

REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN LIVING WITH
HIV/AIDS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

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REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

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Abstract

Paula Treichler's assertion that 'the question is how to disrupt and renegotiate the powerful cultural narratives surrounding AIDS' (p. 37)¹ underpinned this research. Meaning and experience changes over time and because the novel is less about plot, and more about contributing to extant HIV literature and discourse, it was determined that the use of fiction to engage and develop contemporary cultural understandings of living with HIV was germane in that due to medical advances there has been a significant shift in the lived experience of HIV in the Global North. The decision to use creative writing as methodology was pertinent because this research provides portraits on lived HIV experiences that are multi-layered, complex and evolving, as women live more positively and into older age with HIV. In that this was not meant to be a phenomenological piece of research, that is, one that sought to discover knowledge which accurately and faithfully reflects processes and experiences of complex social phenomena, it was felt that creative writing as methodology provided an avenue in which to explore the importance of choice, meaning and responsibility in lived HIV experiences. This is because life contexts and histories vary from person to person, and the meanings we ascribe to such experiences are complex and diverse. Fiction not only has the ability to allow for the interplay between a person's external and internal worlds, it also has the capacity to clarify and magnify emotionally charged experiences. In illustration, people living with HIV are often excluded from fictional narratives and therefore creative writing as a methodology offers a platform to explore sex and HIV diagnosis, and has the capacity to dignify the characters of the novel. Creative writing as methodology provided a means in which to explore existential themes - such as loss, meaning, identity. Thus, in seeking to honour the subjective experiences of the women interviewed for this project, and indeed, the characters of the novel, *Purple Lilac*, it was felt that the use of fiction was a valid methodology in this project.

¹ Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of Aids*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 37.

This thesis consisting of both a creative and critical component investigates the lived experiences of women living with HIV in contemporary Britain. The creative element, a novel, *Purple Lilac*, considers the lives of three female characters, two who happen to be HIV positive. Nkechi explores ordained ministry with the Church of England in the process of re-evaluating what it means to live with HIV in the context of her Christian identity. Maya, in journeying through grief and loss, reassesses her priorities as a woman living with HIV who has just lost her daughter. Anna, although not living with HIV, is bullied; and her experiences are narrated through the subtext of having a mother (Maya) who is private about her HIV status. All three characters in the novel explore themes echoed in the critical element of this project, *Reflections on women living with HIV in contemporary Britain*. A chronic condition, such as HIV/AIDS, can threaten a person's sense of self and identity in relation to the spaces that person occupies. Therefore, a person living with HIV often experiences a shift in life priorities. Drawing on interviews of five women living with HIV in Birmingham, Coventry and London, this critical reflection engages with scholarship on HIV/AIDS and on illness narratives in order to examine the complex reality of living paradoxically with HIV. An analysis of the stories of those interviewed for this project reveals common themes of migration, stigma, silence, sex, intimacy, motherhood, religion and spirituality. Thematic connections have been made between the creative and critical work where the narratives offered by interview participants and characters in the novel give insight to different understandings of self and identity in light of living with HIV as a manageable chronic condition in the Global North.

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I WRITING ON HIV/AIDS

As a child, during a summer holiday in 1980s rural Nigeria, one evening, I witnessed my paternal uncle carrying our estranged cousin to the backyard. My mother told my siblings and I not to go into the room that would become her final resting place. The fear and disgust on my mother's expression palpable. Within a week our cousin died. And in that time, through the silence, raised glances, hushed whispers, I understood that my cousin had died of an illness which was not to be spoken about. At some point, it was mentioned she had died of AIDS – or what I now understand as an AIDS-defining illness – and this was the sickness that could not be named because of the shame it carried. The vision of my uncle carrying that half-conscious figure, sloping into the secret and stained world of those living with HIV/AIDS has always stayed with me. And, perhaps, it is not surprising that in adulthood, I have been drawn to this subject matter and towards people living with this chronic condition; in a bid to understand why it carries such a stigma which inevitably shapes individuals and society in a particular way.

This PhD undertaking emerged out of a desire to probe more deeply and develop further the lived experiences of people living with HIV which I began to explore during my MA in Creative Writing. I embarked on this doctoral thesis to reflect critically on what it means to be a woman living with HIV in contemporary Britain while investigating themes such as stigma, sexuality and spirituality. In the course of my Masters programme I produced an extensive collection of poetry and a smaller collection of short stories and I saw this PhD project as an opportunity to develop a longer piece of fiction. The novel form offers the opportunity to examine through story — experimenting with structure, plot, character and dialogue — what it means to be a woman living with HIV in modern day Britain. Throughout the novel, fantasy and realism, plot devices such as remembering, dreams and symbolism are used to engage the writing of HIV/AIDS as subtext in the narratives of Nkechi, Maya and Anna. The expansive nature of a novel, when compared to a poem or a short story, allows

the narrative to interrogate the social worlds of three women living with, or impacted by, HIV/AIDS. Thus the fictional component of this PhD project works towards developing an understanding of the social realities and lived experiences of women living with HIV, and this is further unpacked in the discourse of this critical component. Although my interest in HIV/AIDS underpins this thesis – nurtured through my encounters with people living with HIV – the creative piece is not pitched as a novel solely about HIV, but about the lives of women who happen to live with, or are affected by, HIV. The reason for this, is that this novel seeks to address the reality that HIV happens to women as beings getting on with the business of living. In the Global North where living with HIV is considered a “manageable condition”, the novel reflects the reality that an HIV diagnosis does not necessarily become, or remain, a central focus in the lived experiences of women living with this disease. The lives of such women are complex and dynamic, as are those of the characters in the novel, who are going through the many and various highs and lows of life as people living with, or affected by, HIV.

Set in modern day Birmingham, *Purple Lilac* is a novel in which three lives intersect. Nkechi, a counsellor, in the process of re-evaluating her life, considers ordained ministry with the Church of England. She is unsure how the Church will accept her as a black woman living with HIV. In her journeying, she is drawn to Paul, a tortuous character, and forms an unlikely friendship with him. Alongside Paul; best-friend, Ardella; sister, Rosie; and Reverend Tobias; Nkechi finds herself navigating life’s transitions as she settles into her “new normal”, a person living with HIV. Anna, a bullied schoolgirl, lives with her mother, Maya. She has a crush on Noah. Her two goals are to find her biological father and to make Noah *notice* her. An assault happens — which changes everything. Further into Anna’s narrative, she stumbles on a derelict shed in the woodlands where she comes upon Fergie; a spirited, rootless, superstitious character. Here, she spends many hours planning her revenge on those who have sullied her personhood. Maya is a single parent to Anna and Hattie. Al-

though she has been living with HIV for many years, she remains insecure with self-esteem issues. Her world shatters with Anna's death. Forced to renegotiate her priorities, she goes off in search of her estranged brother, Dan. Through a pilgrimage of self-discovery she finds a renewed purpose to her life. This is a novel about three women seeking to reclaim their sense of self because as Mike Bury postulates, 'under conditions of adversity, individuals often feel a pressing need to re-examine and re-fashion their personal narratives in an attempt to maintain a sense of identity' (p. 264).²

Research Context

Illness narratives as a concept embodies the process whereby a person living with a chronic condition constructs meaning from their past, present and future (p. 2).³ This narrative construction involves 'story telling, personal biography, interpreting and reinterpreting changes that speak to the relationship of self, body and society and how chronically ill people create and communicate a presentation of self that is meaningful for both them and for wider society' (p. 2).⁴ In reflecting on the research on biographical disruption, there are three broad categories of illness narratives: contingent, moral and core. Contingent narratives understand chronic illness in the context of, and in relation to, others and situations affected and/or impacted by the chronic illness. Thus a person living with HIV might reflect on how they are no longer able to engage in sporting activities or they may communicate how they perceive the consequence of HIV on their relationship with a partner or a child. Moral narratives attempt to rationalise the chronic illness through the lens of 'wider cultural narratives concerning the moral status of illness either by validating their particular situation or by

² Mike Bury, 'Illness Narratives: Fact or Fiction?', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 23 (2001), 263-285 (p. 264).

³ Chris Yuill, Iain Crinson, and Eilidh Duncan, 'Illness Narratives', in *Key Concepts in Health Studies*, ed. by Chris Yuill, Iain Crinson, and Eilidh Duncan (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2010), pp. 2-4 (p.2).

⁴ Yuill, Crinson and Duncan, p. 2.

creating a social distance' (p. 3).⁵ In the case of a person living with HIV, narratives told may include a justification for how they engage in sexual relationships with potential partners, for example, an individual deciding to pursue relationships with other HIV-positive persons. Core narratives, on the other hand, 'operate on a deeper cultural level demonstrating the relationship of self to society and refer to how people with chronic illness draw upon prevailing cultural motifs and symbolic resources to communicate their experiences of chronic illness' (p. 3).⁶ For a person living with HIV, this might be evidenced in the reluctance to disclose an HIV-positive status to family and friends because of the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. Put another way, the meta-narrative of HIV/AIDS on socio-consciousness may influence how a person living with HIV stories their lived experience. That is to say, the overarching narrative of shame and stigma around living with HIV informs how a person living with HIV tells their own personal story. Sheila Bock asserts, illness narratives '[have] become a highly visible mechanism for humanizing – and thereby honoring – the experience of sickness' and as such have 'clearly been shaped by discourses of veneration' (p. 153).⁷ Although Galen Strawson argues that not everyone has 'narrative identity' when it comes to developing self-understanding and interpreting self-experience (p. 429),⁸ there is a sense in which narrativity has something to offer in a person's journey towards self-understanding and acceptance. Notwithstanding its limitations, narration gives people living with HIV a means to articulate their stories, regardless of whether they are assessed as being genuine, authentic or true to the facts of the lived experience. Irrespective of the quality of the story — however "quality" is defined or determined — there is value in having human agency to tell one's story as part of a person's experience

⁵ Yuill, Crinson and Duncan, p. 3.

⁶ Yuill, Crinson and Duncan, p. 3.

⁷ Sheila Bock, 'Staying Positive: Women's Illness Narratives and the Stigmatized Vernacular', *Health, Culture and Society*, 5 (2013), 150-166 (p. 153).

⁸ Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio*, 17 (2004), 428-452 (p. 429).

and identity. And, as part of the course of making sense of one's lived experience, the implication is that testimony facilitates understanding and the resisting of dominant scripts.

Rita Charon argues that contemporary culture is marked by media phenomena such as Oprah Winfrey and Jeremy Kyle-styled sensationalism that is immersed in stock illness narratives; those socially or culturally accepted narratives of people with a particular illness, for example, surviving breast cancer. She asserts, 'such phenomena... demonstrate the craving of ordinary people to tell their life stories, however humiliating or private...' (p. 68).⁹ When comparing breast cancer to fibromyalgia, according to Sheila Bock, it is arguable that cancer has a '[higher] visibility in public discourse'(p. 154-155).¹⁰ This suggests that the stock narrative of breast cancer, constructed for public circulation, highlighted in both media and medical publicity, informs the experiences of individuals affected by breast cancer at the level of their understanding and narration of their personal experience. Sheila Bock goes on to say, 'While their experiences and identities can be delegitimized by telling the "wrong" kind of story, breast cancer narrators begin from a place of sympathy and... veneration (p. 156).'¹¹ The inference being that the narrative arc for a person with breast cancer is indelibly shaped in a specific way, through the rhetoric of empathy; a framing that is arguably not afforded to a stigmatised condition such as HIV/AIDS.

However, the progress that has been made in the last decade, namely through anti-retroviral therapies, has meant that the HIV stock narrative – of declining health, a referral from the GP, a reluctant visit to the hospital, a shock or unexpected diagnosis, and imminent AIDS death; that narrative arc

⁹ Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honouring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 68.

¹⁰ Bock, pp. 154-155.

¹¹ Bock, p. 156.

of illness leading to a shortened life (prevalent in the 1980s) – is no longer compatible with the modern-day reality of managing this chronic disease well into advanced years. Dr Steve Taylor in the podcast titled, *Increasing HIV Testing*,¹² states that effective treatment nowadays means the life expectancy of those living with HIV is in excess of thirty years and the ‘prognosis when diagnosed [early] is excellent.’¹³ Therefore, nowadays, apportioning a monolithic story, a one-dimensional delineation of a person or situation, is incongruent when surveying lives affected by a chronic disease, because as Tineke Abma posits:

People tell each other stories to find out how they should act in certain situations, how they relate to others, and what their identity and role is... Stories frequently embed concrete, situated examples of action and the consequences of action that inform choices about behavior. (p. 171).¹⁴

Hence, how the story of breast cancer is articulated to friends and family will differ from that of HIV/AIDS, on the basis of what Sheila Bock surmises as ‘complex dynamics of tellability/untellability’ (p. 163).¹⁵ The five interviews which resource this research paper attest to this new dialectic in HIV/AIDS discourse in the Global North; where progress in medical science has caused an altering in the narrative arc of people living with HIV. Drawing on these interviews, this PhD project explores key concerns, themes and patterns arising from participants’ stories while making connections between the creative and critical components of this research.

¹² Steve Taylor, *Increasing HIV Testing*, online video recording, YouTube, 22 March 2010, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkA3RPa41RE>> [accessed 30 December 2016]

¹³ Taylor, *Increasing HIV Testing*, location at 1.58 minutes.

¹⁴ Tineke Abma, ‘Powerful Stories: The Role of Stories in Sustaining and Transforming Professional Practice within a Mental Hospital’, in *Making Meaning of Narratives in the Narrative Study of Lives*, ed. by Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (California: Sage Publications, 1999), pp. 169-195 (p. 171).

¹⁵ Bock, p. 163.

Talking about HIV/AIDS

After receiving approval from Keele University's Ethics Committee, I began searching for participants through various channels including Heartlands Hospital HIV Clinic and a number of HIV/AIDS organisations such as Freshwinds, National Aids Trust, Terrence Higgins Trust and Positively UK. Although these organisations have extensive databases I was only contacted by six participants — a reminder of the ongoing stigma attached to the lived experience of HIV/AIDS. I then approached potential participants via email, providing each with an individual introductory letter, an information sheet, and a copy of the consent form, which was discussed with them prior to the interviews at an interview. When participants contacted me in response to the email, I followed this up with a phone call. Due to other commitments, one potential woman, an eighteen year old, dropped out of the process. In discussion with my second supervisor at the time, Dana Rosenfeld, a qualitative medical sociologist and social gerontologist (Keele University), who has done extensive research in the field of HIV/AIDS, it was felt that the use of interviews, that is, the oral history approach, would enable me to gather particular insights into the lived experiences of these women living with HIV. This project did not seek to present factual knowledge per se, but endeavoured to uncover the individual experiences of these women living with HIV. For this reason, I believed the use of interviews was the right approach to reflect the lives of women living with HIV in contemporary Britain because of its flexibility and versatility. Thus, the critical component of this thesis was underpinned by a series of semi-structured interviews with five women between March and May 2015. All aged between 30 and 50 years old, and residing in London or the West Midlands, the women interviewed were Mandy, Susie, Louise, Cath and Tanya.¹⁶

¹⁶ Names of women interviewed have been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Full ethical approval was received to carry out this project. Each participant agreed to participate in the interviews. Due to the sensitive nature of the project topic, and real possibility that equally sensitive information might be disclosed, ethical principles were adhered to and the interviewees were assured of confidentiality on information provided.

Four interviews were held in private homes while one was held at a café. The interviewees chose their own interview location and time. Each interview lasted forty-five minutes to one hour. All the women agreed to be recorded. Each interview was transcribed and analysed thematically. In order to protect the women's privacy and to maintain confidentiality, I have allocated pseudonyms and removed any references that might identify them specifically in this paper. At the time of the interviews, all the women were on medication, receiving treatment from local hospitals. All the participants had been living in Britain for close to a decade or over. Two were public advocates on the issue of raising HIV/AIDS awareness, and it could be said that for Susie and Louise, their relationship with HIV follows Dolorès Pourette's assertion that the 'struggle against the disease became a focal point in their life, an occupation, and the basis for a specific yet perennial social integration' (p. 157),¹⁷ because much of their life was constructed around their HIV/AIDS advocacy work, and in fact, Susie met her long-term partner through this work having given up on the idea of meeting an HIV-negative man. All those interviewed, at the time of the interviews, were in full or part-time paid employment. One lived with her husband and children. One lived with her daughter. Two participants had grown children who no longer lived at home. Three were currently in long-term relationships. One was single, with no children and at the time of interview was not in a significant relationship. The key question that underscored the interviews was to what extent had women living with HIV moved away from normalised stock narratives found in extant literature? This is of particular import in light of the shift in the HIV/AIDS trajectory, that of moving from certain death resulting from an AIDS-related illness to living with a manageable disease into older years. This trajectory, evidenced in the stories of the women interviewed was also reflected in the storying at interview.

¹⁷ Dolorès Pourette, 'Migratory Paths, Experiences of HIV/AIDS, and Sexuality: African Women Living with HIV/AIDS in France', *Feminist Economics*, 14 (2008), 149-181 (p. 157).

The GP said you have hepatitis B and because you've come from a health problem country, I think you should test for HIV. That was really devastating for me because up to that point the only images I had were of people like Freddie Mercury dying. Obviously, there wasn't any treatment at the time so it was not a very good picture...

Yeah it's interesting thinking about hopes for the future because a few years ago, I would not have dared to think about a future, but now it's different. I don't know, for me, I really just live a day at a time (*Louise, late-40s*).

I was particularly interested in researching the ways in which the women interviewed constructed their own stories of living with HIV in relation to the kind of critical/conceptual models of illness narratives that have been identified in scholarship such as Nancy Roth and Myra Nelson's *HIV Diagnosis Rituals and Identity Narratives* (1997) and Arthur Frank's, *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995).

For Arthur Frank, illness narratives fall into three categories:

Restitution stories attempt to outdistance mortality by rendering illness transitory. Chaos stories are sucked into the undertow of illness and the disaster that attends it. Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion, of a journey that becomes a quest (p. 115).¹⁸

Nancy Roth and Myra Nelson argue that chronic conditions, such as HIV/AIDS, can disrupt a person's sense of identity and temporal framing of their lives and can often lead to a re-evaluation of values, spirituality and life priorities (p. 5).¹⁹ According to Douglas Ezzy, developments in Arthur Frank's theory proffer three different narratives that people use to make sense of their illness experience (p. 605).²⁰ Linear illness narratives are consumed by the projected belief that the future can be controlled through human action and behaviours, for example, maintaining a medication regime

¹⁸ Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 115.

¹⁹ Nancy L. Roth and Myra S. Nelson, 'HIV Diagnosis Rituals and Identity Narratives', *AIDS Care*, 9 (1997), 161-179 (p. 5).

²⁰ Douglas Ezzy, 'Illness Narratives: Time, Hope and HIV', *Social Science and Medicine*, 50 (2000), 605-617 (p 605).

will keep death at a distance.²¹ The focus on concrete outcomes is fundamental to such linear approaches whether restitutive or chaotic. Restitutive linear narratives expect that life will mirror the narrative while chaotic linear narratives anticipate that life will not fall in line with the linear orientation.²² Polyphonic illness narratives, on the other hand, are oriented towards the present because the future is uncertain and unpredictable. There is a sense in which the polyphonic narrative approach embraces the element of surprise, mystery and creativity as ways of gaining new insight into living with a chronic illness.²³ Interestingly, when presented with the request, “tell me your story”, three out of the five women interviewed presented linear narratives in that their storying assumed that future outcomes can be controlled through human action. In illustration, Susie, Tanya and Louise, spoke in great depth about medication regimes and support groups they were engaged with which enabled them to feel positive about the future. In addition, all three presented a restitutive linear narrative, evidenced in the “hope” of a normal future offered through medical advancements, voiced and acknowledged in the telling of their story.

The other two participants, Cath and Mandy, perhaps the most private about their HIV diagnosis, evident in the limited number of people who knew about their HIV status, offered polyphonic illness narratives. Polyphonic narratives are characterised by ‘overlaid, interwoven and often contradictory stories and values. They are ‘many voiced’ in the sense that they explicitly contain a variety of different and often contradictory goals, values, temporal assumptions and attitudes’ (p. 613);²⁴ this is perhaps due to a perception of an uncertain and unpredictable future. As these narratives

²¹ Ezzy, p. 611.

²² Ezzy, p. 612.

²³ Ezzy, p. 613.

²⁴ Ezzy, p. 613.

‘tend to include spiritual experiences’ (p. 605),²⁵ it is interesting that for Cath, her relationship with God and church as impacted by an HIV diagnosis formed a significant part of her interview. This complexity of contradictions was also found in Mandy’s narrating where she states: “it was hard coming to terms with it then, but it hasn’t changed me or my life or anything like that. I’ve never let it be an issue in my life it’s just something that’s there, you know, so I’ve never looked at it any different” — and yet, she is protective about who she discloses to, focusing primarily on the present, in the here and now. For both Cath and Mandy, there remain ambiguities around the future, even with the provision of antiretroviral therapies. There is an emphasis on a reframing of present life priorities in light of living with an HIV diagnosis, for example, as Cath articulates, “Having a partner, doing the whole marriage thing and having children is no longer a priority. For now I just need to stay well. Though sometimes I think it would be nice to have a family.”

