself for every swallow that follows my splutters. They are flooding me and I am drowning. I am gasping, I am gulping as Kate rubs my throat, inching the tube down as tears bleed from my eyes. The tube no longer rises. It has mastered the hump of my nose and descends more freely through my gullet, right into the pit of my stomach where I feel it embed. This traitor, this tube is like a snake, hibernating in a nest of darkness.

No air

No light

Dr Miller

There is no end in sight

When Martha begins to unthread the guiding wire from the inside of the tube, my body goes limp. I hang in their hands like a rag doll as Martha twists the syringe onto the end of the tube. She draws out what is in and squirts the contents of my stomach into her pallet. The pH strip paints a colour that confirms her right to proceed with the feed and so she wastes no time. She loads her gun, sucking the Ensure from the bottle before connecting the syringe back to the end of the tube. Her thumb hovers over the trigger. She brushes her forehead with her upper arm and looks into my eyes as a scream peals from me. She waits for my cry to die, releases a breath and then she does, Dr Miller, she shoots me with your loaded gun.

You should tell your nurses to warm the Ensure, Dr Miller. They keep it refrigerated and it's the coldness which ensures you feel every inch of its journey through the tube. Cheek, nose, it strikes the back of your throat, sharp as an icicle that burns in your chest as it passes into the cavern of your stomach. Dr Miller, how could you inflate me with life I was unworthy of living? You bloated me like a balloon ready to burst into celebration. But there'd be no applause. The nurses seemed reluctant to so much as allude to my defeat.

Martha took a step backwards, but it was Kate who broke the silence, 'Diazepam?'

'Yup,' Martha replied, 'Diazepam's gone through, should start kicking in. So you can relax, Tish, we're all done here.'

They were done. They'd had their way with me. Their panting bodies breathed thick, warm relief over my skin. I shivered. Their fingers twitched, easing as they slowly began to retreat, their slackened hands lingering awhile over my skin, lest their retraction trigger a sudden reaction.

They'd get none. The limpet girl was slumped, unblinking and unthinking as they began to give her body back to her, limb by bruised limb. It's funny, how desperately she'd wanted to rid herself of them, yet as they released her, she yearned only to be held. As though she'd learnt that she relied upon the hands of others to hold her together. She was *little or nothing* at all, you see, she was *little or nothing* more than scattered shards of rubble.

Could this girl be me? She seemed so detached from life that it seems impossible to believe a spirit dwelt within her. But it was my body which folded forwards as I slipped onto the floor. I pressed my palms, chest and cheek into the carpet, feeling anchored by its very solidity. And I lay there, unmoved as bodies dispersed and light returned.

Only Penny and Kate stayed. They began to assemble my limbs into a pile which they lifted onto my bed. Tugging the duvet from beneath me, they pulled it over me, save my arms which were theirs now. I seemed to know that they would possess them in the weeks to come, for I did not resist. Penny linked her fingers between mine and leant closer to whisper, 'Tishy, I want you to know I'm sorry, darling. I am. I am so sorry.'

I wonder if Penny knew that I was sorry too, for she smiled as I blinked. She freed an arm and bent to retrieve the parcel which had fallen onto the floor. She lay it on the bed and untethered the pink ribbon. The brown wrapping fell away to reveal a hefty sketchbook. Its pages were thickened by a collage of photos. A patchwork of memories and words stitched together with an intricacy born of sisterly love, alone.

My bumble-bee had saved a page (or two) for herself. There was a Hugo page, a Joss page, another for Shiv, one for each of my parents and countless leaves for my hundreds of wonderful cousins. With one hand still squeezing mine, Penny turned the pages, pausing occasionally to read the words aloud. A murmur, her voice was but a whisper yet somehow it no longer seemed so distant. The words reached me, Tatiana. You kindled in me a desire to respond and look at the testament of life your photo album was proof of.

Penny's page turning came to rest on that photo of all of us siblings. We are sprawled over our gold sofa in a tangle of bodies. Mummy is sandwiched somewhere in between us and her smile is so radiant that it is quite the most beautiful of our five faces. She is looking to the man behind the camera who shares her brood. My father. The shepherd, ever seeking to gather his flock together. Flighty flock that we are, and *listen*, he is no doubt saying, *can you all just bunch up a bit closer? There's a lot of you to squeeze into this photograph.*

And so we clamber closer. We make quite the bundle, though never the orderly kind that assembles in quite the way he would like. There is always one tumbling on top of another. One's eyes will be closed with giggles as a brother's curls tickle the flushed cheeks of another. But no matter, the flock are smiling. They are his. And like this they fit into his frame so that when the camera clicks, it will capture this moment, the spirit of which will last them a lifetime. A lifeline it is to her now, this limpet-lamb, whose eyes glisten as tears begin to blur her view of the photo. So she blinks and blinks again and drinks in all that she sees. All that she needs, the light. There is her light. It is aglow and awaiting her always, as Penny squeezes her hand and reads the last of her father's note aloud:

Laetitia, father and daughter relationships can sometimes be a little difficult, but I need you here by my side to function properly. So take the time you need to get better, darling, but come back to me and your Mummy. One of the four lanterns which shine so brightly in our lives.

*Love you millions my darling,
Daddy*

Alighting

It was not the shouting that did it. It was the alarm. It rang and it rang, drilling, as it too often did, between my eyes. And I was gone. Gone from the therapy room. Gone from Jill, my therapist. Gone from 2018 – the present. I was taken entirely by the past triggered by that alarm, like the walls of Room Two had been pulled down around me and I was locked in. Black, it was so dark. The curtains were shut and the air was stale, as stifling and as sweltering as the sweaty fingers sliding over my skin.

‘Come back to me, Tish,’ someone was calling, distantly. Jill, perhaps. Hands were squeezing my shoulders, shaking me lightly with the return of her voice, ‘Tish, I need you to open your eyes.’

It was Week Six of our Cognitive Analytical Therapy (CAT) and Jill and I had been sitting in a bland consultation room in an out-patient hospital when the alarm had gone off for a patient next door. The building was old, ill-lit and sparsely decorated. But the therapy was new and refreshing and Jill was kind, keenly perceptive and seemed to be warming to me as surely as I was to her. From the get-go, she’d made it clear that her role was not to weigh, measure or monitor my eating disorder. We’d leave that for others to worry about and dedicate our time instead to whatever lay beneath.

‘The point of CAT therapy,’ she explained, ‘is to try and look beyond or beneath your diagnosis. By working together, Tish, I hope we can explore your “history” and create a story that might help us to understand where and why your difficulties began.’ Jill seemed to be offering me a blank page and, I realised, I both needed and wanted her to help me fill it.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ For more on CAT Therapy see: Anthony Ryle and Ian Kerr, *Introducing Cognitive Analytic Therapy: Principles and Practice* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002) in ProQuest <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uea/reader.action?docID=139840>> [accessed January 2019].

‘Can you tell me what just happened?’ Jill was now asking. I blinked and found her outline, her face and then her eyes, blinking wide and worriedly into mine. She pulled my skirt from my fist and laid it over my legs. I wondered, when had it risen? My back ached and my head banged. Jill’s chair was close and her breath had quickened. Her hair looked wind swept, as though she’d physically dragged me out of that tunnel. And perhaps she had, all I could recall was that piercing pulsation of pain, that smothering sense of dread, that *need* to be dead.

In time, it was Jill who told me *what just happened*. For, although it was a precursor to a conversation about hospital in which I was able to speak of the flashback – the alarms and all the shrill panic locked into Room Two – I was not able to explain how it had so suddenly gripped me. It was not the first time the past has stolen me from the present and it would not be the last.

‘Sometimes,’ Jill said later, bringing the letters PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) loosely into the room, ‘when experiences are traumatic, the mind can’t stamp a time onto memories, so when they recur, they have no date which binds them to a specific moment in your past. So they return feeling present. Perhaps some of our job,’ she said, wheeling her chair closer to mine, ‘is to try and document those memories *as* memories. Find a way to accept them as,’ and here, Jill was absolutely clear, ‘only a *part* of your past – a part that doesn’t need to destroy all that was wonderful in your childhood. And a part that doesn’t have to dictate your present, Tish, or your future.’

Why am I writing this? I suppose I feel obliged to admit to the way in which my mental health has slipped in the course of writing this thesis. ‘It’s not surprising, darling,’ my mother has told me, ‘It was bound to be desperately hard.’ Her voice tender, brimming with a pride that felt misplaced, for haven’t I only myself to blame? ‘No, Tish, it’s so important that

people understand. I just wish you didn't have to. I don't know how you keep going. But you are?' She swiftly turned her question into a statement: 'You *are*.'

I am and it is not through obligation, but the strength my mother has given me by reading my work and speaking of it in a way that proves that writing does have the capacity to communicate the kind of distress we would not otherwise dare to share. Hospital separated us and my writing has begun to bridge that gap. She has been shocked, deeply saddened, but also relieved, I believe, to understand that period and see that her daughter is beginning to too.

'You're my little warrior,' my mother texted me soon after that difficult CAT session. I felt a fraud. Warriors don't shy away from the truth and so I decided it was time to be brave and honest with Jill. I hadn't dared tell her about what I was writing, fearing she'd think me foolish for stirring those memories. But she was not horrified, though she was surprised. She soon assured me not to blame myself for struggling to maintain my grip of the past. We cannot forever flee experiences we have encountered, however hard we try to busy our lives against the thought of them. They remain threatening for as long as they lurk in a hidden and so haunted corner of our consciousness. And, just as speaking in some way expels those memories – forcing us to find words to express, share and explore them – so too can writing. The words will come out. They must come out and while we cannot control how, we can be ready to catch and thereby soften their blow when they do.

But it is hard to keep going. It is hard to believe myself strong enough to survive the Voice which murmurs on. Recovery is not the Straight and Narrow Route we'd like to believe it is. The battle is ongoing and we cannot predict the trials it will lead us to encounter. For every mile of ground won, there will be slippages and, perhaps, these need to be accepted as an inevitable part of the course. For, when has true victory ever been won without some concession of loss?

But the past can help us with this. Much can be learnt from our experiences, as Jill reminded me, by asking the very question I have wrestled with as I search for some sense of an ending to this book. She was trying to convince me that I could withstand the waves of this relapse and so she was assertive, at first: 'You got through the worst of it back then, Tish. So you *can* get through it again.'

I can't go through that again, I thought. *I would not survive all that again*. But before I managed to speak, Jill rephrased her words into a question which seemed to wilt her previous conviction:

‘How *did* you get through it?’

That question continues to run, unanswered, around my mind. How did I get through that time? How did my life transform from the darkness of Room Two, to the lighter shade I have found now? And how did those backward steps become baby-steps that tentatively began to walk me back home?

And then it hit me. The reason I couldn't find an answer was because the question was not a case of *how* did I get through, but *who* enabled me to get through. Who made my survival possible? Who promised me it was possible to live on, in spite of the Voice, its poisonous words and in spite of the netting in which it had me so ensnared?

And that, Dr Miller, leads me back to you. Hospital may be no remedy. Believe me, it is no solution to an eating – or any other kind of – disorder. Locked doors, restraining hands and feeding tubes cannot fix a problem that runs deeper within you than the fingers of others can prise from you. But, when you are placed into the hands of one who is willing to fight for you, even when you have not the strength or will to save yourself, you are held in the greatest harness a person could ever hope to have.

And so I have decided that a way of finding the ‘closure’ I have evaded ever since I left you, by avoiding any thought of you, Dr Miller, is to write directly to you. CAT therapy does just this. The treatment ends by asking the therapist and patient to write each other a ‘goodbye letter,’ outlining the period through which a dependency is likely to have grown into something that will be hard to relinquish. In doing so, CAT acknowledges the distress encountered when the therapeutic relationship is severed, quite abruptly and quite absolutely. Too often it leaves the patient with a devastating sense of loneliness and loss. And, just like the loss of any other precious relationship needs mourning, the tie between a patient and professional likewise needs acknowledging. At times, I believe, it needs mourning too.

This then, Dr Miller, is my letter to you. It is a testament of what we went through together and it is my acknowledgement of the suffering we endured. Please take this too, as my long overdue thank-you letter to you, for the instrumental and indispensable role you played in – well? Just in keeping me alive.

From day one you were different. Your predecessors saw me as an illness and hung themselves up with medication charts, weight checking and meal planning. They did not need me to speak, only to listen, and obey. They knew the illness better than I, didn't they? And thus, their answers far surpassed the possible scope of my own.

But you? Your patience gave my confidence time to grow. You waited until I was ready to speak and listened attentively when eventually I did. No matter how partial or irrational, you were prepared to tease my answers out and try to untangle me from them. The Voice is callous, cold and manipulative, but you never made me feel any less of a person for it. I was separate from it, you said, never ceasing to remind me that I was just a girl – someone's girl – who needed to invest her trust in someone who would value her until she could discover that worth in herself.

So you asked questions. You wanted to know all about the Laetitia my parents had given life to. You wanted to hear how she had once smiled in that open and ready way every child should know how to, and you learnt that she loved being one of four siblings and had been quite content to spend her early years tucked away in the countryside, with little but hay bales, muddy creeks and animals to play with.

How could I think of this little girl so fondly and loathe the young woman she'd grown into, so absolutely? You wanted to know and I was bewildered by your determination to find an answer. What were you trying to do? Wasn't it enough to know how deeply I despised myself

for destroying her? Starving myself was small compensation and self-harming poor punishment. So why persist with your questions?

Little did I know. I began to tell myself you were trying to allow me to mourn that little girl. But you weren't and neither were you trying to reiterate my need of punishment, as the Voice began to tell me. It was about restoring me to her – giving her back to me in a connection that alone could make our journey forwards possible. And, with this goal in mind, you valued every scattered shard I gave you, collecting each fragment as materials with which you could build a future. This future would seem possible precisely because it was relative to me and so you went on, collating your collage, aiming for something wholesome, if not entirely whole.

From early on you were intrigued by my reading. The nurses – your extended eyes and ears – spotted the heavy tomes of classics, from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens and the Brontes, tucked under my arm as they lead us down to the lounge for Snack Time. The supervisions which followed each meal time were made bearable by those writers. Pure escapism – that's what it was, to lose myself in a narrative world totally unconnected to the distress surrounding me.

So, when I was no longer able to tell you what book I was reading, you were worried. *I'm not really reading*, I said, giving you nothing more specific than a shrug, *I can't seem to concentrate*. You weren't fooled. You knew my concentration has never truly suffered the effects of low body weight and continued to enquire, hoping, perhaps, that the repetition of your questions might inspire me to read again.

But it was precisely this point of wanting which was stopping me. Just like I wanted to eat – I *longed* to eat – I wanted to read. I *loved* to read. But the Voice attaches greed to wanting and so the greatest punishment it can inflict is to deny me that which I long for most – books, food, water, laughter – you name it, the Voice will put a swift stop to it.

And so the pile of books in Room Two stopped growing. My appetite for reading had not diminished, but it had become unacceptable to the Voice. What right did I have to distraction, pleasure, escapism, when my very existence caused nothing but suffering to those I loved most?

No right. I believed I had no right and the only way I can explain this senseless conviction is to call upon the words of a woman who has inspired me to give you my own. She is a writer you gave me, Dr Miller, and she often reminds me of you. There is a likeness between your appreciation of humanity and the suffering peculiar to each of us, and the worlds she so richly – so delicately and so perceptively – creates. This wonderful woman, this prolific and profound writer, is George Eliot.

It came as no surprise to learn that *The Mill on the Floss* is considered George Eliot's most autobiographical novel. This is less to do with the parallels between the heroine's fall from grace and its writer's, than with the language used to express it. The narrative is so sensitively delivered, yet so poignantly candid, that it could only be derived from personal experience.

The story is about Maggie Tulliver, a humble young girl whose idyllic childhood is prematurely interrupted by family crises. With each cruel blow fate deals her, Maggie's sense of herself dwindles further until it is so warped that she seems paralysed by doubt and self-loathing:

Maggie's sense of loneliness and utter privation of joy had deepened. Every affection, every delight the poor child had had was like an aching nerve to her.⁹⁵

Maggie's mental affliction is so acute that it becomes physical. The pain is draining and she begins to fade into a shadow of her former, vivacious self.

No dream-world would satisfy her now. She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life... some key that would enable her to understand, and in understanding endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on The Floss* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 290.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, p. 291.

Life is no longer about living. Each day is an endurance and survival is the most Maggie can hope to achieve. ‘She is barren of comfort.’⁹⁷ The world is inconsistent. People are contrary, indifferent to her suffering and inconsiderate of her pain. They all seem to know ‘the secret of life,’ but where did they find it?⁹⁸ And why are they so unwilling to share it?

At this point of collapse, young Philip walks into Maggie’s life. His reflective and compassionate disposition is well able to recognise the suffering carved onto Maggie’s expressive face:

The pity of it, that a mind like hers should be withering in its very youth, like a young forest-tree, for want of the light and space it was formed to flourish in. Could he not hinder that by persuading her out of her system of privation?⁹⁹

Philip could and does become Maggie’s voice of reason. If she is determined to deprive herself of the final threads of her life, then he is more determined to sew them back together. So, when Maggie tells him, ‘I have given up books,’ he is surprised, but unfazed, reminding her, ‘There are certain things that we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger after them.’¹⁰⁰

But Maggie’s appetite has not diminished, only her belief in her right to satisfy it. ‘No thank you,’ she says, refusing the books he brings her, ‘It would make me fall in love with this world again, as I used to be; it would make me long for a full life.’¹⁰¹

Maggie is afraid. A ‘full life’ promises dreams that won’t necessarily come true. And books would elevate her mind to a height which would only deepen the distance she could fall, again. Philip disagrees. ‘Maggie, you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of your nature.’¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Eliot, p. 290.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 291.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 309.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 313.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 334.

Fight or flight. Isn't it natural to flee when we feel afraid? To seek relief when we feel pain? If escape is defeat, then consider the bravery of those who first seek to endure their distress by numbing it. Maggie is fading, but she is courageous. 'I must wait; this life will not last long.'¹⁰³

Philip is also prepared to wait, but only for as long as it takes for Maggie to see the light. Until then, 'he would be her guardian angel.'¹⁰⁴ He will hold her. He will fight for her and he is unafraid to tell her of his own pain in seeing her suffer. 'Maggie, don't persist in this wilful, senseless privation. It makes me wretched to see you benumbing and cramping your nature in this way.'¹⁰⁵

Philip calls it a 'monomania' and Philip is not wrong.¹⁰⁶ Eliot asks, 'Does not the hunger tower stand as the type of utmost trial to what is human in us?' and Eliot is not wrong.¹⁰⁷ Hunger is a cavity that stretches you to breaking and starving is the torture that snaps you clean in two. It is madness to deprive yourself of life. It is madness to starve yourself of pleasure. But the madness is impossible to see when you are trapped in the midst – the thick, black, impenetrable mist – of it.

To find the light, it takes someone who can see objectively and be compassionate while they share their vision. The blinkers must be removed and the warped perception repaired, but it will take one who is kind, empathetic and patient to do it. But it can be done. And Philip achieves just this with books. He believes in the redemptive power of literature and uses it to open Maggie's mind. It works and Maggie rediscovers not only the life she had lost, but the pleasures which can – and should – enrich it.

Dr Miller, you were Philip and I your Maggie. You had faith when I had none. You were strong when I was weak and you were determined to keep me alive even when I was determined to die. You gave me books and in time I read them. You used them to broaden my mind and in response I began to listen as you told me to accept *the possibility of living*.

¹⁰³ Eliot, p. 313.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 314.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

‘Maggie, you have the wrong ideas of self-conquest.’¹⁰⁸

Punishment offers no victory, you said, it vindicates no one and makes no amends.

‘You can never carry on this self-torture, Maggie.’¹⁰⁹

It is wrong, you said, to believe yourself unworthy of life.

‘Maggie, it is wrong that you should be committing this long suicide.’¹¹⁰

Hold on, you said, and life can go on,

Tish, it *can*.

There is something sustaining in the very agitation that accompanies the first shocks of trouble, just as an acute pain is often a stimulus and produces an excitement which is transient strength.

It is in the slow, changed life that follows, in the time when sorrow has become stale and has no longer an emotive intensity that counteracts its pain, in the time when day follows day in dull expectant sameness and trial is dreary routine – it is then that despair threatens. It is then that the peremptory hunger of the soul is felt.

George Eliot¹¹¹

It is then that the aftermath truly begins.

¹⁰⁸ Eliot, p. 342.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 336.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 281.

The aftermath began that afternoon of the train. Dr Dawson – Kate – appeared out of nowhere. She snatched my wretched body and wrenched it from the bridge wall. I fell, but little more than a metre to the road where I landed sprawled at her feet. The bridge shook us both as the train thundered past. The deafening screech of its wheels smothered my screams before they began to fade away. The world stilled. Reality filled my lungs, choking my breath until I began to howl, quietly at first – just a moan that swelled as my limbs curled me into a ball.

How slight is the line between life and death? A whisper, a thread – it's cruel. Just like that. The train was gone. My hope had died and yet, death had left me alive. I was crushed, but whole and breathing, lying there vowing never to forgive you, Dr Miller. Could you hear me? *Never.*

Three others arrived. Bent over, with their hands on their knees, these men gasped for breath before they began to unpeel me from the road. Fingers ran over my body and found a trickle of blood oozing from my kneecap, grazed palms and a bluish bump to my head. But this was *nothing*, Dr Miller. You had denied me my right to let go, but how could you? Why would you?

Their panting subsided, my sobs continued. My arms lashed as their limbs closed in on mine. Seeking flesh to grab, they took bones instead, picking me up and propping me between them. Like I was a child swinging between the hands of doting parents. But the limpet-girl was not swinging. She was not laughing. She was hanging between her bearers, cuffed like a prisoner, half-carried, half-dragged back to her cell. Her head was bowed, her will was defeated and her father was heading home to her mother without her – without *me*, Dr Miller. Look what you'd stolen from me?

'She tried to jump,' Kate was saying. The hospital doors were locked behind us and I was released into Penny's outstretched arms. She clasped my body into hers and I began to shake. She was so warm and I felt so cold.

‘She tried to jump,’ Kate was *still* saying, ‘The train... the train – it was right there. She tried to jump. Caught her, the bridge wall. She tried to *jump*.’

Kate gave up. Her hand was on the small of my back as Penny cupped my face in front of her own, bidding me, ‘Never, do you hear me, Tish? *Never* do that to me again.’ Her face was pale but her cheeks were flushed and her forehead glistened. Her voice cracked and her sharpness retracted as suddenly as it had risen. Folding me into her body, the two led me back through the ward, into Room Two where they lay me onto my bed.

That’s when they fed me. The tube I’d wrenched out earlier was removed from the floor and in came the procession of nurses. No longer stunned into silence, my mouth stretched to unleash an outpouring of grief. I was wailing, Dr Miller, for what could have been, what had been lost, and all that remained: hatred. I hated you more with every minute that passed in those silent hours that followed. You’d known my wishes and yet you’d chosen to steal my freedom. You’d swollen my belly, bloated me with life and left my soiled body a grotesque symbol only of your victory. How low a blow, Dr Miller. How dare you feed me with life when you knew I had nothing worthy of saving?

Hours passed before there was a knock on the door. It was gentle, unhurried and unharried, for the storm we’d weathered that day had long since petered out. Donna was sitting by my bedside, with her fingers on my flesh. She looked up. I did not. I was not interested in comfort and I wanted no company. Nothing could dull my longing to die and no one could ease my pain.

‘Tish, it’s me, Dr Miller,’ you said, ‘I was wondering if I could come in?’ My eyes narrowed. This visit was unexpected and unusual. I’d never known you to go into a patient’s room before. But there you were, knocking for me.

‘Do you mind if I come in for a bit?’ you asked again, as though my response mattered. But that was your way, was it not? To ask and never assume. But nothing then would have elicited a response from me and so you came in. I listened to your footsteps crossing the small room. I heard the tussle of cards and photos as you passed my wardrobe and I caught the hesitation of your step as you walked by the pile of books on the side table. Each seemed a sudden exposure of the girl I’d once been and I wondered what you’d come for? To gloat over her remains – to prove you’d won and I’d lost?

I would not look at you. I could not so much as turn towards you and so you fitted yourself into my gaze. I tried not to look away. I focused on your hands. They were playing with the end of your tie that was no longer tied, just hanging. There was no need now for your half-hearted efforts at formality. The official sorts that stalked the corridors by day had long since fled home, leaving the length of the night to the nurses and us. And now you.

You just stood there. You seemed reluctant to look at me, or perhaps it was just curiosity? The surroundings revealed something more intimate than my words had? Or was it guilt? You couldn’t look at what you’d reduced me to? Well, I wanted you to look and then I wanted you to look *away*. I wanted you to buckle beneath my pain. You’d made my suffering your problem but, why would you? How could you? You should have been home by now, tucking your two little boys into their beds, reading them a bedtime story, not shuffling awkwardly at the foot of mine. If only you’d let me go, Dr Miller, why could you not just let me go?

When you did look, you did not look away. You held my helpless gaze and your eyes narrowed, not, it seemed, with pity or denial, just in recognition of my turmoil. You held my pain and in your eyes, I saw your acceptance of it – my entitlement to it as well as your entitlement to a share of it. And I saw your suffering, Dr Miller, in the openness of your eyes. You allowed me to read your fear and in doing so you yielded me with a share of yourself that you had long ago invited me to give to you too.

How quick we can be to condemn and how slow to forgive? It was me who looked away. It was too much. Your care was too clear when the Voice needed me to harbour my anger. Bitterness was its last weapon.

*Look what he's done to you.
Don't you dare let him get to you.*

You moved behind Donna and asked her to relinquish her chair so that you could fill it. She was slow to move, unsure, perhaps, whether submitting to your authority was worth the risk of letting me regain possession of my arm.

‘We’ll be ok, Donna,’ you said, ‘thank you. If you could just wait by the door. Penny will stay with us.’

Funny, how well you knew me and how best to tempt me into trusting you, positioning those around you best placed to enlist it. Penny took the hand Donna released, though Penny did not grip my forearm in the vice-like clench of her colleague. Instead, she wriggled the rigidity from my fingers and interlaced them with her own. Her smoothed nails soon began to swirl lulling circles inside my palm.

You sat down and we three stayed there, like that. For how long, I wonder? It felt a forever. There was a peace to it, a tranquillity that was what I had wanted. All I had wanted. The air was no longer heavy, forcing me to inhale life and exhale my ability never to breathe again. You’d taken that burden, not away, but into your hands and in the captivity of your safety, I seemed to have found a regularity of breath that was no longer so arduous. It was just breathing and being, breathing and being.

‘I’m sorry, Tish. I am so sorry.’

Not asking *me* to be sorry, *you* were sorry.

‘What happened this afternoon should never have been possible. You must have been terrified. I will not let it happen again.’

Don't listen to him. I closed my eyes. *Don't you dare listen to him.*

‘Tish, I don’t expect you to say anything. I just need you to know I am here and I know.’

You knew, how hurt I was.

‘I know.’

You knew, how afraid I was.

‘Believe me, Tish. I know.’

You knew, how alone I was.

‘I know, and I am sorry. Sorry that it has come to this.’

You knew, how hard I was fighting. Every fibre of my body was straining to remain resistant, while my mind longed to fall into your safety. I didn’t want to be wrong, but I was. The anger was mine and the coldness I’d seen emanating from you was nothing more than your resolve to keep me alive.

‘I want you to listen,’ you said, ‘for tonight, that’s all. I need you to know that you are safe, Tish. Completely safe. I will not allow you to die. Do you hear me? You can fight as hard as you need, but I will not let you die. I just won’t allow it, Tish. For all the right you think it, I will think it more wrong. And I will wait, that’s what I want you to hear. I will hold you here with us and wait. Through whatever and for however long it takes for you to accept life. D’you hear me, Tish?’

Your voice seemed so quiet, your body so far. I did not nod. But I was listening.

‘Acceptance Tish, that’s all I am asking you to consider. Not action, just acceptance. I need you to accept that our care of you is unconditional. Fight me as hard as you need to, but it will not change that. Unconditional, Tish. It’s time for you to learn that. It is time for you to learn that you are entitled to life. And you are entitled to care. You do not have to prove yourself worthy of it. You do not have to be good enough for it. You have only to accept it.’

I think you wanted me to look at you. I could not. But I was listening.

‘I have only this to ask of you, Tish. Ok?’

Did I nod? I don’t know. But I was listening.

‘I want you to try and open your mind to *the possibility of living*. That’s all. When it comes, and it will – it *will*, Tish – I want you to grab it. Allow yourself to feel it, each fleeting snatch of life and trust in me to make those moments into a reality you can live by. Ok, Tish, do you hear me?’

I did not nod. I could not nod. I did not dare believe you. But I was listening.

‘Trust me, Tish. I am asking you to trust me. Can you do that? Please can you do that for me?’

I nodded. I think I nodded. Because you nodded. I know you nodded too.

I would love to tell you that when morning broke my resistance did too. That I no longer fought those determined to smother me with their care. But disorder is not so easily defeated as that. It is an *ongoing* battle and if we had reached our rocky rock-bottom, little could have prepared me for how exhausting and eventful our eventual climb would be.

But I was not alone. This is what you sought to prove by returning the following day to relay both your Promise and your Plan. You knocked again and waited by the door while Tessa shifted the barrier she’d made with her chair so that you could pass through. You asked her to close the door and wait on the *other* side, giving us some privacy. But Belinda remained by

my bed, one hand holding mine, though she got up as the closing door plunged the room into darkness. Using her spare hand, she reached towards the curtain, but you knew the distress the sun would bring me. It would be a battle we'd face in the future, but it was a future too distant to bear contemplating that first day. 'It's ok, Belinda,' you said, 'let's leave the curtains for today, bedside lamp will do.'

I sat up, biting down on my tongue. *Don't you dare let him fool you. He'll have to try harder than that.* But even as the Voice seethed, I realised my revulsion was to it and not to you. For there was an ease to your voice that was not contrived nor conceited, just genuine, there and true.

'Did you manage any sleep?' you asked. I paused then nodded slightly. You seemed pleased. You scrunched your toes and the leather of your shoes creaked as your mouth opened, closed. It opened, you said, 'Tish, what happened yesterday – it should never have happened. And it should not have been *able* to happen. But it did. We let you down. And we nearly lost you, Tish.'

I flinched against your softness but you were undeterred. 'I'm afraid... It has meant... I mean... well...', you stuttered and I was unnerved. Words so rarely evaded your tongue. 'I am only telling you this because... well, because the only way we can get through this now is to be completely honest with each other. Fighting together, Tish. Do you understand, it's the only way now?'

And so you told me of the pressure you were under to have me transferred to a forensic unit, a secure unit, where they could ensure my safety without question. They had, you all but said, extended powers of restraint, doors that locked, windows that were barred and rooms that were devoid of any kind of furnishing that could be used as ligatures to inflict harm.

You were torn, you said, laying plain the divided pieces of your mind for mine to contemplate. In part, you believed that I needed *that kind of safety*, for my need to die had become too great for you to shield me from. But there was this *other* part of you, you said. You believed this part to be your instinct telling you to hold me there with you and use this as the basis of proving to me that your care was unconditional.

Too many times, you reasoned, I had been handed over by one institution to another, my ‘care’ withdrawn at the first sign of trouble, with little or no explanation. At times, it had been necessary, you said, but more often it had been an injustice you didn’t want to repeat. I had learnt, you said, to expect ‘abandonment’ and await ‘rejection’ in a way that was hindering my trust in the team who were trying to care for me. You understood, you assured me, and the depth of your understanding I did not doubt, for you had made a link back to my school years that I had been unable to recognise.

‘Locked doors aren’t the answer, Tish.’ You believed trust was. And acceptance. Me, accepting your care as unconditional. And you, accepting my need to hurt myself. But whilst you respected that need, you also needed it to stop being the wedge that divided us. It could, you said, unite us in our battle to find a way for me to live on – in spite of it.

Stabilisation was the aim of your plan. Your sole condition – is there not always a condition of sorts? – was that things settle down.

‘Should something like... should you try...,’ you began, seemingly unable to finish. ‘Should you try to take your life like that again, Tish, I will have no option but to let them transfer you. Not to punish you, that’s what I need you to remember. Not because I think you’re bad, or because I am disappointed in you, but because you are ill. Suffering terribly from a severe illness that gives me a duty of care to keep you safe. Unconditionally, Tish. Whatever it takes.’

I would be on Two-to-One Supervision for the foreseeable future, you told me, and I would not leave that room for many months. But, within the confines of those walls, there had to be a level of stability. ‘There *must* be Tish, we can’t give them any leverage to take you away.’

So, we – you no longer spoke of you and me as separate forces – simply couldn’t afford the kind of distressing, messy scenes which gave ammunition to those pressuring you into having me transferred. Messy meant bloody. Messy meant alarms. Messy meant restraint.

‘This is not about denying you your pain, Tish. It’s about helping you find ways to express it which do not endanger your life.’ Ice-cubes and elastic bands must replace

scratching fingers. Blood could be drawn (this you accepted and allowed for), but my blood could not stream in the way that it had gushed. It could not reach that critical point.

‘Stabilisation, Tish, the bare minimum, for now that’s all I’m asking you to accept.’

Your words were of a value to me that I cannot express. You had a way of breaking through the rigid resistance the Voice sought to place as a barrier between us. And your reassurance won each time, because your words were followed closely with actions that proved their sincerity. Yes, you asked me to accept the *possibility of living*, and that was no easy ask, but you returned your condition by making a concession that surprised not only me, but those around me. Weight gain was ceased, temporarily only, of course. But, given that I was on bedrest and bound to that room, you were prepared to forgo my need of nourishment. It was too great an ask, you said, to be forcing health onto the body of one whose mind was not yet ready to accept life, let alone health. And it was too great an ask to continue forcing the nurses into forcing that tube into me, each and every time a meal time reared its ugly head.

Weight gain could wait. Acceptance could not and this was not something which could be wrought with force. You had learnt all too well that restraint would never win against a Voice that would return your force with a resistance of far greater might. But compassion? The Voice had none. Kindness? The Voice was quite without and it was only by building a partnership built of both that you could ever hope to overcome the power the Voice exerted over me.

And in *my* mind? Weight gain meant health. Health meant life. So, if I did not deserve life, I did not deserve the sustenance that kept me alive. It was testament to your courage, however, that you were willing to forgo the criticism of all those professionals who measure progress by weight gain. I’d reached a stage where my weight was critical, but you continued to view it as inconsequential to the stabilisation of my mental health. It was my mind that posed the most enduring threat and so this became your priority. You were determined, I see now, to prove you were not concerned with the ‘illness’ – not the hollow shell my body had become – but with my being. It was *me* who was of value to you. It was me you deemed worthy of saving. It was me who was worthy of living.

So, that second day you told me that the tube would be removed. You made clear that you fully expected it to feature in our battle again – and it would – but only when I’d be ready to accept it as a ‘safety net’ that could help us move forward, not apart. Until then, you consulted The Maudsley Hospital and came to me with a Meal Plan that was the calculated, minimum-daily allowance of fluid my body needed to survive. No solids, just enough syrupy Ensure to ensure I stayed alive. ‘That’s all I’m asking, Tish. For you to accept the absolute minimum it takes for you to survive.’

‘Take your time to think about it,’ you said. ‘We have time and I will wait until you are ready to trust in our willingness to fight this alongside you.’

You stood up to leave. But rather than moving away, you stood still, as if you were holding out for a response. I doubt you expected any, but you can’t have known how greatly I wanted to ask you not to leave. I needed you to know that I believed in you, but lacked the words to tell you. My mouth was open and I tried to speak, but got no further than a stutter. My breath quickened and you waited, just in case. But my lips sealed, my teeth bit down and my nails dug into my palms until you eased my frustration by breaking the silence.

‘It’s ok Tish,’ you said, ‘You know, nothing will alter my opinion of you. I can’t predict what we have ahead of us, but unconditional, Tish. That, I can promise you. And that, *that* I need you to hold on to.’

With that you began to leave. You walked across the room and out of my line of vision. But your footsteps stopped and I wondered why. I couldn’t see you and I hadn’t the energy to turn towards you, so I waited, listening as the wardrobe creaked in its frame. A pause. Then the sound of your footsteps brought you back to my bedside.

‘Is this the Butley Creek you’ve talked about?’ you asked, holding out a photograph for me to see. I nodded and you said you couldn’t quite make out who was who in the line-up of bodies bathing in and painted with thick creek-mud. ‘You?’ you said, pointing to one, chubby little lump caked in mud. I nodded. You smiled, looked closer and said, ‘I’m going to go with... Hugo?’ I nodded. ‘And this one?’

‘Joss, that’s Joss,’ I said, as in, Out Loud and in the Air. You tried not to falter in response to the sound of my voice and I was grateful, for I was as surprised as you.

‘And Tatiana?’ you asked, tentatively now. But there is joy to the thought of a sibling that gave me the voice to tell you that Tatiana was more likely to be fully clothed on the pontoon, taking the photograph. For Tatiana is not so easily inclined to the mud as we.

You smiled and said it was ok. ‘Tish, you know, it’s ok to accept life for them. What I mean is it’s ok to live life for them, just now. If that’s what it takes to accept your existence – to silence that voice telling you that you’re unworthy of life, then I can accept that. One day I’d love for you to be able to live for yourself. But just now, if you need to, live for them. Survive, for them, Tish. That’s all I want for you, to live your life alongside them. So stick with me, ok? And let’s get you back there to them. With them.’

And there you laid the photo to rest against the bedside lamp. And there you left me to them. With them. You left me lying in their peace.

‘Simone de Beauvoir, Tish, have you heard of her?’

You took me by surprise. I’d assumed our session was over. It had stretched long enough to exhaust me back into the pillows and you had stood up, as if to leave. I began propping myself back up, unsure whether this was just a passing question, though I suspected not. Your voice had that slowness that tended to suggest protracted thought. Weeks had passed and I remained in Room Two, but progress had been made and speaking came more easily.

‘Who?’ I asked, more wondering why.

‘Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*?’ you tried again. I shook my head again. ‘No?’ you said, ‘Don’t worry, doesn’t matter. One day, though, I think she will be an important woman for you. She’s a writer – a philosopher, really. Good tendency for over-thinking.’ You allowed your voice to trail away in the comparison you had drawn between this writer and me – your Queen of Over-Thinking.

‘French,’ you went on, ‘has a lot to say about the nature of existence and shows it quite wonderfully in her fiction. There’s a particular book I’d like you to read. When you’re ready. And not before,’ you added, seeing my eyes close. The prospect of *all* we had ahead of us, before I’d be ready to allow myself to read, suddenly felt physically suffocating.

You withdrew, asked me to breathe in, reminded me to breathe out. To focus on you and the here and now. We’d save Beauvoir for another day, but you’d like me to read it. ‘And when you do, let me know. I’d like to know what you think of it.’

With a nod, you handed me back to the care of Pam, and turned away, making to leave. Pam dragged the chair you’d left closer to my bed, sinking herself into it as you stopped by the door, remembering, ‘the book, the particular one I mean, it’s called *The Blood of Others*.’

That’s how you began what this has become. Could you have envisaged then, that your casual suggestion would one day elicit a response from me the length of a book? Perhaps not, though I have no doubt you knew the value I would find in reading the words of all those who dared to impart something of their consciousness into their writing for others to read. Simone de Beauvoir is one such woman. And she is *the* woman you believed could help me to recognise the power guilt has to destroy life, quite literally. And too often, quite irrevocably.

It would be many months later, when we were emerging from the darkness of that room, that I would remember your suggestion and ask my mother to order a copy. Reading, by then, had become a written part of our Battle Plan. My Care Plan stated that, *Tish is to do half an hour of reading in the afternoon*. You made it official, not to force me into reading, but to give my mind the permission it needed to justify the pleasure to the Voice. And it would work. Each book was a baby-step that drew me further out of myself, reconnecting me not only with the writers whose words I was reading, but with the world about which they were writing.

My mother was delighted to be put to task, having become somewhat adept in the art of Amazon. And not just Amazon, but the costly Amazon Prime I seemed to have been conned into, much to the shared delight of my family. Yet, either my mother's technical skills were lacking – which is a definite possibility – or *The Blood of Others* was out of print and uneasy to purchase. But, eventually, the book was shipped over from America, arriving at the hospital many weeks later to the satisfaction of Penny, who burst into my room announcing the arrival of a 'package for you Tishy!' Her footsteps came to a dramatic halt as she used the shelter of my room as an opportunity to – as she was more than wont to – have a *sneaky re-organisation of her person*. This meant a hoiking-up of her navy tights, which, according to their wearer, had a life of their own, dedicated to 'forever pestering me, Tishy. Don't hold none of me in and busy their whole day laddering and slipping down. Drive me *mad*.'

Dress alterations complete, Penny perched onto the edge of my bed, inspecting the package in her hands. 'Now,' she said, 'not to spoil the excitement, but me suspects it's a book.' Penny suspected it was a book and handed the suspected book to me, who suspected much the same. A little tingle fluttered in my tummy as my eyes read my mother's untidy handwriting. A scribbled line had crossed right through our Ferry Farm address, redirecting the postman to The Hospital.

'You open it for me,' I said, swallowing the thought of my mother and handing the package back to Penny. Her bright eyes widened and her eager fingers set to work, yanking at the tape to pull out an ancient copy of '*The Blood of Others?* Lordy,' Penny was frowning. 'Tishy darling, looks like your kind of book: Bloody Miserable. Why can't you read something lighter for a change? Who is this, Simon do Beaver, anyway? Never even heard of him.'

‘It’s a *her*,’ I said, smiling as Penny tutted her *jolly-well-typical* tut, ‘And anyway,’ I went on, ‘this one’s Dr Miller’s fault. He suggested it.’

‘He suggested this?’ Penny fanned the pages, inhaling their dusky-damp scent, ‘Lordy, me feels more intelligent just for the smell of the thing.’ She turned the copy over and began reading the blurb aloud, not stopping until she’d read every inscription of praise beneath. ‘Well, Madam,’ she said, ‘Dr Miller’s gone and Lost the Plot. “Written during the Occupation, the novel portrays the agony of the French Resistance and the inner distress and awakening of a man impelled by anger and obsessed with family guilt.”¹¹² Blimey. Hasn’t Dr Miller ever heard of Jilly Cooper? I can recommend a bloody marvellous few of them.’

‘You already have,’ I reminded her, to which she raised her eyebrows, going on to remind *me* that she was yet to see proof of a Cooper copy in that pile of books over there.

‘You’d think,’ she said, ‘he’d have learnt from that first one your mum brought in. You know, the one that started off so marvellously and ended *so* badly?’

I smiled and Penny tried not to. Every book I read seemed to start so *marvellously* and end so badly, but we both knew *the* book in question. Enlisting my mother into his campaign to rekindle my reading, Dr Miller had asked her to bring in an array of books from home that *Tish might like*. The brief was non-specific, though (naturally), given my current state (not to mention surroundings), there was an un-written rule that the books she selected should be of the *appropriate* kind.

Visiting me that weekend, my mother came into my room laden with a pile of books that fell over the bed between us. She leant over to give me a hug before we began to look through the collection, her face aglow with satisfaction. They were mostly books by women writers that she’d read, though it soon became clear that when and *what* they contained she had little recollection of.

¹¹² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, trans. Moyses and Senhouse, (London: Penguin Books, 1964)

‘Why don’t you start with this one?’ By now, we had removed the odd bits of laundry she’d brought me from the scattered pile of books. Spreading the books into a line of sorts, my mother pulled a darkened copy of Edith Wharton’s to the front. ‘Yes, she said, I’m *sure* I loved this one.’ She picked it up, turned it over and said, ‘Can’t go wrong with Wharton.’

‘You’re sure?’ I was Less Than Convinced, watching her scan the blurb with little recollection sparking in her face. But there was an assortment of apple stickers tacked to the back cover which she pointed to as proof. Her blue eyes brightened and we spared a thought for my father. My mother is one to munch an apple in bed each night with her book, much to the displeasure of my father, who has learnt to busy himself switching-off *all* the lights downstairs until he is confident the apple is safely Out of Harm’s Way.

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ my mother was sure. ‘I mean, *The House of Mirth* – sounds cheery, doesn’t it? Perfect in fact.’

We settled for perfect. And so perfectly did I fall in love with the novel’s heroine, Lily Bart, as she dazzles New York with her resplendent lifestyle. And how my heart crumbled as her wondrous being begins to decline into a prolonged yet spectacular fall.

‘Sorry, come again, Tish. She died?’ Dr Miller, you asked me in the following Ward Round, confusion making you repeat the final words of my synopsis: ‘She died, how?’

‘Committed suicide,’ I said, toes treading on toes. The trace of a smile pulled at my lips, knowing you were baffled, beaten by my mother.

‘No!’ From over in her corner, Kate clapped a hand to her forehead, her mouth stretched wide.

‘Yes,’ I said, wringing my hands in my lap. ‘Tragic, really. It was so sad. She couldn’t keep up with the... pace of life.’ Sad here stood for the Inconsolable State Martha had found me in, wondering what on earth had triggered *all these tears, Tish?* Getting no reply, Martha had prised the book from my lap and closed it firmly. Her abruptness clearly intended to signal that she likewise considered the Wharton Case closed: Lily Bart had been thrown forevermore onto The Inappropriate List.

‘Right,’ you said, ‘Right,’ again, ‘so the next time I tell your mother to bring you in a *light read*, I need to be more specific?’

‘Yes,’ I said, nodding.

‘Right,’ you said, smiling. ‘Never ceases to amaze.’

‘Well, in fairness,’ I said to Penny, ‘Dr Miller *did* say to wait “until I felt ready”, but Penny, how do you know when you’re “ready” to read a book?’

‘Me thinks, Tishy, you are asking the wrong person. But, well?’ She turned the book in her hands, ‘Lethal-looking thing like that, make sure you *are* ready, sweetheart.’

Penny must have seen my face cloud over, for she regained the spirit she’d let slip. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘let’s have a look together, can’t be as lethal as it looks. He’s a bit bonkers, is our Miller, but there’s usually some sort of method to his madness.’

There was, Dr Miller. There always was.