Indeed, for all those interviewed, there was a sense in which there was a real determination to live positively and proactively with their HIV diagnosis in that their narratives were characterised by ‘an attempt to narrate and live a “normal” life in spite of an HIV/AIDS diagnosis’ (p. 610).²⁶ For example, Louise spoke of her dreams for her university age daughter; Susie spoke at length about travelling around the country with her advocacy work and going to visit family in South Africa; Tanya spoke about how living with HIV had made her appreciate her life, stating: “it has definitely woken me up.” I suggest that the improvement in medical intervention has made these participants believe that they can live a normal and long life, able to achieve their dreams and goals, even as people living with HIV. After the initial shock of diagnosis, and when acceptance had been achieved, there was no longer a focus on a shortened life. This could be attributed to the fact that all those interviewed have lived with HIV for almost a decade or more, and had come to a place of acceptance of

²⁵ Ezzy, p. 605.

²⁶ Ezzy, p. 610

what living with HIV meant for them; in terms of: medication regimes, engaging with medical and clinical staff, support groups, social networks, and suchlike. At this juncture, it is worth noting that the purpose of the interviews was not to produce a piece of medical anthropology or sociology but to gain insight on broader contemporary experiences of women living with HIV in the Global North.

The narrative inquiry design used in this research is based on models employed specifically to investigate life histories. The particular design of Linda Viney and Lynne Bousfield (Table 1), developed for illness narratives, was a good fit for this project in terms of the research concerns and focus because it is a tool through which recurring themes can be uncovered. It offers an opportunity to contextualise the narrative – in relation to the temporal, spatial, and relationships with other people. It also enables the identification of key events in the lived experience and provides a human-centred approach to the HIV experience, which was invaluable in informing and interrogating the creative work (p. 5).²⁷ Thus, this narrative inquiry model was deployed to make sense of, and to interpret the data from the interviews.

Steps	Narrative Structural Features	Identify	Application (as pertaining to my research)
1	Orientation	Introduction, context, setting	Describe each participant's background in terms of circumstances at the time of interview.
2	Abstract	Tale summary	Identify the core story from each interview.
3	Complicating Action	Sequence of events	Identify a plot and narrative to the story told by each participant.

²⁷ Roth and Nelson, p. 5.

4	Resolution	Main themes	Elicit minor and major themes running through each story. What are the significances of these?
5	Evaluation	Recurring patterns and implications	Elicit links between the core of the story, plots (and sub plots), narratives and themes; and assess any recurring patterns. What are the implications of these with respect to issues around contemporary representations of women living with HIV?
6	Coda	Relevance, transition points, commonalities	Identify transition points and commonalities between the experiences of those interviewed and the characters of the novel. What are the relevancies in terms of the life stories and the experiences of living with HIV in modern day Britain?

TABLE 1: Techniques outlined by Viney and Bousfield (Roth and Nelson 1997, p. 5)

The model highlighted in Table 1 provided a scaffold for a structured process of analysis and interpretation of the information collected from interviews. The value of this approach is that it offered an avenue in which to interpret the accounts of the five women interviewed, eliciting key patterns and themes in their stories and storying. This narrative inquiry model provided a viable means for analysing the content, form, structure, expression, context and temporality of spoken elements. In so doing, it gave an approach for observing patterns and themes emerging from the narratives, for example, emotional, spiritual and social concerns. In addition, it granted a lens to identify and interpret the language of things that cannot be said, pertinently, when talking about a stigmatised illness such as HIV because as Robert Atkinson contends, ‘the life story offers a way, perhaps more than

any other, for another to step inside the personal world of the storyteller and discover larger worlds’ (p. 224).²⁸

The interviews were used to uncover themes, such as identity, migration and spirituality, explored in the novel. The disparate, multifarious and contradictory stories communicated during the interviews are echoed in the narratives of Nkechi, Maya and Anna. Cross-examining the creative work in light of the interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the motivations and internal worlds of the fictional characters. Through the process, I was able to explore, in the novel, a deeper understanding of self and identity in relation to the characters living with HIV. This is in line with Cheryl Mattingly’s assertion, ‘Stories can render experience meaningful by placing events into a culturally and personally understandable plot. It is often contended that narratives provide coherence to the chaos introduced by illness’ (p. 407).²⁹ Furthermore, as Angela Woods surmises, ‘Narrative helps recognize and legitimize the first-person perspective as another form of knowledge about illness, and emphasizes the ill person’s agency as she becomes the empowered author-narrator of her own story’ (p. 114).³⁰ In listening to the stories of the five participants and creating the narratives of Nkechi and Maya, there is a sense in which this doctoral project endeavours to contribute another voice into current discourses on HIV/AIDS because as Paula Treichler argues, ‘Diverse voices... represent not

²⁸ Robert Atkinson, ‘The Life Story Interview as a Bridge in Narrative Inquiry’, in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, ed. by Jean D. Clandinin (London: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 224-246 (p. 224).

²⁹ Cheryl Mattingly, ‘Acted Narratives: From Storytelling to Emergent Dramas’, in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, ed. by Jean D. Clandinin (London: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 405-425 (p. 407).

³⁰ Angela Woods, ‘Beyond the Wounded Storyteller: Rethinking Narrativity, Illness and Embodied Self-Experience’, in *Health, Illness and Disease: Philosophical Essays*, ed. by Havi Carel and Rachel V. Cooper (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013), p. 114.

diverse accounts of reality but significant points of articulation for ongoing social and cultural struggles' (p. 126).³¹

Talking about illness in relation to self, identity and stigma

Any attempt to write about illness experience necessitates a sustained reflection on the ways we talk about illness in relation to our lives and selves. Notably, Fredrik Svenaeus states:

It is important to understand the fundamental difference between a phenomenological illness concept and the concept of disease... a disease is a disturbance of the biological functions of the body (or something that causes such a disturbance)... [while] typically, when I experience illness, my biological organism will be diseased, but there are possibilities of being ill without any detectable diseases... (p. 105).³²

Hence there remains a lot of theoretical debate around illness and its evaluation as Muriel Lederman attests: 'Within medicine, descriptors abound, from the distinction between disease, as a physiological condition and illness, as the disease in its social setting' (p. 280).³³ This is a development on Susan Sontag's assertion that: 'everyone who is born holds dual citizenship . . . each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place' (p. 3).³⁴ Susan Sontag therefore makes a distinction between disease and wellness, utilising the metaphor of countries, and suggesting that at any given time individuals hold dual citizenship.³⁵ However, this supposition is problematic when discussing a chronic condition such as HIV, because most people are neither completely well nor completely sick, and in fact, a person can be 'gravely ill and yet feel so normal' (p.

³¹ Paula Treichler, p. 126.

³² Fredrik Svenaeus, 'What is Phenomenology Of Medicine? Embodiment, Illness and Being-In-The-World', in *Health, Illness and Disease: Philosophical Essays*, ed. by Havi Carel and Rachel V. Cooper (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013), p. 105.

³³ Muriel Lederman, 'Social and Gendered Readings of Illness Narratives', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 37 (2016), 275-288 (p. 64).

³⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), p. 3.

³⁵ Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors* (London: The Penguin Press, 1989), pp. 9, 16.

64).³⁶ This is of particular import in the case of people living with HIV, where with the assistance of antiretroviral therapies, a person will often swing on the illness/wellness pendulum. Significantly, during the interviews, all the participants indicated that being on medication enabled them to live “normal” and “active” lives – suggesting wellness. Four participants, Susie, Cath, Tanya and Louise, communicated a period of being unwell prior to their HIV diagnosis.

I was in and out of hospitals for three years, as the doctors tried to figure out what was wrong with me. I was working full-time over that period and I was getting progressively sicker... but, once diagnosed and put on medication, within three months I began to feel better. Now, I can honestly say that I sometimes forget I'm HIV positive.
(Cath, early-40s).

It was only Susie who spoke of being unwell post an HIV diagnosis and being placed on antiretroviral therapy – this due to underlying kidney problems; she says, “I was sick for a very long time.” In contrast, the other participant, Mandy, did not go through a “feeling unwell” stage, diagnosed during routine pregnancy checks. Therefore, there will be times when a person living with HIV feels unwell and at other times will feel well; irrespective of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual spaces they are occupying. In illustration, although a person living with HIV might be “well” physically, they may at times, in particular phases of their HIV journeying, suffer with depression, mood swings or other symptomatic problems. In the novel, for example, although Nkechi lives “well” with HIV, she sweats a lot which is symptomatic of the virus in her body. In that a person cannot “recover” from HIV, it can be problematic to frame HIV as a condition that can at all times be considered as “illness”. Susan Sontag states that ‘[AIDS] is the name of a medical condition, whose consequences are a spectrum of illnesses’ (p. 16).³⁷ This is a helpful definition when looking at the connections between disease and illness in a person living with HIV, where the virus which attacks the immune system (CD4 cells) may cause a weakening in the ability to fight off infections. A per-

³⁶ Carel and Cooper, p. 64.

³⁷ Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors*, p. 16.

son living with HIV may go through lengthy spells when they are ill with a variety of opportunistic infections which are present as a result of the virus. If HIV is not treated, the gradual weakening of the immune system it causes leaves the body vulnerable to serious illnesses it would normally be able to fight off. In the late or final stages of HIV, if a person develops certain AIDS-defining illnesses or opportunistic infections, they are diagnosed as having AIDS.

In contrast to some cancers, such as breast cancer, which can be treated, and for which people may enter into remission; that movement between “having cancer” and “being cancer-free” – this aspect of “surviving” a disease is not afforded to people living with HIV because HIV remains permanently within the physical body, albeit, if treated, the virus (viral load) might decrease to levels of undetectability. As with other chronic conditions such as diabetes, even with an undetectable viral load, the ongoing effects of this virus on the physical body may cause an individual not to fall into the camp of “wellness”, as this depends on other factors, such as diet and mental health. To illustrate, one of the women interviewed had an additional disease, failing kidneys, and in fact, it was this kidney disease requiring regular dialysis that made her unwell, while the HIV in her body was under control with medication.

An MRI scan showed I had problems with my kidneys although I knew that kidney problems runs in our family. I was sent to a transplant team to the dialysis team and I was put on the donor register. I was so sick with the kidney problem... The doctor wasn't particularly concerned about the HIV - y'see that was being managed. Though he was interested about my whole wellbeing especially before I had the transplant. Post transplant, I feel like a new woman. To be honest compared to the kidney problem, the HIV doesn't feel like I'm sick. (*Susie, late-40s*).

It is therefore not surprising that the concept of “illness” is contested. Janine Pierret describes ‘Illness as a “fault”’ (p. 17).³⁸ Arthur Frank conceptualises illness as a ‘wound to the body-self’, stating

³⁸ Janine Pierret, ‘Constructing Discourses about Health and their Social Determinants’ in *Worlds of Illness: Biographical and Cultural Perspectives on Health and Disease*, ed. by Alan Radley (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 17.

that ‘disease interrupts a life and illness then means living with perpetual interruption’ (p. 56).³⁹

Debra Swoboda, on the other hand, asserts that:

Illness refers to the subjective experience of a person suffering from symptoms that are salient in his or her cultural context... [and] from this perspective, illnesses are empty of essential characteristics independent of their formation and representation in social interaction and discourse (p. 234).⁴⁰

While Havi Carel and Rachel Cooper posit ‘... [we] disagree when it comes to determining exactly what counts as health or ill-health’, they go on to make a distinction between disease and illness in the following way: ‘Disease [refers] to biological processes taking place in a diseased organism (the ill person’s body), and illness, refers to a person’s first-hand experience of the disease.’⁴¹ Illness can therefore be understood as a specific condition, a disease, which prevents a person’s body and/or mind from working normally, or it could be defined as the state of being unhealthy in mind and/or body. However understood, nonetheless, illness lies on a spectrum of wellness and feeling unwell. According to Havi Carel and Rachel Cooper, ‘In illness, and more pointedly in some cases of chronic illness and disability, we find a need to rethink the body’s ability to engage with the world, its ability to provide movement, freedom and creativity as it did before’ (p. 30).⁴² They make a further distinction between the biological and lived body: ‘the biological body is the physical or material body, the body as object [while] the lived body is the first-person experience of the biological body’ (p. 31).⁴³ Living with HIV differs in comparison to other chronic conditions because, when managed with medication, although HIV still exists within the biological body, it may not be experienced consciously; particularly in cases where there are no physical symptoms of the illness, for

³⁹ Frank, p. 56.

⁴⁰ Debra Swoboda, ‘The Social Construction of Contested Illness Legitimacy: A Grounded Theory Analysis’, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2006), 233-251 (p. 234).

⁴¹ Carel and Cooper, pp. 1, 8.

⁴² Carel and Cooper, p. 30.

⁴³ Carel and Cooper, p. 31.

example, muscular pain and/or general malaise. To emphasise this point, for the 17% of people in the UK estimated not to know they have HIV (Terrence Higgins Trust),⁴⁴ if there are no other health issues or symptoms, they would most likely consider themselves fit and healthy. This is in line with Havi Carel and Rachel Cooper's supposition that we can think of 'disease without illness (e.g. early non-symptomatic stages of undiagnosed cancer) [and] we can similarly think of illness without disease (perhaps some cases of minor depression, that give rise to symptoms but where no clear disease process is present).'⁴⁵ It could be argued that though there is an alignment between the objective and subjective body, a person living with HIV will always have the virus in their body. Nevertheless, the fact that such alignment between the biological and lived experience can be attained, it remains debatable if a body affected with HIV can be considered "well" on the basis of the fact that it is only due to medication that the disruption of harmony between the biological and lived body is minimal.

Before my HIV diagnosis I was really sick. I had flu-like symptoms that took months and months to shake off. The doctors thought it was glandular fever. Later, I developed shingles. That was bloody awful. Really terrible. I was completely wiped out, fatigued and exhausted all the time. I just wanted to die because I was so sick.

Three months into starting my medication I started feeling better. I've been on antiretrovirals for eight years now and I feel well most days. I still have bad days, when I can sleep lots and I feel really tired... but I'm not always sure if it's the HIV, my imagination or something else. But compared to the state I was, the three years before being diagnosed, I do feel well again. (*Cath, early-40s*).

Hence in Cath's narrative, "illness" could be understood as 'an abrupt, violent way of revealing the intimately bodily nature of [her] being' (p. 32)⁴⁶ because in her HIV body/experience the variance in distance between the alignment of the biological and lived experience determined how "well" she

⁴⁴ Terrence Higgins Trust, 'Facts and Figures', <<http://www.tht.org.uk/myhiv/HIV-and-you/Simple-science/Facts-and-figures?gclid=CMPYvrGB0ssCFY4y0wodvb4PiA>> [accessed 21 March 2016]

⁴⁵ Carel and Cooper, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Havi Carel, *The Cry of the Flesh*, 2nd edn, (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013), p. 32.

felt pre- and post- diagnosis. In the lived and embodied experiences of a person living with HIV ‘the change in illness is not local but global, not external but strikes at the heart of subjectivity’ (p. 35)⁴⁷ in that it affects not only mood and the physical body, but also impacts on relationships with others; suggesting that the way an HIV body experiences HIV will differ from person to person. For the purposes of this discourse, a distinction is made between disease and illness due to the complexity of how HIV affects individuals along the illness/disease scale. In illustration, how HIV affects a newly diagnosed individual with a low CD4 cell count will be quite different from how it affects someone with a high CD4 cell count.

Two days after my partner passed away, a male and a female police officer came to my house and told me that he [my partner] was found to have HIV and I should go for a test... I was exhausted and beginning to feel nauseous with very bad flu like symptoms, but I put it down to the shock of my partner dying so unexpectedly.

I was told I had HIV. My CD4 count was something like 64, it was very very low – so it went low very quickly. So it could only have been in my body for a matter of weeks because we wore condoms for the first part of our relationship. So I could only have had it in my body for 6, maybe 8 weeks, when I started to have the really bad flu like symptoms. The nausea, not being able to eat, drastic loss of weight, being extremely weak — I had all that. (*Tanya, late-50s*).

With regards to the fictional work, this distinction between illness and disease is evident in that although Nkechi and Maya are living with HIV, they are not “ill” with it and are functioning as “well” people in their narratives. In addition to presenting living with HIV as a manageable chronic condition in the novel, the reality of living with other challenges associated with HIV is also depicted in *Purple Lilac*, for example, Nkechi battling with sweats. Illness has the potential to disrupt a life, whether momentarily or for an extended period of time, and as such memory and continuity are essential for maintaining personal identity over time (p. 33).⁴⁸ Angela Woods states:

⁴⁷ Carel, p. 35.

⁴⁸ Carel, p. 33.

Illness narratives are always embodied, [in that] all stories of the self are told, and witnessed by embodied subjects. In the case of illness narratives, the physically ill or broken body is both the subject of the story and the mode of its telling; illness brings the body into the foreground and is a forceful reminder that it must be accounted for (p.123).⁴⁹

If life is acknowledged as a biographical narrative, in that the body is central to its self-experience, then chronic illness as a biographical interruption is when illness disrupts everyday structures and experiences (p. 124).⁵⁰ Mary Larkin articulates it in this way:

[Illness] disrupts [a person's] sense of identity, their everyday life and their hopes for the future. During the experience of the first of these, there is a "loss of self" as the body fails and the individual experiences a disjuncture between the healthy self and the ill body. This demands a fundamental rethinking of a person's relationship with their body – their self-concept – and a search for explanations (p. 107).⁵¹

In contrast, as Kathlyn Conway argues, not everyone interacts with illness in this manner, because 'an illness story is on the ill person's internal experience as it unfolds outside time', that is to say, '[although] an illness story attempts to explain, alongside the unfolding of events in chronological time... a more fractured internal experience is occurring' (p. 77).⁵² The implication of this being that, depending on the nature and degree of "disruption" that the illness '[constituted] damage to the self' (p. 38),⁵³ this will determine how a person engages with the illness experiences — in relation to their physical body, mental and spiritual states.

Living with HIV is accompanied by a number of challenges. People living with HIV must not only adhere to strict antiretroviral regimes, they also have to reconcile their lived experience of HIV with

⁴⁹ Woods, p. 123.

⁵⁰ Carel and Cooper, p. 124.

⁵¹ Mary Larkin, *Social Aspects of Health, Illness and Healthcare* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), p. 107.

⁵² Kathlyn Conway, *Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression* (USA: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), p. 77.

⁵³ Conway, p. 36.

their sense of self. In offering transformation opportunities, living with a chronic disease raises issues around quality of life and the significance of distinctions around the body, self/self-concept and identity. This, especially, if as Kathy Charmaz surmises ‘[that when a person is] adapting to an impaired body [this] means resolving the tension between body and self elicited by serious chronic illness’ (p. 658).⁵⁴ In this context, the notion of self-concept can be used as a vehicle to assess the ‘role chronic illness plays in one’s self-definition’ (p. 77).⁵⁵ Depending on how the chronic illness is perceived — namely, if it is playing a central or peripheral role — determines to what extent a person ‘accepts chronic illness as part of one’s self (p. 78).⁵⁶ Self-concept could be surmised as ‘an individual’s perception of their identity, adjustment, social skills and status, self-fulfilment, physicality and morality’ (p. 213).⁵⁷ Or according to Mark Ferro and Michael Boyle, it could be understood as ‘a psychological construct formed through inter-personal experiences in social contexts and influenced by genetic endowment and the expectations and judgments of significant others (i.e. parents, siblings, peers)’ (p. 839).⁵⁸ Due to the reconfiguration of the physical and emotional experience that chronic illness causes, the relationships between self and others have to be renegotiated, particularly, for example, in terms of existing social and familial relationships.

After my diagnosis, I was thinking what do I do now? Do I take the job? I’m dying anyway, you know what, let me take it and keep myself busy while I’m waiting to die!
(Louise, late-40s).

⁵⁴ Kathy Charmaz, ‘The Body, Identity, and Self: Adapting to Impairment’, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36 (1995), 657-680 (p. 658).

⁵⁵ Koen Luyckx, Jessica Rassart and Ilse Weets, ‘Illness Self-Concept in Type 1 Diabetes: A Cross-Sectional View on Clinical, Demographic, and Psychosocial Correlates’, *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 20 (2015), 77-86 (p. 77).

⁵⁶ Luyckx, Rassart, & Weets, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Thomas M. Wright and Litza A. Kiropoulos, ‘Intimate Relationship Quality, Self-concept and Illness Acceptance in those with Multiple Sclerosis’, *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 22 (2017), 212-226 (p. 213).

⁵⁸ Mark A. Ferro and Michael H. Boyle, ‘Self-Concept Among Youth With a Chronic Illness: A Meta-Analytic Review’, *Health Psychology*, 32 (2013), 839–848 (p. 839).