Penny began flicking through the first pages, as though the method to your madness could be found there, ready and awaiting us both. It was not. But Penny took relief from the opening epigraph, taking a moment to *praise the living Lordy* for it being so short. Pushing up her glasses and wriggling in a limbering-up of her shoulders, she inhaled deeply before settling down to read it aloud:

‘Each one of us is responsible for everything and to every human being.’¹¹³

Her forehead was creased and her tongue was defeated by the name inscribed beneath: ‘Dorsk...’ she tried, ‘Dossy-something?’ Her nose bunched up, but it was no good. She held the text out for me to take and translate into Penny-Speak. For Penny liked to have things spelt out Loud and Crystal Clear – she got her *fair share of illogical-nonsense from the lot of you naughty girls to last me this living lifetime. And the next*, she always added with a wink. For, Penny had decided that now she had hit the fifty-year marker, she was near enough to the end of this life to begin planning the next one. *Bloody Marvellous and all*, she was *sure* that next one would be.

‘Umm, *Dostoyevsky*, I think,’ I said, knowing well my pronunciation was far from correct, but even further from likely to be corrected.

‘Yes, well *exactly*, her.’

‘Nope, ’fraid, this time it’s a him.’

‘Tuh,’ Penny tutted, still huffing and puffing as she handed the book back over to me, muttering something along the lines of it being irrelevant whether it was a him or a her, the *point* was never to open a book with such a pointlessly complicated quote. She’d read more than enough, would leave the rest of it to me, thank you very much.

¹¹³ Fyodor Dostoyevsky in, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, trans. Yvonne Moyses and Roger Senhouse, (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 5.

The Blood of Others takes place over the course of a single night, as Jean Blomart, a communist-turned-resistance fighter, sits at the bedside of his lover, H  l  ne. He is watching her sleep, but truly he is waiting for her breathing to cease and death to steal her from the life he had planned with her. It isn't the injustice of her death he is lamenting, but the responsibility he believes himself to hold for causing her suffering. He introduced H  l  ne to the Resistance and her subsequent involvement has left her lying in bed, dying before him:

Her eyes are shut, each breath labours between her lips; the sheets rise and fall. They rise too often; the effort of living is too obvious, too noisy; she is struggling, her light is failing; at dawn it will be out.¹¹⁴

Beauvoir captures my existence in Room Two in a way I could never: the laboured breath, the force of life, the strain of living. She somehow makes beautiful what is torturous in reality, not in a glossed-over way which undervalues the pain, but with a vividness which makes the suffering real. And here, I don't mean the suffering of the woman lying in bed, but the torment of those by her bedside – those who offer her every level of care available, but to no avail. For what can prevent the death of another when that other's body is determined to die?

I wondered if this was what you wanted me to recognise: the finality of death, the sanctity of life and your sense of helplessness in trying to restore my body back to life. But I believe the meaning you intended me to read was far deeper and it has taken me four years to uncover these layers. Each time I return to the book, I feel a proximity to you which is relieving, Dr Miller. I am reminded of you teaching me about that thing which was governing me, that thing you sought to take from me, that thing that made me think myself worthy of suffering alone. It is *the* thing which continues to haunt and weigh upon me with a heaviness that too often overwhelms me.

Guilt

The guilt of existing.

The sin of being another being.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Beauvoir, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 12.

This is why you gave me Beauvoir. You weren't intending to undermine or ridicule my sense of guilt, only to show me the toxic bind it held me in. You wanted to legitimise the power of it – your belief in my experience of it, but also my submission to it. And, while I lacked the distance to comprehend this, I believe you knew time would afford me the affinity I have found now. For *The Blood of Others* is not just a novel about personal responsibility, but the *limitations* of our responsibility. This distinction was the fundamental tenet I believe you wanted me to heed, for my blinkered determination to blame myself for everything – to take on the blood of *all* others – was impeding any possibility of progression you were offering.

Beauvoir takes us back to Blomart's childhood to describe the exact day on which he first discovered the influence his existence could have upon others. 'There is,' he realised, 'not an inch of my path which does not trespass on the path of someone else.'¹¹⁶ Trespassing here encompasses the sin he associates with the act, which extends as the novel progresses: 'I was continuing forever to be the origin of evil for others.'¹¹⁷

Blomart's guilt originates in the days following the death of a neighbour's baby. Though he is entirely uninvolved, he is nevertheless stricken by its mother's grief. The finality seems incomprehensible: 'Nothing would ever give the child back to her – no, not ever. Nothing would blot out that unhappiness which had fouled the world.'¹¹⁸ And, from that day forwards, Blomart's perception of the world is fouled. Call it survivor's guilt if you will, but Blomart will never forgive himself for being unable to abate that mother's pain and I wondered if it was her grief you hoped I'd identify. How many times had I begged you to let me go, for what worth was there to prolonging the life of a hollow shell, the beautiful essence of which I had killed many years ago? I was not the innocent babe my parents had named Laetitia. What possible resemblance to her plain loveliness was there left lying in that darkened room, day after night after day?

I was wrong again. Though tragic, the baby's death was no more significant in your eyes than it was a tool used by Beauvoir to mark the moment at which guilt invaded Blomart's life. And it *is* an invasive presence. Once found, that 'odour of guilt' is forever known: 'The sense

¹¹⁶ Beauvoir, p. 115.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 61.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 10.

of guilt eddied out in sickly spirals.¹¹⁹ Seeping, spreading, guilt works its way through your senses until it has captured them in entirety, leaving you, quite literally, *senseless*.

And shame was there... it was guilt in a new guise. It could be found immediately lurking in another corner... it was always somewhere.¹²⁰

Whilst shame remains present everywhere, what hope is there of evading it? It is self-perpetuating – a self-fulfilling prophecy: if you *feel* guilty, then surely you must *be* guilty. Not only at fault, you must be *the* fault, the blot, the blemish, staining the lives of others.

Cowardly, unfair, flighty and treacherous – disgusting. I was disgusting.¹²¹

Yes

The unfairness... lay in the centre of my being... in that curse... the curse of being a separate being.¹²²

Yes

I was beginning to understand. It lay in the essence of my being. It was my own self. For the first time I thought: perhaps there is no solution.¹²³

No

There was no heaven towards which [my] soul could leap, freed from its heavy past; it remained snared in its own net, as solitary and unavailing as a dead body buried in the earth.¹²⁴

No

I should never have existed.¹²⁵

It is uncanny. How similar are Beauvoir's words to those I gave you? When I spoke them, you called it 'anti-narcissistic' and I was horrified, believing you considered me self-obsessed. Self-absorption is abject to me, but I was and you were right to want me to see how I was consumed by self-loathing.

¹¹⁹ Beauvoir, p. 8.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 86.

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 104.

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. 112.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 86.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8.

But how couldn't I blame myself? Had events at school not proved my *badness* to be true? I asked you to remember that day the Headmaster had put me on trial and judged me guilty of lying. Showcased before a jury, convened by a man of the cloth, no less, I was corrected. My testimony was labelled a 'version of the truth.' I was not 'being bullied.' She was innocence incarnate, smiling sweetly and denying plenty. And I? I was 'mistaken.' I was 'troubled.' I was *guilty* of launching an accusation against another that was worthy of seeing me condemned. Wasn't that the bare face of it? How else could I interpret my dismissal? The root must be scored out lest the infection spreads and I had been *removed* from that school so absolutely that you would have thought my *badness* was contagious, perilous, *poisonous*.

Guilty if I spoke. Guilty if I remained silent. Whatever I did I was in the wrong.¹²⁶

You responded by reminding me that we are not guilty for the mistakes others make. When institutions cast principles aside, those individuals who are sacrificed cannot take on the blame without questioning the integrity of the agendas kept hidden. We could find a pathway out of the consequences, you said, but only if I let go of the guilt that was like a rope, binding me to that past – their judgement – my guilt.

'It was a useless remorse,' Beauvoir writes, 'it made no amends for any fault.'¹²⁷

'It's killing you,' you told me. 'What would it solve, Tish? What possible good could come of your death? It would cause unhappiness beyond that which you can comprehend. The death of a child is something unimaginable to you right now, Tish. But one day, when you have your first child, you will know. When you hold that baby in your arms, you will know that there is nothing it could ever do to make you love it any less.'

'Do you understand?' you asked, but I could weep only. The thought of all that little girl had been, wrapped up in a tight bundle in my mother's arms. What had I done? It was too late. You could not retrieve her spirit any more than I could revive her body.

¹²⁶ Beauvoir, p. 112.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 86.

‘It was too late,’ Blomart says, ‘everything was over... it was already within me, part of my flesh, my breath. The original rottenness.’¹²⁸

‘It is never too late,’ you told me, time and again. I did not need to live forever in abeyance to the shame I felt just by breathing, breathing and believing I was tarnished by, what Beauvoir calls, ‘that curse of being a separate being.’¹²⁹

It is a curse. But in truth, that curse is just an illness. This was the distinction you needed me to accept. Until I did, I would continue to feed the curse with power that was starving me to death.

‘But I’m not ill,’ Beauvoir writes, ‘If I were ill, I could be cured. No. But there’s something bloody wrong about my make-up, and that’s incurable.’¹³⁰

Incurable.

Un-savable. Un-forgivable. Un-loveable.

Wrong. I was wrong. And you would wait so patiently to prove to me so. Time and time again, reminding me in that darkened room, reminding me anew with every reading I give to Beauvoir’s words, that my existence merits no shame. I need not feel guilty for breathing, for existing. ‘I am asking you, Tish,’ – all you were ever asking me, Dr Miller – ‘is to have faith in me. To accept the *possibility of life*, Tish. And your valuable position in it.’

¹²⁸ Beauvoir, p. 185.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 104.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 147.

‘Tish, I’ve got your meds here.’ Precious strolled into Room Two with an assortment of plastic cups in her hands. She was the nurse leading the night shift that began an hour earlier, when Belinda handed me over to the care of Nneka.

Nneka had waltzed into the room, clucking a tune to the clicking beat of her fingers. Reaching the bed, she’d scooped her ‘baby’ into her breast and cocooned me into the rhythm of her hum, releasing me only once she’d plumped the pillows as best she could with her free arm.

It had been a long day. Just another day spent lying in that bed waiting for the minutes to drift into hours, the afternoon to steal me from the morning and pass me onto the length of the night. The only interruption came from my mother, who rang each afternoon as she walked the dogs along the seawall with my father. The sound of her voice was so welcome, but the phone line seemed to emphasise the distance between our bodies in a way that made mine ache. Physically, I longed to feel her arms around me, yet the rate of our baby-steps remained so incremental that the longing stretched into a desperation which too often empowered the Voice.

‘That’s great, darling,’ she said the day I told her my observations had been reduced from two nurses to one. ‘So do you think maybe when we come up and see you this weekend, we might be able to see you without the nurse in the room?’ I twisted the coiled phone-wire in my fingers, unsure what to say. ‘Doesn’t matter, darling,’ my mother was quick to add, checking my hesitation with the sureness of her voice, ‘We’ll get to see you, that’s the main thing. Can’t wait.’

Reluctantly, she’d hang up not without promising that we’d speak again tomorrow. ‘Ring again if you need to though,’ she always added, before yelling across the countryside for one of our straying spaniels, ‘No, darling, come on, those better not be tears I can hear? I’m just here.’

But she was not *just here*. I was *here* and she was *there*, home, without me. Mummy, how great was the distance between your *here* and mine? A gulf that no amount of our prayers seemed able to bridge.

So it was a relief to see Precious slipping through the door, carrying enough medication to bring all that longing to an end. The golden spangles looped around her slim, tanned wrist jangled along with the ward keys swinging bulkily at her belt. She crossed the room and swept aside a space on the bedside table so she could balance the cups on the surface. But her efforts at care were distracted by the sound of muffled voices coming from the television. So as the cups landed, the photograph you'd positioned to face me took flight. Swooping and swooning in a zig-zagged descent, it landed in a slide across the carpet. The creek-muddied bodies of my siblings and I now lay, face down and unnoticed by Precious's feet.

'Ooo, what are you watching?' Precious asked, glancing briefly at me, before turning back towards the small screen opposite my bed. The graininess gave little away and so she squinted her eyes for a better look.

'We're watching *The Apprentice*, aren't we Tish?' Nneka said for me, though really it was for *her* that we were watching. When the series started, she'd begged me to let her switch it on, telling me I'd be doing her a favour. She'd asked her *babies* to record it for her at home, 'But what are *they like*? My babies are hopeless, never thinking of their poor Mammy at work. And their father? Hmmm. Don't get me started on him. Leave him a long list of instructions, but what is done when Mammy comes home? Nothing is done, my baby, and no *Apprentice* recorded. Best we watch it together, hey. Much, much better.'

I'd protested at first. I wanted nothing but silence. No distraction. No light. No glint or glimmer of the life I was entitled to no part of. But much time had passed during which the nurses had chipped away. And, bit by bartered bit, Nneka had worked her Minor Miracle so that *The Apprentice* became a weekly feature. It was an extension, she said, of Dr Miller's Battle Plan – your plan to reconnect me with the world beyond the four walls which had, for too long, enclosed me within my darkened own.

Opening the curtains came first. *Tish is to have the curtains open for five minutes a day.* 'Just five minutes, Tish,' you said, 'Five minutes.' Then ten minutes. Then fifteen and on the day in question we had reached forty-five minutes of daylight. Nearly an hour of life I had allowed you to prescribe for me. That's how you asked me to think of it – as a prescription you wrote onto my Care Plan in the black and white lettering that made it official. 'No different to taking your meds, Tish. No different.'

Except it *was* different. We both knew that. My meds could be injected into me with force, if need be, but I could get the *hell* out of bed and shut the curtains the moment a nurse tried to open them. The same was true of the television. I simply could not see how an eclectic bunch of suits, with less Business-Sense than I had Munching-Sense, could possibly inspire me to *want* to re-engage with the madness of their world.

But Nneka insisted she liked it and her insistence eventually out-bartered my resistance in a way you had to give her credit for. Nneka took the credit, rushing into my room following hand-over every Monday evening to switch on the telly before she'd even sat down. 'Oh look, my baby,' she'd say, 'what *luck* is this? Our programme's just started.' It wasn't luck at all, but it was wonderful all the same, the way one woman's affection could affect real change.

'Oh, what a *treat!*' Precious ploughed on, 'Tish, all cosy watching telly, such a treat, isn't it?' Precious was pleased. She liked to throw an 'isn't it' onto the end of her every sentence, even (and especially) when it was definitely *not*.

'No-no, it's *not* a treat,' Nneka tossed Precious a look that told her to have a good and proper think about the words she was using. 'Not a *treat* at all,' she said, 'in fact, it's *not* even a big deal, it's just something we do together, isn't it Tish. Nothing more.'

'Oh I don't know about that.' Precious did not know about that. She was *sure* it was a treat to be tucked-up watching telly, missing Nneka's emphasis and relaying it back in all the wrong ways, 'Happily swap with you.' Precious smiled at me, adding a wink as she continued to trample – as in stomp – all over Nneka's tiptoed progress.

I rubbed my forehead. Getting hotter, I rubbed harder. The very thought of 'treating myself' was making me flat-out hotter. And so I rubbed harder, my fingers turning inwards so that nails scratched skin. *How could you?* The Voice was stirring. *How dare you let yourself watch telly?*

'Mmmm,' I began mmm-ing. Getting hotter, I looked over to Nneka, whose arms began to chase mine. I was slow and she was fast and so the chase was short. She caught and

anchored my fingers with hers, pressing the knotty bundle onto my tummy with a firmness that told me to stay focused on her and definitely *not* on Precious.

‘Tishy does it for me, let’s me watch it, don’t you, hey?’ Nneka was saying, jiggling my hands for a response. I nodded, looking into her round, brown eyes to receive the plea from her pupils before closing my own. My heart was thumping and my chest was heaving. I was alive and breathing and the Voice did not like it.

‘Right, yes, your meds,’ Precious said, in response to Nneka’s suggestion that now might well be a *good* time to give me my meds, the other patients must be waiting after all, no?

‘Yes, yes. Are you going to sit up to take them then Tish?’ Precious checked her chart and held out a paper cup with a round, pink pill inside. I took the Quetiapine, let it tickle and tingle on my tongue. It began to dissolve into sharp chalkiness that made my shoulders shudder, my eyes dampen and my nose wrinkle, much to Nneka’s pleasure. ‘My days,’ she squeezed my hands, ‘what a face you’re pulling.’

‘Open up?’ said Precious, keen to check the pill was not just hiding, slipped under my tongue. ‘Here,’ she handed me the syringe of liquid diazepam and watched as I squirted the calpol-like syrup onto my tongue. ‘And your Venlafaxine.’ The next syringe squirt made my nose bunch anew. Nneka was amused. Precious was pleased. ‘Good girl,’ she said, handing me the final plastic cup, ‘And your Mirtazapine.’

I took the cup. I looked at the cup and thought about the cup. I looked closer at the measurements running up the side of the transparent cup, did some calculations before my eyes rose to take a Good Long Look at Precious. She was now looking, Good and Proper back at me, no doubt wondering why I was looking at her? But I was busy wondering why *she* had diluted my Mirtazapine in – closer inspection of the cup – forty-five-*whole* millilitres of water? I gave her a glare. This was not part of the deal. My Meal Plan clearly stated: 600 millilitres of food/fluid across the day, including Meds and Ensure. So what was this?

This was a trick.

‘Come on Tish,’ Precious spied trouble and tried to quash it. ‘You know if you don’t drink it I’ll have to inject it. Come on, it would be a shame, isn’t it, to have to interrupt *The—* what’s-it-called?’

‘*The Apprentice,*’ Nneka said, squeezing my fingers.

‘Yes – that’s the one, be a shame to interrupt it, isn’t it?’

Shame

Shame

What a shame

‘Tish, come on now, don’t be silly.’

Tish was *not* being silly. Tish was *promised* the plan would be stuck to.

‘Come on, let’s not have a *little scene*. In Handover, Martha said you’ll be seeing Dr Miller tomorrow, wouldn’t it be a *shame* to have to tell him we had to inject you? Such a shame.’

Shame

Shame

What a shame

How quick that word could surface. The guilt was not just riddled *in* me, Dr Miller, it *was* me, and how disappointed would you be to hear I’d made a *little scene*?

I sealed my lips and bit my tongue. Raising the cup, I closed my eyes and opened my mouth: One, Two, Three swallows and it was gone. Down and done. My eyes watered and my tongue began rubbing the roof of my mouth, for the taste had been far sharper than I’d expected of the dilution.

‘Good girl.’ Precious was pleased. I was not. She took the cup and I listened as she went on to use your Forbidden Words to say again, ‘There’s a *good* girl. Can leave you to *enjoy* your programme now, isn’t it?’

‘Yup,’ Nneka said, ‘well, it’s *my* programme, but yes, Precious, I think *probably* we’ll manage without you from here on, won’t we?’ Nneka glanced at me, nervously. Her face softened and she winked, squeezed my hand and said, ‘My girly needs some sleep, hey?’

I do fall asleep. I slip into a deep sleep that is welcome and undisturbed until the early hours of the dawning morning when I open my eyes to behold Winnifred. It is dark, the lamp glows dimly and she is sitting beside my bed with a *Woman’s Weekly* open across her lap. She jumps when I mumble something about needing the loo and drops the crumpled magazine. She lifts and pins me upright, then steps back to see if I can stand without her.

I cannot. There is a rushing and a ringing swelling in my ears and fizzy popping in my eyes. My legs are heavy as cement, but wobbly as jelly and so I swoon and I sway until Winnifred loops an arm around me. She pulls me into her side and together we limp the three steps to the bathroom.

She puts me on the loo. My body folds forward. She pushes me back. I fold forward. She pulls my shoulders, this time careful to hold me against the lid until I am propped well enough for her to let go. She backs away and leaves me slumped on the loo, wondering, *why so heavy?*

Why are the tiles spinning? The ceiling lights are so bright that the tiles blur. They spin so fast that I close my eyes. It is too late. I am like a twinkling star, tingling now with prickly pins and needles. They twinkle on and so I clench my fists tighter against the sudden thought. Yes, I am determined to push *that* thought away and so I swivel to flush the loo. But either

the lever is too stiff or my hand is too feeble and I give up and turn to face the journey back to bed. *Why so far away?*

One. Two. Three and I am up. Then down: body thwack, head smack onto tiled floor. Bump like *thump* – my heart is thumping against my chest, thrumming between my eyes and I am trying to yell. But my lips are sealed with glue and a moan alone seeps through. It is not enough and I try to unpeel my hand from the floor. But I'm stuck to the floor, it is magnet and I am metal, sweaty now and stuck still. *Why so stuck?*

Why so nauseous? Sickness passes through me like waves propelled by the tide. They flood my lungs and I gasp, ready to scream, but I am beaten by a shrill that is not mine. It is not human, it is like a drill piercing between my eyes, wailing in my ears but, *why so loud?*

Someone's hands touch my body. They shout at me and they shake me, like they are trying to wake me, but I hear you. *Why can't you hear me?* They pull my limbs into a pile and carry me for miles and miles. We arrive and the cold tiles are swapped for pillows, so soft that I sink in. And gosh, how lush, *what luxury is this?* This bliss is peace – this heaven is *mine* so please can you just leave me the *hell* alone?

'Can you hear me, Laetitia? Can you hear me?'

Yes, I can hear you, all too clearly: You're, like, *shouting* in my ear when I am *trying* to sleep here.

A man's voice sounds. Deep, sombre and solid, it says, 'Tish, I'm the RMO,' as in the Overnight Doctor, 'You've blacked out, but you're fine. Just taking your blood pressure.'

I am Less Than Impressed. My left eye opens and I sneak a peek. The light shines when I want darkness. The voices yell when I want silence. I close my eyes and keep them locked as I wonder, *am I fine?* I think maybe I am not, but I am willing to play *fine* if then you'll let me rest in peace?

P-ffffff. The cuff deflates. Velcro scrunches and the cuff is off. The reading is ready. The RMO says, 'Oh no, it's low. It's very low.' His voice is low. It's very low, 'But by the look of her BP chart, that's not abnormal for her?'

'No, but still, this isn't...'

Nneka, is that you? *Phew*, I think it's possible I am in a pickle and I *need* you to hear me. I *need* you to help me. Nneka I think maybe I *need* you to save me.

'Yes, postural drop is normal for her,' Nneka says, 'We've had problems with her blacking out, but even so this isn't... no, this isn't normal...' Nneka is cut off. No buts please. It's late. It's very late, RMO would like to get back to bed. 'Will check on her again in the morning,' he says, 'but right now she needs to get some sleep.'

They don't leave. There are more pokes and prods and fingers pushing a limb here, pulling the blanket there. But I am hot and so I wriggle until a clammy hand clamps against my damp brow. 'Precious,' the RMO beckons Precious and speaks some words but all I hear is *Precious*. I see Precious alone now. I see her pearly smile, her teeth bright white as she brings the cup towards me. She holds it out, I take it and I see me look, think, then drink. One, Two, Three swallows, too bitter, too much. Yes, *yes*, you see, I see it *was* too much.