Mediating such relationships is important to people living with HIV because the manner in which these individuals negotiate the various spaces they inhabit will be shaped by self – evolving through social, cultural and environmental factors – and indeed influence their readings and interpretations of both their internal and external worlds. Self, in relation to other, is the entirety of an individual as perceived by them – a person’s understanding of self, determines how they narrate their stories and integrate their narrative identities. Thus, a self, constructed and/or re-constructed, in the telling of a narrative will shift and change depending on how the self is understood through social paradigms, others, and temporality; in line with Angela Woods’ supposition: ‘The ill person’s sense of self, her ill body, her illness narrative and social being in the world are all mutually developed and dependent’ (p. 120).⁵⁹

Furthermore, Daphna Oyserman et al argue that people create meaning through their embodied interactions and experiences with the world, asserting that:

Generally speaking, self and identity are social products in at least three ways. First... people are likely to define themselves in terms of what is relevant in their time and place... Second, being a self requires others who endorse and reinforce one’s selfhood... Third, the aspects of one’s self and identity that matter in the moment are determined by what is relevant in the moment (p. 76).⁶⁰

This suggests that it is through social roles and interactions, in relationship with other people, identity is shaped and determined. To demonstrate, the advocacy roles of two of the participants, Susie and Louise, informed the tone and storying during interview – in that, a significant portion of both participants’ interviews was spent with them communicating in great detail their work supporting men, women and children living with HIV.

⁵⁹ Woods, p. 120.

⁶⁰ Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore and George Smith, ‘Self, Self-concept and Identity’ in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June P. Tangney (New York: Guilford Publications, 2011), pp. 69-104.

I go around the country and do pregnancy journey workshops for different organisations that work with people with HIV, work with men and women and their partners around safer conception, planning pregnancy. We talk about what happens, we talk about what do you need to do, just the whole journey [of HIV] so that more people can have the right information to make the right choices. *(Louise, late-40s)*.

I'm probably more confident working in my current job [as an advocate for PLWH] because I'm all over attending conferences and meetings in all sorts of places and the rest of the [HIV] community kind of looks to [me] for solutions. *(Susie, late-40s)*.

Hence, as Daphna Oyserman et al surmise, 'self-concept and identity are highly malleable and can even be dynamically constructed in the moment...' (p. 95).⁶¹ The implication being that identity is neither concrete nor rigid, but is flexible, changing and adapting to environment and relationships with others. In other words, as Hüseyin Cinoğlu and Yusuf Arıkan claim, 'identity is the social position that the self not only possesses but also internalises' (p. 1116).⁶² The identity of a mid-forties Zimbabwean, who migrated to the UK in her twenties and later discovered she is living with HIV, will differ from that of a Nigerian who has lived most of her life in the Global North and was diagnosed with HIV in her thirties. Thus HIV experiences will vary. Not only do culture, socio-economic and educational factors play a part in shaping a person's identity, it develops from an individual's past, present and future in relation to social contexts, roles and relationships. This is perhaps significant when considering the private and public spheres an HIV-positive person inhabits. For example, a person living with HIV who works as an advocate might possess quite a different identity (or set of identities), in comparison to a person living with HIV who opts for a more secret and private way of being; in that even in their private spaces, the former may be more overt and self-assured about their living with HIV because of the public advocacy role they have. Though, this is not to say that people living with HIV who are advocates can not or do not choose to have private selves

⁶¹ Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, p. 95.

⁶² Hüseyin Cinoğlu and Yusuf Arıkan, 'Self, Identity and Identity Formation: From the Perspectives of Three Major Theories', *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 9 (2012), 1114-1131 (p. 1116).

in relation to their HIV. Nor does it mean that they are indiscriminate about with whom they share their HIV status.

You can be as visible or invisible as you want. I've been in publications and interviews [about HIV-positive people and living]... As someone living with HIV I'm probably more confident working for [a charity that supports HIV positive people]. In my current job I travel all over the country for conferences and meetings in all sorts of places... being in this role makes it easier to talk about my HIV. (*Susie, late-40s*).

Thus as Daphna Oyserman et al suggest:

People can consider themselves from a number of perspectives—the individualistic “me” self or the collectivistic “us” self, the temporally near “now” self or the temporally distal “future” self, the immersed “mind’s-eye” self or the observer’s “eyes of others” self (p. 73).⁶³

It is therefore not surprising that when a person suffers loss, questions around how identity changes often arise. The implication being that the storying of a person living with HIV will depend on the interplay between their self-concepts and the familial, social, political, religious and medical structures in which they operate. This was evidenced in the contradictions in the stories of the women interviewed. For example, when Cath says, “Sometimes I forget I have [HIV] and I don’t really think about it” but later states, “I was always a private person, but [HIV] has made me even more so.” Similarly, in *Purple Lilac*, though there is an underlying sense that Nkechi believes she has accepted her HIV status, the exploration process she undertakes towards possible ordination reveals deep-seated insecurities about Nkechi’s self-concept and identity within the framing of the Church of England, God and her own spiritual journey.

⁶³ Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, p. 73.

According to Lerita Coleman Brown, ‘stigmas mirror culture and society’ (p. 147)⁶⁴ and as such there are multiple ways in which to view stigma. Erving Goffman in his notable work on stigma suggests that stigma refers to a characteristic or particularity an individual possesses which discredits if uncovered or discovered (p. 13).⁶⁵ He argues that stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person, and determines how people read the person through that particular distinction, because ‘[a person] possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what [is] anticipated’ (p. 15).⁶⁶ Erving Goffman further claims the degree to which certain chronic illnesses are more stigmatising is dependent on a number of factors: the visibility of the symptoms of the disease, the extent to which others are aware of the illness, and the extent to which the illness affects interaction between the ill person and others (p. 12).⁶⁷ Stigma can be understood as an imputation of a virtual social identity or an actual social identity (p. 12);⁶⁸ where a virtual social identity is a characterisation imputed on an individual based on assumptions, while an actual social identity is an attribute or category an individual is proved to possess. The discrepancy between the virtual and actual identity can cause a reclassification from one category to another. This discrepancy can also arise when discussing a person’s private and public identity. Significantly, the central feature of the stigmatised individual’s life is the question of acceptance (p. 19).⁶⁹ Recent empirical studies have created a shift in thinking on stigma, as Andrew Kaplan, Anna Scheyett and Carol Golin posit:

It is now generally accepted that stigmatising attitudes are a pervasive and inevitable feature of human interactions. Virtually everyone holds attitudes that could be described as stigmatising; these attitudes are the product of one’s socialization, education, and

⁶⁴ Lerita C. Brown, ‘Stigma: An Enigma Demystified’, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis. (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 147-160 (p. 147).

⁶⁵ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin Group, 1963), p. 13.

⁶⁶ Goffman, p. 15.

⁶⁷ Goffman, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Goffman, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Goffman, p. 19.

experience. Consequently, most people face stigma during their daily interactions with others (p. 185).⁷⁰

This is echoed in a participant's experience, where even though she was attending treatment that had nothing to do with her HIV diagnosis, she felt stigmatised by the attitude of the medical staff—and interpreted their actions as a comment on her being HIV-positive because this was the lens she was operating out of, even in that renal clinic.

In renal care especially, I found the dialysis team very unfriendly. I don't know why, I never really got on with them. They were not open and not welcoming or, maybe I was just too spoiled by HIV. (*Susie, late-40s*).

Erving Goffman's theory contends, 'the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives' (p. 164).⁷¹ Pushing this argument further, Lerita Coleman Brown asserts, 'the infinite variety of human attributes suggests that what is undesired or stigmatised is heavily dependent on the social context and to some extent is arbitrarily defined' (p. 148).⁷² The discourse around stigma has developed significantly to take into account cultural and social variances attached to stigma, and acknowledge enacted and felt stigma; where Mary Larkin states, 'the former is used to denote actual stigmatising reactions from others, while the latter refers to the personal shame individuals feel about their condition and can result in their concealment of it', all pertinent in this discourse (p. 108).⁷³ She further surmises, 'the extent of the disruption caused by a chronic illness is also influenced by the stigma associated with certain diseases which leads them being less fully accepted by

⁷⁰ Andrew Kaplan, Anna Scheyett and Carol Golin, 'HIV and Stigma: Analysis and Research Program', *Current HIV/AIDS Reports*, 2 (2005), 184-188 (p. 185).

⁷¹ Goffman, p. 164.

⁷² Brown, p. 148.

⁷³ Mary Larkin, *Social Aspects of Health, Illness and Healthcare* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), p. 108.

others' (p. 107).⁷⁴ Thus, according to Lerita Coleman Brown, there is a power dynamic at play in that dominant groups ultimately 'determine which human differences are desired or undesired' (p. 148).⁷⁵ In the worldview of people living with HIV, those who have not tested for HIV and therefore do not know their status, and those who have tested HIV-negative, are the dominant voices that have played a role in determining that the "difference" of an HIV-positive status is undesirable. Therefore, this stigmatization as Lerita Coleman Brown claims, is a 'consequence of social comparison' (p. 148).⁷⁶ The stigma a person living with HIV experiences is significantly tied to social context and therefore constructs particular meanings through social relationships. From the participants' stories, there was evidence to suggest that each woman experienced stigma differently. The two advocates, Louise and Susie, did not convey a sense of living with stigma – perhaps, because through their advocacy work, they were "outed" as people living with HIV. So, although they communicated in a global sense that HIV was still understood as a chronic condition which still stigmatised – when asked directly how they experienced stigma, they stated that they did not generally experience stigma on the basis of their HIV. For the other three women, there was a sense of living with the stigma of HIV in their every day existence. This articulated in their discussion around shame and fear of "being found out" in line with Lerita Coleman Brown's assertion that: 'fears are grounded in a realistic assessment of the negative social consequences of stigmatisation and reflect the long-term social and psychological damage to individuals resulting from stigma' (p. 156).⁷⁷

In *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi is aware of the stigma attached to an HIV diagnosis and this is evidenced in her anxiety as she considers ordained ministry. In reflecting on the issues of stigma, fear and shame,

⁷⁴ Larkin, p. 107.

⁷⁵ Brown, p. 148.

⁷⁶ Brown, p. 148.

⁷⁷ Brown, p. 156.

I have explored internal and external stigma through her interactions with Reverend Tobias and through angst in her dreams. For example, in one dream sequence the image of a chalice appears as Nkechi wrestles with the subtext of “stigma” and being accepted as a person living with HIV in the context of church, faith and spirituality. How she responds to this exploration process towards ordination in itself incorporates both the meta-narrative of the culture in which she lives and breathes and moves, and her own personal narrative. Furthermore, it is arguable that the subtext of HIV stigma underlines how she relates to other characters in the novel such as her parents, who are not privy to her HIV status; Paul, with whom she has a profound connection but makes a decision not to have a sexual relationship; and Reverend Tobias, who she discloses to, and because of his positive response to her disclosure proceeds with the process of exploring ordination.

II HIV/AIDS AND CULTURAL IMAGINATION

The cultural construction of HIV/AIDS is complex and is reflected in the various ‘productions of illness narratives’ (p. 86).⁷⁸ There is an abundance of journals and articles which discuss issues around HIV/AIDS, with particular foci, engaging topics such as, the psychological, social and economic concerns around an HIV diagnosis. From the personal to policy dictates; from individual to communal spaces; from antiretroviral therapies to debates around transmission; from stigma, sexuality to spirituality – in the intervening years between the onset of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s to the present day, much has been written on the subject, fulfilling a range of remits and agendas. This is in line with Thomas Couser and Nancy Mairs' supposition:

To be HIV positive is to exist in a liminal social space between health and serious illness. Thus people who are HIV positive but asymptomatic may resist writing illness narratives because they are reluctant to identify themselves as infected, for fear of prematurely adopting or being assigned to the sick role (p. 86).⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Thomas G. Couser and Nancy Mairs, *Recovering bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 86.

⁷⁹ Couser and Mairs, p. 86.

Due to the focus of this doctoral project, a fictional novel set in Birmingham, my aim is to review the fictionalised memoirs and fiction genres on lived HIV experiences in the Global North, although I acknowledge that this said corpus would be significantly larger if it were to include works from the African, Latin American, Asian and South East Asian continents. Reflecting on the fiction genre, according to Melissa Gross et al, ‘Novels have the power to contextualise the political, economic, socio-cultural, and interpersonal dimensions of the disease’ (p. 400).⁸⁰ This is germane in light of what the creative thesis is trying to achieve – to research the multidimensional nature of living with HIV in contemporary Britain while giving insight to ‘common assumptions, accepted ideas, and widely shared opinions of culture’ (p. 401).⁸¹ Here, I focus on fiction from the USA and UK published since 1985 because from around this time, HIV/AIDS was no longer seen as a critical health issue but as a chronic one that could be managed with medication. As Perry Halkitis posits, ‘a major breakthrough in our understanding and management of AIDS came in 1985 when the pathogen that causes the infection was identified and isolated...’ (p. 52).⁸² He further asserts:

The AIDS epidemic in the United States has radically shifted due to medical advances—the detection of HIV-1 followed by the development of the HIV antibody test in the mid-1980s and ultimately the discovery of highly effective therapies a decade later (p 16).⁸³

It is from the mid-eighties that public perception and attitude towards HIV shifted, and people affected by HIV/AIDS, began to imagine futures as people living with HIV. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, autobiographical works about life with HIV were presented as testimonies of defiance,

⁸⁰ Melissa Gross, Annette Goldsmith, and Debi Carruth, ‘What Do Young Adult Novels Say about HIV/AIDS? A Second Look’, *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 78 (2008), 397-418 (p. 400).

⁸¹ Gross, Goldsmith and Carruth, p. 401.

⁸² Perry Halkitis, *The AIDS Generation: Stories of Survival and Resilience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 52.

⁸³ Halkitis, p. 16.

and as ‘an alternative to silence’ (p. 166).⁸⁴ It is worth noting that since the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, a significant contribution to writing about HIV/AIDS in the United States has come from gay authors – perhaps not surprising because at its nascent stage, ‘HIV/AIDS [was seen as] primarily a gay disease in the United States...’ (p. 14).⁸⁵ And, in fact, as Kylo-Patrick Hart states the ‘condition was referred to by physicians as GRID, which stood for “gay-related immune deficiency”; throughout American society, it was more typically referred to as “gay cancer” and the “gay plague”’ (p. 4).⁸⁶ In this context, as Richard Canning surmises, ‘the first decade of the health crisis, indeed, witnessed early plays, films, poems, memoirs and novels about HIV/AIDS’ (p. 89)⁸⁷ that depicted HIV/AIDS as a disease to be feared. However, in the intervening decades, the range of genres and approaches to this discourse has increased: poetry, memoirs, diaries, personal essays and fiction – perhaps, as the orientation towards an untimely death changed, those affected by, and living with, HIV/AIDS found different and more relevant mediums of sharing their HIV/AIDS stories – in response to how they experienced the disease. Interestingly, Kylo-Patrick Hart states, ‘The treatment of AIDS in news accounts, documentaries, television programs, movies, and other mass media offerings over the past two decades has undeniably shaped the way the American public thinks about and responds, socially and politically, to the pandemic’ (p. 8).⁸⁸

Paul Monette produced four AIDS memoirs. *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1998) which recounts the eighteen plus months where he cared for his partner, Roger Horwitz, who was living and

⁸⁴ Jason Tougaw, ‘Testimony and the Subject of AIDS Memoir’, in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, ed. by Jason Tougaw and Nancy K. Miller (Illinois: Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 166-185 (p. 166).

⁸⁵ Halkitis, p. 14.

⁸⁶ Kylo-Patrick Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), p. 4.

⁸⁷ Richard Canning, ‘AIDS, as it Struck Us, You and Them — or, Contemporary Gay Identity and the Syndrome that Barely Was’, in *The Meaning of Sexual Identity in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Judith Kaufman and David Powell (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 87-98 (p. 89).

⁸⁸ Hart, p. 8.

dying with AIDS. In *Love Alone* (1988), Monette through poetic form, an elegy, reflects on the cycles of emotions he experienced in confronting his partner's physical deterioration and his emotional response to death. *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (2004) charts his life before and after AIDS, and his inhabiting the space of supporting a person living with HIV/AIDS. *While The Last Watch of the Night* (1995), a collection of essays, depicts the struggle around an AIDS diagnosis as a 'diagnosis [that] was and is a life-changing event' (p. 54).⁸⁹ Monette's gritty hard prose, often self-deprecating and angry, reflects the mood of the times where HIV/AIDS was seen as a death sentence, a sickness that had no escape, because living with this disease meant a painful decline until death. Notably, the stock narrative arc of the times informed and influenced the kind of writing that emerged during this early phase of the pandemic. The themes which underpin Monette's work – the politics of silence and the prevalent Catholic culture – 'foregrounds the difficulty of narrating illness because of the way it threatens one's sense that life has coherence, continuity, and extension' (p. 157).⁹⁰ This is echoed in *Purple Lilac*, albeit nuanced differently, where themes such as stigma and silence are explored through the plot and structure of the novel; mingling elements of human drama within the narratives.

Others who have chronicled their illness experiences include, Michael Callen who died at the age of thirty-eight, and wrote an open and honest personal account of his life in *Surviving Aids* (1990). John Preston, whose memoir, *Winter's Light: Reflections of a Yankee Queer* (1995), uses essays and social commentary to give insight on the progress of what it meant to live with AIDS in this period of the epidemic. Not surprisingly, the confessional quality of many of these writings reflect the times – where living with HIV/AIDS did indeed incur a "last rites" positioning, because a person living with HIV/AIDS was on the cusp of life and death. David B. Feinberg, in his essay collection,

⁸⁹ Halkitis, p. 54.

⁹⁰ Couser and Mairs, p. 157.

Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone (1996) and in his autobiographical novel, *Eighty-Sixed* (2002), again through black humour captures the doom and gloom of AIDS in the gay community in those times. Further portraits of the AIDS pandemic are detailed in David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) and his graphic novel *Memories that Smell Like Gasoline* (1992). In *To the friend that did not save my life* (1991) the French novelist and photographer, Hervé Guibert, describes his attempt to come to terms with an HIV/AIDS diagnosis. Living with HIV/AIDS at that time was not something a person imagined they would ever do. Speaking on the cultural responses of that era, Sharon Leslie claims:

The legacy of the artists and creative people who have died from AIDS or suffered the loss of loved ones is huge. Many of the personal narratives and memoirs about the effect of AIDS on people's lives reflect the fatalistic mood of the 1980s (p. 275).⁹¹

For some, at this stage of the epidemic, any other sort of death would have been preferable. Again, Reinaldo Arenas, in *Before Night Falls: A Memoir* (1994), recounts his personal pilgrimage and persecution under Castro's regime in Cuba as a gay man living with HIV/AIDS. Mark Doty details the "slow erasure" of his long-term partner in *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir* (1997). These fictionalised autobiographical accounts reflect the realities of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the eighties and nineties. This composite picture of "male and gay" in such narratives shows, perhaps, a need for other diverse HIV experiences to be depicted in novels particularly where the 'Silence=Death' framing is no longer true in the Global North (p. 167).⁹² In addition, this context of fear and control, stigma and shame, proffers opportunities in which fiction can be used to challenge the myths which persist around living with an HIV diagnosis — or as Paula Treichler argues, 'the question is how to disrupt and renegotiate the powerful cultural narratives surrounding AIDS' (p. 37).⁹³

⁹¹ Sharon Leslie, 'HIV/AIDS: A Postmodern Epidemic and its Depiction (Bibliographic Essay)', *American Library Association*, 53 (2016), 971-981 (p. 275).

⁹² Tougaw and Miller, p. 167.

⁹³ Treichler, p. 37.

The language used in the titles — *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1998), *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (2004), *While The Last Watch of the Night* (1995), *Surviving Aids* (1990), *Winter's Light: Reflections of a Yankee Queer* (1995), *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) — parallel the landscape of fear and oppression that marked the times of the day. The negative connotations of these words and phrases, “borrowed time / half a life / last watch / surviving / winter / disintegration” (to name a few), expose the dying motif and rhetoric of the AIDS epidemic in those early years until the mid-nineties when ‘AIDS [was] generally considered to be invariably fatal’ (p. 83).⁹⁴ Jason Tougaw asserts that the characteristic of these works as testimonies was that they bore ‘witness to a collective trauma: speaking for a group of people who have shared a traumatic experience’ (p. 167).⁹⁵ These initial AIDS memoirists were on a mission, to inform their communities about their illness, and in an act of defiance to stave off death for as long as possible, while seeking to give a voice to what was unspeakable, and engaging in social and political action. In this context and climate, “‘action’ for AIDS activists has largely meant the ‘production of discourse’” (p. 168).⁹⁶ This is of particular import in that there was a time when to write about HIV/AIDS was to purge oneself and bear witness to one’s testimony – that idea of being a “truth teller”; where the storying of living with HIV/AIDS transcends the physical and embodied experience of living with the condition as Paula Treichler surmises:

The story of the AIDS epidemic, its nature and future, takes place in cells, bodies, test tubes, hospitals, laboratories, bodily fluids and death. But it also takes place in language and discourse, where AIDS, the word, is constructed, where it becomes a story, where it is rendered intelligible, and where it is acted upon. (p. 329).⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Couser and Mairs, p. 83.

⁹⁵ Tougaw and Miller, p. 167.

⁹⁶ Tougaw and Miller, p. 168.

⁹⁷ Treichler, p. 329.

The sheer act of penning one's story of living with HIV/AIDS was in itself an 'antonym for silence' (p. 168).⁹⁸ Put another way, at that time, 'the narratives of AIDS testimonies [were] fuelled by a tension between conflicting but viscerally felt drives: toward survival and death' (p. 169).⁹⁹ In other words, as Richard Canning postulates, '[AIDS memoirists] had sometimes paid witness, sometimes taken notes, sometimes prevaricated, and, of course, sometimes protested through political activist organisations such as ACT-UP. Literary productivity implied reflectiveness and the achievement of perspective...' (p. 89).¹⁰⁰ According to Jason Tougaw, 'Before 1996, most people with AIDS could not hope to live to be cured' and this compelled these truth-tellers to get their stories down while they were 'physically and intellectually sound enough to write' (p.169).¹⁰¹ The focus and compulsion to "get it all down" – from monographs that posited AIDS in the Holocaust paradigm; both in terms of the literal deterioration of corporeal bodies and in a metaphorical sense – transformed as an underlying meta-narrative when there was no longer an imperative to bear witness before an untimely death. These testimonies which were initially seen as an appropriate means in which to narrate illness experiences, in that they offered opportunities to shape trauma through the narrative structure of 'beginnings, endings, before, during, and after' (p. 171),¹⁰² changed focus when the emphasis was no longer about dying from AIDS-related infections, but living with HIV as a managed chronic condition. If these memoir writers, particularly those from the gay community, once spoke to a collective audience, in giving a voice of warning on the subject of HIV/AIDS, over the decades, there has been a movement in which more diverse voices have been heard, for example, heterosexual women living in the Global North and young people who were born with the disease.

⁹⁸ Tougaw and Miller, p. 168.

⁹⁹ Tougaw and Miller, p. 169.

¹⁰⁰ Canning, 'AIDS, as it Struck Us, You and Them — or, Contemporary Gay Identity and the Syndrome that Barely Was', p. 89.

¹⁰¹ Tougaw and Miller, p. 169.

¹⁰² Tougaw and Miller, p. 171.

In discussing HIV/AIDS in Young Adult fiction, Melissa Gross et al contend, 'The number of young adult novels that include a character with HIV/AIDS has increased. However, this body of literature is still small relative to the population that may be affected' (p. 412).¹⁰³

When considering the distinction between memoir and autobiography, Jason Tougaw claims, 'An AIDS memoir, like life with AIDS, is haunted by death at every turn, constructed by and through the likelihood of early death' (p. 182).¹⁰⁴ Thomas Couser and Nancy Mairs state:

Once diagnosed with AIDS, however, the same individuals might be reluctant to write illness narratives for different reasons - a sense of hopelessness, symptoms that interfere with the sort of detachment conducive to autobiography, or simply desire to avoid or minimize the stigma of AIDS (p. 86).¹⁰⁵

Thomas Couser and Nancy Mairs further assert: '... personal narratives, which can resist, but not entirely ignore or escape, presumptions about HIV/AIDS; at best, such accounts are in the position of revising what are in effect prescribed narratives' (p. 81).¹⁰⁶ It is therefore not surprising that the construction of AIDS writing from the relational and communal rapidly changed with the improvement of HIV drug therapies. The manifestos of those early writers, public and political, took on a new pace and form in the modern-day landscape where writing about HIV/AIDS did not necessarily foreshadow death, in sharp contrast to a time when a 'vast majority of AIDS narratives have taken the form of memoir rather than autobiography' (p. 86).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Melissa Gross, Annette Goldsmith and Debi Carruth, 'What Do Young Adult Novels Say about HIV/AIDS? A Second Look', *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 78 (2008), 397-418 (p. 412).

¹⁰⁴ Tougaw and Miller, p. 182.

¹⁰⁵ Couser and Mairs, p. 86.

¹⁰⁶ Couser and Mairs, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ Couser and Mairs, p. 86.

Turning to fiction, Thomas Couser and Nancy Mairs claim, ‘reading accounts of illness where life is literally at stake exposes a crucial divide between fiction and nonfiction’ (p. 54).¹⁰⁸ And, although within the American literary landscape, many fictional works have emerged to address HIV/AIDS, it can be said that ‘fictional characters, no matter how autobiographical, have a different relationship to their authors than their autobiographical counterparts’ (p. 54).¹⁰⁹ There have been a significant number of books written with a central HIV-positive protagonist. However, in the first decade of the epidemic, echoing the memoirists, within the fiction genre, a number of protagonists’ profiles are “male and gay”. Samuel Delany’s *Flight from Nevèrjón: The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, is an early fantasy novel which tackles aspects of the rise of an AIDS epidemic within the gay community of that time (Delany 1994). A further work of fiction which encapsulates the focus on urban settings is Sarah Schulman’s tale, *Rat Bohemia*, which portrays David, a gay writer dying from AIDS, and explores his isolation and loneliness against the vibrancy and backdrop of New York City (Schulman 1995). Again these works reflected the fatalistic mood of this period. In Michael Cunningham’s, *The Hours*, Richard Brown, a gay poet’s life and personality is examined in parts of this narrative — characterising HIV/AIDS as it was understood in the eighties and nineties:

He [Richard Brown] lifts his massive, ravaged head. Clarissa turns her face sideways, and receives Richard's kiss on her cheek. It's not a good idea to kiss him on the lips—a common cold would be a disaster for him. Clarissa receives the kiss on her cheek, squeezes Richard's thin shoulder with her fingertips (Cunningham 2000: 68).¹¹⁰

Interestingly, Douglas Crimp posits that portrayals of gay men living with HIV in this particular manner meant that, ‘[they were] kept safely within the boundaries of their private tragedies’ (p. 120).¹¹¹ In Alan Hollinghurst’s *Line of Beauty*, a novel about an Oxford graduate, Leo Charles, who

¹⁰⁸ Couser and Mairs, p. 54.

¹⁰⁹ Couser and Mairs, p. 54.

¹¹⁰ Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 68.

¹¹¹ Douglas Crimp, ‘Portraits of People With Aids’, in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 120.

finds himself having to get to grips with his sexuality, his mother's homophobia and an HIV diagnosis (Hollinghurst 2004). Again, a characterisation which fed into media stereotypes 'maintaining those fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings' (p. 120)¹¹² that exploited personal stories for public spectacle and consumption.

Richard Canning's collection of short stories, *Vital Signs: Essential AIDS Fiction* (2007), charts the uphill AIDS struggle through eighteen short stories. As Richard Canning asserts, 'it became clear that somehow, in the decade since treatments were first mooted, HIV/AIDS... to the Western lay mind, became historical' (p. 87).¹¹³ He goes on to state, 'Of course, HIV/AIDS had not ceased to be a medical catastrophe for millions in the West... [However] millions now are living with HIV, rather than dying of infections and conditions related to it...' (p. 88).¹¹⁴ It is worth noting at this juncture that a similar trajectory was occurring in movies, in illustration, Kylo-Patrick Hart surmises:

... the central characters with HIV/AIDS in the earliest AIDS movies—including *An Early Frost* (1985), *Buddies* (1985), *As Is* (1986), and *Parting Glances* (1986)—were all represented to be gay men. What is more surprising, however, is the number of AIDS movies that have continued to reinforce the persistent link between gay men and AIDS over the past two decades (2013: 47).¹¹⁵

The shift in these representations on the literary landscape mirrored the lived experiences of those living with HIV, where people living with HIV/AIDS were now negotiating "life with HIV". Thus, Edmund White's novel, *Chaos*, a collection of five stories, in semi-autobiographical tone, discusses issues about ageing with HIV (White 2007). In his later novel, *Jack Holmes and His Friend* — a story about lovers; one homosexual, the other heterosexual — does not engage HIV/AIDS as a

¹¹² Crimp, p. 120.

¹¹³ Richard Canning, *Vital Signs: Essential AIDS Fiction* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007), p. 87.

¹¹⁴ Canning, *Vital Signs: Essential AIDS Fiction*, p. 88.

¹¹⁵ Hart, p. 47.

point of discourse, perhaps because for people living with HIV/AIDS in contemporary times, HIV is no longer necessarily an all consuming focus in a person's story, because life can and does continue to be lived around an HIV diagnosis (White 2012). Again in Armistead Maupin's *Michael Tolliver Lives* the focus of this book is about living; getting older and coping with HIV especially in light of the death predictions the protagonist had lived through (2007). This is particularly relevant in our modern day where HIV/AIDS has been repositioned and no longer only speaks from one paradigm, in line with Paula Treichler's assertion that, 'As AIDS moves through time and through more and more communities, its narratives and explanations move with it, to recur, like urban legends, in new places, with locally inflected players and plot twist' (p. 319).¹¹⁶ Not only has there been a reframing of HIV/AIDS from that literal and metaphorical gaunt hollowness, as people are living longer with HIV, the emphasis on the physical characterisation of HIV/AIDS has changed, allowing authors, such as myself, to explore other themes such as spirituality, through the lens of living HIV.

The other prominent profile of an HIV protagonist is that of a child. As of 2009, Melissa Gross et al posit that, '[their research] has identified 92 works of fiction published in English or translated into English, that include at least one character who is HIV positive or has AIDS and a protagonist who is 11 to 19 years old' (p. 70).¹¹⁷ In Sapphire's *Push*, we encounter Claireece Precious Jones, an obese and illiterate sixteen-year-old protagonist who experiences rape and incest. When her father dies from AIDS, Precious begins a journey of self-discovery as she comes to terms with her own HIV-positive status (Sapphire 1997). Amanda Farrell, an eleven-year-old character, contracts HIV from a contaminated blood transfusion and Alice Hoffman's novel, *At Risk*, portrays the fall out of this diagnosis in her family relationships (Hoffman 1998). According to Melissa Gross et al, 'There

¹¹⁶ Treichler, p. 319.

¹¹⁷ Gross, Carruth and Goldsmith, p. 70.

are many HIV/AIDS characters... who are relegated to background, presented in vague ways that fail to identify exactly who these people are that have HIV/AIDS and how they became infected' (p. 71).¹¹⁸ The Young Adult fiction by Courtney Sheinmel, *Positively*, introduces thirteen-year-old protagonist, Emerson Price, living with HIV which she contracted from her dead mother (Sheinmel 2010).

Novels that do not fall into the category of having a homosexual person or child protagonist include the following. In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Roy Cohn is an attorney with AIDS (Kushner 1993) while in Matthew Gallaway's *The Metropolis Case*, one of the main characters, Martin, a forty-one-year-old successful attorney tries to find meaning to his dissatisfied existence (Gallaway 2010). Another, where a female character is offered, is Pearl Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy On An Ordinary Day*, where we are introduced to Ava Johnson who has built a successful career as an attorney; her future looks bright until it is shattered following an HIV test (Cleage 2001). It is worth noting that there are other novels where the protagonist is not living with HIV but is affected by this diagnosis in another character. For example, in Penny Raife Durant's *When Heroes Die*, Gary, a child-protagonist, discovers that his Uncle Rob has died from an AIDS-defining illness (Durant 1993). Melissa Gross et al states, 'there is a sense of shame associated with the discovery of homosexuality; it momentarily causes Gary to question his own sexual identity in *When Heroes Die...*' (p. 75).¹¹⁹ Turning to the HIV fiction scene in Britain, the picture is limited; an example, being a 1999 novel by the novelist, Colm Tóibín, *Blackwater Lightship*, related from a siblings' perspective, it explores her brother's delayed disclosure of dying with AIDS (1999).

¹¹⁸ Gross, Carruth and Goldsmith, p. 71.

¹¹⁹ Gross, Carruth and Goldsmith, p. 75.

In summary, the literary fiction and life writing surveyed here suggest that there is scope for a wider cross-section of voices of people living with HIV/AIDS to be characterised as protagonists in the fiction genre, particularly, from the standpoint of a woman living with HIV. As Thomas Couser and Nancy Mairs posit, ‘... the stories of gay men need to be supplemented with those of a population more representative of those now infected with HIV’ (p. 172).¹²⁰ Notably, the works cited here are predominantly fictionalised memoirs, autobiographies and novels which depict HIV/AIDS as a critical illness. The paradigm shift of living with HIV, in the Global North, as a manageable chronic condition, means that there is room for depictions of other diverse narratives reflecting the HIV experience of a heterosexual woman. *Purple Lilac*, though not a novel solely about HIV but one that explores the lives of women who incidentally live with HIV, seeks to offer a unique contribution to extant literature by sharing a different and more contemporary voice in the HIV/AIDS discourse. Nkechi’s story focuses on the challenges of HIV on her faith and spirituality which exists on both an individual and societal level. Maya’s story explores the possibilities brought by hope and love when confronted by bereavement. Anna’s story examines a life affected indirectly by a parent’s HIV status, and provides a viewpoint on how a young person might experience HIV in her day-to-day reality.

III EMERGING THEMES

In analysing the data from interviews of the five women, several themes were identified in their narratives including: migration, spirituality, sex, stigma and silence. All five women interviewed had migrated at some point to live in Britain. All five women spoke on how religion impacted on their HIV status — either turning away from it, or turning towards it to help cope with their diagnosis. All five women spoke about sexual experiences pre- and post- finding out they are HIV-positive. And all five women communicated on how they navigated stigma and disclosure in their private

¹²⁰ Couser and Mairs, p. 172.

and public lives. Four out of five of the women were more open in telling their stories, while in contrast, for one participant, significant stretches of silences punctuated her storying and she had to be prompted with a question to keep her narration going. The themes identified in the participants' interviews are pertinent in Nkechi and Maya's stories in *Purple Lilac*. Nkechi's migration story is alluded to through constant references of Nigerian foods, such as, plantain, yam, and stock fish. A strong theme of spirituality emerges in Nkechi's narrative as this section examines how living with HIV impacts on her spirituality and faith; this explored through her interactions with Reverend Tobias. Sex is a significant theme in both Nkechi and Maya's stories, and how these two characters negotiate disclosure around their sexual relationships is considered. In addition, how these two characters understand their sexual selves in relation to living with HIV is examined in great depth in their unfolding narratives. This exploration of sex and the questions around the ethics of disclosure underscore the reality of stigma in their lived experiences. For example, a constant concern of Nkechi's is how her HIV status might be viewed if it was "out there" within the Church context – and, this anxiety of being discovered is presented through her chalice dream. Throughout the novel, there are points on which the characters' narrative is silent, for example, from whom did the characters contract their HIV. For the purposes of this discourse, I will discuss the themes of migration, religion and sex because in both the creative and critical components of this project, these topics were relevant to the participants interviewed and the characters in the novel.

Reflections on migration

A significant number of people living with HIV/AIDS in most European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) countries are migrants: 'New HIV diagnoses among migrants from non-EU/EEA countries account for 22% of all new diagnoses and represent an increasing proportion of all new HIV diagnoses among migrants in the EU/EEA' (ECDC Special Dublin Declaration Report 2017, p.

3).¹²¹ The ECDC Technical Report 2014 report states, ‘estimates that there are approximately 64 million migrants in Europe, which account for 8.8% of the population in Europe’ (p. 10).¹²² In light of the ECDC Surveillance Report 2015 claim that, ‘In 2015, migrants, (or persons originating from outside of the reporting country), again constituted a considerable proportion (37%) of new HIV diagnoses in the EU/EEA’ (p. 8),¹²³ it is not surprising that out of the five people interviewed, four came from Sub-Saharan African and one from Ireland.

Maureen Mweru states, ‘Migration increases vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, as the migrants are far away from their families and partners, living in poverty and are all too often exploited, and they may have limited or no access to health services and appropriate medical information’ (p. 337).¹²⁴ In relation to limited access to health services, this was particularly true of one participant who had immigration issues from the point of diagnosis. Although there is considerable variety in the biographical and migration profiles of those interviewed for this project, nonetheless, their migratory trajectories can be categorised in the following ways: for travel, study and work. For each of those interviewed, their reasons for migrating was linked to social, economic and/or medical issues. For all the women interviewed, their HIV was diagnosed in Britain. In the case of one, diagnosis came shortly after arriving in the UK for a wedding, when besieged by ill-health she eventually took an HIV test. For two of the women, diagnosis came with pregnancy. Another, diagnosis came in her fifties, after a relatively short relationship with her partner at the time who had died from AIDS-re-

¹²¹ ECDC Special Dublin Declaration Report, ‘The status of the HIV response in the European Union/European Economic Area, 2016’ <<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/Publications/Status-of-HIV-response-in-EU-EEA-2016-30-jan-2017.pdf>> [accessed 4 March 2017] (p. 3)

¹²² ECDC Technical Report, ‘Migrant health: Epidemiology of HIV and AIDS in migrant communities and ethnic minorities in EU/EEA countries, 2009/10’, <http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/publications/0907_ter_migrant_health_hiv_epidemiology_review.pdf> [accessed 4 March 2017] (p. 10)

¹²³ ECDC Surveillance Report, ‘HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe, 2015’, <<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/Publications/HIV-AIDS-surveillance-Europe-2015.pdf>> [accessed 4 March 2017] (p. 8)

¹²⁴ Maureen Mweru, ‘Women, Migration and HIV/AIDS in Kenya’, *International Social Work*, 51 (2008), 337-347 (p. 337).

lated complications. Another participant's diagnosis came in 2007, after three years of deteriorating health, when she took a test three weeks before her planned wedding. Three out of the five women contracted HIV in Africa while the other two contracted HIV in the UK.

From Kenya I moved to the UK to start my university education and it was during this time I fell sick. This was in the early 90s. *(Louise, late-40s).*

In 2001, I came to the UK, from Zimbabwe, for a family wedding. That's when I got tested. I've been here ever since. *(Susie, late-40s).*

Raised in Ireland I left when I was 19 and came to work in England. *(Tanya, late-50s)*

A range of factors have contributed to how each person interviewed has experienced HIV. One woman, who did not have immigration papers for over ten years, remained in a vulnerable position, socially, financially and medically, because she had limited access to social service entitlements. This participant communicated how it was through engaging in volunteering positions with HIV charities that she was able to build up a network; a community of support around her, which enabled her to hope for a better future despite her HIV and immigration statuses.

The next big fight was immigration. I had to change my visitor's visa into a resident permit or something legal... During this long ordeal, I started volunteering and being open about my status... the volunteering helped in sort of distracting me from my stresses and I got to meet some fantastic friends through the support groups for HIV. *(Susie, late-40s).*

There is a sense in which this participant's immigration story is tied to her HIV narrative, in that if she had not been diagnosed with HIV in Britain, she would not have been looking to remain in the UK where she could access healthcare and medication for her HIV. And, again, both her migration and HIV trajectory shaped the social networks which arose to support her through this phase in her life. Perhaps, it is not surprising that this participant became an advocate in that HIV was the foun-

dition of her existence here in the UK. Her entire life in Britain was built around figuring out how to live with HIV in a foreign land.

For all the women interviewed, their HIV was diagnosed when they migrated to England. For some, the diagnosis was made within months; for others, it was many years later. Yet, significantly, in all the interviews, many began the telling of their HIV-configured narratives with the story of their migration from their homelands. Perhaps, this is not surprising, because in the same way that HIV inevitably becomes a part of a person's identity, similarly, the migratory tale is a meta-narrative, often tied up to an individual's identity and meaning-making of the world they come to inhabit in relation to the other. Put another way, an HIV diagnosis is the lens through which people living with HIV negotiate self and identity, in relation with otherness, the other, and the spaces where these relationships happen. Likewise, a migration narrative affects a person's identity because much of this HIV journeying is intertwined with that migration story. For example, for a number of the women interviewed, discovering they were HIV positive led them to seek leave to remain in the UK to gain access to medical treatment; thus, their HIV diagnosis prompted a decision to reside permanently in the UK. For the women who discovered they were living with HIV soon after they arrived the UK for a visit or study, their socialisation in the UK was centred around their HIV diagnosis. Thus through interactions with medical and social services, as migrant women, their social life became organised around appointments to clinics and suchlike. In addition, living with HIV presented a means for a number of the women to secure or regularise their immigration documentation permitting them to live and work in the UK.

I was with [an HIV Organisation] then... Anyway, that's where my life sort of turned around. That's where I got the advice about my immigration status and they gave me a list of lawyers and I was lucky, there was still this free lawyers support service at the time. (*Susie, late-40s*).

Well I have to think about it [HIV] only because I work with it every day but not in terms of me, if you know what I mean. I live with it, maybe that's what's helped me because I'm around it all the time. (*Louise, late-40s*).

For these two participants their lived HIV experiences is woven with their migration stories, in that, the lives they have created for themselves have been informed by HIV – being diagnosed with HIV in Britain, trying to gain access to medical care for their HIV, and seeking other networks to support their HIV diagnosis. Thus living with HIV has impacted on every aspect of life for these two participants who have chosen to live publicly with their diagnosis. Their experience of living with HIV is different from the other three who do not live publicly with HIV. And, perhaps, for these two advocates, their lives are less compartmentalised because of their very public identities – as people living with HIV.