'Mmmm...mmm,' I am groaning. Deep Voice is leaving and I am lifting my head to stop him, but it rolls. It lolls and my body begins to twitch with spasms that will make me sick. *Why so sick?*

'Laetitia?' His back turns. His eyes are wide and white against dark skin. Closing in, he shouts louder, but I hear you. I do, *why can't you hear me?*

'Laetitia, listen to me: you need to stop trying to speak and try and get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning. Go back to sleep.'

Sleep? Stop. Wait. Leave me to sleep and I will never wake up. I tell you, I will die here. *Why can't you hear me? Why won't you believe me? Please don't leave me.*

‘Miiiiirrrta...’ I am groaning. The word is filling. It is so nearly clearly.

‘What’s that, Tish, I’m listening? Wait, she’s trying to say something,’ Nneka wipes my forehead, ‘I don’t like this.’ Nneka doesn’t like this. ‘I don’t like this at all. Something’s not right.’

That’s right, something’s wrong, Nneka, *what’s wrong with me?*

‘Can you just wait? I said *wait!*’ Nneka is cross. Nneka is furious. RMO stops, she waits. He hears, she says, ‘Listen, Tish, try and say that again?’

‘Tazzz... tazzpine.’

‘Your Mirtazapine?’

Relief closes my eyes over and I roll back into the pillow. The word is no longer mine. It is hers and I am done. Like overdone and ready to bow out, but Nneka has other ideas. I sigh, she says, ‘What about your mirtazapine, Tish?’

‘You had your Mirtazapine last night, Laetitia,’ RMO says, ‘so you’re a bit confused, that’s all.’ He stops. He’s done. His breath recedes. Away, he says, ‘Trust me, she’s a bit drowsy, confused, that’s all.’

No. ‘Too much. Much. Too much.’

‘What’s too much, Laetitia, what’s too much?’

‘Mirrrrtazzpine. Not right. Too much.’

‘Tish, it was normal,’ says Precious from Out of Nowhere. She has come to get me. She is closing in and she is cross. She sounds so sure, but I am too. *I am, I am.* ‘I don’t know why she’s saying this,’ Precious says, ‘She had her meds like normal. She’s just confused.’

No

‘Yes, she’s confused,’ RMO agrees, ‘I think we should leave her.’

No

‘Yup,’ Precious says, ‘that would be best. You see... if she gets upset... it only escalates, tends to, quickly, isn’t it? Quite out of control.’

No

‘Yes, Laetitia, you need to calm down. It’s not helping. Nothing’s wrong with you. You’re imagining things. You’re confused and you’re drowsy. But it’s ok – it’s just the medication. Your postural drop again, that’s all. I’ll come and check on you again in the morning. But for now, Laetitia, you need to try and fall back to sleep.’

No, please. Leave me to sleep and I will slumber forever. But oh, sleep is tempting. Sleep is coming. It is calling me, like a lullaby, lulling me towards the heaven it promises to make out of all this hell. *If only, if only,* I will surrender and let go.

Should I?

I don’t know. Mummy, what should I do? Your hand is stretched towards me, your eyes are glistening and round and your cheeks are blushing darkly, but I can’t reach you. I never want to miss you, Mummy, but I am falling. Slowly, I am slipping into this sleepy caress that is soft and snuggly and warm. Peace is spreading through me, loosening my limbs and slackening my grip until I am so relieved to be floating. I am, Mummy, so you needn’t be sad. It’s just like you said, *I am just here.* Just *here*, forever with you in these clouds, soaring high and flying still.

The pain is easing,

The grief is ceasing,

The guilt has gone.

Fear? There is none.

Mummy,

I am free.

I am. I am.

‘Tish?’

‘Tish? Come on sleepy head, it’s morning. Penny and me are here to take over. Time to wake up.’

‘Tish? Why won’t she wake up? Tish. *Tish?*’

Are you kidding?

‘No, come on, Tish. Wake up, can you open your eyes?’

Thanks, but no thanks, I’ll pass. I’ll keep my eyes closed. I am heavy and Less Than Impressed by the fingers pressing in and prodding skin. One cheek is pulled down. My forehead is stretched and *what the actual hell?* A blinding light flashes. This torch swings from left to right and when I blink and blink and blink I catch a snatch of eyes. The pupils are brown and blue, whites all wide and blinking too.

Enough, *Bog Off*. Stop poking. Stop prodding and please *stop* all your shouting.

‘Tish? Oh god, what’s happening, why’s she shaking? Tish, have you taken something?’

‘Pam, come away. Tish, it’s Lynette here, it’s ok, it’s ok if you *have*, but we really need to know: have you taken something you shouldn’t have? What have you taken? Oh Tish, what have you done?’

Done, done? *What have I done?* Done, done. *What have I become?* Oh god, I am hot, like burning fast and sweating still. I shiver and then I twitch and twitch and twitch.

‘We’re not blaming you, Tish, we just need to know what you’ve done?’

Done, done. *What have I done?* Maim me, shame me, blame me, I do. Dr Miller will you blame me, shame me, maim me, too?

‘Tish... *Tish?* She’s gone again.’

‘No, no Tish. *Tish?* Press that alarm. We need help in here. Someone hold her down, she’s fitting.’

‘What happened?’

I hear snatches. Nothing whole. Nothing clear.

‘She was fine last night, *fine*,’ they say. I groan. ‘She had her meds like normal. Like normal.’

‘Normal? Precious, what part of *this* looks normal? Tishy, listen to me, we need you to keep your eyes open.’

The sound of Penny’s voice sets me off moaning. I am groaning but the effort triggers more twitching. My body is hurling in convulsions that are hurting, Penny, this is scaring me. Mummy, where are you? Mummy, I *need* you.

‘I mean,’ Precious says, ‘she collapsed, yes. But she always falls. The RMO said... yes, he said she was fine. Just postural drop. No... *he* said she was *fine*.’

‘But she’s not *fine!*’

Yes, Penny, that’s right, I remember, ‘Mmmrrr...’

‘Can you just be quiet.’ Penny is cross or just plain panicked, ‘She’s trying to say something: yes, darling, try and say it again?’

‘Tazipine... Mrr...’

‘Mirtazapine. Yes, I don’t know why, she kept saying that last night too.’

‘So WHY did you put her back to bed? Tishy, darling, what about your Mirtazapine? We need to know. We’re not cross, we just need to know.’

Uh-oh, I know. Cross means blame. Blame means shame and now I am panicked. I know but they don’t. I did not do this but they won’t believe me. Why would they? Why should they?

*Guilty if I spoke. Guilty if I remained silent. Whatever I did I was in the wrong.*¹³¹

‘Tish. Fuck’s sake, *Tish!* She’s fitting again. Hold her down, get Kate in here and someone call an ambulance.’

When I next open my eyes, there is rushing. Walls are moving and legs are running me down to the resuscitation bay in a spiral of dizziness that closes my eyes back over. Maybe I am deaf. The volume is low and the voices seem distant. Nope, there comes one loud voice. It is male, harried but clear. His pokes are measured, methodical and determined to wake me.

‘Laetitia, if you can, I need you to keep your eyes open and stay awake.’

¹³¹ Beauvoir, p. 115.

But why? I have found my heaven and am not dead keen on returning to his hell. Too bad, he is thumping, like *thump-thump-thumping* my chest. It is hurting but still he does not stop. I groan and he softens his blow slightly, stilling his fist briefly to stretch my eye open and shine his torch in. Like, excuse me, what are you *actually* trying to do here? Could you please stop blinding me? Don't bash me with your pain and don't you *dare* steal my heaven. Hello, are you deaf? No, I decide. He's another Plain Evil. I opt out. Give up. Close my eyes.

It was Penny who was sitting by my bedside when I opened my eyes to find the world was restored. My head pulsed through my eyes and my body remained immovably heavy, but my vision had returned and my mind could distinguish the cubicle we were in to be in the Emergency Department of the local general-hospital. It was the first time I had seen walls other than those of Room Two for as long as I dared remember, though these were but flimsy walls made of measly paper curtains. They yielded little privacy from the hive of activity going on beyond. And, quite suddenly, the Outside World was no longer beyond but within. Had it really been here all along?

Seeing my breath quicken, Penny stood up, her bag hitting the floor as she drew closer to the bed. Her shadow relieved my eyes of the brightness as she drew her hand to my face, sweeping away the loose curls. She looked down and gave me the bare comfort of knowing. I was not alone. I was alive. I was safe and I was believed.

'Tishy darling,' she said, 'we're in A&E. You were right, there was a – a terrible mix up with your meds last night.' She sniffed and blinked, watching the width of my eyes try to make sense of the alien surroundings, all these machines and wires beep-beep bleeping.

'But you're going to be alright.' Penny smiled. Little beads of her wetness sprinkled over my cheeks as she blinked and blinked again. 'And I'm going to stay here with you until you're all better to be transferred back to the ward. Ok?'

I nodded. This meant ok.

‘Ok. Big sigh then, hey. You gave us a right scare, darling. You’ll be the bleeding end of me, and how many times have I had to say that?’

I nodded. This meant lots.

‘Exactly, so let’s see if we can make this the last time, hey?’

I nodded. This meant lets.

‘Yup, suspect it won’t be though, will it, madam? Born trouble-maker, you. Time to get you out of here though, darling. This place... it’s no place for you,’ she paused as her eyes scanned over the wires, drips and tubes connecting me to this thing – this thing they call life. ‘And I don’t just mean this frightful cubicle thing-y either. I mean hospital, generally, Tish. Lordy, I love you – and mind you shh-up about it – but hospital is no life. Home is where you should be, darling. Isn’t it, hey?’

I nodded. This meant yes, home. Mummy, I want to come home.

‘So you’re not to go giving up on me now, my Tishy, do you hear me?’

I shrugged. This meant yes, I hear you, my Penny, but please don’t you go giving up on me.

‘Good, now are you comfortable? You’re shivering. Or is it just? They said you’d be twitchy for a bit.’ And I was, my teeth were chattering, my muscles jolting and jarring with the ripple of life pulsing in shock waves through my body.

‘It’s alright, darling. Hey, it’s ok, ok?’

I nodded. This meant more than yes. This meant Penny meant more than I could say. My mouth opened and a salty tear crept in. I closed my mouth. Words were too heavy. They were weighed down by a fear I did not yet understand. It was the fear of being assumed

responsible for the overdose – of being accused, disbelieved and ultimately dismissed, again. After all I had done, how could you *not* think me guilty of trying to abandon your efforts to save me? You'd be unable to forgive me, Dr Miller, I was sure you would now give up on me. You'd leave me with this shame – this battle – I did not know how to bear alone.

‘It’s alright darling, hey, no tears. You needn’t be fussing and all frightened. I’m here, aren’t I? And I’m not going anywhere, I promise.’

Penny promised. Having ebbed away, her face nestled closer again. Her thumb was stemming the tears from beneath my eyes, until one of her own dropped onto my cheek and began to feel its way down. The tissue scrunched in her palm was flaky and wet, so she let it go and pulled her sleeve over her palm to wipe across my cheek.

‘Get some sleep, darling. You’re safe now. I’ve got you. I promise you’re safe.’

And alive. *I am. I am* grateful to be alive.

Telling for telling’s sake has never been my intention. And, as such, I never intended to include this episode. But the more I tried *not* to think about that night, the more I was drawn to it. Why? Because gradually I realised the valuable part it played in altering the course of my treatment. It is this value which I hope will be remembered and not the error that caused it. We are all human, imperfect and liable to error and there was no malevolence to the mistake. It was *just* a mistake – a mistake that could have cost me my life, yes. But it did not. Instead, it gave me an understanding I had lacked and that, Dr Miller, was my acceptance of the depth of your understanding of me. And your determination to hold onto my life – for dear life – for as long as it took me to take it, step by baby-step, back from you.

When you knocked on my door the day following my transfer back to the ward, it was with meekness I felt too. I was lying with my back to the door, facing the window, staring without seeing. I was tired. A&E is a busier ward than ours and I hadn't slept properly for days. The curtains were closed and the room was dark, but when you came in you did not switch on the bedside lamp, like you usually did to avoid triggering a needless battle before we began our sessions. Instead, you swept aside one of the curtains on your way past, just a little, just enough to allow a slither of the dusky sun to cast the room into its orange light.

As you sat down, I sat up, shiftily shuffling my body back into the slackened pillows. My body was still twitching from the overdose and I hugged the blanket closer around me, tensing my muscles in the hope they'd still and you wouldn't notice me shaking. I was shamed enough and wearied by the very prospect of how disappointed you must be in me. Dr Miller, I was so frightened that you'd assume me responsible, thinking I'd stockpiled my medication with the intention of slipping through the protective hold of your fingers. After everything we'd been through – the attempts I'd made, the risks you'd taken – how could you not think me culpable, conceited and cowardly for shunting your every effort to save me?

By the time you arrived, I felt hostile. I'd had too much time to wait and wonder what you'd say when you came. I'd prepared myself for the cautious, premeditated words I pictured you using to tell me that *enough was enough*. You'd given me countless chances and in return I'd given you no other option than that Secure Unit. I figured you'd offer me a consolation of sorts: at least *this* way we both knew I'd be kept safe. But disappointment would weigh your words and your eyes would be unable to meet mine. For you'd know as well as I that the transfer would take me to a unit where I'd feel only as secure as I was alone. Locked up, I'd feel abandoned, with no one to blame but myself. Because the fault was mine, wasn't it, Dr Miller?

I was guilty

Of being,

Of breathing.

Breathing,

What right have I to be breathing?

The scrunch of your toes brought me back to the room. My eyes rose in the direction of your shoes and you scrunched your toes again, as if in receipt of my gaze. And, just like that, you dispelled the tension I'd expected, with an ease that makes me wonder at the power of the isolated mind. How easy it is to make assumptions that feel so vivid as to be true. Fed by desperation and deprived of the counsel of another, they can become so false and far-fetched that we can be quite shocked when reality emerges to paint a different picture.

You did not speak right away. You did not need to. Instead, you allowed us to rest in the sanctuary we seemed to have found in that silence. How long, I wonder, did we stay like that? Perhaps it was your way of giving me time to come to terms with your presence, or perhaps you too were just enjoying the tranquillity we seemed to have stumbled upon. It was so long sought and so gratefully found. You seemed as exhausted as me. But if you were wearied by my presence, I was relieved by yours, and moved by the sudden knowledge that I did not want to lose you. I could not afford to lose your sagacity or your strength, for it was a combination of both that had allowed me to be there with you.

You must have sensed my apprehension stirring, for you broke our silence with a sureness that expressed your determination to be heard, not only by me, but the belligerent Voice inside my head. You began with an apology that stole the words from my lips and made the sentiment your own.

'You're sorry?'

'Yes, Tish. This should never have happened. Never and I am sorry.'

My eyes narrowed. What had you to be sorry for?

'Precious made a mistake, a terrible mistake. But it's our mistake, not yours. So it's us who need to apologise to you. Do you understand, Tish? I cannot have you blaming yourself for this. I won't.'

How could you have known? You knew my mind with an exactness that bewildered me, realising, as I did right then, that this encompassed your appreciation of my pain as well as your willingness not to suppress or deny me my entitlement to it. Your conviction was in our

shared ability to overcome it. And this belief had not wavered, it seemed only to have strengthened.

‘Do you hear me, Tish? I need you to let go of the guilt. I know it’s there, now more than ever, but I need you to let it go on this one, we can’t carry any more of it and it’s not needed. It was a mistake, a terrible mistake, but it was not your fault. Am I clear?’

You were all too clear for my liking. You seemed not to recognise the part I had played, the fault that was mine and this I *needed* you to know. How else could I seek the forgiveness I needed to be able to fight on? Strange, how dependent I had become upon the protection of your care.

‘But I heard the nurses in A&E,’ I began, ‘They said she’d lose her job. Precious, I mean. Without question, her “head would roll”. Please, *please*,’ the pleading caught in my throat, ‘don’t let her lose her job because of me. I couldn’t live with myself, Dr Miller, please.’

‘And that’s exactly why I’m here, Tish.’

‘But it was *my* medication.’

‘Your medication, yes Tish,’ you said, resolutely. ‘But *our* responsibility to administer it. Just like it’s our responsibility to take care of you, Tish. Unconditionally, is that not what I promised you?’

There would be an inquiry and you wanted me to hear this from you alone. ‘We nearly lost you, Tish, and that can never happen again, to you or any other patient.’

Precious had mis-calculated my medication chart, misreading milligrams for millilitres to the effect that I was given an overdose of 450mg as opposed to the 45mg I was due. But she would not lose her job and this you needed me to believe, for how else would you have enabled me to bear the part I had played in jeopardising the livelihood – the life – of another?

‘Let this go, Tish, please don’t let this push us back. Do you understand?’ Seeing I did not, you shifted your position, sitting forwards before trying again, ‘Tish, how exactly could what happened possibly be your fault?’

Your question now alluded – did it not? – to events that extended further into the past that I had envisaged. My ‘version of events’ had been as disbelieved and dismissed by the RMO as my testimony was shunted that day I spoke out about the bullying at school. That shame was so particular – so peculiar – yet so similar and I felt it pressing in Room Two with an urgency I could not suppress any longer. I believe you were waiting for me to unleash it, with tentativeness that was not hesitation, but tenderness. For you knew I feared releasing that which was within me, just like you knew that speech alone could purge me of the guilt I harboured inside.

‘Tish, come on,’ you coaxed, your voice quiet, ‘I’ll need better reason than *it just is* if I’m to be convinced of your guilt. You need to tell me. You need to and you can. You *can*.’

‘What if I knew?’ I said, eventually, ‘that something wasn’t right? As soon as I’d drunk the mirtazapine, I think I *must* have known it was pure, not diluted. But I let myself – I let myself fall asleep. So, what if I wanted it? What if I was relieved I didn’t have to fight for it anymore? Fight for my right to die when all I had to do was wait.’

‘Tish, it’s ok. You are ok.’

No, I was not ok. No, things were not ok. How could things ever be ok? I shook my head, denying your forgiveness. It was too ready when I’d been so scared. Tears began to stream as I told you of that fear – my god, the terror of slipping into a sleep that would bring me no awakening, no way of telling my mother how much I loved her, how sorry I was to leave her and my father to shoulder my disgrace. My fist bunched up at the very thought of my father and our promise that we’d beat this. And you, Dr Miller, how I had feared you’d never be able to forgive the mere memory of me.

‘I drank it. Me. Do you understand? *I* drank it.’ The pitch of my voice amplified as you continued to shake your head against my guilt. Why weren’t you listening? Why were

you so determined to deny me my confession? What about the part I had played, the guilt that was mine, the shame that was me, Dr Miller, *me*?

‘I need you to know... I did try to tell them, I promise. I told Precious – *the mirtazapine, the mirtazapine*. But they said... I was confused. Overreacting. They didn’t... they wouldn’t...’

You took each sentence that died on my tongue and gave my words the life I could not. ‘They didn’t listen, Tish. They wouldn’t listen to you and they should have. They should have Tish, and I am sorry. Especially, because... I know. Tish, I know.’

How powerful it is to be disbelieved.

‘I know Tish, I know.’

How painful it is to be dismissed.

‘I know, Tish, I know.’

How shameful it is to be disgraced.

‘I believe you, Tish. I believe that you didn’t take the overdose knowingly. And I believe that you tried to tell them and that’s all that matters. You are believed. Your word is valuable. It is, Tish, you are.’

‘No, I can’t, Dr Miller, I can’t do this anymore.’ I sobbed. I howled. I wailed before you and you let me, knowing that unless it came out, it would continue to impede the forever-after that you held in your sights for me. ‘I can’t bear it anymore. The guilt. It’s too much. I don’t deserve to live. That’s what this was – fate, my comeuppance. The irony, surely you see the irony?’ Half shrieking now, my voice cracked beneath a sob that became shrill laughter: ‘Me, trying so long and so hard to kill myself and then Wham-Bloody *Bam*, Precious strolls casually in and does the job better for me.’

‘Oh yes,’ you said, scrunching your toes, looking more fondly sceptical than convinced. You asked me to go on and for once I did. I told you, in snatches of sentences broken by the contraction of sobs, that there was nothing left of any order in me, just this unyielding, yet implacable pain and that distorted fear that you’d believe me to be as guilty of *badness* as my school had once judged me.

I believe I was asking you to forgive my existence. But before I managed to ask for it, I realised I did not need it. I did not need to prove my goodness, my badness or my madness. Neither could endear me to you nor repel me from you. I had something far stronger and that was your acceptance of me. I was both acceptable and accepted, just as I was, Dr Miller. Just as I am.

You were waiting now. You knew what I'd learnt and what was distressing me. And you knew of the wanting inside me which was desiring all that I had been depriving myself of. You wanted me to tell you. You had promised you would wait for as long as it took me to tell you, but I did not need you to wait any longer. I could not hold the fear of it any longer. I needed you to hold it with me and make that *possibility* a reality for me.

'I want... I am... I am... scared, Dr Miller, I am terrified that I won't be able to... Scared, because I know... now... I think I know that I want to get through this. I mean... I really *want* to live.'

And there it was. The single sentence you had waited so many months for me to find was Out Loud and in the Air. Our tuning point was my will to fight alongside you and against whatever the Voice tried to throw in our path.

Things did not get miraculously better from that day forwards. You repeatedly warned me that there is no miraculous cure to an illness as intractable as anorexia. The battle goes on and I needed to hear this caution. Left unchecked, my sudden urge to be home could fatigue me to the point of frustration and that could be dangerous. Pining paints a rosier picture than reality and there remained a gulf of contradiction between the discharge I now longed for and that dream coming true.

The Mirtazapine Mishap may have given us a foundation to build upon, but you knew the incremental steps that would be required to turn my willingness to live into *living*. Acceptance needed to be translated into action and this involved eating without a feeding tube and living through each day without a nurse propping me in place. Without the knowledge that they would intercept my efforts to hurt myself, wouldn't the Voice become harder to endure? Harder to ignore? It would and it would take time to muster the strength to stand on my own two feet, though you promised never to stand at too great a distance from me.

'Baby steps?' I said, frowning. I was not convinced by the rate of your proposed baby steps. Would strides not be a quicker way of marching me home?

'Yes, baby steps,' you said, not unamused. 'We have to take things slowly, Tish. It's for your own good.'

I remained Less Than Convinced and you knew it. Whatever was done for my 'own good' tended *not* to feel good (at all). But you were not trying to thwart the rate of our progress, you were just right. Each stride involved so many tentative footprints that felt their way into the ground in that cautious way that cannot be hurried. The risk of falling backwards was too possible, though my desire to move forwards remained a constant pull towards the home of my goal. It remained distant, but it was a beacon whose glow did not diminish, no matter how dark the rest of my mind, at times, continued to be.

The curtains were open. The sun was warming me slightly, you slightly too much. You scrunched your toes and looked across my bed towards Kate, who was busy doing her scribe-thing for you.

'Now Tish, this is probably going to be highly controversial, ok? So bear with me,' you said and I frowned. When you introduced something controversial, it usually brought

Trouble (with a capital T). ‘But, here goes,’ you ventured on, ‘Dr Dawson, you might want to prepare yourself, I’m about to use an analogy.’