In the novel, *Purple Lilac*, the character Nkechi is of Nigerian parentage and as such migration is a part of her backstory. Although this theme is not explored overtly in this narrative, there is a sense in which issues around her heritage come to the fore. Namely, the tensions between her traditional African parents who expect her to be married and to have children. These strains are exposed in her relationship with her sister, who is seemingly achieving all that she is not.

Nkechi stirs the pot – enjoying the smell of Maggi and dried fish. It always surprised Nkechi that although she loved foods from her African roots, she normally lived on a diet of brown rice and brown pasta. No yams, plantains, or fufu.

“Well?” Her mother isn’t going to let it go. She has started on the salad.

“This looks great. I should make an effort to cook traditional dishes for myself,” Nkechi says, replacing the lid on the pot – leaving it to simmer.

“Paul – was it?”

Nkechi inhales sharply. Why had she mentioned a person of interest to her mum? Only God knew where Paul was. He had gone quiet on her again — not responding to her texts or calls. She wondered if he had made his way down to London, into Ayesha’s purse-strings. She contemplates propagating the lie. It would be easier. It was always easier to lie to her parents.

“It’s gone nowhere. He’s left town.”¹²⁵

Not surprisingly, this migration history, could be seen to influence Nkechi's experiences of the world, particularly, as a person living with HIV. Although there is much that is unsaid in Nkechi’s narrative, there is a sense in which her African roots play a significant role in how her identity shifts and shapes in relation to self vis-a-vis other relationships. This is perhaps evidenced in her relationship with Paul, who is a projection of her submissive and passive self, in that she has often found life happening to her, rather than her being in control of her life. To elaborate on this point, for example, in her sexual encounters and relationships, Nkechi has not been assertive in insisting on the use of condoms each and every time, and by so doing, has given up this power and control to men, emphasising a submissive and passive nature (a possible result of living in a strict African household) which has ultimately disempowered her over the years. This lack of self-assertion – such as insisting on the use of condoms; a laissez-faire attitude towards her sexual exploits, perhaps in-

¹²⁵ Excerpt from *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi Chapter 7.

formed by a difficult relationship with her parents – has led her to having several affairs, whereby one led to her contracting HIV. Nkechi disempowered by her HIV status, rails against her lack of self-worth. Nonetheless, as the narrative proceeds, as in the case with the women interviewed who engaged with various volunteering pursuits, it is through Nkechi's exploring ordination with the Church of England that she finds an avenue to be re-empowered; to be re-configured to her new normal – that new identity as a person living with HIV. And, interestingly, perhaps in trying to re-dress this balance of power, Nkechi resists having a sexual relationship with Paul.

Reflections on religion, faith and spirituality

Each participant I interviewed reported on religion, faith and spirituality in their interviews. Although not always overtly articulated, there was a sense in which religion – the one they were brought up with, or that which they claimed for their own – played a role in their making sense of their HIV status and how this played out in their relationships with self and others. For example, making a decision not to disclose to parents who were strict Catholics, or turning to faith for strength when they found out about their HIV. Since all five participants spoke from a Christian faith understanding (Protestant and Catholic), this section will explore possible theological implications on religion, faith and spirituality on a person's lived experience with HIV from a Christian perspective.

Throughout history, people with religious inclinations have sought and found comfort in scripture, and therefore it is not surprising that the women interviewed communicated how their faith helped or hindered them in light of their diagnosis. Throughout scripture we see Jesus in the midst of the rejected, despised and alienated – the outcasts of society.¹²⁶ Jesus' ministry of solidarity with those on the margins sought to give voice to the voiceless, re-humanise and restore, through generous

¹²⁶ Mark 5.21-43; Matthew 8.1-33; John 4.1-54; Luke 19.1-10.

compassion, love and acceptance. In reflecting on the story of the leper, Ched Myers asserts, ‘Jesus’ ministry... always involves more than the liberation of the individual “victim.” He also challenges the *cause* of the disease’ (p. 34)¹²⁷ – that is the religious, social and political systems, which have played a part in victimising and marginalising people living with leprosy in the context of Jesus’ times, or HIV in our contemporary age. Therefore, Jesus Christ is not only to be found among the vulnerable and disinherited, he/she/other *is* the poor and oppressed, and as such, the body of Christ, *is* this *imago dei* that Michelle Gonzalez attests as, ‘something [the Church] embodies through our ethical actions, a challenge we must meet in order to truly reflect our intended nature’ (p.193).¹²⁸

It is against the backdrop of rising global migration that the Church has become increasingly aware of the need to make Jesus relevant in context and culture. This is especially significant because a theology that can be applied at the grassroots of community is crucial in enabling people to not only comprehend, but to live out their faith. In an increasingly diverse landscape, it is in this interface, where Christ encounters culture, that the Church engages with issues around migration, namely, religious diversity, destitution, marginalisation, and identity, to name a few. Humans are cultural beings and as such it is not surprising that all five participants spoke from what José de Mesa coins ‘culturally interpreted experiences’ and therefore, as he further asserts, ‘any understanding of Jesus, whether we are conscious of it or not, is inevitably culturally conditioned’ (p. 9).¹²⁹ The participants’ religious and faith understandings inevitably augment their experience of living with HIV. Similarly, in Nkechi and Maya’s narratives, their understanding of God/Christ is expressed through cultural understandings and insight. In *Purple Lilac*, there is a sense in which Nkechi needs to re-

¹²⁷ Ched Myers, ‘Behold, the treasure of the church’, *Sojourners*, 28 (1999), 32-34 (p. 34).

¹²⁸ Michelle Gonzalez, ‘When We Don’t Choose Our Friends: Friendship as a Theological Category’, *Theology Today*, 69 (2012), 189-196 (p. 193).

¹²⁹ José de Mesa, ‘Making Salvation Concrete and Jesus Real Trends in Asian Christology’, *Exchange*, 30 (2001), 1-17 (p. 9).

imagine a new understanding of who God/Christ is in her life in order to find meaning of who she is in the context of HIV and her Christian faith. This is because as José de Mesa posits, ‘Images of Jesus are capable of transforming a person's attitude toward life. They can integrate perceptions, change value systems, reorientate loyalties and create a sense of commitment and attachment far stronger than abstract concepts’ (p. 14).¹³⁰

From a Christian perspective, in reflecting on the role of faith and spirituality on the lives of people living with HIV, an understanding of Jesus as “the Christ” should be made relevant and located through the lens of culture and context. If God is proclaimed through creation, an incarnational Christ, and human experience; if God’s message of salvation was revealed through Jesus and the disciples in that specific Jewish and Gentile landscape – this suggests that culture played a crucial role on how Jesus’ message was received, understood, interacted with and applied in those times. Notably, in the gospel passages Jesus asks a question of the disciples, ‘Who do you say I am?’¹³¹ — and it is this same question that is posed in the development of Nkechi’s character. Thus, not only are these women’s spiritualities understood through their various cultural contexts, it is also nuanced by their lived HIV experience.

I was raised Anglican but over the years I’ve attended many churches. When I was diagnosed I was attending a local Anglican church. I felt incredible guilt and shame in the eyes of God. I felt I was being punished for my sins. The bible is very clear about sinful behaviours — immorality, sexual sin, adultery, fornication. But I still went to church and decided to see a Christian counsellor. You won’t believe what she said. She said, I deserved my HIV. I guess in a way she’s right, because of my promiscuity. But when she said that I felt completely broken. I couldn’t face myself, God or the church. It’s funny talking about it now makes me realise how her comment made me to stop going to church for a long while. I was angry with God. Though I blamed myself for being so stupid.
(Cath, early-40s)

¹³⁰ de Mesa, p. 14

¹³¹ Matthew 16.15; Mark 8.29; Luke 9.20.

The challenge of what it means to be HIV-positive and a Christian is real for this participant, especially in seeking to interpret “salvation” in the context of an HIV-positive diagnosis. This is perhaps exacerbated by an upbringing in a strict religious household. This participant found that she had to re-evaluate what living with HIV meant in the face of José de Mesa’s Jesus as the ‘embodiment of righteousness, truthfulness, honesty, peace, harmony and right relationships’ (p. 17).¹³² In Nkechi’s story, the “hope” of Jesus as Christ is presented as one who ‘not only restores right relationships with God, people and the cosmos, [but] is himself God-with-us, truly human and centre of the whole cosmos’ (p. 17).¹³³ Thus, this restoration is proffered not in any kind of miraculous healing, but through a narrative of self struggle, and as such, the questions for Nkechi are: Who and what am I in the face of an HIV diagnosis?, and where does that restoration ultimately begin in relation to reconciliation with self? Kwok Pui-lan asserts, ‘the most hybridized concept in the Christian tradition is that of Jesus/Christ [because] the space between Jesus and Christ is unsettling and fluid, resisting easy categorisation and closure’ (p. 171).¹³⁴ It is in this human-divine sphere that there is ‘an invitation for every Christian and local faith community to infuse that contact zone with new meanings, insights, and possibilities’ (p. 171).¹³⁵ For a person living with HIV, there are opportunities for new insights to materialise as one mediates what it means to live with HIV in this space where the human-divine Jesus/Christ encounters humanity and new images of Jesus/Christ can materialise in relationship with self, the other, and in community. To illustrate, Nkechi’s capacity to support her best-friend, Ardella, through miscarriage, and Maya extending forgiveness to her brother, Dan, — are examples of “new insights” gained by these two characters in terms of what it means to love more deeply and be more generous in compassion; that is, having the capacity to transcend their

¹³² de Mesa, p. 17.

¹³³ de Mesa, p. 17.

¹³⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 171.

¹³⁵ Pui-lan, p. 171.

HIV diagnosis, and be transformed through the experience of living with HIV. And, in so doing, not allowing an HIV diagnosis to limit their capacity to be loved and show love and compassion to others in need. And, by going beyond themselves in this way, a “new image of Jesus/Christ” emerges through those relationships.

In the case of the women interviewed, the images of Jesus/Christ that were a part of their life story up to the point of being diagnosed invariably shifted in light of their experience as a person living with HIV. The interactions with medical teams, depending on whether these were positive or negative experiences, would have developed their interpretation of Jesus/Christ in a particular way. For example, if a person living with HIV has a positive experience with medical staff, they are likely to see Jesus/Christ in the compassionate care-giving of the nurses and health advisers. On the other hand, if such experience is negative, the person living with HIV, although they might not see the love of Jesus/Christ in that specific interaction or situation, might experience all that Jesus went through – being humiliated, shamed and despised.¹³⁶ This suggests that people living with HIV have something to offer the meta-narrative of human experience and existence. It is arguable that *Purple Lilac* endeavours to explore through its characters and plot, opportunities for the Church to respond positively to people living with HIV; being attentive to the whole person presenting in front of them; acknowledging the complex backstories in which an HIV diagnosis is framed.

On a further point, it could be considered that not only did the human Jesus migrate; became a refugee,¹³⁷ in another sense, Jesus migrated from his heavenly abode into the earthly realm, a journey of life, death and resurrection. This motif of journeying and suffering is a key element in many migration stories. As people move from their homelands in search of refuge in new lands, they carry

¹³⁶ Isaiah 53.3.

¹³⁷ Matthew 2.13-14.

the burden of their hardships, the memory of their experiences – and embark on a transformative journey of resurrection. What is more, when people leave their homelands, there is a real sense in which these are community events, in the same way, as Marcella Althaus-Reid states, ‘Jesus’s resurrection was also a community event: women and men witnessed how he came back from the dead, walked among them and continued the dialogue which existed before his crucifixion’ (p. 194).¹³⁸ The migration experience is a death experience on many levels – a death of what once was, dead dreams and ambitions, loss of relationships and identity (amongst others). And as such as Marcella Althaus-Reid posits, ‘[the migration experience] changes the life of the survivors because some humanity is removed from them’ (p. 194).¹³⁹ Like with migration, when a person is diagnosed with HIV, loss occurs. For example, the death of a partner to an AIDS-related illness; loss of family networks through relocation; inability to continue with a particular employment. These were all losses that the five participants communicated. As Kathlyn Conway contends:

Even when the body can be restored to its former state, or when the appearance of the formerly intact body can be restored, a person must still mourn the loss of an earlier conception of self as well as the loss of a sense of security about life and the future (p. 52).¹⁴⁰

Similarly, in *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi’s narrative explores loss – loss of the person she once was prior to her being diagnosed. This need to renegotiate self and identity in the context of HIV is reiterated in the Health Advisor’s comment, “There’s life after an HIV diagnosis”. Also, in Maya’s narrative, this loss, is read on many levels, not only the loss of a daughter who may have been inadvertently affected by her mother’s decision to keep her HIV diagnosis private, but also the loss Maya herself inevitably incurs through finding out that she had HIV, for example, the loss of a longterm relationship. These losses revealed in the narrative: “Everything’s changed. Just as it did when she was di-

¹³⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid, ‘Doing the Theology of Memory: Counting Crosses and Resurrections’, in *Life out of Death: The Feminine Spirit in El Salvador*, ed. by Marigold Best and Pamela Hussey (London: CIIR, 1996), p. 194.

¹³⁹ Althaus-Reid, p. 194.

¹⁴⁰ Conway, p. 52

agnosed. HIV positive!”¹⁴¹ However, through these losses, as Marcella Althaus-Reid contends, ‘... death took on another meaning; the resurrection became the paradigm [that showed] the durability and indestructibility of life and justice.’¹⁴² This suggests, for an HIV-positive woman such as Nkechi and Maya, that in this metaphorical cycle of “living and dying” there are opportunities for growth and transformation.

Around this subject of “loss” in *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi’s narrative explores the guilt and shame around her understanding of HIV as a punishment from God; evidenced by significant bouts of self doubt as she attends meetings with the Diocesan Vocations Officer. Underlying Nkechi’s motivation to pursue ordained ministry, is a need to share and respond with action that gospel message of hope; to partner in ‘God’s mission, particularly in showing solidarity with [people living with or affected by HIV]’ (p. 87).¹⁴³ This is as Nkechi attempts to find a way of living meaningfully, and in a manner that affirms, in the face of stigma and discrimination so often found, not only externally, but also internally within church communities. The supposition being that:

Unless we accept all human beings and their conditions “as they are”, there is no mission... we have to show solidarity with people “as they are” and not trying to fit them into our category of “perfect” Christian as we are all imperfect beings and participate in their struggles for survival and dignity (p. 87).¹⁴⁴

The “good news” for people living with HIV is a life-affirming message where the triune God works through, and with, a host of agencies to support their challenges, both unique and universal. To this end, Christ cannot be an individual messiah, he/she/other has to be a “communitarian one” with the ability to be re-read as a challenge to unjust structures that oppress people living with HIV

¹⁴¹ Excerpt from *Purple Lilac*, Maya Chapter 2.

¹⁴² Althaus-Reid, p. 194.

¹⁴³ Gideon Byamugisha, John J. Raja and Ezra Chitando, *Is the Body of Christ HIV Positive: New Ecclesiological Christologies in the Context of HIV Positive Communities* (Birmingham: ISPCK, 2012), p. 87.

¹⁴⁴ Byamugisha, Raja and Chitando, p. 87.

in our modern times. Thus, no longer will the Christ generosity offered by the Church be about healing their HIV, but will encompass valuing their whole person and become about challenging political, social and religious structures that disempower people and condemn them to living sub-standard and sub-human existences.

A chalice appears in Nkechi's dream, silver plated with a floral motif around its middle. Her eyes focus on a procession of lips – thin, thick, rouged, chapped. Heads dip forward, taste the alcohol, then jerk backward. She finds herself at the front of the queue. Her heart pulsates, a sheen of sweat on her brow. To sip or to dunk? She clutches the communion wafer in her hand. All those mouths. She flinches — wakes to the drone of her mobile.¹⁴⁵

In this excerpt, the chalice represents the Church in communion with Christ. In this dream sequence, Nkechi's nervousness as she approaches the altar rail to receive communion reflects her anxieties in terms of what it means to be a person living with HIV in communion with the church — both capital and little 'c'. The question for her is whether a person with her disease can be accepted by the body of Christ on earth? And as a person belonging to that "body of Christ" (the church), what does this mean for the Church? In living with HIV, Nkechi wrestles to reclaim her Christ-identity in the face of a "spoiled identity" as expounded on by Erving Goffman (p. 11).¹⁴⁶ When a life has been disrupted by a diagnosis such as HIV, it can cause a person to question previous certainties and meanings of faith, in light of the reconfigured self. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that Nkechi at this juncture in her life, in middle age, is exploring ordained ministry as part of her journey towards self-discovery, as she inhabits a different identity as an HIV-positive woman.

¹⁴⁵ Excerpt from *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi Chapter 8.

¹⁴⁶ Goffman, p. 11.

It could be argued that Nkechi continues to transition from her old self, to a new identity, as she manages the tension of strength found in weakness.¹⁴⁷ James Fowler suggests ‘a transition from one faith stage to another does not necessarily mean a change in the content or the direction of one’s faith. It does, however, change in the way one holds, understands, and takes responsibility for living one’s faith’ (p. 68).¹⁴⁸ In this neutral space of ‘going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new is not fully operational’ Nkechi is most likely struggling with both internal and external jostles of self and community acceptance (p. 5).¹⁴⁹ While trying to preserve herself, she steers ‘new challenges by constructing new patterns of knowing and valuing in order to deal with them’ (p. 72).¹⁵⁰ The implication being that Nkechi, in a zone of making critical realignments and repatternings, navigates a ‘psychological transition’ between ‘the old reality and the new one’ (p. 8).¹⁵¹ As in all the other life cycles, in the middle years’ stage, many changes and transitions occur. And using the metaphor of old and new wine skins, the challenge for this life cycle as Richard Rohr posits is its ability to, ‘stretch, die in its present form, or even replace itself with something better’ (p. 2).¹⁵² The resonance and symbolism between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not lost — echoed in the stories of the women interviewed for this project and indeed in Nkechi and Maya’s narrative.

Whether a person chooses to disclose an HIV positive status, or not, there are significant opportunities for churches to hold and affirm people living with this chronic condition in their pastoral care

¹⁴⁷ II Corinthians 12.9.

¹⁴⁸ James Fowler, *Faithful Change* (London: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 68.

¹⁴⁹ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009), p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ Fowler, p. 72.

¹⁵¹ Bridges, p. 8.

¹⁵² Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of the Life* (California: Jossey-Bass, 2011), p. 2.

and practice. For example, churches should be safe spaces where a person living with HIV can confidently make a request for prayer, in relation to a specific need around HIV concerns. Again, it is not the proposition of this researcher, that people living with HIV must disclose, or how much they should reveal, rather a suggestion that persons living with HIV have particular and individual needs – emotional, psychological, and spiritual – that are unique and specific to living with HIV. To this end, there is real opportunity for church communities to reflect critically on how healing and wholeness activities are designed, in terms of accessibility and liturgy; to ensure all people, including those in Nkechi’s position, feel supported and affirmed. As Emmanuel Larrey states, ‘nurturing is an ongoing process that is sensitive to the crucial “life-stages” through which we go’ (p. 66).¹⁵³ Thus, the invitation is for the church community to acknowledge the range of challenges a person living with HIV might experience, for example, mental health issues such as low moods, and perhaps, that ongoing sense of grief and loss which often undergirds a life experienced through the lens of HIV.

The scriptures are full of accounts of how God brings about his redemption in the midst of chaos, a theological impetus on God’s part to respond to the messiness of life.¹⁵⁴ According to Mercy Oduyoye, God’s incarnational response to the suffering of humanity offers a paradigm of salvation, redemption and liberation; as we grapple with how to recover the personhood that has been lost, mangled or marginalised by the human condition (p. 13).¹⁵⁵ The image of a suffering God, the trope of a redemptive Christ, provides occasions to find God in seemingly unredeemable places. Even in a narrative of shame and a “spoiled identity” Christ can be found. Even in that place of worthlessness

¹⁵³ Emmanuel Larrey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), p. 66.

¹⁵⁴ Genesis 1; John 3.16; Luke 15.20; Psalm 103:13.

¹⁵⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (London: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 13.

and marginality a new creation, a whole person, can evolve.¹⁵⁶ According to Rowan Williams, it is important for all people, including people living with HIV, to be accepted in the truth that God's purpose is to reconcile creation, liberating the world, in becoming more like him because 'at the heart of the desperate suffering... [which] we can do nothing to resolve or remove for good, there is an indestructible energy making for love' (p. 10).¹⁵⁷ This focus of a God who encounters us in the economy of forgiveness, sacrifice and renewal, provides an avenue for a redemptive narrative on a life fractured by HIV. And it is in this milieu that this author enables the fictional character, Nkechi, to find the courage to disclose her HIV diagnosis at her initial exploration meeting with Reverend Tobias:

Whether she should disclose or not – revolved in her mind like the *he loves me/he loves me not* game she had played as a child...

Nkechi sinks deeper into the armchair. She doesn't know where to start. She is nervous that somehow this man of God will detect her sin. Her shame. There was no sugar-coating the truth. No, she wouldn't say anything about living with HIV. Only answer the questions put to her...

She inhales, feels the embarrassment heating her cheeks.

I can't disclose. I'm not ready to. I can't say it.

"Before...?"

¹⁵⁶ Revelation 21.5.

¹⁵⁷ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Kent: Canterbury Press, 2007), p. 10.

“Before I received an HIV diagnosis.” She exhales. The words stumble out, as if with a mind of their own. She licks her lips. Breathes. With the back of a hand, dabs the sweat on her brow.¹⁵⁸

Reflecting on this extract, if God is present, everywhere, and no situation is irrelevant, or beyond him; this means that ‘God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation’ (p. 16).¹⁵⁹ Therefore, despite Nkechi’s apprehension and reluctance to disclose her HIV status to Reverend Tobias, there is the possibility for Nkechi’s life to be re-imagined through God’s generous love because the bible presents a model of Christian friendship which transcends boundaries, and brings into God’s kingdom-community, those that society has fenced out or rejected. This is in line with Gideon Byamugisha’s supposition that, ‘... the process of working to transform this world is to become human. To transform our community is to participate in humanity’s salvation’ (p. 27).¹⁶⁰ Reverend Tobias hears Nkechi’s story, acknowledges and affirms her as a person living with HIV, just as Jesus did in the narrative of the woman who suffered from haemorrhages for twelve years.¹⁶¹ And, in so doing, Reverend Tobias plays an active part in confronting the present challenges and injustices posed by HIV/AIDS.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is presented as someone who has the power to overcome all types of diseases. The story of the woman suffering from haemorrhages develops the theme of Jesus as a miracle-worker, and yet, points to the central Marcan theme of transformation which goes beyond the

¹⁵⁸ Excerpt from *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi Chapter 1.

¹⁵⁹ Williams, p. 16.

¹⁶⁰ Byamugisha, p. 27.

¹⁶¹ Matthew 9.20-22; Mark 5.25-34; Luke 8.43-48.

physical healing event, and includes the “wholeness” and “restoration” of the whole person, thereby as Robin Branch puts it, ‘[a person] is given new life’ (p. 7).¹⁶² Here was a woman who had endured much shame and humiliation on account of her illness, one that rendered her unclean, a person with a “spoiled identity”; so much so, that no one would have wanted her near, in case she made them ritually impure by her touch. The woman’s condition, involving blood, rendered her ceremoniously defiled according to Jewish Leviticus laws, and as such, ‘all garments, linens, utensils, and furniture she touched, sat on or used had to be washed (p. 2).’¹⁶³ Robin Branch further asserts, concerning the central issue of being ceremoniously unclean, ‘[the woman’s] flow of blood, whilst not contagious, nonetheless necessitates her separation from others (p. 5).’¹⁶⁴ For this reason, she did not want to be seen among the crowd, chose to stay anonymous, and did not dare to do much more than touch Jesus’ cloak. Similarly, an HIV diagnosis can place a person in the sphere of invisibility and silence. The significance of this text goes beyond the obvious physical healing, in that a ministry of wellbeing and wholeness is evidenced here. In this encounter of suffering – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – both the woman and Jesus are involved in a liberating co-creative process, where ‘Jesus re-orientates the concept of covenant and community purity around himself’ (p. 7).¹⁶⁵ The woman finds the courage to stretch out a hand and touch Jesus’ cloak, that liminal moment emphasising an undeniable commitment, action and courage on her part. Immediately, she is healed of her disease. But Jesus does not walk off, carry on his way, as one might have expected him to do. Rather, he chooses to stop and acknowledge this woman. The manner in which he does so is significant. He does not humiliate or disgrace her, by calling her out on her illness, but simply asks, ‘Who

¹⁶² Robin Branch, ‘A Study of the Woman in the Crowd and her Desperate Courage (Mark 5:21–43)’, *In die Skriflig*, 47 (2013), 1-13 (p. 7).

¹⁶³ Leviticus 15.25-27; Branch, p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Branch, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Branch, p. 7.

touched my clothes?’¹⁶⁶ His love protects her personhood, dignity, and identity. And even when she does not own up straightaway, Jesus does not embarrass her, right to the end where he concludes their encounter with: ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’¹⁶⁷ He never names the illness, but acknowledges the woman, *in* relationship, through the use of the word, “daughter”. Though, it is not explicitly stated, what the content of the “whole truth” she revealed to the audience was, as she owned up to touching his cloak, is it impossible to imagine that she confidently identified her disease, even one as injuring as HIV. And, in that imagined self-emptying honesty, Jesus restores and rehumanises her personhood as Robin Branch surmises, ‘Jesus makes people like this woman whole.... Their conditions of chronic illness and death are reversed [and] others in the community can now interact with them in a normal way’ (p. 7).¹⁶⁸ This model of a life-enhancing friendship that is invitational, inclusive and restorative is seen in Reverend Tobias’ response to Nkechi’s disclosure:

He hands her a box of tissues.

“You’re on antiretroviral therapy?” he asks.

She looks at him with surprise; her clenched fists relax with relief that he is not shocked.¹⁶⁹

Analysing Nkechi’s story, it seems relevant to explore the God-event from both a feminist and liberationist perspective. Mercy Oduyoye claims, ‘feminism is a precondition for a Christian anthropology that does justice to the humanity of women’ (p. 67).¹⁷⁰ She further posits a reconceptualisa-

¹⁶⁶ Mark 5.30.

¹⁶⁷ Mark 5.34; Luke 8.48.

¹⁶⁸ Branch, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ Excerpt from *Purple Lilac*, Nkechi Chapter 1.

¹⁷⁰ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, p. 67.

tion of inclusiveness by which the ‘Christ-event affirms for women the equal value of all human beings and assists in facing the challenge of difference’ (p. 69).¹⁷¹ If as she suggests, ‘humanity in all its variety exists in the very image of the divine,’ the implication of this is that a woman living with HIV, equally reflects that image of God (p. 69).¹⁷² Nkechi, in her womanhood – middle aged, single, childless, and HIV positive – embodies Christ, and in turn, reflects the humanness of the relational other, which enables the Christ-community to become more fully human. Thus the worthiness and value of women like Nkechi remains a challenge for the Church. Like the woman with the bleeding condition discussed above, Nkechi has a role to play in resisting her dehumanisation, because Mercy Oduyoye states that to resist these ‘feelings of inadequacy or humiliation that attack their innermost integrity of self’ is a crucial step in refusing to remain in the margins (pp. 75-76).¹⁷³ According to Gustavo Gutierrez, ‘oppression is perhaps understood as a power or force that prevents a person from becoming fully human and thus fully reflective of the image of God... to oppress others is to dehumanize them’ (p. 15).¹⁷⁴ To extend this further, Mercy Oduyoye argues, ‘God speaks to humanity and humanity has the ability to respond to God. Made in God’s image, we are expected to be God-like’ (p. 14)¹⁷⁵ – and this should be at the heart of the Church’s response to engaging with people such as Nkechi found in our congregations. Thus ‘hierarchy [church structures and systems] that undermine community and ignores individuals’ ability to contribute, is con-

¹⁷¹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, p. 69.

¹⁷² Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, p. 69.

¹⁷³ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, p. 75, 76.

¹⁷⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 15.

¹⁷⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (London: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 14.

demned' (p. 16).¹⁷⁶ And according to Richard Rohr, the challenge for the Church is to 'transcend and include,' and by so doing, to move beyond boundaries that dishonour and shame (p. 10).¹⁷⁷

Reflections on sex, intimacy and motherhood

All the women interviewed reported on how, in the period immediately following their HIV diagnosis, 'all life plans (including plans to have children) were put on hold' (p. 157).¹⁷⁸ However, when, through clinical interactions, they acquired more knowledge about HIV/AIDS and realised HIV could be managed to old age with appropriate medication, diet and exercise regimes – all the women stated they felt able 'to plan again for children and new relationships' (p. 157).¹⁷⁹ The ease with which this transition occurred seemed to be determined by how supported the person living with HIV felt at the time of diagnosis. Four of the women expressed that it was always a challenge revealing to new partners their HIV status because they feared rejection due to the stigma attached. In describing how she met her current partner via an online dating site, one participant recounts how she negotiated sex and a relationship with him, while another explains her decision to only engage in relationships with HIV-positive men.

I disclosed to the first partner, the first guy I went out with probably a year after my diagnosis. I disclosed after two or three dates as we negotiated a possible sexual encounter, and that's the last time I saw him. Then I just said to myself, ok, I'll only disclose if it becomes serious. So, I never had to disclose to other partners because at the end of the day you think it wouldn't work and it'd be a waste of my disclosure... I made a decision early on to be with another HIV positive person. It's easier that way. My current partner and I, we've been together for 18 years. Because he's also positive, y'see we met at a hospital patient forum, we just seem to get on quite well. (*Susie, late-40s*).

¹⁷⁶ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, p. 16.

¹⁷⁷ Rohr, p. 10.

¹⁷⁸ Pourette, p. 157.

¹⁷⁹ Pourette, p. 157.

I sort of went through a little phase where I was prolonging the second date. It was a bit of a build up to meeting a man and going on a date, not wanting to meet him again because of my condition. But then eventually I thought, c'mon, I need to pull myself together and I need to sort of face this. So, I met S, and I felt I really wanted to be with S, we had a lot in common. I met S for one date and then we had another date. There was no sex or bed or anything involved. Around the third week, I started to get into bed with him and I went through this whole rigmarole where I told him, I don't believe in having sex too soon because I need to get to know the person. At the same time, I was asking my daughter how I should approach the situation. She said, right, if you want to make it look more clinical – say that you had a blood transfusion when your son was born. So, that's what I did. (*Tanya, late-50s*)

Each of these accounts suggest the stress of disclosing HIV to a new partner even in our present age. And this meant that some of the women were inclined to focus 'on partners who they thought may be more willing to accept them despite their having HIV and to consider starting a life together and a family with them' (p. 158). Several of the women reported incidences of rejection by partners where, when they disclosed their HIV status, they would not hear from their date again. For all the participants, there is an acknowledgement that living with HIV has had an impact on their sex lives: how they perceive potential partners view them; how they believe potential partners might receive their disclosure; and what it means in terms of setting up home with a potential partner. A participant recounts that the reaction of her partner at the time was to use two condoms when she communicated her status. For all those interviewed, there is a clear decision on strategising about how such potential relationships are to be managed. For one, it was to avoid all sexual encounters. For another, it was to seek a relationship with a person who was HIV positive. Yet another, it was to disclose right from the start to all potential partners and get that information out of the way.

In considering relationships, the issue of children is important for those living with HIV due to the fact that it affects their childbearing desires and use of contraception. The development of antiretroviral therapy and drug regimens for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV have

‘offered people living with HIV hope for a longer, healthier life and dramatically increased the chances that they can bear children who are free of the virus’ (p. 581).¹⁸⁰ Four participants had children prior to or at the point of their HIV diagnosis. One participant does not have children. One participant has a daughter who is HIV positive. In all the narratives of the participants, there was a point at which post receiving their HIV diagnosis, they considered if having more children would be an option. This might be due to concerns about how long they were going to live for, and fear of what might happen to their children, should anything happen to them. Sarah Hayford et al state that most studies show ‘individuals express reluctance to bring children into the world when they fear they will not be alive to raise them to adulthood’ (p. 192).¹⁸¹ However, there was a real sense in which, as awareness around their diagnosis grew, and knowledge of what it meant to live with HIV increased, perceptions changed and a number of the women no longer discounted having children on the basis of their HIV status alone.

I’ve never been sure I wanted kids. Yes, my Nigerian heritage and culture says you are not fully woman without children and so I always thought I might have kids one day. Not necessarily because I wanted them, but to please my parents. When I was diagnosed with HIV, my husband and I discussed kids. Being diagnosed in 2007, with all the advancement in medication, meant I quickly knew that having HIV didn’t mean I couldn’t have kids. But I decided it wasn’t right for me because the marriage was all wrong. If I met the right man, yes, I would like to have children. I know I can even with HIV. But with age, I’m heading to my mid forties, it’s getting more and more unlikely. I guess, for me, adoption will be an option. (*Cath, early-40s*).

Um because when I was younger, I think like many girls, I had plans: I wanted to finish university, I wanted to learn how to drive, I wanted to live in a two bedroomed house with plants and I wanted to have four children... I managed to achieve many of those things, and then I got my diagnosis after uni. Just as I was starting to look forward to a bright future. Then I thought, that’s it then, I will never really have the children. But then being able to access the treatment, I realised that we should be able to choose if we want to have children and do it safely. (*Louise, late-40s*).

¹⁸⁰ Akinrinola Bankole, Ann E. Biddlecom, Kumbutso Dzekedzeke, Joshua O. Akinyemi, Olutosin Awolude and Isaac F. Adewole, ‘Does Knowledge about Antiretroviral Therapy and Mother-to-Child Transmission Affect the Relationships Between HIV Status and Fertility Preferences and Contraceptive Use? New Evidence from Nigeria and Zambia’, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 46 (2014), 580-599 (p. 581).

¹⁸¹ Sarah R. Hayford, Victor Agadjanian and Luciana Luz, ‘Now or Never: Perceived HIV Status and Fertility Intentions in Rural Mozambique’, *Studies in Family Planning*, 43 (2012), 191-199 (p. 192).

Similar to the participants interviewed, in the creative work, *Purple Lilac*, the character, Maya, living with HIV, is a single parent to Anna and Hattie. Having separated from a long-term relationship with Ian, Hattie's father, in this narrative we find Maya engaged in an on-off sexual relationship with David. Mirroring the lived experience of those interviewed, the novel presents the reality that people living with HIV continue to be sexual beings, with sexual needs and desires, though there is the added dimension of negotiating HIV in such sexual encounters. Maya who has lived with HIV for a longer period than Nkechi, presents as an individual who is clearer about her sexual needs. To illustrate, throughout Maya's story, there is no indication that there is ever any confusion as to how she views her relationship with David. Perhaps informed by her regret at losing Ian, she does not at any point consider this new relationship as one that will be lasting. In other words, she sees it as perfunctory, functional; simply serving a purpose. Hence, at the end of her narrative, when David makes the decision to relocate to Scotland with his job, Maya, simply, lets David and the relationship go because her priorities, triggered by the death of her daughter, have changed.

IV CONCLUDING REMARKS — DIVERSE STORIES

At the start of this doctoral undertaking, I thought I was going to write a fictionalised piece of work informed by interviews of women living with HIV, but as the research progressed, there was a sense for me, that the key thing was to just write a novel depicting the lives of three women, who live with, or are affected by HIV. Thus, from an early stage in this research undertaking, it was clear to me that *Purple Lilac* was not meant to be a fiction solely about HIV/AIDS, but seeks to tell the stories of three women, two who happen to live with a manageable chronic illness. For this reason, Anna's story is important, because her challenges with being bullied is something her mother, Maya, has to deal with — alongside the subtext of her living with HIV. And, conversely, Anna is living with the subtext that her mother, Maya, is living with HIV. In terms of structure, I initially

thought to weave Anna's story through the narratives of Maya and Nkechi, but later decided, that each character deserved their own voice, including Anna. And so, it felt right to give space and significance to the stories of all three women — where HIV/AIDS is not at the centre of their lives, nor is it the sole focus of their existences, but in a sense is a presence among other presences in their lives. Therefore, this work seeks to offer another voice to existing literature and discourse around HIV/AIDS — to include the complex, contradictory and even dialectical voices of heterosexual women living with HIV.

According to Mercy Oduyoye, 'God suffers to give us the chance of a second birth... thus beginning our re-creation' (p. 16),¹⁸² and it is in this context of God-love and God-compassion that there remains an uneasy dance between the lived experience and the storied experience of people living with HIV. Each interview, as a performance in space, a scene of a lived experience, proffered the opportunity for participants to allow their HIV experience to expand or contract to the extent that they permitted. From the interviews, it is clear a new narrative arc of living with HIV has developed over the last three decades, post when an HIV diagnosis equated to an imminent AIDS-related illness, and subsequent death. Living with HIV influences meaning-making in the production of space and as such, alters the temporal and embodied spaces that an HIV narrative occupies within an urban context in contemporary Britain.

For the women interviewed, there is a dichotomy between visibility and invisibility, absence and presence in relation to spaces occupied. Alison Bain states, 'Invisibility can bring relief and respite from surveillance and responsibility; it can introduce an element of privacy (p. 420).'¹⁸³ The vulnerability and insecurity of people living with HIV due to the stigma of HIV often forces them to

¹⁸² Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, p. 16.

¹⁸³ Alison Bain, 'In/visible Geographies: Absence, Emergence, Presence, and the Art of Identity Construction', *Journal of Economic & Social Geography*, 95 (2001), 419-426 (p. 420).

retreat into a sort of self-exile, taking refuge under the radar, in a bid to protect themselves from possible recrimination or discrimination. Therefore such invisibility grants a person living with HIV the ability to manage their HIV story, by being selective and strategic, about not only when and how they tell the story, but where they choose to reveal this information. And this seems to take on an added significance in urban contexts where there are multiple spaces in which such persons must function within – for example, interactions with medical staff, family members and work colleagues. This suggests that the lived experience of HIV/AIDS is shaped by treatment, context, culture, and life circumstances and consequently, the HIV/AIDS journey is fluid and dynamic, complex and multi-faceted.

The medical advances that have been made in the science of HIV/AIDS means there has been a change in how people living with HIV embody their lived HIV experience. The distance between the impaired body and their self-concepts has contracted, in that the ill body is no longer so ill, as compared to the period when HIV/AIDS arrived on the scene in the 1980s. The bodies of people living with HIV in the Global North have been normalised and made more acceptable through scientific development in antiretroviral medication. However, the stigma which continues around an HIV diagnosis means that, although an internal distancing may have diminished over the last three decades, when it comes to a person's receptivity to an HIV bodily experience, the external distancing persists in terms of the relational, social and spatial environments they move and locate themselves. The lack of a visibly altered body, as would have been the case at the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, has transformed the meaning of loss and identity construction in the HIV trajectory. The losses experienced with HIV are easily masked. And in a climate of shame and stigma, it is possible to live behind walls, avoiding risks that might "out" a person on their HIV status. Even though people living with HIV are not necessarily social captives of their HIV infected bodies, and can/do

function in a range of contexts as “well” people, there is a sense in which paradoxically, they remain social captives to the relational and social spaces they occupy — in that, the relationships they encounter in the spaces they find themselves in determine how they might present as a person living with HIV. Put another way, people living with HIV have multiple identities as they negotiate their various commitments and responsibilities. A person living with HIV preserves a sense of self, and chooses to project their preferred identities in any given space, by, for example, making careful decisions about when and to whom to disclose their HIV status.

The characters of Nkechi and Maya in *Purple Lilac*, through their narratives, mirror this shift in providing different insights of what it means to live more integrated lives as people living with HIV. This underscores Kathy Charmaz’s assertion ‘In order to handle their lives, they must integrate self and illness without having it consume their self-concept’ (p. 671).¹⁸⁴ *Purple Lilac* is a novel that offers a different voice on the reality of life through the lens of living with HIV, because the physical body cannot be separated from the lived experience. A person living with HIV will always have the virus in their physical body even if managed with antiretrovirals that maintain an undetectable viral load and enable a strengthened immune system. For this reason, as Kathy Charmaz argues, ‘part of redefining personal identity depends upon seeing one’s self as more than one’s body and the illness within it’ (p. 671).¹⁸⁵ This is of particular import for a person living with HIV, in that, there is no escaping the virus, therefore finding a way to adapt to the impairment provides an avenue to transcend the disease. Nkechi seeks to find redemption by exploring ordained ministry because to be accepted by God, and indeed by the Church, is an identity goal that is important to her as she journeys towards self-acceptance. For Maya, the loss of her daughter causes an adjustment in her priorities. At one point, Maya’s identity goals may have been mediated predominantly by an

¹⁸⁴ Charmaz, ‘The Body, Identity, and Self: Adapting to Impairment’, p. 671.

¹⁸⁵ Charmaz, ‘The Body, Identity, and Self: Adapting to Impairment’, p. 671.

HIV diagnosis, however, at the juncture of her life when the reader encounters her, she begins to relinquish previously held identity goals, namely, the desire to be in a committed and loving relationship, to pursuing a more valued identity, that of self-acceptance and finding self-worth through her story of grief.

This exploratory research seeks to address a gap in the literature on HIV/AIDS, in response to Robert McRuer's assertion when talking about HIV and AIDS signification that: 'demonized at worst, patronized, desexualized, or tolerated at best, people with HIV/AIDS have repeatedly been denied autonomous voices or subjectivities...' ¹⁸⁶ (p. 221). Thus, this project has endeavoured to offer different representations of HIV/AIDS experience, by depicting realistic portraits of women living with HIV/AIDS. And, what I discovered through the act of writing this novel, is the unpredictability of boundaries between the fictional and biographical, individual and shared experience, the personal and the political. The stories of the interview participants and indeed the narratives of Nkechi, Maya and Anna provide new contemporary readings of a lived HIV experience — challenging the present body of literature.

¹⁸⁶ Robert McRuer, 'Critical Investments: AIDS, Christopher Reeve, and Queer/Disability Studies', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 23 (2002), 221-237 (221).