A silence followed the marvel of your announcement. It was brief. Kate needed no more than a moment to voice her objection:

‘An *analogy*? Oh no Dr Miller, please don’t.’ Kate clapped a hand to her forehead, dislodging her glasses as she looking from you to me, ‘God no, anything but one of your analogies, you know how they make me...’

‘Cringe. Tish, Kate isn’t – in fact,’ you corrected yourself, ‘*none* of the nursing staff exactly seem to appreciate my use of an analogy. But I think once in a while it’s good for them. Good for you Kate, got it?’

Kate had not got it and shook her head to show it. ‘And more importantly, Tish,’ you said, ‘I hope it will be good for you too.’

Kate looked at me, her eyebrows arching with mock disapproval as you began asking me for the name of my favourite dog.

‘Sorry, what?’ Kate said for me, ‘Tish, he’s lost it. As in properly Lost It: Miller, did you just ask about her favourite dog?’

‘I did,’ you confirmed, smiling as you turned back to me. ‘You’ve got spaniels, haven’t you, Tish? Which one’s your favourite?’

My mouth was open, not poised to reply, just agog as I wondered:

- a) What bearing our three spaniels could possibly have upon my mental health and,
- b) When, in the last year of our sessions, had our spaniels featured enough for you to know of their existence?

I blushed, thinking perhaps I’d mentioned them in a moment of unconscious madness (these being many), but you just pointed towards the wardrobe. I followed the line of your finger

and blushed further as the photographs tacked to the door focused enough for me to spot the feature of spaniels, dotted between horses' legs and the ankles of siblings and cousins.

'Tish,' you sighed, 'one day you'll begin to appreciate the fact that your doctor is vaguely perceptive.'

Vaguely, Dr Miller?

You remain the most perceptive person I have ever known.

'Um,' I nodded, still taken aback, defeated by the ethical proposition you'd posed by asking me for – 'My *favourite* one?'

You saw my Moral Issue and sighed, muttering something about my over-thinking and your lack of. 'Forget the *favourite* bit, then. Just the name of one of them?'

'Hippy,' I said, decided.

'*Hippy?*' you said, amused, playing with the sing-song sound of her name that seemed so much more ridiculous in the solemn voice you used to repeat it: 'Right, Hip-py. Excellent, so suppose you imagine yourself entering Hippy into a competition.'

'A competition?' I was unconvinced, but not as unconvinced as Kate, who removed her reading glasses altogether and capped her pen, deciding, perhaps, that the rest of your analogy would be beyond the need or reach of her notes.

'You know, a competition – for dogs. Aren't there such things? You're the country girl, must know better than me.'

I shrugged. This country-bumpkin didn't just *not* know about fancy competitions (that more likely took place in cities), she didn't have a clue. I shrugged again. You persevered (ever The Optimist) and appealed to Kate. She added a shrug and glanced my way to say she'd warned me after all, about the danger of letting this doctor loose on an analogy.

But, however much she protested, Kate liked to be nudged into the conversation and so you merely said, ‘Kate?’ again and her protestation began.

‘Tuh,’ she tutted, ‘I wish you wouldn’t *always* assume I know your every wayward thought, Doctor. You’re not half hard to follow at times. But Crufts, I suspect, given your *limited* knowledge of dogs, you can only be referring to Crufts.’

‘Well, *of course* I meant Crufts,’ you said. ‘Excellent,’ you were well away, ‘so, you decide to enter Hippy for Crufts. Don’t ask me why, you just do.’

‘I just do,’ I said.

‘You just do,’ you said back. ‘So that’s that and there’s no going back,’ you added, hastily, ‘once you’ve decided to go for it, it’s all systems go. Because these Crufts people accept your application. And though you doubt your readiness for it, their acceptance is binding – they are,’ you added, ‘a fussy breed.’ You paused, your words coming slower now, ‘Their acceptance makes the challenge feel very real. Scary, no doubt. But it’s ok to be frightened, Tish. It’s completely natural, given all the tricks Little Hippy needs to learn. But it *is* possible, Tish. It is and gradually, very gradually, before you even realise it, Tish, that far-off possibility will become a reality that you can believe in.’

There was a silence you did not rush to break. ‘But you have to trust me,’ you said eventually, in a low, slow voice. ‘Just like Little Hippy must trust you, you must leave me to pace the baby steps in the way that you can manage. Ok? You must trust me, Tish. And I think you do? I think you do.’

I did, Dr Miller. I do.

‘It’s ok,’ you said, seeing I was not. You seemed to be asking me to accept, not only your proposition, but your genuine desire to see Little Hippy succeed. ‘I promise you, Tish, we won’t let Hippy go into the competition until she’s bored senseless with all the practice we’ll drum into her. That’s all I’m asking, for you to accept the work we need to do in order to give Little Hippy the best chance of success. Seeing her shine on the day of the

competition, though, seeing her enjoy it when it finally comes, I promise you, Tish, it will make all that hard work worth it.'

'It will be a *LOT* of hard work though,' I said, needing to cling to your humour. My eyes were stinging at the thought of lively, lovely Little Hippy, whose only trick to boast of is jumping up and hugging your leg, without letting go.

'Indeed, a lot of work, especially as, well, Hippy hasn't always been the... she's not *always* the most straight forward of pupils,' you said, selecting words wisely, not hiding the smile that came easier now. 'Sometimes her behaviour can be a bit... erratic. Can it not?'

'It can,' I said, swallowing. My fingers twisted the tassels of my blanket as I nodded, determined to keep nodding, now thinking of Little Hippy, clinging to my mother's leg like one that never will let go.

I nodded some more. You were nodding now too.

'Yup, she can drive us *all* mad at times,' you said, with a scrunch of your toes. 'You love her no less for it, but all round, it's fair to say there's work to do to get her ready. For this thing.'

This thing they call Life

Real Life

'This competition, I mean,' you said, 'Filling in the entry form, deciding to go for it, that's just the beginning. A huge start, a brave one at that, Tish. A symbol of the courage I need you to believe is in you. That iron will of yours, that determination that never ceases to amaze us, it all needs to be channelled now. You can do it, Tish. Together, we *can* make that possibility into a reality. I know we can.'

For Kate's sake, I will try to avoid giving higher praise to your analogy. But I admit you had a point and intended me to heed it. Prior to the competition, there were tricks to be learnt, challenges that would not always feel rewarding, you warned. For Hippy was no robot, was she?

No.

Hippy was little more than a puppy, and learning would encounter challenges that would not easily be overcome. But would these difficulties alter my opinion of Little Hippy?

No.

Would I punish her for struggling and needing extra help here and there?

No.

‘No, you wouldn’t, Tish. And neither will we. Where you will struggle, we will support you. Where your strength will waver, our care will not. This won’t be easy, Tish. I need you to recognise its going to take time. But we have time, your strength and a whole host of nurses, all of whom are pretty keen on seeing you smile.’

We began with the curtains. In this baby-step the Mirtazapine Mishap made us jump from an hour of daylight to half the day. For a whole half of the day the sun would shine into the room, or the rain would pitter-patter against the window. The droplets would gather, feeling their way down the pane tentatively at first, before gaining strength and speed from each other. Lying in bed, I’d watch them, contemplating the latest challenge you’d set me and the rate of our progress. Were our baby steps truly gaining overall ground? Could progress as slow as mine ever flow as freely?

You left it to my discretion to choose whether it was morning or afternoon that saw my room filled with natural light. Force would no longer do. Now we had acceptance, it was about

learning that it was ok to choose life. It was ok to *want* life and the little things that contributed to it: sunlight, reading, nourishment, love. What a way we had to climb?

Morning was my curtain preference. Soon after I awoke, a text would arrive from my father urging me to be positive and remember what lay outside the four walls of Room Two.

Morning darling. Open those curtains, look out and see the Gift of Life. We're all waiting for you. Mummy missing you terribly and driving your daddy terribly mad. Your brothers making too much noise. Need my girls home with me. Tatiana and Shiv down at the weekend. We'll all come and be with you, Sunday afternoon. Stay strong today, for your mother and I. We love you, millions. Daddy.

By the afternoon, what my father called the Gift of Life – what you called the *possibility of life* – had withered into, what I'd call, the Challenge of Life. Wearing by the day, I'd retreat into darkness, grateful to be surrounded by a blackness closer to that I felt inside. But now there was this new sense of relief that I had successfully survived my morning of daylight. And today, Dr Miller, I can tell you that I felt a simple sense of pride, knowing I'd managed the first of our feats.

'Right Tish, I have a plan.'

You gave me time to get used to the idea before expanding, 'I've been thinking about Little Hippy, how best you'd get her ready for the big competition.'

'Crufts?'

‘That’s the one. I decided it’d be quite a big ask to expect her to manage the big Crufts thing without having the practice of a competition or two before hand. Crufts is the nationals, isn’t it?’

You looked around the room, though who knows why. Neither Kate, Martha nor I had a clue. From word go, your analogy stretched all our imaginations.

‘So what we need is the preliminaries. Is that what they’d call them? Qualifiers?’ You scanned the room. No one sprung to your aid. You abandoned ship: ‘You’re all hopeless, you know.’

We all knew and left it to you to go on. And you did, telling us that the next phase of your plan began with three letters: ‘DBT.’

‘DBT?’ I said, forehead creasing. ‘Do you mean CBT?’

‘Nope,’ you said, ‘I mean DBT: Dialectical-Behavioural Therapy. It’s like CBT, I guess. Only different.’ If you took a moment to enjoy your own humour, you gave me little more explanation. It was not so much the theory you were concerned about, but the practical matter of making my attendance possible.

‘DBT’s going to be our Qualifiers. There’s a group every Thursday over at the day hospital. Just across the courtyard. And just two hours, Tish,’ you said, as though the length of the pebbled courtyard was not a world away and two *whole* hours not a very long time for one whose life was still divided by five-minute checks.

‘But,’ I began, but the *but* I had in mind was so obvious that I let you finish it for me.

‘But, you’re wondering how that’s possible, when you’re still shut up in this room?’

Nod from me.

Nod from you.

‘Yes well, that’s sort of the point. I think it’s time to be brave and get you out of this room. It *is* time, isn’t it Tish?’ you asked, wanting me to feel ready, but knowing I was afraid, so terribly afraid.

But for every ‘can’t’ I gave you – and I gave you plenty – you had a ‘can’ that was far stronger: ‘You can, Tish. You *can*. And I’m not suggesting we try it today. I’m just asking you to consider it. We’ll both have a think about the When and the How for next time we meet. Next rotation of the group starts in two weeks. So we’ve got plenty of time to make it possible.’

And that was that. You’d given us a goal to work towards, a date that was not so far ahead as to be vague, but not too close to be unrealistic. It was possible, like you said, but the very *possibility* made me realise that I was more frightened by the idea of leaving Room Two than you. What did I fear? What did I *not* fear? The freedom, mostly. I feared finding myself back in a position where I knew escape was possible and hurting myself easy. Too easy. I knew how hard the Voice would try to tempt me back onto its destructive path and I dreaded the guilt it would make me feel should I try to stay on the Straight and Narrow. It wasn’t that the Voice had gone silent – I don’t believe I will ever be entirely free of it – but, surrounded by your safety, Dr Miller, it had quietened. Your determination defeated it at every turn. But without you – the restraint of your nurses, the walls of that room and the force of that tube – what end was there to the harm it could do?

‘I won’t make you do anything, Tish,’ you said, trying to allay my anxiety. But in this you failed, for I had learnt better than to read your reassurance as submission to my resistance. Rather, it tended to signal that you’d crafted a way to get us both around it. ‘I won’t force you, Tish. You know that.’ I knew that, but when the appointed time arrived the following morning, you believed I would have accepted your proposition in a way that allowed me to want it too.

And who better to have as bodyguards than Penny and Pam? It was no coincidence that it was that double act who came to escort me out to the ward sofas just beyond my door. ‘Five minutes, darling. Dr Miller told us just five minutes. How does that sound?’

It sounded scary – so terrifying, in fact, that the blood-pressure cuff strapped to my arm flashed a heart rate that was rapid, to put it mildly. ‘Lordy, Tishy,’ Penny said, holding out the screen for Pam to document, ‘anyone would think we’re here to feed you fish and bleeding chips.’

But Penny’s fingers were trembling as they pulled the cuff from my arm. I was not, it seemed, the only anxious person present. But if speech had abandoned me, Penny continued to witter on, determined to Keep Calm and Carry On as Normal and not as though the Biggest Event in my Ward History were about to take place.

Blood-Pressure checked, Pam poked her head around the corridor corner, double-triple checking the other girls had *definitely* gone down to group. They had and so they propped me upright to make me the filling of a Penny-Pam sandwich.

Baby-steps: One, two, another and another. We made the five-feet beyond my door and the sofas into a marathon of our own. Exhausted by our feat, Penny leant back into the sofa, reclining like the Lady of Leisure she always was sure she *should* have been. But Pam sat up with me. My body was more perched than settled, my eyes darting every which way: the magazines beneath the table, the crossword book on the surface, Fran’s perhaps? Yes, closer inspection told me it was *Jumbo*, abandoned. Had Fran moved on from *The World of Word Search: Lose Yourself*? Unlikely. But Beady-Eyed Skipper, how dearly did I realise I’d been missing you?

The door clicked. I jumped, listening to the trundling tread of footsteps followed by the simplest yet sincerest exclamation of joy I’d heard in months.

‘Tish, oh *Tish!*’

Lily, oh *Lily!* The little thing appeared before me, her slight arms working hard to haul the table out the way. She propped herself onto her knees, her palms smoothing the carpet around her, seeming suddenly afraid. I had not spoken, but the words were not too few, Lily, there were too many.

‘We’ve missed you. So much. Oh Tish, it’s so good... I’m just so relieved to see you. I’ve knocked. So many times, but they didn’t let me... they said you...’ her voice fizzled out, replaced quickly by Pam’s ready reassurance.

‘We told her, sweetheart – didn’t we Tish? – that Lily was asking after you.’ I nodded, feeling shamed by the tightness that was barring my throat from giving Lily anything more than a meagre nod.

‘It’s ok, Tish, it’s ok.’ Lily’s fingers began to squeeze my knee, like it was ok that I’d been unable to thank her. Like it was ok that I’d abandoned the battle she had continued to fight. But it *wasn’t* ok that I’d been so consumed by my pain that I’d been unable to return the love of this humble, understated girl, who deserved so much more.

‘It’s ok,’ Lily said again, hers eyes widening at the connection she’d found with mine. We blinked each other in, speaking a thousand words that needed no sound to be heard.

‘Lily, sweetheart, aren’t you supposed to be at Psycho-Ed Group?’ Pam said, spying my eyes filling, my head lowering.

‘Yes, sorry. I’m sorry,’ Lily said, her voice so small.

‘You don’t have to be sorry, darling.’ Penny came to the rescue. Taking my hand, she wrapped it up with her own. ‘This is just Tish’s first time out, so it’s all a bit... a bit... a bit scary, hey?’ The hey was for me, but the forgiveness was for Lily, though I wished she could believe she needed none.

‘I’m going, I’m going,’ Lily said, watching my mouth open, then close. Tears began to leak from her eyes as she squeezed my thigh a final time, telling me how soon she’d be back to see me. ‘Please Tish, just don’t give up. I need you. Keep fighting, can’t wait to have you back with us.’

When Lily had disappeared back to Group with the notebook she’d forgotten, Penny and Pam took me back into Room Two. They laid me in bed and let me cry. I was distraught. Quite suddenly I felt inconsolable, but the emptiness within me was a hollow void that I now knew

needed filling. The uncomplicated love of another is precious and you were right, Dr Miller, it was ok to want it. No one is unentitled to love. No one is so unworthy as to be un-loveable – not even someone as flawed as me. Because accepting the love of another is a transaction in which the love is returned. I saw this in the sincerity of Lily’s glistening eyes. She was loving, but she was longing too for what I could give her – just by being there with her, in a way that asked nothing of her, but accepted every part of her.

Dear Lily, you gave me the will to want to see you again and the strength to leave that room again, one day and forever. The fear had not dispelled, but it had distilled into something that was clearer: my fear of living was a fear of exposing myself to the *possibility* of being rejected again, of proving myself unworthy of the love of others. But you, Lily – though you may never know or believe it – *you* made me realise that this risk was one well worthy of taking.

I made it to the opening session of DBT. And it worked in all the ways I believe you hoped it would. It broke the tedium of hospital life, got me off the ward and into the presence of others. These were out-patients who lived in the Real World, where the day did not necessarily begin with a six o’clock weight-check or end at nine-thirty (sharp), with a mug of warm(ish) milk, a final BP check and a (potent) concoction of sedatives.

It was a novelty and I was amazed. They seemed so *normal*, though it soon became apparent that they considered themselves abnormal. They were plagued by demons of their own: PTSD, depression, abuse, alcoholism, substance misuse. Mental health is so varying in its many manifestations and my appreciation of these is so much richer for my attendance to that group. We may have been divided by the kind of behaviours upon which we had become dependent, but they were all equally destructive. And, I should add, ultimately they were all defective in dulling that pain they sought to abate. Mental torment can feel so isolating that I

believe we all found it relieving to discover that it is – and it *is* – experienced by many, not few, others.

You wanted me to see this. You wanted to prove that you believed my pain extended beyond a belligerent resistance to food and water. And you wanted to show me that the behaviours that had led me to an eating-disorders ward were just secondary symptoms of an underlying pain that needed exploring. If you could not cure it, you could help me to endure it and those groupies became your – my – living, breathing proof.

I was curious. Just how was it possible that these people could manage jobs, head companies, parent families and function (relatively) normally? The strength it took me to keep breathing was suddenly exposed as weakness in the face of their determination to Keep Calm and Carry On – to parent on, to study on, to soldier on. Was there any end to what they could achieve? And all the while they believed they were *failing* their children, partners, colleagues and friends. Success and failure, I realised, can be too black and white when it is judged by a mind far too quick to find fault with itself. They taught me resilience. They showed me compassion and, just by breathing, breathing, breathing on, they were heroes to me. Couldn't they see that?

No, they could not. Nor could they believe my story. I baffled them to a point that bordered disbelief. Could someone *seriously* be locked in hospital for, what was then nearing, a solid year?

Yes.

No, surely not. And, 'like, with the whole *food thing*: is it really possible to resist cake? What about birthdays?' Danielle decided she rather liked the idea of not being tempted into cake, thinking perhaps it would simplify her life altogether, in which dieting had never played an easy part.

Steve's disbelief got no further than chips. He couldn't contemplate, let alone comprehend, living a life without fatty potatoes. 'As in, not even after a night out? I mean,' Steve meant, 'like, what *other* hangover cure is there?'

I declined to point out that not only did Nights Out not top my Priority List, they were, in fact, not yet a scheduled part of the hospital's Rehab Programme.

Young Hattie hung herself up on parmesan. She could weep, she said, at the thought of bolognaise without a peaked mountain of parmesan. The travesty! And in this we were agreed, though the real tragedy she made me mourn was for my mother, who has waited ten years for me to rediscover my love of her bolognaise.

'Question,' Dan had a question, 'Do they knock you out, like, when they put it in?'

'The tube, you mean? No. Don't be mad.'

'Mad? *You* must be mad – that's criminal, doesn't it hurt?'

'A bit.' So much.

'Nope. Just no.' Dan shook his head. He was *sure* it wasn't possible to have a tube threaded through your nose, right down into your tummy without sedation or some form of anaesthetic.

In time, I assured them that it was not just possible, but completely true. On that first day, though, I unsettled myself by scrunching my toes in the silence that followed the first barrage of questions. The soles beneath my feet felt so solid, the canvas of my ballet pumps constricted my feet in a way they were not yet used to. My sweaty palms smoothed the stiff folds of the skirt Belinda had chosen for me that first morning. She'd seemed so excited, her face lit like a child, dressing her (reluctant) doll for the Big Event that began at ten o'clock that morning. How strange it was to wear a cardigan with buttons done up and a skirt which had fabric firmer than the flimsy dresses which had served me so well as nighties for all those months.

Belinda took a step back to admire the masterpiece she'd made of me. Brushing the creases out of my skirt, she pulled my cardigan higher over my left shoulder so that she could tuck the end of the tube beneath the lapel. 'Look, Tish,' she said, 'if you slip the tube under there, no one will even notice it.'

I raised my eyebrows and tried not to smile. Belinda nodded, nodded some more and tried not to smile. She caved. We both smiled and she squeezed my shoulder while I told her that no amount of cardigan could possibly conceal the presence of a tube that was hanging from my nose and strapped to my cheek with conspicuously white masking-tape.

But you had, Dr Miller, had you not, foreseen how their gaze would dart to my cheek? You knew their eyes would expand before turning away at a rate which sought to disguise their surprise. It did not and as I walked in that first morning, late and accompanied by a nurse, my cheeks reddened as theirs paled. The masking tape itched and my fingers twitched with need to remedy the discomfort. But I made steel fists and sat through it, reluctant to draw further attention to a tube that suddenly seemed such a stark symbol of my abnormality.

‘Ok,’ Mandy, the DBT therapist, soon broke the silence, ‘let’s address the elephant in the room then, shall we?’

The elephant was me. And I sure felt ginormous, sitting there alongside a troop of terrified mice as Mandy said, ‘This is Tish. She’s an in-patient on the eating-disorders ward. And, as you can see, she’s being tube-fed at the moment. But it’s ok, you needn’t look quite so frightened, she doesn’t bite.’ Mandy smiled warmly at me, and I tried *not* to smile at the thought that part of the problem was that Tish did not bite, like, anything at all.

Undeterred by the silence, Mandy ventured on with the introduction you’d asked her to give. And she was lovely, with a plumpish figure which was usually shrouded beneath a long, red cardigan that fell below her knees. Her sparkly brooch was, perhaps, the only indication of her Essex roots other than her shellac nails. But, however well-intended, her explanation of me singled me out in a way that made me twist further with dis-ease. I was no exception, for we were *all* strangers to each other. But the months of my confinement had normalised the strangeness of my situation in a way that could not have prepared me for the range of questions I was about to face. I knew you trusted Mandy to shield me from their intrigue, but only now can I see that you also wanted to expose me to their curiosity. A year in hospital is long enough to become institutionalised and if this is plain to me today, it was much hazier back then.

So DBT became an education into the nature of normal and the *abnormality* that had become my norm. It wasn't about striving for normality in the sense of sameness – uniqueness would do and was as valuable to you as it should have been to me. Acceptance was the key. You wanted me to learn to live with who I was, without forever punishing myself for who I was not. It was ok, you said, to live in fear of the darkness. What wasn't ok, was to let that fear keep me in darkness. Now that the curtains were open, that far-off *possibility*, lurking on the horizon, was inching closer with each day. And you knew – did you not? – that my kinship with that group would help you bring that blurry vision into a focus I could focus on.

'So how was DBT this week, Tish?' you asked towards the close of our ward-round session some weeks later.

'Good, I think,' I said, 'I mean, we tried a bit of mindfulness.'

'Mindfulness?'

'Yup, mindfulness, and I know what you're thinking,' I said, knowing you were thinking that the idea of me meditating quietly without my mind busying itself over-thinking was a therapeutic likelihood unlikely to work in my favour. 'It was Dan's turn to choose the final exercise, and he said this whole "mindfulness thing" was becoming a bit of a craze and he wondered whether it was a better band-wagon to jump onto than the substance-free one he kept falling off from.'