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PURPLE LILAC
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BY

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ANNA

Chapter 1

Mum says after my birth her bladder was the size of a Satsuma. My birth certificate reads Anna Saffron Sharpe. I like its sing-song lilt. Sometimes I say my name over and over again just to hear the syllables rise and fall. As a whisper, I could be a Cartoonist. As a shout, I could be a Triathlete. In my normal quiet, hesitant voice, I could be a Writer.

Mum says there are two reasons why she named me Saffron. She spent a year teaching English in Sri Lanka and fell in love with the spice. While she was pregnant with me, she ate dishes infused with saffron. My biological Dad left when I was 5. Mum says he never liked the name – said it reminded him of something you wash with. He travelled to New Zealand and never came back. That was ten years ago. Mum and my step-sister, Hattie, now live in a terraced house on Poplar Road.

Today, we are going up to Porthmadog in Grandpa and Nana’s camper van. Every year it’s something different. Last year: we were on a narrow boat cruising the Cotswold canals. The year before: two weeks at a backpacker’s hostel in Ambleside. The year before that: we’d travelled up to Anglesey to visit Grandpa and Nana. This year: Porthmadog.

Hattie’s excited – she’s been running up and down the stairs, back-and-forth from kitchen to living room to bedroom. “Mum, I can’t find my globe,” she shouts for a second time. It’s the globe my step-Dad gave her on her birthday. She fancies herself as an archaeologist or anthropologist. I think she’ll end up being something dead boring like a primary school teacher or a museum curator.

“Anna. Did you hear me?” Mum calls out again. “I don’t have time for this. Help your sister,” her pitchy voice floats upstairs.

I finish a sentence in my diary. The ‘g’ on *strong* is rushed – a hurried, narrowed squiggle. A doodle of Noah centres the page. He’s a Year 9 boy I sort-of fancy; gawky, with braided hair and

hazel eyes. When he speaks, it's *sotto voce* — my music teacher taught us that. He is intelligent. Not in a conventional way, but in the intensity he pours when he talks about issues that matter to him: Palestine and Israel; the favela communities in Brazil; or the threat of closure of Moseley Baths. He smells of Wrigley's spearmint and bleach. His mother is OCD about cleaning. I know all this because we were paired together in our WW1 project. We worked closely for three weeks, handed in the assignment and that was that. When we see each other at school – in the playground, in the canteen, at the school gates – he looks the other way. I pretend I haven't noticed him looking away and carry on to wherever I'm headed. Since we don't talk, I doodle him. Never in my Every-Day Pad, but in my Private Notebook which usually stays at home under my bed. I toss it into my rucksack and dash downstairs.

There is a knock on the door. Mrs Hussein. She is carrying a food container wrapped in a Sainsbury's plastic bag.

“How are you da-arling?” she asks, “Your mudder home?”

Mrs Hussein is our neighbour opposite, in no. 9. She lives with her husband and two children, Ruqayya and Mustafa. She works part-time at the Montessori school. ‘Husband. Crazy man. He don't like me to work,’ I overheard her telling my Mum soon after she moved into the street.

“Couscous. Iranian style,” she says, putting it down on the kitchen table. “Nice and hot. For your trip.”

“That's so kind, Rehab,” my Mum says, then turns to me, “Anna – we leave in an hour. Have you found your sister's globe?”

I disappear to the living room. I look under the sofa-bed, behind the arm chair Mum rescued from a skip, between the books on the bookcase, along the window sill. Nothing.

Outside: Leanne from no. 11, sits on the low wall of her house. Bottle red hair, she only dresses in black. She doesn't work – had an injury at the bakery in town. The neighbours on our street are weird. Next door, Zafar and Amir are students. I think they're from Istanbul. On the weekends, they play Turkish music. Mum says she likes it because it reminds her of when she was an exchange student in Jordan. On the other side of us, are Jenny and Rob. I don't think they're married. But they are always having sex. Millie's Nana says the image of people at it like rabbits is nauseating. I don't agree with her – after all it's what people do.

“Found it...” Hattie screeches.

At the top of the stairs, she waves the globe.

“Anna, bring your rucksack down,” Mum says. “And Hattie's...”

I sigh. Run upstairs, brush past Hattie, shut my bedroom door and stretch out on the bed. I know she and Mrs Hussein will gossip for a long time. They will talk about the neighbours, me and Hattie, Ruqayya and Mustafa, and men. I put my headphones on, collect the notebook from under the bed and begin doodling again. The camper van and Mrs Hussein sitting on it, riding it like a horse, with my Grandpa and Nana holding on for dear life.

Chapter 2

The Monday after our trip to Porthmadog I'm so excited to be at school. My Grandpa spent the weekend teaching me how to tie knots: Figure Eight, Overhand, Noose. He said he learnt when he worked on a navy ship. I'm not very good at tying knots but I promised him I'd keep practicing. The one thing I'm good at is counting squirrels. I count squirrels all the time. Mum said I started counting squirrels when my biological Dad left. She always gesticulates when recounting the story. She hardly tells it now. The last time she told it, her sadness seemed distant. I wonder if she no longer remembers my Dad. I sort of remember him. Sometimes – he is brimming with laughter; chocolate icing all over his Simpson's tie. Sometimes – he is pinched and pale. Sometimes – his face vanishes; blurred lines; a vacant mass of nothingness.

I count squirrels for many reasons. When I'm sad – like the time Marmite was run over by a wheelie bin. I also count squirrels when I'm super-ecstatic. Like the time I won a trip to the Ikon Gallery for an illustration. My best friend, Millie, bugged me until I entered the competition. Every day, it was: Anna, why don't you enter? Or, I think you should enter, Anna. Or, you are *that* good, Anna, y'know. Or, you never know, you might just win. She'd always say it with an all-grown-up tone. After weeks of umming-and-arrang, I entered. I counted twenty-seven squirrels that day. It was the last time I won anything. I was in Year 6.

Twenty-seven. It's not my lucky number. Quite the opposite! A very unlucky number for me, come to think of it. My biological Dad left on 27 March. Marmite died after only twenty-seven days of coming home to us from Ward End rescue home. I decided to turn her death into something positive. I wrote down twenty-seven things I would like to do before I'm twenty-seven.

1. Not die.
2. Eat roasted marshmallows (like they do in American sit-coms).

3. Travel to Japan.
4. Skip ten pebbles in a river – so far, I've only managed six.
5. Be a world famous illustrator.
6. Change my name.
7. Grow a garden.
8. Learn to play the flute.
9. Fill a time capsule (I got the idea from my favourite Year 8 teacher, Mrs Pratt).
10. Find Mum a boyfriend.

I have a long way to go. And this is just ten from my list of twenty-seven. It doesn't really matter what order I do them in, as long as I achieve them all before my twenty-seventh birthday.

I count when I think. Like now. *Treasure Hunts*. I hate Geography treasure hunts. I hate being paired up with Ryan – the most awkward, spectacled boy in our class. Ms Fitzpatrick irritates me even more. Twelve – so far. No red ones yet. Mum says that red squirrels are rare. She says to spot one is a sign of good luck. I don't believe her. Nothing good ever happens to me. Unless you count the time I won that competition and the time I was paired up with Noah for a project. He wrote me a note. My first ever note from a boy. It said: *Meet me at the library. Lunchtime*. At the bell, I went to the library. He wasn't there. Even after I went back and forth, through the short aisles; there was no sign of him. I decided to stop liking Noah that day. But I started doodling him.

11. Don't fall in love with Noah.
12. Never name my child Noah.

Now in Year 9, I haven't stopped liking him. Millie, my on-off friend, says I'm in love, but I doubt it.

I turn.

Ryan hovers over where I'm crouched.

"What are you doing, weirdo?"

I say nothing. Just spotted number thirteen. A patch-grey squirrel scurries behind a rose bush.

"We're not going to win..." he says. Maybe I don't want to win, I think. "C'mon. Let's get a move on. I've found five so far." He hands me his worksheet. He has found the answers to questions about climate change, coastal erosion and the Amazon Rainforest. There are ten more answers to locate. "What about you?" he asks, straightening his glasses.

I rise – shake my head. He frowns. His lips move to say something but doesn't. Instead, he walks off and I slink after his thin shape.

*

The next morning, I take the longish route to school – behind the mini-mart and post office box, along the path which runs through the park to the North entrance of the school. No squirrel sightings. At school, Millie clasps her hand in mine, asks me what is wrong.

"Nothing..." I say, untangling my fingers and walking off ahead.

I start to cry in period 2. Our supply History teacher, Mrs Mulenga (I think she is Kenyan!) shoos me to the office where I'm given a box of tissues and I can only shake my head to all the questions. Ten minutes later, I'm taken away by the nurse and more questions are fired by Mrs Pot-

ter, one of the Assistant Heads, and all I do is cry and shake my head some more, wishing I could be swallowed up by a hole. I spend a class period in the Purple Room not doing much. I don't have my notebook to doodle so I just stare out the window hoping to spot a squirrel.

On the way home, Millie chats non-stop. Did you hear about the food fight in the canteen? Casey and Loreen have fallen out again. Noah was watching you at break. Why don't you give him another chance? I hate that Miss Thompson – how dare she insist we play netball in the pouring rain.

By the time we reach the cross-roads where we go in different directions I have counted four squirrels.

“Anna, you know you can tell me anything...” Her braces flash, her freckles seem to have multiplied. “I'm sorry about the note and getting you into trouble.”

“I'm going to teach that Loreen a lesson?” I say, “How dare she put bubblegum on my chair. My skirt is ruined. Mum is going to be so pissed off.”

“We'll have to think of a way to get her back.”

“Forget it,” I say with a wave, “I've got to go.”

“I'll ask my Mum if I can pop round later,” Millie says, running down the path.

*

The next day we are in the library. The library at school has been recently redone. All the fundraising we did last year went into upgrading our library. It is light and airy. In one area there are egg-pod chairs which are really comfortable. I just love the way they swivel. In another area, there are a bank of new Apple computers. And, the walls are lined with books on sliding bookshelves. I am sitting opposite Millie, daydreaming. What was my biological Dad doing at this minute? Shopping at

a Tesco equivalent, driving home from an appointment with the dentist, having a coffee – did he drink coffee? Or was he more of a herbal tea type? I imagine him to have relocated, to be living in London somewhere – a place like Primrose Hill or Muswell Hill. Both have a nice ring to them. Like the place where interesting people sit around having interesting chats over a latte or cappuccino. Millie’s Nana calls them ‘Bohemian snobs who pass time in endless café chit-chat’. Millie’s Nana seems to know a lot about these Bohemians and coffee. Yes, he might be one of them. I see him in a café on a hill sipping an espresso, tapping into his I-Pad while strangers swirl around. ‘More of a mound than a hill,’ Ms Fitzpatrick had laughed when I’d asked her if she’d ever been, as she adjusted her narrow frames. ‘I lived in Muswell Hill for a handful of years. Loved it. Absolutely loved it. Had to move after the divorce. It got terribly expensive.’ Ms Fitzpatrick has a habit of overusing words like *terribly* and *absolutely* like necessary punctuation. ‘Both are absolutely gorgeous leafy suburbs. To die for.’ As she spoke, I watched the cheese crumble off her tiny Irish mouth.

I wonder what he did now. For a living that is. Mum said he fancied himself as a creative sort. A writer? What kind of books did he write? Thrillers? Crime novels? Fantasy? Perhaps, he was an architect. Designing amazing bridges and railways and apartment blocks.

“Maybe, he’s a Fashionista...” Millie pipes. I’d forgotten she’s with me. “... or a Translator. Didn’t you say he took a Japanese class and that’s how they met?”

I’ve told Millie all I know about Dad because if I’m ever going to find him – I may need her help. I shake my head. I can’t imagine the bearded man with long lashes (tucked between the pages of my Mum’s bible) being a Translator or Fashionista. “No, it was Italian,” I say. “Not Japanese.”

“My Nana says it’s a sad state of affairs. She says the re-constituted family is the end of civilisation. Same as internet dating. Whatever happened to meeting in the flesh, she says...”

Millie's Nana reminds me of a muttering meerkat. She makes peculiar noises and is constantly making never-ending remarks about the "demise of civilisation". On her fourth marriage, she's one to talk.

Millie squeals.

"Noah..." she hisses in a loud whisper.

I grunt.

As he approaches: we watch his black-boy gait and his boy-band hair. Except he is not all-black; nor is he in a boy band. Noah places his rucksack on a swivel-chair, runs a hand through his braided hair.

"I never wrote the note," he says, digging his hand in his pockets.

"Well, who did?" Millie asks.

"It was a prank. The idiots! Sorry."

"So who was it?" That's Millie again.

"Does it matter?"

"But you knew about it?" Millie can't let things slide; like a cat clinging to a grasshopper for dear life.

"No – I didn't," he straightens himself. As he does so, I glimpse the love bite on his neck – a frog-foot print.

"Forget it..." I finally say. "It doesn't matter..."

"It's not that I don't like ya, Anna... it's just..."

“Just what, Noah?” Millie places a hand on her hip.

“It’s just...,” he curls his lips in his Noah way. “I’m with Loreen...” he looks away. “I wish we could be friends...”.

“Fat chance. Not after the way you’ve behaved.” Millie says. “Anna has nothing more to say to you Noah Jacobs. Moron.”

My eyes remain fixed on the webbed smudge on his fair complexion.

“I really would like a chance...” He adds and without another word, walks off. Outside the window: I spot a red squirrel.

*

The colours in my bedroom are warm: cantaloupe coloured walls, a yellow knitted beanbag, and a square rug that looks like it was bought in Morocco, but it wasn’t, Mum got it from the rag market in Birmingham. Millie and I lie side-by-side on the bed staring at the butterfly lampshade dangling from the ceiling.

“Google is god.” Millie pants, her words spilling with excitement. “That’s where our search begins,” she says.

“You think?” I say, picking up the magazine on the bedside table and thumbing through it. There are lots of thin girl-women in thin dresses with thin smiles.

“Anna – a bit more enthusiasm would be great. Aren’t you excited about finding your DNA-dad?”

I put the magazine down, and we roll onto our sides; our legs tangle. Millie’s clear blues meet my anxious browns.

“There might be a dozen Russell Wyatt’s in NZ.”

“Not likely,” Millie says, rolling onto her back, “I’ve never come across a Russell Wyatt before. Ever.” Millie’s freckles darken in her seriousness. Without another word, she reaches over and grabs the laptop. “C’mon you, let’s make a start.”

“Maybe there are more clues in Mum’s journal.”

“You get reading and I’ll get Googling,” she says, switching the laptop on. “I’ll do a search and see what comes up.”

Millie soon unearths some potentials:

1. R. S. Wyatt, Wellington
2. Russell Wyatt, Christchurch
3. Russ Wyatt, Napier

We decide to widen the search. Another two possibilities.

4. Russell B. Wyatt, West Port
5. Ross Wyatt, Auckland

We stare at the screen.

“Just call. Ask them if they knew a Maya Sharpe,” she exhales. “You could ask if they knew her from that evening class?”

“But that many years ago — who’d remember?”

“Pretty random...” she laughs – a short sudden sound; puts the laptop on the carpeted floor.

I role-play the conversation in my head.

Um, hello... you don't know me... but... um... I could be your daughter. Or. Did you ever happen to know a Maya Sharpe?

No, I need to keep it cool, as if it's no big deal.

Um, hello... did you attend a class with Maya Sharpe? At Bristol College – yes, that's right... She's my mum... and I might be your daughter.

It all sounds far-fetched; I pick the dry skin off my thumb.

“Anna. Anna.”

“I wonder if I have his hands and feet,” I say, reaching for my nail clippers. “Mum says some things are best left in the past.”

“What are you saying?” Millie asks.

“Dunno. He may not want to be found. Is it right to inflict me on him?”

“There could be a whole new family out there to discover,” Millie gushes. “If I were you, I'd want to find him.” Her expression, eager and excited, she hands me the phone.

It doesn't quite happen as I expect. I dial the Wellington number.

Hello. **Pause.** *Can I help?* Yes – my name's Anna Sharpe. *Yes?* Are you Russell Wyatt? *No – Roger.* Not Russell. *No – Roger.* **Pause.** I'm sorry I've got the wrong number. I hang up.

“Shit.” Millie shrugs. “Well, the next one's definitely a Russell,” she says pointing at the listing.

I dial.

Hello. *Russell Wyatt – can I help?* **Pause.** *Can I help?* It’s awkward but I’m calling to find out... *Yes?* Do you know a Maya Sharpe? **Pause.** *Maya Sharpe?* You might have met her in Bristol. **Pause.** *No – I can’t say I do.* You sure? *What’s this about?* **Pause.** Nothing. I hang up.

Millie’s Nana says if you stand and smile at the end of a phone line people listen more positively to what you have to say. So I am standing and smiling. There’s no answer from the line in Napier. A woman answers the West Port number. She sounds old and angry. She hangs up. And Ross, with an ‘o’, in Auckland has never known a Maya Sharpe. I go to the window, take a seat, and watch a man bend awkwardly over his paunch to pick up a newspaper.

“Well – that’s that...”

“Maybe he changed his name by deed poll...” Millie offers.

“Or perhaps he’s dead?”

“Or he could have moved,” Millie scratches her nose, “Relocated to another country?”

“If he isn’t listed it’s going to be tricky tracking him down.”

“Don’t worry, Anna.” Millie places a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll find a way.”

From the window a thick cloud has pulled itself across the sky hiding the sun’s warmth. I see a squirrel. It stops at the foot of the apple tree, stares at me as if making an important squirrelly decision; should I climb up the tree or make a getaway over the wall. Squirrelly eyes dart from side-to-side before it disappears up the wall.

*

The next afternoon I am sat in my counsellor's room. It is spacious, with a large window. The indigo artwork on the wall makes me feel safe. Millie's Nana says when in doubt never tell the truth; it could hurt the other person's feelings, or they might not be ready to hear it.

"I'm fine ... Apart from Noah and Loreen – I *am* fine," I say.

Nkechi scribbles on her clipboard pad.

I started seeing Nkechi soon after my step-Dad, Ian, upped and left. Not to New Zealand – but to Plymouth. A builder, he'd found work there. Mum refused to go. They argued. My step-Dad called Mum an ostrich. My Mum called him a Fuckhead. Mum said it had been heading that way. She insisted Hattie and I have counselling.

At first we saw my step-Dad every month. Now it's every three months.

"Do you believe in heaven?" I suddenly ask Nkechi. Millie says there is no such thing as heaven and everyone ends up in a parallel universe. Even Marmite is supposed to be there — in this parallel universe.

"Why do you ask?"

My shoulders rise and fall, and I say, "Just making conversation."

"I'm not sure I believe in a physical place as such..." She rests the clipboard on her lap. "But I do think there's another dimension to our lives after we die."

"I want to find my Dad. My biological one."

She picks up the clipboard again. Scribbles. Coughs. And scribbles again.

I don't know why, but I think about the time, in Year 6 when I learnt the word omniscient. I liked the sound of the word so much I spelt it out on the fridge with letter magnets. I repeated it in

different voices: an Oxford graduate, a Brazilian foreign student, and what I imagine the Pope to sound like.

Nkechi clears her throat. “What’s brought this on?”

“Dunno.”

“Have you told your mother?”

I shake my head, trying not to stare at the sweat patch under her arms.

“Perhaps – it’s something you could discuss with your mother?”

I shrug again. I don’t want to hurt Mum’s feelings. I don’t want to tell her these things. But I mumble, “Yes – perhaps you’re right.”

Chapter 3

I am at the train station. Platform 4.

Mum has driven us to Birmingham New Street and puts me and Hattie on the 10:12 Virgin train. Destination: Plymouth. I spend the three-and-half hour journey listening to Hattie's incessant chatter (until she falls asleep); doodling in my notebook; staring at fields the colour of lime jelly and bored-looking sheep. At one point I try and read. *To Kill A Mockingbird*: '*Remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.*' *That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it. 'Your father's right,' she said. 'Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.'* Loreen said Boo reminded her of a beetle and not a mockingbird. She laughed when she said it. Beetles are not innocent. Dim-witted, but not innocent. Everyone laughed. Even Noah.

Hattie is sleeping. Her head against the window, mouth wide open, she purrs. The large black man opposite glances up from his newspaper, gives a half-smile, and carries on reading. The old lady on the other side of the aisle is crocheting while talking to the silent man sitting opposite. She stops momentarily and takes a sip of Ribena. Perhaps I should add that to my list. Crocheting, that is.

Next week I will take my list of 27 to Nkechi.

13. Drive a yellow mini. (Ian says such cars are criminal; it should be illegal to drive those death traps. Still, I think they're cool. They remind me of time capsules).

14. Visit three major cities in Scotland: Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness. (I'd like to try some haggis. Though it might be as awful as black pudding. And, I've always wondered about

the Loch Ness monster. Millie says Nessie is a flat-bodied and short-tailed plesiosaurus. She says it probably has a sixth sense which allows it to sense danger and disappear deep into the lake long before anyone can catch a sighting of it.)