I should add that Dan was a fan of painting his world with a comic-strip of colour and these were his words not mine.

'So you all better zip it,' he had said in response to the sceptical looks being thrown around the room, 'Got it? Nobody's to laugh.'

We did get it. Dan was Dead Serious. His mindful plan had been conjured in earnest. That much was plain from his stubby fingers, which trembled slightly as he began to unzip his orange backpack. It must have been a relic of his teenage-son's younger years, for although Dan liked to consider himself a Macho Man of sorts, it was not of the Action-Man kind that featured on the fore-flap of his backpack.

Dan pulled out two roses and swore lightly as he pricked his fingers on one of the thorny stems. One bud had donated its petals to the bottom of his backpack and so he let that stem fall to the ground. He licked his pricked finger and shrugged his burly shoulders. The remaining wilted rose would have to do. He glanced towards the ally he had made of Hattie – a girl roughly my age, who had kindness for all but herself. She gave some to Dan now, returning his sudden neediness with a smile that was warm and a nod that helped him along.

Dan went on. He nodded and gave the petals a quick blow, as though his breath might bring them back to life. It did not and so Mandy said, 'Desperate. Dan, you've been too long without your wife.' She paused, her fondness coaxing Dan into a smile, 'Did she not teach you that roses don't blossom so well in backpacks?'

'I did wonder,' Dan had wondered, 'but it wouldn't do my street-cred much good, dropping the kids off in the Range Rover with a couple of roses on my lap.'

We accepted this as Fair Game. We had long since decided that the school gates were a likely place for him to meet a mother, who also wished to exchange single parenting for something more companionable. Dan now bade us to be quiet. This was his moment, was it not? And, squaring his shoulders, he resumed command, like he was in the boardroom, relying on his (questionable) charm to win over potential clients.

'So,' he said, 'they're my late wife's favourite. Pink roses. We had them for our wedding. So I get them for the kids, at home, you know. Keep her with us,' he paused, his eyes dropping in thought, 'I don't know. My littlest, she likes having them about. The cost though, Christ! I'm thinking of switching to those plastic ones. Not them tacky things mind, but them nice ones, you know?'

We nodded. We knew. He nodded and looked around the room without meeting any one of our eyes. The fingers of his right hand were twisting the wedding band on his left. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘I was reading this stuff about mindfulness – about finding a way to focus on the here and now. Letting go of – *stuff* – and, well, finding “restfulness in the moment”. I know, sounds like crap. But thought maybe we could try it, you know?’ The corners of his mouth sunk uncertainly, but he found Hattie’s eye and the twitch of her lips caved his into a smile. ‘Oh get over yourselves, will you? Let’s face it, not exactly got much to lose, have we? So give it a go, with me. Won’t you?’

He stood up and, taking assurance from Mandy’s calming nod, began plucking the rose. Petal by petal, Dan pulled it apart, handing one petal to each of us. We were quiet and moved, I believe, to receive the precious fragments Dan was willing to share between us.

Distribution complete, Dan laid the remains of the rosebud to rest on his lap. ‘Right,’ he said, ‘don’t be divs and peek: Close your eyes and *try* and find,’ he paused, scanning over the crumpled notes in his lap, ““inner peace” from the petal. You know, just focus on it and *nothing* else.’

‘And the result?’ Dr Miller, you asked.

‘We tried,’ I said and we both smiled as I told you of the flurry of worries that had whipped up in the silence before Dan had let us open our eyes. Consulting his lesson-like plan, he’d said, ‘Thought maybe we could go round now, each say how we found it?’

To this there was an exchange of askance glances. Cheeks were sucked in and eyes were averted as we wondered what the *hell* to say. We dearly wanted to turn Dan’s experiment into a success he could take away, but this would require thought. There was silence.

‘Yeah... Um, I mean,’ Steve took the lead, ‘yeah. I think maybe it *could* be really helpful, mate.’ I was lost. Steve had stolen the conditional tense in the way I’d hoped to. ‘Look,’ Steve went on, glancing at Mandy before looking back at Dan, ‘with some practice, reckon it *would* be well good... Shutting down the thoughts though, it’s bound to take time, mate, isn’t it?’

Oh, to *these* wise words, there was a lot of nodding from the rest of us. As though our bobbing heads could counter the suspicion brewing on Dan's face.

It did not. Dan frowned, and said, 'But the whole point was to focus on the rose.'

We kept nodding. Dan kept frowning, 'So like, how did it *feel*, holding the petal?'

The nodding continued. So did the silence. Hattie glanced at me. I looked at Steve. Steve breathed, heavy and long, then tried again, 'It felt... calming. I guess, like I was holding part of the natural world, you know?'

Silence.

'Bollocks!' The bollocks came from a disbelieving Dan, who laughed. And laughed loud, 'So full of bollocks, Steve. As if the natural world even entered that thick head of yours. Knew it was a load of crap.'

Lips twitched. Cheeks were pinched and eyes began to turn towards Mandy in the hope that she'd take over. She did not. Inhaling slowly, she turned back to Dan, leaving him to go on. Dan did, eventually. He rubbed his forehead, closed his eyes and said, in a shrunken voice, 'Holding the rose, all I could think was that I'll never hold Sally again. And how's that supposed to help anybody?'

Mandy pulled her cardigan together, crossed her legs and removed her glasses. 'Look guys,' she said, 'no one's ever mastered Mindfulness in ten minutes. It doesn't work for everyone, but for anyone that it *has* helped, it is has over time. With practice. With patience.' Mandy's eyes spied and stayed on Hattie, who was sitting flush-faced and subdued, 'Hatts, you're very quiet in the corner over there. How was it for you? How did your petal make you feel?'

'Feel?' Hattie's forehead rippled into creases. She sat up and opened her palm with a flick that flung the remnants of her torn petal into the air. The rest of us watched as the pieces fluttered like confetti to the floor. 'The petal felt fragile,' she said, conclusive, 'like flesh. Like how easy it is for me to rip my flesh into messy pieces.'

And that brought a swift end to that. Mandy clapped her hands together with a loudness lost to our laughter. It was, she said, probably time to finish for the day. ‘Thanks Dan, for your thoughtful intervention, but perhaps mindfulness would be better kept for a week further along the line.’

But Mandy allowed us to laugh and is laughter not a remedy of sorts? I am yet to be persuaded into mindfulness, but the laughter we shared that day lead me to want more. In that moment, with my tummy aching with convulsions that only returned as my eyes opened to behold Dan’s Action Pack, with Hattie’s fingers pressing into my back to steady her shaking body, I had quite forgotten that the Voice did not allow me to laugh. I just did. Surrounded by them, I just did. And is that not mindfulness in a way? A way that allowed me to forget my past, surrender any thought as to the future, and just enjoy the present we had found together.

‘Knock-knock.’

Martha appeared in the doorway of Room Two. Her face softened into a smile as her eyes came to rest on my mother and me sitting – more lying – together on my narrow bed. ‘You’ve been summoned,’ she said, laughing at her own formality. ‘Dr Miller’s *almost* ready for you both. So shall we go down and wait there? Won’t be long now.’

My mother glanced at me, her face caught between relief and apprehension. We were nearing my discharge and she’d driven up for my CPA (Care Plan Assessment) – a kind of glorified Ward Round that family members and community-care workers are invited to join. The intention is to review the patient’s progress and begin, where possible, to plan the steps leading up to and following discharge. They call it ‘Aftercare,’ though, Dr Miller, the reality is that community resources are now too stretched to make it the seamless transfer I believe you had in mind. Little did we know.

‘Ready darling?’

‘Ready,’ I said and we both slipped off the bed to find shoes. She found hers. I could not and settled, as usual, for going without. I was nervous. CPA’s often had unpredictable outcomes, but they rarely passed without causing Trouble and I was eager to have it over.

Penny had other ideas. Martha had taken the lead, but we only made it as far as the ward sofas before Penny called us over. ‘You off to your CPA, Tishy?’ she said, fighting a yawn. It was early afternoon and Penny called this post-lunch lull her Natural Nap-Time. She uncrossed her legs and stretched her arms tall above her. I nodded and my mother did too.

‘Good luck then darling.’ Penny smiled, reassuringly, ‘Have you got The List we made last night with all your questions?’

I gave Penny a wave of The List. And Penny was pleased, though she tutted all the same, for the paper had shrunk considerably with all the folds my fingers had anxiously ironed into it.

‘Lordy, Tishy,’ she winked at my mother, ‘one of these days I’m going to chop those busy fingers of yours off altogether. But well done, darling, get them questions asked and remember what your Penny always tells you?’

‘Go for Gold and Glory: Ask for Everything. And Settle for *Anything*.’

‘Thanks Fran,’ I said, for it was Beady-Eyed Skipper who had spoken Penny’s wise-words, not quite sitting, but perching on her sofa arm beside Penny. No doubt, the pair had been on the Look Out for Action and a patient being summoned down for their CPA was Action indeed.

‘Watch it though, Goodchild, rumour well has it that Miller’s in a Bad Mood today,’ said Fran, Chief Circumventer of Every Rumour, ‘Carla came out from her ward round, like, *bawling* her eyes out. Cos she got,’ Fran began ticking-off her spindly fingers, ‘like, No Leave this weekend. No Rehab. A.N.D a *WHOLE* meal-plan increase.’ Having run out of fingers, Fran straightened her palm and whipped it across her neck to re-enact The

Decapitation of Carla. ‘Yeah, well,’ she said, ‘enough said, Goodchild. Carla went ballistic. Like, Properly Ballistic.’

‘Fran, that’s enough.’ Martha had heard enough. She glanced towards the end of the corridor, hoping, perhaps, that Kate would appear and rescue us before my mother witnessed too much. No good. There was no sign of reprieve and so Martha turned back to Fran. ‘Do I have to tell you again Fran?’ she said. She did. ‘It’s inappropriate to perch up there like that. If you’re going to be sitting on the ward, then you need to be *sitting*. Otherwise it counts as exercise, Fran. And. You. Know. It.’

‘Yeah. *And...*’ Fran’s retaliation failed to materialise. Her mouth closed, she shrugged and pulled her face into a look that told Martha to Back Off whilst she was mid-way through telling tales. No, Fran was not done with Carla. With a sigh that snubbed Martha, Fran turned to me and picked up where she’d left off. ‘Goodchild, surely you heard The Screaming?’

We had heard. But my mother and I had chosen not to hear as Carla let loose her blood-curdling cry. ‘Yeah, well,’ said Fran, reading the rise of my eyebrows and splaying her palms: Point Proven, ‘She Lost the Whole Flipping Lot of The Plot with Pam.’

Fran was now glowing golden, basking, as she was wont to, in any distress that fell upon Carla. Fran’s charm was an acquired taste that Carla was yet to appreciate. And Fran did not much appreciate those unwilling to lend themselves to her charm, offensive as it usually was.

‘*Don’t* worry,’ Fran said, not worried. ‘It’s all hunky-dory now, they shut her *right* up with some PRN diazepam. So she’s fine,’ Fran added, deadpan, as though a shot of medication genuinely made the Whole Flipping Lot of Carla’s Plot A-Ok.

‘Tuh, that’s enough, Miss Skipper.’ Penny failed to look surprised as she turned to Fran, trying to muster an expression of disapproval. Martha’s disdain, however, was plain. She tossed narrowed eyes in the direction of Fran, who tossed them back. Martha stopped herself and turned to my mother with a sheepish look that was as brief as it was revealing to Fran, who purred with triumph. Martha was well and truly backed into a corner, torn between letting loose and Keeping Calm at *All* Costs in front of my mother.

‘Fine, Fran,’ Martha said, all but fine. Payback was coming and Fran’s body was now shrinking in sheer expectation of it. ‘Sit down *appropriately* or go back to your room. You can be getting your Recovery Star Book filled in for me to look at with you later.’

Fran was trumped. Martha was triumphant. Recovery Star Book was punishment indeed. But the irony was not entirely lost on Fran. Her lips were twitching in wry recognition of it – for Fran starred in many things, but Recovery she had yet to master, no matter the number of worksheets she has been made to fill in.

The jostle of Dr Dawson’s keys sounded from the end of the corridor. Her busy arm beckoned us to join her with all the nod Martha needed to get me and my mother the hell away from Fran. But really, Martha needn’t have worried. My mother had heard much about Beady-Eyed Skipper, and each story was only a relieving reminder that there really *did* exist specimens more complicated than her menace of a daughter.

‘No need to look so frightened,’ you said, before my mother or I had even sat down. But that was your way, wasn’t it? You made any tension plain and, in that simplicity, enabled us to see the bigger picture.

The room was long and narrow. A row of chairs lined each wall, facing each other with no table between. A panel of window ran behind your back and the gentle breeze coming through the blinds rustled the papers until Martha closed the door over, sealing us in. I sat opposite you, edging my chair a little to the right, closer to my mother.

‘Now, Sabina, Mrs Goodchild,’ you turned to my mother, unsure what to call her. The professional side of you aspired to a formalness that will never become you. Perhaps you felt you knew her too well, though you had met her only a handful of times. But your way to get through to your patients was to learn much about what was important to them and my mother

is my world. Hospital laid a distance between us that you worked hard to close by bringing her into constant conversation.

‘Sabina,’ you began, ‘Thank you for trekking up here today. I think probably you know everyone here, but an introduction never does any harm, does it. So, we all know Tish and me. Sabina, this is Kate – Dr Dawson, our Ward Doctor. Think you’ve met? And Martha, our Charge Nurse, you perhaps know?’

My mother smiled. She was all too familiar with Martha and her infamous Inappropriate List. I glanced at Martha, with an apology she returned with a knowing but warm smile.

‘And this is Doris, here on behalf of Tish’s Community Team. So that’s everybody?’

I looked across to your worn, leather shoes and you scrunched them in the silence that followed your introductions. The path you were about to tread in telling our progress was one I knew would be hard to hear, not only for me, but for those gathered with us. My mother was sitting with her hands in her lap, her body tilted slightly towards mine, her face open and needing, perhaps, to know that her daughter was safe. And she was. The worst was over. The aftermath had begun and the ever-after you had in your sights was beginning to emerge in mine.

My fingers coiled my skirt as you told us how pleased you were to have this rare chance to reflect on the journey of my admission. Kate muted her protest against your analogy, though the very thought of her squirm lightened the air, for she disguised her discomfort by crossing her legs. *Thud*. The wheels of her chair wheeled her indiscreetly back into the wall.

You ploughed on. The scrunch of your shoes filled the moments where your voice trailed away. You were reflective, candid and proud, offering me bland questions that invited me to walk alongside you.

‘It’s been quite the long haul, hasn’t it Tish?’ you asked, not looking for a response. Experience had taught you that the formality of such occasions tended to steal my tongue. But I was able to nod and you nodded too. I was with you and so you went on to tell us how

fearful you had been in our darkest weeks, that you'd lose me. The loss you were referring to went beyond the possibility of losing me to a forensic unit, but you shielded me from the angst it incurred by keeping the focus on you. For once the vision you were imparting was not through my eyes, but yours. It was the first time you'd dared to share your version of our battle and I was stunned by the tactful way in which you could allude to the darkness without glossing over our struggle, or lingering over the details that will forever remain too distressing for my mother to hear.

'We were faced with the very real possibility of losing you, Tish,' you said, your voice dropping with each word. It was as though you wanted me to come to terms with your fear without feeling the guilt you knew the Voice would try to attach to your suffering. 'We nearly lost you, Tish. And that was incredibly hard for us all to bear.'

I swallowed. Kate re-crossed her legs and Martha sniffed. She sniffed again and I couldn't but look up. Her wide eyes were awaiting my own, glistening with a dampness I never will forget, Martha.

'The Mental Health Act is a constant dilemma for us clinicians, especially with eating disorders. Why? Because Tish has both the intellect and logic to know her situation, yet this proves no defence in the face of an illness as aggressive as hers continues to be. Which is why,' you said, with simplicity that was felt by each of us, 'without the section, Tish would not be alive today.'

This retelling gives me the chance to say what I was unable to that day. I wanted to correct you, to tell you that it was not the Section which had saved my life, but the man orchestrating it. Without the compassion through which you directed your care, the section would have been powered by force. Force met with force, for the Voice will never submit to anything that threatens to disempower it that way. But kindness? It has none. Compassion? It is quite without, and your generosity of both ultimately outweighed it in a way that did not allow me to fall on any side other than yours.

Little could I have known that you were speaking of the Section as a preamble to something we were fast approaching. 'Now, bear with me, Tish. It's possible you're going to find this a little controversial.' You looked at me, but I did not dare return your look, for the sideways

glance you'd given Martha told me clearly that it was very possible I would find your proposition more than a *little controversial*.

'I know you're keen for us to discuss your discharge, Tish. But we have a little way to go before then. That said, I think it's good to be open and talk about it.' Now, this was skirting around like no other. Your sentences were lacking direction and so you gave up and gave us nothing more than three letters: 'CTO.'

Blank faces blinked. My mother repeated the letters with perplexity you solved, explaining, 'It's called a Community Treatment Order, have you heard of it?

Blank faces blinked.

'No?' Evidently not. 'Well, it's something which is occasionally used in cases where the patient has been held under a hospital section for a longer period than is usual.' You paused, waited and went cautiously on, 'It's a bit like being on a section, only within the community. On your discharge, you'd come off Section Three, Tish, and be transferred onto a CTO. Now,' you said, weaving your fingers together and scrunching your toes, 'Tish, you're looking worryingly pensive. Can you just hold off your over-thinking for a moment and listen? Because, I promise you, the benefits hugely outweigh the negatives, in that it will have few implications that you will be aware of. Whilst it sounds very official, the reality is it's just a safety net for those caring for you. A preventative should you relapse – and, let's be clear, Tish, when you have relapsed in the past it has been at a rate that has significantly impaired our ability to treat you without relying on more invasive forms of treatment. Well, the CTO speeds up the rate of hospital intervention, by allowing me to set a number of *conditions* you need to meet in order for you to stay out of hospital and in the community.'

Silence

'Sabina,' you began with my mother, 'you look decidedly relieved. But Tish, the creases of your frown have deepened as I've gone on.'

All eyes swivelled to me. Heat had risen to my cheeks with the quickening beat of my heart. I shuffled back in my chair, twisting slightly. The Voice had stirred at the very mention of the

word ‘conditions.’ It felt threatened and I was uneasy. Were you not turning my discharge into a kind of parole? A release that could be snatched from me should my footsteps even begin to wobble?

‘I know this is hard for you to hear, Tish,’ you said, sensing me slipping through your interlaced fingers, ‘but the point of telling you now is to give us plenty of time to discuss it – together we can come up with the conditions – your target weight etc.’

You must have seen my face contract, because you stopped to remind me not to panic. ‘There’s no need to, Tish,’ you said, though when was there ever a need for Tish to panic? It was too late, you had awoken the Voice and Tish was busy, panicking. *What trick was this?* This was a trap. *No*, the Voice decided, I was wrong and *it* was right: This was not *just* a trap. *This was a Bloody Ambush.* You were forcing me into compliance with an ever-looming threat of readmission. Too bad: Tish would *not* be fooled.

‘Tish, come on, slow it down,’ you tried, glancing into the faces of those present, afraid, perhaps that they were teetering on the brink of witnessing a situation best left between you and I. But my left leg was deaf to your words. Jiggling furiously, it pushed you into pulling me back, ‘Tish I *need* you to listen – it’s really important you hear what I am saying and *not* the warped version you’re hearing inside.’

You waited for your words to settle. ‘You have to trust me, Tish, that I am not doing this to trap you. Not to put pressure on you. And not, Tish, absolutely *not*, to punish you. It is simply because I believe it is the right thing to do in order for me to continue protecting you. I need you to trust that, Tish. Can you do that?’

My mouth opened. It closed. What could I say? How could I say anything in front of all those gathered there to hear of our progress? It is hard to have to pretend. It is hard to be strong when you feel weak, to be ok when you feel anything but. The act is not contrived in the conceited sense, but an element of pretence will always play a part in the desperate bid that is trying to prove your sanity. I needed your approval to leave. I needed you to believe I was ready to be released into the arms of the mother sitting beside me. Her fingers were squeezing my palm so tightly that I could not let go to wipe away the single tear that was straying down

my cheek. Why was it *still* so hard? Why is wanting to be ‘better’ not *enough*? Would being ‘ok’ ever come naturally?

I believe you valued my determination not to protest. You gave me time to come to terms with the worst of your words and returned with a voice that was quieter. ‘Just like the Section has been indispensable to our fight Tish, I believe the CTO will likewise prove invaluable to you in the future.’

Us

You

Me

How slight was the difference of words? Yet the broken ‘us’ placed you and me in separate worlds. Just like that, the single word had slipped from your tongue with a subtlety that barely left a trace. But it had been there, had it not? The split. The division of our paths. Our battle was broken into a fight that would be mine to face alone when discharge parted me from you. I winced and wriggled my hand from my mother’s fingers, leaving her one hand and using my other to wipe away the next tear.

‘Have we got any tissues?’ you asked the room.

Did you know, Dr Miller, that I had suddenly perceived that discharge would not bring an end to the torment? There was no way out, was there? No magical recovery awaited me. Unlocking the hospital doors would not unshackle me from the Voice’s chains. Releasing me would not expel the pain in my head. Is that what you were trying to tell me, speaking so slowly, as though your efforts to open my eyes were flexed by your uncertainty of my courage to face the emerging truth?

Martha pulled a box of tissues from off the windowsill and handed it to you, though she was closer to me than you. You took the box, plucked a tissue and leant forwards in your chair to extend your offering to me. I took a tissue, but the tear continued unchecked on its path down my cheek. The tissue was too scrunched in my fist for further use. It was my only way to hold on, Dr Miller. You were willing me to believe myself ready to face the *ongoing* battle without you. But, how could I? Dr Miller, how could you?

‘Don’t look that far forward,’ you said, just knowing. ‘We’re not there yet. And remember what I said, Competition Day won’t come until I believe we’re absolutely ready for the challenge. Remember?’

It took so much to give you my nod, but I did. I nodded, swallowed and kept nodding until you moved us on. We’d face this trial better without an audience later. ‘No different,’ you said, in a voice that lightened as you sat back, ‘to the Section. And remember how much of a hard time you initially gave me for that?’

The silence told you that I was not so forgiving as to find you funny just yet.

‘Acceptance, Tish. Acceptance. That’s all I need you to do.’

And there, in the singleness of that word, you said all you needed to say to hold me with you. You’d loaded that word with a thousand meanings known only to us and I heard them all. I gripped hold of them, knowing that in the future that word would become as important as I can say now it has certainly proved to be.

But just then it was too hard. I was overcome by the realisation that we were heading towards a destination that did not exist in reality. Discharge is not the end where recovery is found. It is like a rainbow – distant, promising but ever evading your ability to grasp it. There is no finality. The Voice denies you anything as finite as that. The battle goes on, doesn’t it?

And on.

And on.

And on.

How blind does hope allow us to be?

I began to rock in my chair. Running my fingers through my hair, I turned to my mother, as though she could somehow stem the flow of tears welling in my eyes. Hers swelled in receipt of my appeal, but it was you who spared me with the humorous deflection you knew best. Turning to the others, you said, ‘Tish has – have you not, Tish? – an *uneasy* relationship with my use of the Mental Health Act. Very deep down, she knows it’s for her own good, but, at

times, it can be a testy challenge to dig that knowledge up to the surface. We're getting there, though. Tish, are we not a work in good progress?'

We were, Dr Miller, we were.

You were smiling and I tried my utmost not to. My dis-ease at your proposition had far from dissipated, but the corners of my mouth were struggling to steel themselves against you. My mother nudged my arm – well aware that her menace of a daughter is a stubborn thing to behold – and my lips twitched. You waited, watching her teasing fingers wrestle the last creases of my frown. And, together, you won. You had both earned your right to it and I was unable to withhold it. I smiled, plainly, sincerely and all the more dearly, I believe, to you for the proof it was that we were – and we truly were – *a work in good progress*.

'Oh, your Tish can be a tricky thing to convince, Mrs Goodchild,' Martha said to my mother, whose head tilted as I looked up into her face. She was still smiling, her cheeks were flushed and her fingers were nervously plaiting the tassels of the purple pashmina she'd taken off. She mmmm-ed in agreement, too content to see her menace smile to say anymore. It was a kind of kindling to the hope she continues to hold for me. It is a dream you gave back to her, Dr Miller. In the darkest period of my life, you offered her hope that she has never relinquished. For she continues to dream and each vision she has of my future is rarely blighted by the reality of the illness's potential permanence. Rather, she *accepts* the setbacks we face with passivity that is unwavering. And her resolve fills the void you left me with on the day of my discharge, in a way I could never have foreseen. She is my constant companion, my ally and my brave and quite wonderful Mummy.

Releasing her pashmina, her hand crept back over to my lap and found my fingers to squeeze. She made a bunch of us: the scrunched tissue, my palm, wrapped up in the fingers of her fist. And, like that my mother clung to me, Dr Miller, like she was the limpet and I the rock she could not be without. It forced me out of the tunnel of my vision and into the light of her eyes. Through her, I saw how she was clinging to the comfort you were offering her by releasing me into a discharge safeguarded by a CTO. She knew you were not intending to ensnare me in hospital, you were trying to ensure my position at home. The CTO was no different to the safety net the tube had once been. It was there to harness me, to hold me, to catch me should I begin to fall. So she needed it, perhaps more than I, and I realised to deny

her that security would be tantamount to rejecting the love a mother will always wish could be enough to protect her child.

‘It’s really important, darling,’ she said, quietly. ‘We need all the help we can get. It’s not going to be easy...’ Her voice trailed away and when it returned there was a plaintive, pleading note that exposed her fear for the coming months in which she too would feel the loss of your care. ‘Please don’t fight it, darling. Dr Miller’s right, you need to trust him on this, please.’

‘Like I always say, Tish,’ Martha did always say, ‘All we want is for you to go home and for you to be safe there. The CTO, it’s for your own good.’ She paused before repeating, ‘for your own good, Tish,’ as though the repetition could make the goodness better felt. But the good remained hard to grip when the Voice was working hard to pulse the negatives round and round my mind, like the poisonous weed which anorexia truly is.

‘Your reservation is fair, though, Tish,’ you said, sensing the Voice clamping my jaw shut. ‘To be honest, I’d be more concerned if you weren’t concerned by relinquishing what...’ your voice stalled, seeking a delicacy that softened my jawline in bemused expectation, ‘what you *perceive* to be your freedom.’

I pinched the smile from my lips. Perception was something we tended to agree to disagree on.

‘But it’s a small price to pay for the life I hope it will allow you to lead. The CTO is not about force, Tish. It’s about protecting the interests of someone who is, at times, still unable to accept her entitlement to life. And this can, can it not, Tish? at *other* times impair your decision making?’

This was Fair Game.

‘For the benefit of all present,’ you said, ‘that smile means Tish knows her doctor means her well. She will, however, at present, decline from confirming anything to that effect with words. So,’ you turned to me, ‘shall we leave it at that for now, then, Tish? You can – and she will – give me a hard time about it later, ok?’

You took my smile as permission to move on. You were keen to outline our baby-steps and emphasise that though they'd seemed incremental, each had been fundamental to our progress. 'We are getting there. We *are*,' you said, leaving me to wonder who you were most seeking to convince. 'Tish remains sceptical about my pacing and I was given a bit of an earful when I tried telling tales about tortoises and hares.'

'Hang on,' Kate said, 'It's the way he tells it.'

'Oh, I *do* apologise,' you said, 'my mistake, it's the *way* I tell it. Better?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Well, contrary to popular belief,' you said, 'our progress is huge. Tish is out of the wheelchair, her postural drop is no longer such an issue and her bloods are stable. Weight gain, however, continues to prove a challenge.' This was your version of an understatement and it was not lost on my mother, who rolled her eyes from you to me. 'That said,' you said, 'Tish opens her curtains every morning and I am told,' you turned towards Martha, who tilted her head in expectation, 'that *mostly* the curtains stay open without any need of encouragement?'

Martha inhaled in deep demonstration of the arduous battle which were those few mornings when the world remained too unbearable to bear. But her nod came eventually, and she was smiling as she said, '*Mostly*. We're getting there, slowly. Consistency isn't our thing just yet, but like I keep saying,' Martha was always saying, 'swings and roundabouts. We're all allowed our good days and our... let's say, *complicated* days, hey Tish?'

'What can *I* say?' you said, 'we are a constant work in progress with your daughter, Mrs Goodchild.' I believe Mrs Goodchild appreciated the fondness of your tone as you went on, 'Yes.... Tish is now electively tube fed – following a... *trying* period without it, a few months ago we agreed to re-passing the tube and, Tish, am I right in saying that the tube has now become a weapon used for the good of our cause?'

It was hard to nod. The Voice resented any admission in favour of a weapon that had – and it had – served our fight so well. ‘And, gradually,’ you went on, ‘we’re trying to replace her NG feeds with solids. Martha, am I right in thinking Tish manages two meals and two snacks orally now?’

‘That’s right,’ Martha replied. ‘Lunch still via the tube. And although she has the same thing each night for dinner, she does manage it orally. Stays in her room with One-to-One supervision for that. But she’s started coming down to the dining room for breakfast with the others. You see,’ Martha added, ‘Breakfast tends to be more manageable for our patients – the cereal, the milk, it’s all very closely measured so they know exactly what to expect. No little surprises.’ She sent a wink my way, ‘A relief for us all, hey, Tish?’

I couldn’t not smile. ‘But,’ I couldn’t *not* correct Martha and spoke out loud, I realised, for the first time, ‘not when there’s a Cornflake Crisis.’

Martha giggled. ‘Except when there’s a Cornflake Crisis.’

‘Sorry, come again,’ you said, feigning ignorance, ‘Tish, am I aware of this Cornflake Crisis?’

‘Even *I’ve* heard of the Cornflake Crisis,’ my mother piped up, pleased as punch to be able to lead me into the tale of woe that had begun (not for the first time) that Tuesday morning, with a delivery driver who failed to include the individual packets of Cornflakes. *Starving amidst plenty* is a wise and fitting adage for a scene in which the ample packets of Bran Flakes, Coco Pops and Frosties proved no consolation to the absence of Cornflakes. Why? Because Cornflakes were safe. Why? Because the Cornflake packet weighed three *whole* grams less than the other packets and three *whole* grams less is a *lot* more for an anorectic to face, unprepared. There is (or should be) a Basic Rule: DON’T make an anorectic deviate from that which they which they have made *safe*. DO and it will end badly.

Anarchy had ensued, of course. Carla kicked us off, falling afoul of Martha’s List of Table Expectations by picking up her bowl of milk-sodden (sodding) Bran Flakes. Yes, I mean up and *off* the table mat – a travesty in and of itself. White knuckled, clutching the brimming bowl in both hands, Carla began spitting the blame at Martha, who was (Less Than

Fortuitously) sitting beside her. Carla was right, *obviously*: it was *all* Martha's fault. This was not *just* a Cornflake Crisis, Carla decided, this was nothing short of a Conspiracy, orchestrated by Martha with the *sole* intention of punishing us all.

'Carla, try and take a breath,' Martha tried, not daring to look away from the bowl now hovering between Carla's face and her own. But Carla's lips were sealed so tightly that no breath was likely to find its way through.

'Now, come on, Carla, let's not be doing anything rash,' Martha tried again, now seeing the bowl as the potential weapon it would soon become.

It was Elise who looked up from her own bowl and slid her arm across the table. She couldn't quite reach Carla's body, but the slither of her sleeve across the table was enough to open Carla's eyes. 'Please,' Elise took over the pleading, putting her spoon down as she said, 'we're all in the same boat, no one wants this. But it's not Martha's fault. Please, Carla, don't do this. Don't let it win, just don't listen to it.'

It

For Elise knew too well that there was an *It* that clamped Carla's eyes back shut. It stole her from us and pressed her into an action which her shaking fingers showed her desperation to prevent. Elise saw her torment and ceased her entreaty, in fear, perhaps, of being the one to trigger the loaded bullet. The bowl had not lowered and Carla's eyes remained shut, though tears were slipping over each crevice her jawbones made of her cheeks.

'Carla, please, don't do this. We can get through this together, ok?'

No amount of Elise's kindness could have drowned out the voice pulsing through Carla's mind. It was so loud you could almost hear it. Her shoulders shook and the muscles in her face were straining to resist it.

But it was no good. It had a will greater than Carla's strength to beat it. Martha had no time to reapply her pressure before the bowl was tipped and the milk cascaded, as if in slow motion, in a torrent that became a Bran-Flake-d puddle in Carla's lap. Many of us suffered

the shower of milk, not least Martha, whose hand rose to wipe the splatter now dripping down her cheek. But her nose was so firmly snubbed out of joint that she was too quick to release Carla from her gaze and so the finale sounded in a smashing crash of china. Carla barely flinched as the shattered pieces scattered across the wooden floor. Her hovering palms closed into fists, which she held, scrunched up, bunched tight in front of her, as though she were still clinging to the bowl, to something.

Anything?

Nothing

The damage was done. The bowl was broken. Carla's body was shaking and her sickly pallor was stained a burnt crimson. Scraping her chair back, she glared at Martha (obviously) and shoved the wheelchair (her current mode of transport) *out* of the way. Pathway cleared, Carla glared at Martha (again), turned and stormed off with a huff and one hell of a tortured puff.

'Nobody. Is. To. Move.' Martha told us not to move, giving her damp shirt a dab between each word. She flashed a look at Belinda. Belinda's eyes narrowed – notified – and turned to look at Penny, whose eyes could balk no wider. She nodded slightly and the communication was confirmed: Back-Up Plan was now *in action*.

'Nobody,' Martha added, just for good measure as she began to stand up, looking from our one face to the next. Less Than Impressed, her eyes came to rest on Doug who was sitting at the far end of the table, sniggering. His headphones straddled his neck and his baseball cap was pulled so low down his forehead that you could see little but the snigger of his smile. And why not? Doug was safe (sniggering) – Martha had bigger fish to fry, though she threw Doug a glare all the same (why not?), before spinning around, grabbing the (empty) wheelchair and setting off in hot pursuit of its (supposed) user.

Protocol had ensued, of course. Carla's refusal was unlikely to rupture anything less than Full-Blown Resistance from the rest of us – except for Doug (of course) who continued, contentedly, to chew, chew, chew – does the boy *ever* stop chewing? – his Coco Pops. For Doug was as good a Coco-Pop Man as my brother, Joss (no mean feat), and thus, Doug was not prepared to forego his chocolatey moment for yet another of our Antics. Protocol would

hold us captive at the table for the next hour and half and I believe Doug relished every spare minute it gave him to chew, chew, chew his way through those chocolatey balls.

The simple maxim that *things can only get better*, simply does not apply to an eating-disorders ward. A bad start did not tend to lead to a better rest of the day. We are like stacked dominoes: topple one and the rest shall fall. We did, excelling, Penny said, even ourselves, so that by the time Bed-Time Meds brought the madness to an end, Carla had been put back on a One-to-One. The wheelchair was her downfall, of course. Having been reunited with it, she'd put it to (the wrong kind of) good use as she tried to barricade herself into her bedroom.

Our snubbed Elise had – to put it *appropriately* – declined to join the rest of the group for Group Therapy, or Snack, or Lunch. And (why not?) Elise went for the Clean Sweep, striking her way through Supper and Snack Time. As for Collette? Well, Collette went into melt down *at* lunch, throwing *that* lunch across the table – a jacket potato saturated in baked beans – which made a tidy tie-dye effect of Belinda's pastel-pink blouse. Could Belinda *seriously* not see? Collette wailed, how unfair it was she was being made to eat the *biggest potato she'd EVER seen* when Carla had been allowed *not* to eat her Bran Flakes?

Belinda decided it was not The Time to be quibbling about the size of said potato, instead pointing out that Carla had hardly been given permission *not* to eat. Collette did not appreciate The Point. The potato was thrown and alas we went back into Protocol.

Two taut hours later, our detention came to an end. Released from the table, we were hauled into the Supervision Room for an Emergency Community-Meeting, called by Martha to restore calm. It backfired (obviously). She caused Bedlam (naturally), rupturing rather than relieving the 'hostile tensions,' by misquoting Collette.

It was Fran, of course, who pushed the *miserable lot of us* over and off the brink. 'Martha, get with The Programme,' Fran took the liberty of correcting Martha, 'it's *Inappropriate* to quote your patients unless you're going to be accurate about it: Collette didn't call Carla a *bitch*. She called her a *fucking bitch*.'

Community Meeting was closed. We were dismissed. Martha sent us packing to our rooms for 'reflection.' We went, heads bowed, arriving just in time to witness Collette streaking

across the courtyard, only to throw herself over the wire fence and into the duck pond, with a purpose that remains a mystery to us all.

‘Just another day in the Madhouse,’ Penny said, kicking off her shoes and throwing herself onto the sofa at the end of her shift. She would be late home. Martha was still handing over and the greater the day’s antics, the longer Handover lasted. And besides, Penny said, she was in no hurry to get home. Us *naughty madams* had worn her out too much to be rushing back to cook Mr Duckett’s dinner. ‘Best he fend for himself.’ She needed a lie down, of course. ‘Although,’ she said, now lying flat on her back, peeping through one eye to check I was still propped on the floor beside her. I was. She said, ‘I knew all along it would be a Tits-Up Tuesday. Felt it in me waters, Tishy, when I woke up this morning, that Trouble was About.’

When we moved on from the Cornflake Crisis, you spoke about the role DBT had played. You hoped it had helped me to recognise that you did not view my illness as a cause, so much as an effect of my ‘crippling depression’ and ‘chronically low self-esteem.’ In the past, you explained, the intensity of these emotions had been overlooked in a way that had impeded my engagement with treatment.

‘Ironically,’ you said, ‘it’s about survival. The anorexia is harder for Tish to relinquish precisely because it has proved such an effective coping mechanism. It is both numbing and fulfilling – Tish punishes her body in order to excuse her existence. Forcibly removing that self-punishment won’t solve the issue long-term. When we have tried to do so – using the tube to feed her – it has only escalated her reliance upon other forms of self-harm. To let go, Tish needs to trust that there are alternative ways of regulating her distress and, I hope, DBT has given her a support network of others who are also looking to replace their destructive behaviour patterns with ones which will – and they will, Tish – eventually enable you to re-engage with the world, and *accept* the *possibility* of your position in it.’

You must have been looking at me, everyone else was. Perhaps that's why CPA's are so hard, they make what feels so private, public. If the communication is necessary, it is no less exposing and I felt bare, Dr Miller. Was that why you turned your address towards my community nurse?

'It is problematic,' you said, uncrossing your legs to turn fractionally towards her, Doris, 'because her weight tends to drop severely low which leads to a focus on weight gain.' This was natural, but it was pivotal, you said, with clarity that I can never return in gratitude, that this focus did not prevent me being treated as anything other than an individual.

Somewhat startled, Doris said, 'I *absolutely* agree,' again and then again. Her agreement was too easily garnered and her nod too ready to believe sincere. But your part was done. You were keen to move on and I was slow to keep up. The prospect of an aftercare that was not guided by you was as daunting as it suddenly seemed imminent. How dependent I had become on the absolutism of your understanding of me? What a loss it would soon be?

My loss, Dr Miller, it continues to be.

I was getting tired. The sun was warm against my navy tights and my thoughts were slowing. My head was bowed and so I allowed my eyes to close over. How could home be so close and feel so far? The end was nigh, yet somehow it remained just beyond my reach. Just like the approach of summer. The moment spring yields us glimpses of its sun, time creeps to no more than a crawl. It seems cruel. Trees blossom and birds chirp, swooping down to peck the goodness from the dewy lawn. But the sun lingers in a way that ekes out the days and though the rays are warm with promise, the breeze still blows with a chill that no amount of your longing can will away. You cannot cultivate an end that must come naturally. You cannot learn to run before you can walk and to rush your footsteps would run the risk of slipping back. You must wait and in waiting you must learn to endure.

'Tish?' My mother was squeezing my hand and the press of her fingers drew me back to the darker shade a cloud had cast over the room. I blinked and the shapes began to regain their outline, crystallising into a focus I wasn't sure I wanted. I blinked again and the sombre

murmurs became audible voices again, each distinguished by a weariness that was mine to feel.

‘Tish, it’s ok,’ you said, seeing I was not. ‘We are getting there. I know you’re tired, frustrated by the slowness of our progress. But it *is* progress and though there is a way to go, I feel so confident now that Little Hippy is almost ready for her big day.’

I smiled. Or tried to. Tears stung in my eyes as I nodded. I nodded again, not wanting you to say anymore. Inquisitive faces were glancing at each other, save my mother’s. She alone knew of the Hippy you were alluding to, but you kept Little Hippy between us and gave the others the next steps you had in mind.

‘I want to try and get you off the tube in the next few months. Completely, and I’m afraid that will take time. It will be difficult, to manage without it. For many reasons.’

So many reasons. Following a ‘challenging start’, you said you believed an inevitable dependency had grown which would require time to relinquish. ‘To an extent, the tube absolves Tish of the responsibility of feeding herself and removing it will entail her accepting not just her entitlement to nourishment, but her worthiness of life.’

‘It is possible, though Tish,’ you said, turning back to me. ‘If we continue increasing your oral intake like we are, that we can soon think about removing the tube completely. Once that’s done, we can be talking about home leaves. Extending those. And then – and I am aware that I am approximating something with so many variables that make me both uneasy and unable to be more certain – then, we can be thinking about discharge in the next three to four months. How does that sound?’

Three to four months? It sounded like you were sentencing me to a lifetime. But this was your way of managing my – our – expectations, wasn’t it? You needed us to remember that there is no miraculous cure to the illness. I have said it before, but it needs saying again, and again, because recovery is not sudden or final. The battle is one of endurance and you needed my mother and I to heed the realism of this lesson. Your caution was not pessimistic, or even shaped by the severity of the storm we had weathered. It was just realistic and unless we could accept this, the perfected visions of our dreams would only end in the crushing

disappointment of another rude awakening, to this thing – this imperfect and unpredictable thing – they call life. Real life.

To my relief, you soon brought the CPA to a close. You asked what the slip of paper was that I had tucked somewhere between my dress and the chair and I was surprised. I'd forgotten about Penny's list and blushed as I pulled it out, my fingers trembling a little.

'Perhaps they're questions for another day?' you said, sensing my uncertainty. You knew the kind of questions The List likely contained. Penny tended to press pen and paper into the palms of all her patients come Ward Round days. 'I'm fed up,' she'd say with an arm hooked onto each of her hips, 'of you all going in, asking none of your questions, then coming out and grizzling at me cos you got nothing. Write a list.'

The List

- Ask to upgrade Duck-Pond walk to Hugging-the-Building.
- Ask for an Unsupervised shower in the evening.
- Ask for a Ten-Minute Sit Outside.
- Ask to be allowed to open bedroom window.
- Ask to be excused from Body Image.

These requests may seem trivial, but when your every moment is monitored and controlled, these are the basics which make daily life bearable. But that day, my perspective shifted. I had my sights on a landscape broader than any loop of the duck pond or hug-of-the-hospital could ever offer. There were greater challenges to face than worrying about whether I was supervised showering or accompanied outside. And there *is* an importance to life that Penny's List belittled, however good – and so dearly good – were her intentions.

'How about we discuss The List on Friday and for today, I give you two hours out with your mum?'

‘Two hours *out*,’ I said, looking up at you with a slight frown, ‘Like, you mean...?’

‘Yes, I mean, *outside* the hospital grounds.’

‘Like, un-supervised?’

‘Like, supervised by your mum,’ you said, not without smiling.

‘Like, seriously?’

‘Like, seriously,’ you said, ‘I think you are, like, *seriously*, ready, Tish. And I think it would be good for you both to spend a few hours together away from everything here. Martha would have to do a full Risk Assessment and I’ll have to draw up some Section 17 Papers to sign you out. And ensure your return,’ you added with a smile, ‘But what do you think?’

I think I was unsure whether it was my mother or I who was most pleased. And in the two hours you gave us we got little further than the park just beyond the hospital grounds. We sat on the grass, picking at the buttercups as we talked about home. Small children were clambering over the climbing frame, watched by a collection of mothers in dark glasses. Their bare arms were patchy, pale and pink, but round and proudly outstretched, ready to catch their little lumps, should they stumble and fall.

We sat and we watched and I was content. I felt a closeness to my mother in the peace we found in being together that afternoon that I have not lost in the years that have since gone by. In speaking of the creek, of home, my siblings and our naughty spaniels, she gave me strength to believe my return to them was not so remote. She spoke of the things we could do, together. Dr Miller, she promised to accompany me through the long haul ahead. And by this she meant more than the path of recovery, for that was too narrow a route for the life she continues to believe I have ahead of me. My mother is the greatest emblem for those who will not alter their perspective in the face of the trials we encounter. She refuses to define me by my illness and, together, we refuse to be confined to the narrow remit anorexia too often captures individuals within. It is liberating, Dr Miller. She has held onto the Laetitia she gave

life to and in that grasp of me, we are able to plough on with our adventures, be it swimming in murky seas or muddy creeks, riding horses or sipping Pump Street coffee with our legs dangling over the Orford Pier.

So, from that day forwards the creek was no longer so far away. The future began to emerge and I found I was frightened by it. University was proposed and you encouraged me to apply, promising the practicalities need not be an obstacle. Literature was a healthier focus than the illness and so you set my discharge for July. September would bring the start of a new semester and you were determined I would join on the same day as my peers. The interim months would give me time to adapt to the outside world and this, you said, would be quite the transition. Perhaps I'm assuming too much, but I think you were nervous. Was that why you continued to push my discharge back and back? Much, I should add, to my frustration. I was impatient, but you were unmoved. You would not be hurried. We still had, you said, *plenty of time*.

I would not be calmed. We were, I said, running *rapidly out of time*. The summer was swimming fast away and I had yet to feel the squelch of mud between my toes as I tentatively tested the creek waters. Your time frames were too vague when I needed certainty. And this neediness soon sparked into impatience which pulled me from you and began pushing me back into the arms of the illness. The Voice preys upon uncertainty and fear and I was full of both. I was stranded between hospital and home in a way that denied me a true place in either.

But you knew this, didn't you? Just like you knew that mingled into my anxiety was the apprehension of losing your support. And, as long as that remained imminent, the torment remained constant.

Was that why you yielded? Eventually my *need* to know seemed to defeat your hesitation and you packed me off on my extended leave with the belief that I would be discharged on my return. It was August. It was peak summer and my family and I packed the car full of wellies, swimming cossies, coats, hats, socks and spaniels. We were off on holiday, to Scotland.

‘Dr Miller, you CAN’T do this,’ I wailed. We were back. The Scottish holiday had become an Unfortunate Scottish Affair and I was not just indignant, I was mortified. ‘You *promised* I’d be discharged when I got back from leave.’ How could you break your promise, just like that? As though it meant nothing.

‘Tish, hear me out.’ You wanted me to hear you out, but your calmness only riled my rage further, like red rag to a bull (me). ‘I don’t remember promising you discharge. Kate,’ you appealed to your loyal witness (my time was up), ‘am I right in thinking I deliberately avoided the word “promise”? Tish, I recall saying we’d *discuss* the possibility of your discharge when you got back and that’s what we are doing now.’

You and all your *possibilities* were too much for me. I spied defeat and stormed out soon after. It is no excuse, but the Voice had been growing louder and I was scared by how fast I was slipping back into self-doubt. Weren’t you just prolonging my admission to punish me for losing weight whilst I was on leave?

‘Tish, how many times am I going to have to tell you to look for an answer in the grey area between reward and punishment? Goodness and badness. This isn’t about either.’

And it wasn’t. Weight was too far down your list of priorities to be a deciding factor. In fact, you seemed amused as you heard about the Unfortunate Scottish Affair. ‘Why am I not surprised, Tish?’ you asked when you learnt that the instructions Martha had given my mother were all but overlooked.

My mother had arrived late to collect me, of course. Martha was in a rush and I was in no hurry to hold her up as she briskly ticked her way through my Risk Assessment. The questions grew no less spoof-like with repetition and their answers were as unrevealing.

‘Firstly then, Tish,’ Martha looked down at her list to read, ‘Do you intend to comply with your prescribed medication?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. And your Meal Plan?’

‘Well, of course.’

‘Tish, this is not a joke.’

‘No, of course not. Martha, I intend to behave.’

‘Hmm,’ Martha was Less Than Convinced, but not entirely unamused. No patient whose bail hangs in the balance is likely to reveal risk and Martha was no fool. Legalities give us parts to play and Martha was well-rehearsed in hers. ‘Next,’ she said, poisoning her pen by the next box, ‘have you got any thoughts of, or plans to commit suicide?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Are you at risk of harming yourself?’

‘No.’

‘Of harming others?’

‘Nope.’

‘Great. Next, do you rate your current mood: Good, Average, or Low?’

‘Excellent.’

‘...is not an option Tish, you need to be taking this seriously. Now: Good, Average or Low?’

‘Let’s go with Good.’

‘Fine. Is Patient – I mean, Tish, are you aware that if you fail to return on your agreed date, we have the right to...’

‘Phone the police?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, well aware, Martha. Next?’

‘Last one: Have you any thoughts of committing arson?’

‘*Arson?* Nope, none today.’

‘Good, then we’re done. Sign here.’

I signed. Martha sighed then signed and we were agreed: no harm, suicide or arson for me. Capping her pen, Martha folded our contract and said, ‘Shall we get Mum back in then?’

My mother came in and was given a carrier bag full of my medication and a copy of my Section 17 Leave Papers. ‘Now,’ Martha said, in a voice as simple as she believed her instructions to be, ‘make sure Tish sticks to her Meal Plan and keeps her activity level to an *appropriate* minimum.’

We nodded. Martha, smiled, lead us to the entrance and unlocked the door. The wind blew my skirt high. The door locked behind us. Martha waved. We waved. My mother threaded her arm through mine. We were free.

‘So,’ you said on my return, doing your best to show every atom of your disbelief, ‘you’re telling me that you ended up on the side of a Scottish mountain. Roaming for miles. Completely Lost. With no food. And no clue where you were heading?’

I nodded. You said, ‘Tish, your family? They surpass every possible expectation.’

But your wonder was the kind that bordered on awe rather than dismay. You expected nothing less. At every turn, my family seemed able only to prove ourselves the Country Bumpkins that we are. Penny will always believe I live in the Back of Beyond, where the only inhabitants for miles are of the four-legged kind. And so you were unfazed to learn of my (radical) weight loss, it being inevitable that a holiday with my family would not be the sort of sedentary affair *appropriate* for one whose body needed restoration and, just, rest.

You did say, however, that we’d excelled even ourselves when you heard that it was only a lack of phone reception that had prevented my father from calling an air ambulance. Hindsight can be cruel, for an anorectic daughter and a diabetic wife are hardly a combination fit for mountain hiking. But there we were, thick mist, mid-mountain, lost, with the rain beginning to descend, as rapidly as my mother’s blood-sugars were dropping. And dropping, until she had the kind of hypo that does not improve with the three hours of walking we’d make of our descent.

‘For God’s sake, Laetitia, just *let* me carry you!’ My father had seethed, desperate of course, for this was not the gentle walk he had envisaged.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ I had laughed, for hysterics are wont to appear at the most unfortunate moments. But my father had insisted and so I was hoiked onto his back. The piggy-back lasted all of six strides before he surrendered me back to the ground, gasping for breath, eyes gaping at the thick forestry that stood between us and the bottom of the mountain.

‘You might have to walk,’ my father conceded, quietly. ‘Not because you’re too heavy, just because...’ he said, trying but failing to climb out of the hole he’d sunk into. Bracing his back, he glanced skywards at the thickening clouds, as if his silent prayer could

prevent the heavens from opening. It did not. ‘Sabina, *stop* laughing, this is so far from funny that I’m considering leaving you both here to fend for yourselves. Bad. As. Each. Other.’

The each other was me and my mother. Her wobbling legs gave way and she sank into the wet ground, her tummy convulsing with giggles that would not stop, despite her husband’s Less Than Impressed Looks, for my mother’s laughter tends to Finish Her when her blood-sugars fall below The Funny Point.

And, without exception, my mother laughing?
Makes Me Laugh.

When I had calmed down, you called me back into the room. You’d finished the rest of your ward rounds and it was late. The sun was low and you looked tired. You’d loosened your tie and done a good job of the Oreo packet at the foot of your chair. Your coffee cup was empty and the buzz from the contraband seemed to have dissipated into a weariness I felt too.

You asked if I was ok and I said I was sorry. With our end in sight, my need for your approval had grown. Unless I could walk away with a positive memory of our work, how could I continue our battle in the future? Quite suddenly, that thought was too much and I think you knew this. You waited for me to gulp down my broken breaths, saying simply, ‘It’s ok. Tish, it’s ok,’ you *kept* saying, as though it was ok. It was not.

‘I’m sorry,’ I kept saying, ‘I’m really sorry.’

‘Tish,’ you said, not without exasperation, ‘What am I going to do with you? How many times am I going to have to say that you don’t have to earn your right to our care. You don’t have to prove yourself worthy of my approval. Unconditional, Tish, that’s a rare promise I have always been more than prepared to give you.’

‘But, I thought... I thought...’

‘You thought I would be disappointed in you. You thought getting “angry” with me and walking away would mean I’d be unable to forgive you?’

I nodded, brushing the tears from my cheek. ‘I thought,’ I said, ‘that it would ruin our relationship and that it couldn’t be repaired.’

You did not reply right away. When you did, it was with words I remember to this day, Dr Miller. They have stuck with me in the way I believe you hoped they would. They were all I needed to hear then, and often today too.

‘Tish, this is what I have been worrying about. And largely, that’s why I am trying to give you more time to come to terms with this transition. After an admission like this, the end was always going to be incredibly complex and scary. In the past, these kinds of relationships have either been cut unexpectedly, or in a way that severs the ties without giving you a chance to adapt to the changes. I want you to be able to let go of us here in a way that allows you to move forwards. Keeping you here longer – it was never about punishing you, I think you know that. But, after a year with us, it would be foolish to rush things for the sake of a few weeks. We are dealing with the *rest of your life*, Tish. And I want that future to be one you lead from home, without us and on your own terms. But *with* the strength we have fostered here together.’

‘You know,’ you paused, thought and went on, ‘You don’t lose that, Tish. When you walk away from here, I want you to remember that all we’ve learnt together stays with you. And you mustn’t ever be ashamed of it. The relationships you have made are real. They will and should remain dear to you. So it’s ok to feel sad. It will feel hard to let go. For all of us. I just need you to try and remember, Tish, that the turmoil we have been through has been life-changing. It has contained experiences that have made a bond between us that does not break as easily as your doubt leads you to believe. You have not disappointed me today, or through the months we have been together. I am so proud of the progress we have made, Tish. I am. I *am*. It has been a privilege to work with you and a joy to watch your trust grow enough to allow me to walk those baby-steps with you. So, keep those curtains open, hold onto those

glimpses of life that make the rest possible. And allow yourself to smile, that open and ready smile that reminds me so strongly of the little girl you thought you'd lost. You have not, Tish. She is as imperfect as the rest of us. But no less loveable for her imperfections. And she is within you, Tish. So hold onto her for me and go out there and allow her the life I promise you she deserves. And one day, *one* day, it would make your doctor very happy to hear how her life is turning out.'

Well, Dr Miller, I made it to university and I got my degree. A starred first, would you believe? Typical, you'd no doubt say, not without sighing resignedly at the knowledge that perfectionism will always drive too much of what I do.

The day I was discharged, Penny packed me off home with a hug that lingered and tears that mingled from her cheeks onto my own. She cupped my face so close to hers that I was unable to imagine her letting me go. It was time, though, she whispered, her fingers squeezing my cheeks, to say goodbye. Lordy, she'd love me always, but it was time to move on, hey? The world was waiting for me, as was a card she slipped into my pocket for me to read later, when I got home. Penny always did have to have to the *last* wise word. And she knew that discharge is like a climax that can turn anti on you the moment you find yourself back home, with the rest of your life thrust back upon you. *Lordy*.

It isn't that you love home any less, or long for hospital any more, it is just an adjustment that takes time. A year has passed. Your world may have been on pause, but *the* world has gone on without you. Siblings have grown. Their lives have expanded while yours stood still. Dynamics are familiar, but different too and where once you just were, your position needs re-establishing. You can still squeeze between them on the sofa, but they are bigger and so they will grumble. But love is there and this works wonders. It does. It – they, my family –

make the *pressure* inconsequential and *the pain* endurable. They turn endurance into existence and colour my existence into a life that is vibrant and truly worth living.

As it transpired, Penny's words must have been as wise as she thought, for they resembled yours. You'd asked me not to be ashamed and Penny did too, though her message came as part of a List of Instructions. 'Number One: Keep a Mars Bar in Each Pocket and when feeling Wobbly-Wobbly, Don't Forget to Munch. Failing that, Breathe, Tishy. May the Lordy remind you to keep breathing.'

The final instruction was the reminder not to be ashamed, of what I'd been through and who I was, even, for do our experiences not shape the people we become?

I have tried, Penny. Dr Miller, I have tried so very hard not to be ashamed. But it was hard from Day One at university. I was lost, unsure who I was or who I was supposed to be. These fresh-faced gap-year students were grouped in such tight packs, oozing in confidence and eager with questions. I had no answers. Silence was suspicious and shrugging, it seemed, gave you little reprieve in the Real World. But what could I say? How was it, they *kept* asking, that I was (an *unspecified* number of years) older than they? Had I just been on an extra-long and lavish Gap Year?

No.

No?

No.

Not globe-trotting?

No.

No?

No.

Oh.

I am unsure whether it was shame exactly that stopped me from explaining the real reason I had become so well acquainted with the people of Essex. I just know that I was struck by a complete inability to find words – any words, let alone the *right* words – to express the nature of our experience. Even if I could, would they actually believe the stories I had to tell? How Martha would laugh to hear the irony that less than a month free from her authority, I found I

was censoring myself for fear of voicing – yes, you’ve guessed it – The Inappropriate. But wouldn’t it have been *inappropriate* to speak of events that could shatter their aspirations with the harsher reality I had awoken to?

It wasn’t long before I realised that the harder I tried to confine those memories to the furthest parameters of my mind, the greater power they were quietly able to acquire. My need to be busy – to escape them – escalated into a mania in which I found myself a part-time job alongside my studies. Soon this wasn’t enough – when is it ever? – and I upped my hours when I began this project. I took on a full-time position as – believe it or not – a healthcare assistant (Penny Duckett, I blame you) on an acute (and acutely busy) emergency medical ward. Because I *needed* to be busy. I *needed* to keep going. And I *needed* to feel my existence contributed to someone else’s. If I allowed myself to look back and remember those events, wouldn’t I just collapse beneath the weight of their trauma? Those emotions were packed too tightly to dismantle, the memories too volatile to risk bringing anywhere near the surface and the relationships too tender to contemplate being so suddenly without.

Silence was my only option. But the isolation it kept me in saddened me more than I can say. A young person should not have to hide those experiences which make them unique, yes, but not different in the sense that merits the kind of separation I felt from my peers. I blame no one and know that my self-doubting nature played a role in my retreat. Too readily, I assumed people’s judgement where, perhaps, had I been braver, I would have found kindness instead.

Whatever it was, it is that distance I hope to bridge with my writing. Those writers you packed me off to study taught me the power literature can have in overcoming the boundaries silence otherwise places between us. Writing is a kind of communication that unites people, enabling compassion to grow from the understanding that is shared between writer and reader. It is no solution, and neither am I under any illusions that writing can eradicate mental health, but I wholeheartedly believe it can alleviate the distress at the heart of it. And it is this notion that brings me back to George Eliot. Her words best articulate this plain truth:

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.¹³²

May the amplification of my experience give others the eyes to see a reality beyond their own. From that vision, may they gain an understanding which kindles their desire to empathise with the many who suffer at the hands of a voice that speaks inside their heads. A voice which yields them so little relief and denies them the belief that they remain worthy in themselves.

May the voice I have given be a testament that gives others the words to tell their own tales. May we care less about the form the words take, and more about the picture they can form. My words began as an essay and grew into a story of sorts. It is imperfect and full of insecurities, but then, so am I. May sharing it prevent the next boy or girl, beginning their venture, at university or any avenue of life, from arriving burdened with the shame of a history they know not how to share.

And, to those on the brink of discharge, may you believe you are returning to a world that will not outcast you. We will embrace you with open arms and, in offering you this simplest yet surest proof, may we remind you that you need not conform to society's norms in order to be accepted. We are unique. We are *all* unique and so much better for being so. Our differences should never define or divide us, not when they can be the very thing which unites us.

¹³²George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', in *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 110.

Four years then, Dr Miller. It has taken me four years to find the strength to think of you. What stopped me? Fear, I think, of feeling the loss of suddenly being without you, and the shame that very thought caused me. Wasn't it wrong to be grieving a relationship that was merely professional? Professional standards can be so strict as to suggest that the therapeutic relationship is no more than a pretence, a performance, with the roles – doctor and patient – clearly defined. Discharge adds to this sense. It severs the ties that have held you together, giving you no way of reconnecting with the people who worked day in, day out, to keep you alive.

Was this the shame you warned me of? You did not want me to deny myself the memory of your care in the fear that it was somehow wrong to mourn it. But you were right. The battles we faced were real and the bond that brought us through them no less so. I believe you were giving me permission to grieve and, perhaps, all these years later, I finally am.

No doubt sceptics will call it an attachment complex of sorts. But let them. You were prepared to take a chance on me and that makes this a risk well worthy of taking, especially if it can be used as a testimony for the value in seeing beyond clinical constraints. Because the reality is that relationships *are* complex. There should not be professional standards which segregate the patient from their clinician. You have made me the living, breathing proof that there is more to a patient than the illness that others seem so keen to define them by. They are – we are – *still* human, just individuals who must be treated as such. How, otherwise, could we hope to recover the identity we have lost? Lordy, it takes time. Lordy, it takes patience, but eventually this knowledge can become the basis from which that same individual can begin to see the *possibility of living*, the worth of life and, yes, yes, *yes*, the worthiness of their contribution to it.

So I will be brave and speak plainly of all that I have missed about you. It is the only gratitude I can give you for the acceptance you gave me. And it will give me, I hope, the closure I have gone too long without.

It will come as no surprise that I miss the scrunch of your toes and the creaking of your worn, scuffed shoes. It was a reminder of your presence when the Voice would not let my eyes look at you. The mere proximity of your body gave security to mine – the knowledge that I was

cared for, unconditionally. And that I was safe. You locked me into Room Two and though I raged, it relieved my mind of the constant torment of wondering how and when to end what I believed I had destroyed beyond repair. You did not believe it. You would not accept it and the restraint you warranted the nurses to use was never without need.

And I did need it. I know that now and hope that the next girl who resists your care is met with the same unflinching resolve you showed me. May you promise them too, that there does always exist the *possibility of living*. Because you were right, Dr Miller, there does. There *does*. You held onto this conviction for dear life, for *my life*, knowing that only together could we survive a battle I would have lost without you.

And so I miss the guidance of your sagacity. I miss the regularity of the baby-steps you not only paced for me, but paved for me in the sense that I never walked alone or unaided. I was ever supported by the army of your nurses – the Pennys and Pams, the Marthas and Belindas. Their spirit kept me alive when mine had died. They stayed sane for every moment in which my sanity collapsed into utter madness. They showed dignity when I could not and bravery when I had not the courage nor will to accept their protection. And they had compassion which did not waver in response to my resistance. Far from shrinking, their empathy only swelled with their respect for the girl who was suffering before them. They were a credit to you, Dr Miller, and you to them. For you were all united by your underlying yet overwhelming belief in humanity and the *possibilities* our actions can bestow upon those in need of both compassion and companionship.

I miss just being known, understood, believed. The way you could predict my pause, the brewing of my ‘but’ and the indefatigable patience through which you were prepared to listen to the illogical nonsense that was too often the rotten root of it. My ability to over-think, you once said, continued to surpass even your wildest expectations. It remains my specialism and that, I am sure, will amuse you to read. That humour of yours did not just characterise you, it humanized you, bringing us closer and me nearer to the brighter future you held in your sights for me.

It’s that very smile I miss, for you never tried to conceal your fondness for the girl you were piecing back together. I was a puzzle to you. I was an enigma, you said, in too many more ways than one. But each and every dubious piece of me was precious to you in that it was a

person that was wholesome you were seeking to restore. Nothing partial would do, nothing pretentious or pretending. I need not be perfect and this you proved to me by your determination not to reward the progress we made. Just as you never punished the times where I was unable to rise to your challenges and fell back into that self-loathing demon of mine. And, though that Voice continues to haunt me, you taught me enough to distinguish its voice from my own and in that way, keep it better at bay. It tested me and, *Lordy*, we tested you. But you wouldn't be beaten and you wouldn't see me defeated. The battle I faced, you made ours and though I continue to face it without you, I am never without the weaponry you gave me with that single word: Acceptance.

That's all I ask of you now, Dr Miller – for you to accept my gratitude. Nothing more. Nothing less. Take it with you. Keep it close to you. And give a part of it to each haunted boy or girl who finds themselves fortunate enough to fall into the harness of your care.

Afterword

In *Trauma and Recovery* renowned psychiatrist, Judith Herman, accounts for the moment in which she ‘realized the power of speaking the unspeakable and witnessed firsthand the creative energy that is released when the barriers of denial and repression are lifted.’¹³³

Herman rightly terms it a ‘privileged moment of insight’ and is mindful of the complexities that arise from translating that ‘creative energy’ into words.¹³⁴ Fragmentation is common and alterations between various states of consciousness an inevitable consequence of reliving the memories.

The Long Haul reflects this precarious lack of coherency as it navigates its way through trauma. The form naturally emerged into a literary memoir. It is a genre that blends together creative and critical writing in a way that allows for the kind of experimental and experiential narrative best suited to the fictionalised vignettes and literary criticism I found myself producing.

My intention, I realised, was never to provide a source of information about anorexia nervosa, rather I wanted to create an informed picture of my experience of the illness and its treatment within an acute in-patient setting. This required me to demonstrate an awareness of theories regarding eating-disorders, trauma and dissociation, from a range of psychological perspectives – psychoanalytic, humanistic and cognitive therapies – but only insofar as they contributed to the specific scenes in which I dramatize the impact these understandings have upon the individual. Memoir, I learned, not only allows the flexibility of form and tone to achieve this, but celebrates it in its refusal to be bound: precisely the spirit I hoped to translate onto the page.

I am, however, conscious that I have not directly engaged with other memoirs written about anorexia nervosa. This does not mean they do not exist. Owing much to Hilde Bruch’s pioneering text, *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia* (1979), several sufferers felt empowered to write about their ordeals. Marya Hornbach’s seminal memoir, *Wasted* (1998),

¹³³ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books: New York, 2015), p. 2.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

triggered a string of writers, from Emma Woolf and Laura Freeman, to Nancy Tucker and Hope Virgo, to chart their own experiences of eating disorders in candid and creative ways.

However, it was upon reading these testimonies that I first felt driven to offer my own. Why? Because I felt a distinct uneasiness with how the illness was represented. Most of the memoirs I read appeared to perpetuate rather than dismantle certain stigmas. For instance, the demographic affected remained focused upon middle-class, young women, frequently portrayed in treatment settings as competitive, cold and often cruel to one another. The narratives arced from illness into a recovery that seemed finite and neatly conclusive. This was not my experience. Humanity and humour remained evident throughout my treatment and recovery continues to remain elusive and, in short, anything but conclusive. No miracle has yet transpired to rid me of the Voice and neither can I identify with the diet culture that is popularly thought of as its cause. And if there is an enigma at the centre of my story – a resistance to answer the question as to why my illness began – it is because there is no single or definitive reason. A ‘series of unfortunate events’ culminated to destabilise my self-esteem to the extent that I could not bear my existence. Not my body, but my *being*. And the complexity of this cannot be simplified further than the gentle allusions I have made to my schooling and the relationships surrounding those years.

Rather than apportion blame of any sort, I wanted the focus to remain upon the present and pervasive Voice that emerged. This Voice of the illness is unique to each of its sufferers and it is for this reason that I have chosen not to engage with other memoirists. My experience significantly differs from theirs, but this neither seeks to negate their understanding of the illness nor devalue the empathy their stories rightfully elicit. Instead, I have incorporated writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Simone de Beauvoir and George Eliot, all of whom spoke from no particular diagnosis in the hope that we can begin to see the value in looking beyond such rigid and often reductive definitions. Their spirit gave life back to mine and their expression of internal pain filled me with the curiosity and eagerness that lead me to share my own.

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Too often, mental health workers are subject to intense scrutiny. We are quick to criticise their practice without considering the conditions under which they are expected to work. The truth is that their job specification is minimalist. It neither reflects the reality of their role nor values the monumental contribution they can – and do – make to lives in crisis. To those doctors, nurses and healthcare assistants who went above and beyond to give me a second chance at life, I am so very grateful. You never forgot to treat me as an individual and I hope this thesis reflects your humanity as well as my admiration for it.

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