15. Volunteer at an elephant sanctuary. (I haven't decided where yet. Thailand, Cambodia or South Africa. Millie's Nana says she mounted an elephant once and it was as scary as mounting an Egyptian camel.)

*

At the station platform, I'm hesitant. Hattie clutches my hand. I allow the swell of people to sweep us up: along the platform edge, up an escalator, through the barriers and into the main waiting area. I stand unsure about what to do. Before long, Ian appears. He waves.

"Anna. Hattie."

He folds us into a hug. He smells of tar and paint.

"C'mon girls – let's go grab a bite? You must be hungry."

I'm not, but I nod.

Hattie shouts, "Yeah..." and takes hold of his hand, letting go of mine.

He looks different somehow – a slight limp. Dressed in jeans and striped shirt, he seems way older than he did three months ago.

He takes us to the Boathouse café. There are lots of Alice-in-Wonderland sized cupcakes and nautical-themed cups and saucers in the window display. Inside: more cupcakes at the counter;

boats, anchors, sailor's caps dangle from the ceiling. We choose a table beside a set of bookshelves filled with books.

"How are my girls doing?" He doesn't wait for a response and asks, "How's your Mum?"

Again he doesn't wait for an answer.

"School? It must be getting serious now, with GCSEs and all?"

I scan the menu. Wonder what Millie is doing at this moment. Watching Hollyoaks on catch-up TV; texting or chatting on FB; taking Yoda for a walk.

"What do you fancy? Hattie, burger and chips?" Ian asks.

I take in the Black and White prints of jazz musicians on the walls. Many of them are black – with puffed faces, stretched cheeks and bulging eyes. Inflated, balloon creatures. Trickle of sweat on their foreheads. Thick fingers arch over small and large stringed instruments.

"That's a cello," Ian says – pointing at a B&W print.

Hattie looks up. "I want one."

"Fish and chips," I say.

He checks his watch for a second time, looks over his shoulder, and turns back, absently going through the menu again. A slender woman, with hair piled in a bun, and holiday tanned skin, walks towards our table. She places a hand on Ian's shoulder, and squeezes. He rises, plants a kiss on her cheek and looks flustered. He is wearing a tie Mum gave him some Christmases ago. Tickled hedgehogs. The Christmas before, Squid and Fish. It wasn't that she only bought him neckties, but she always got him a tie and something. The year she'd got him the one with the Dragonfly (for his birthday, I think), she'd also bought him a whistle key finder.

“Girls – I’d like you to meet Gina.” She smiles sweetly, stretches out her hand. Hattie takes it. I circle the rim of my glass. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you girls,” she says.

I turn to Ian. For an explanation.

He pulls a chair out for her, takes a seat – places his hand on her arm. “Gina and I are together. We’ve been seeing each other for a while now...”

“It was time to introduce me to you two,” she smiles again. Her eyes are bright and brown and bulging. “Ian thought a neutral place would be the best. Didn’t you Ian?”

Drinks and meals arrive. Gina orders salmon and salad. I shake salt and vinegar on my chips – pick a chip, blow at it, take a bite. Still piping hot.

“We’ve got a lot planned for you girls this weekend,” she says, “Smeaton’s Lighthouse, the Aquarium, and perhaps we can hire some bikes...”

Ian drinks his ale, and places his hand on hers.

“It surprised me when Ian told me you hadn’t been...” she pauses, “Has he told you about the move?”

A chip sticks in my throat. Its heat and sting tickle. I take a drink of water.

“Ah – yes. We’re moving to Plymton. It’s closer to Gina’s job,” Ian says.

“Real Estate...” Gina says.

“Does Mum know?” I ask, staring steadily at Ian.

“It’s much bigger...” he says, then adds in a softer tone, “...with a shed and a garden.”

“Your dad’s been waiting for the right time,” she says, taking a couple of short sips from her glass of wine.

Hattie uses a foot to rummage under the table; it catches the steel table legs. She bends down and reappears with a fork in her hand.

Gina’s salmon arrives. Its pinkness resembles Noah’s lips. She cuts into it and stuffs a fork-full into her rouged mouth. “There’s lots of space for a dog.”

I’ve stopped eating. Not because I’m not hungry. But because I’m watching her chew each mouthful of salmon.

“Daddy? Are you getting married again?” Hattie asks.

They both laugh. “It’s too early to say, sweetie,” Gina says; her voice saccharine, soft.

“I’d like to be a bridesmaid,” Hattie says. “Can I pick out my bridesmaid’s dress?”

“I need the loo,” I mutter.

I make my way to the back of the café, and veer to the door opposite the kitchen. Down a short corridor. Into an air freshened room. I hate public toilets. Millie’s Nana says that public loos are the devil’s spawn. There are no windows to open. I enter a cubicle and text Millie.

Chapter 4

The following week, I'm back at school. Eight-fifteen. It all kicks off this morning. At the school gates, Ryan punches fat Frank (he really is fat). Me and Millie stand under the yew tree. A small crowd of students gathers. Frank calls Ryan 'ginger minger', and Ryan in turn, shouts out 'porky'. They fling insults back-and-forth. And when Ryan likens his fart to a tsunami Frank dives in, pulling at Ryan's carrot top. Punches fly. More insults. They scrap until Mr Morris and Mrs Potter appear. Blood trickles from Frank's cut lip; in his right hand a clump of red hair. Ryan holds a hand over his forehead. Without a word, they are marched off for a cool-down, conversation and discipline.

It starts to drizzle. Millie and I make our way to our first lesson. English. At the far end of the South corridor, the classroom, on the first floor, is narrow and oblong. A whiff of car smellies. Always vanilla or lemon. Millie says it's because Mrs Osborne smells of bio – a strange combination of doggy wet and human sweat. Fresh and clean and pale in the mornings, by the end of the school day she is tired and glistening and red. 'From gooseberry to raspberry,' Millie jokes. As we enter, a chair crashes to the floor. Casey: chocolate-brown hair pulled in a floppy bun, be-jewelled fingernails, a permanent scowl – chases Dom over chairs and under tables, as if running an obstacle course for a charity Fun Day. Another chair topples. She hovers over Dom – shy, skinny, spectacled Dom – now on the floor, and out-of-breath. She sits on him. He wheezes, a tinny whistling sound. "I should cut your willy off. No one talks about my bezzie mate like that and gets away with it," she says. Nate: half-Chinese and half-Jamaican, tallish with skewed brows; he pulls up a chair beside Casey and laughs again. He spits out the gum he is chewing and it lands on Dom's shoe. He starts to cry.

I tuck my schoolbag under my feet. Turn. Noah sits on a desk, chatting to Loreen. I rest my chin in my palm. I must add getting a tattoo to my list. A tree design with birds flying off, a red

squirrel, or a Japanese symbol or kanji script. Millie's Nana says it's important to know what is being said in a foreign language; that it's crazy finding out you've got 'demon' written and not 'destiny'.

Millie shouts, "Give it a rest, Casey. Leave him alone."

"Get off him, Case," Loreen says, in a bored tone, and turns back to Noah. "Nutter," she says, under her breath.

Adam moves to the door. Stout, with a large mole, and even larger thighs; he speaks in nods, grunts, or single-syllabled hyphenated phrases: shur-rup, fuck-off, yeah-sure, jog-on, jog-off. He stands in the doorway, his head moves from left to right, then right to left. The second bell clangs. Adam leaps back inside. "Ozzy," he hisses. Heels click-clack on concrete. Nate returns his chair, and settles himself next to Jordan, a fleshy boy always with something-or-other stuffed in his hole. Now, he sucks on a lolly, making loud suckling sounds. Casey rises, moves towards her seat, and retrieves a make-up bag. Dom jumps up, wipes his nose, finds his seat and takes a puff of his inhaler. Casey's peering into a mirror when Mrs Osborne walks in.

"Put it away, Casey," she orders. At her desk, she clicks on the keyboard, and takes the register. Outside: the drizzle has stopped and the sunshine colours the skies a sharp clear blue.

*

At break-time, I head to the canteen. Buttered toast, that's what I fancy. Millie's gone to see Ms Fitzpatrick – something about undone Geography homework. I spot Noah and Loreen at the first set of swing doors, at the end of the East corridor. He leans into her, whispers something, and kisses her deep and hard – a hand against the science lab window. They part. She giggles, pulls out some lip-py, applies it and smacks her lips. He reaches down, collects his backpack, and plugs a headphone in an ear. He kisses Loreen again, this time on a cheek – watches her slight frame disappear down

the corridor, through the second swing doors. He turns, sees me, comes through the doors and heads up the stairwell. I don't know how long I stand there.

*

After lunch, during Art, a new girl is introduced to the class. Kazia. Polish; fair-haired, green eyes, halting English. I stare at the acne on her chin – red lumps and crevices. She wears her school uniform properly. Not like Loreen, who hikes the skirt up to the top end of her thighs, rolls her school shirt sleeves to elbows, and keeps the tie very short. She never wears tights, not even in winter. Mum insists I follow the school uniform rules. But I allow my shirt to hang over school trousers, and the tie is loose around my neck. I'm not a rebel; it's just more comfortable this way. Kazia is immaculate and proper and tidy. No makeup, no chewing gum, and no fancy combs in her hair – which she has put in two simple plaits.

Mr Puttock sits her at the front; at the end of Casey's table. Today's lesson: drawing an inanimate object. Musical instruments. We have a choice. I decide on a tuba. I use chalk pastels to draw lines and strokes; shading and blending colours. At the end of the class, we tack our drawings on the walls. Mr Puttock makes us walk round the room – as if in an art gallery – to observe each other's work. Millie has drawn a trumpet – a large misshapen trumpet, in lots of lively light colours. Loreen's is a simple yellow harmonica – it looks rather girlish and cartoonish. Noah has drawn a double bass – slanted, against the empty white page. Kazia has drawn a viola – lots of browns and oranges, with delicate strings. My tuba suddenly looks dull and dark. But Casey hasn't bothered at all — at least I've given it a go.

*

Saturday. Ten o'clock. A mug of hot chocolate in hand, I pull the curtains. Light floods the front room. The neighbours on our street are a motley bunch. That's what Mum says. Mrs Rossi comes

out of number seven. In her eighties, she hobbles into her mobility scooter, tugging at her terrier, Bounce, who promptly jumps into the attached basket. She doesn't say much. For that matter, she doesn't go out much either. Sometimes she uses her walking stick to bang on her window to get people's attention. Apparently, she's lived in her house since she was married. There is an urn – black with shells engraved – on the window sill. Mum says it's her husband. Watching her screwed-up shrivelled face, I wonder what she looked like when she was twenty-one. I've seen photos of old people when they were young. Often there are no traces of their young selves. It's as if they've been swallowed up by the years. Millie says she wants to die young.

Mrs Rossi and Bounce head down the street.

Mr and Mrs Hussein come out from number nine. He has a short beard and brown teeth. Mrs Hussein wears different coloured hijabs on each day of the week. On Mondays, burgundy; Tuesdays, marigold; Wednesdays, taupe; Thursdays, crimson; Fridays, beige; Saturdays and Sundays, black. Ruqayya and Mustafa press their faces against the window, hands high above their heads. I sometimes babysit them. Ruqayya is round and loud. Mustafa is square and silent. In their living room, they have a Muslim bible displayed high on a shelf. No paintings on the walls, only curly Arabic script. Koranic texts, that's what Mrs Hussein says they are. The Hussein's pray a lot. When I told Mrs Hussein I don't believe in God, she offered me a fruit biscuit. I had wanted to explain. Tell her that God's lost the plot. Awful things happen every day: nasties like Casey and the fact that I'm invisible to Noah.

Mum pulls in, and parks the car. Hattie hops out – chattering, clutching a bag of sweets. The front door opens and closes behind them.

“Anna, you up yet?”

“In here,” I call, and turn on the tele. Flick through the channels. Jessica Fletcher’s bewildered face peers into a darkened room. Steam, sweat and clattering steel fill a kitchen while four cooks attempt to create a dish out of scraps and leftovers. Two girls are shouting over some baby in Hollyoaks. I switch it off.

Mum enters – a tray in her hand.

“It’s a bit early for apple pie, but I can’t resist a weekend treat,” she sits down, turns the tele back on. “Pancakes for Millie’s sleepover tonight?”

I nod; rise and head back to my room. Millie and I need to work out our next plan of action to trace my biological Dad.

“Make sure you don’t go back to bed, young lady,” Mum says, calling after me, as I race up the stairs to my bedroom.

*

I show Nkechi the tattoo designs I’m contemplating. She scrutinises each one. I fiddle with a chunky brass bangle, turning it round and round on my wrist. Nkechi’s languid expression is vacant, unreadable. Cross-legged, on a pouf, I lean against the desk. The bangle I’m wearing catches my cardi. It takes a while for me to disentangle it. She looks up, hands back the bit of paper.

“What does your Mum think?”

“I’ve not told her...” I click my fingernails. I’ll paint them again when I get home. Metallic orange or grey. I’m bored with the deep purple. “She doesn’t think I should have one before I’m eighteen.”

“Ah –”

“Jan’s less bothered. But Mum says he doesn’t count.”

“Might not be a bad idea to wait. Chew over it for a while.”

“I’m just going to do it,” I say, splaying a hand. Glitter or Neon? “I’m pretty good at lying.”

Nkechi is quiet. She jots down some notes on her pad.

“I’m a pathological liar.”

“Why do you say that?” Nkechi asks.

I look away. The bookcase is cluttered with self-help books and other stuff. Tranquil images encircled with positive mantras. Two large plant pots. A wooden lantern. Several candles – three are lit. And a small standing silver cross. To the left of the bookcase: a super-sized street map. To the right: a Keep Calm and Carry On metal hanging.

“I lie to everyone. My mother. Casey. Myself.”

“And why do you think you lie?” Nkechi asks. Her pen stops scratching, and she places her hands on the clipboard.

My gaze rests on hers, and I attempt a half-smile. “It’s easier...logical...”

Nkechi pauses, her fingers link together. “I read somewhere it’s all about whether you can live with the lie or not.”

Labrinth’s tune, *Jealous*, flits in my mind. I rise up, and begin to pace the room, humming.

“I’d rather live with my lies,” I eventually say.

*

During History, I doodle an image of Mrs Mulenga. Her enormous belly, smudged circular strokes; corkscrew curls; wide nose, full and shaded in; ballooned waistline stretches knee-length skirt and pop-corn blouse. Elbows are ashey and dry. I am about to draw in the clock above her head when –

“Anna...” Mrs Mulenga purses her lips, hand on hip, and stares at my hunched demeanour.

“What was the question, Anna?”

I straighten up slightly, clear my throat. Thankfully, she moves to address Loreen with the same question. She has an answer. I sketch in the crucifix dangling from her neck.

Casey, sitting two rows behind, sniggers.

Mrs Mulenga turns her attention back at me.

“In the bin. You know the school rules.”

I hesitate – frown. For a few moments, I don’t move. Casey laughs again. Mrs Mulenga’s second hand moves to her left hip. Millie whispers something indecipherable. Outside the window, I spot a grey squirrel. It’s the first I’ve seen in a while. Mrs Mulenga walks over, cheeks flushed, a patch of sweat deepens under her arms. She resembles a bloated penguin.

“So hard...” Nate’s voice pipes from his corner of the room.

“Eff off. Twat...” I get up, move past Mrs Mulenga, and spit into the bin. The long hand of the clock creeps along. Ten to three.

Nate jumps up, knocks the table over and kisses his teeth.

“Get lost, prick...”

Mrs Mulenga says, for a second time, “The pair of you. Enough!”

Nate lobs a paper ball at me. It spins off my shoulder, lands on the floor. The class dissolves in fits of giggles. I lunge. Pull him to the floor.

A number of students rise in anticipation.

I punch his chest, his arms, his shoulders, and his stomach. He kicks my stomach. It hurts. Punch. He bites my arm. Punch.

“Fight, fight, fight,” echoes all around.

Nate swings and catches my nose. I ignore the trickling warm red, and claw nails into him.

“... not an asylum...” Mrs Mulenga shrieks. “... fetch Mr Morris.”

Nate’s hands tighten around my throat. I kick and kick and kick. I’m about to lash out again when Mr Morris and Mrs Potter walk in. It’s straight to the Head’s office. All I can think about is what Mum will say about my torn and bloodied school shirt.

*

Two days later, after school, I’m cornered in the alleyway.

I watch their faces. Casey moves closer. Nate, Adam and Jordan are a few steps behind.

“Piss poor skank,” she hisses.

“Eff off...” I stand my ground, and chew slowly on a piece of gum.

“You don’t get away with mugging us off...” Casey says.

Jordan, the largest of the four, rushes in to pin me against the wall. “Get off. Prick,” I kick and swipe at him. He grabs my arm, uses his weight to hold me.

“She’s scratched me...”

“No-shit,” Adam says. “Slag.”

Jordan and Adam push me to the ground. Adam sits on my legs. Jordan positions his knees on my shoulders, and puts his hand down my bra. “Feel them knockers,” he laughs. Casey kneels down, reaches inside my school shirt, and squeezes hard.

“Peach or an apricot?” She squeezes again. I scream. She clamps her hand over my mouth. My head spins and I feel physically sick. “Nate, come have a feel,” she says.

I bite at Casey’s palm. She releases her clasp. “Leave me alone,” I shout.

Casey pulls out an aerosol from her school bag. They swap places. Adam moves his bulk, wedges my head between his thighs; pressing hard on my shoulders, puts a hand over my mouth. Cheese and onion breath. Jordan gets up and moves to clasp his hands, like cuff-links, around my ankles. I am rigid. Casey pulls my knickers down, laughs and plunges the canister. I stifle a scream. My body slackens. She plunges again. Nate hasn’t budged from where he is standing. When she pulls it out again, fluid trickles down my leg.

“Skanky slag,” Casey says, “next time, we’ll all have a piece of you.”

*

I don’t move and it begins to rain. Moss sprawls between worn bricks, and on a clear patch of wall, sprayed graffiti: 4EVA YOUNG. A loose brick, a crisp packet, and scatterings of fag-ends and glass shards. An ink-black cat scrambles over the wall. Its tail vanishes behind a string of purrs.

My head pounds. I close my eyes and wait.

I don’t know how long I stay there. Eventually, I get up, pull up my knickers, straighten myself and take the long route home. Along Vicarage Road, to the back of the allotments, through the park, by the pond side, and down the stretch of Alexandra Road, past the row of green and blue

houses, past the burnt out garage at the back of Singh's Dental Surgery, through a cut-through path, over the bridge towards Poplar Road. By the time I arrive darkness has fallen on Kings Heath.

*

Mum closes the door behind her for a second time.

I roll over on my back, and fix my gaze to the ceiling. The lampshade catches the sunlight and forms a spidery outline against the ceiling. It crawls, moves forward and retreats. It falls beside the crack above the purple door where Mum stood a few minutes ago. The crack in the ceiling has lengthened. I've often imagined the house would one day collapse, engulfing me, Mum and Hattie while we slept. It hasn't happened but the crack has widened. I will paint my room. Orange or yellow? I will dye my hair too. Purple or jet-black? The time I dyed it a brilliant Rihanna-red, Mum went berserk. Millie thought it was ace. Millie's Nana said it reminded her of her younger self: free, feminist, feline.

I hate *them*.

I want them *dead*.

They must *pay*.

Another knock on the door.

"You awake? Anna?" Mum says.

When I hear her disappear down the hallway, I sit up, collect my Private notepad and begin to doodle. A chicken strangled with a rope. Cartoon characters. Brick on brick on brick – build a circular room. Four faces in a crowd. Distended and distorted. Smoke. A large net. Knot on knot on knot. Four lifeless fish.

My chest tightens.

Chapter 5

The day after it happened. I wake to Casey's voice – an electric screw driver drilling my skull. I curl up. Skanky. Slag. Each word drills deeper. Skanky slag. Behind closed eyes, their faces. Jordan. Adam. Nate. Casey. Gremlins and gargoyles. I ignore the ache between my thighs. *Piss. Poor. Skank.* I go to the loo, lock the door, arch over the toilet bowl and retch. I don't move till all of it is purged.

I wash my face. Something's changed. Pale. The tightness in my chest eases. I hold in my pee. The scissors. I say nothing. Finally, I start to cut. Clumps of hair in the sink, on the taps and the floor. Some on a loose tile. Cut. Cut. Not too short, just shorter. Cut. A new fringe. A Marion Cotillard pixie bang. I take a piss and ignore the burning sensation. Finished, I use a ton of loo roll to clean the mess.

Four text messages from Millie:

*WTF happened to you after school Friday? / Wassup... you up for town? / You ignoring me?
/ WTF is up with you? Got some goss.*

Phone switched off.

I pull on sweatpants, hoodie, squeeze my hair into a ponytail and find a hat. In the kitchen, Mum hovers over the laundry, sorting and stuffing whites into the washer. *Karma Chameleon* crackles on the radio. An untouched cup of tea sits on the table beside a half-eaten crumpet. On the stove, eggs boil. Probably for Hattie. She has these crazy food phases. Last month, smoked mackerel. The month before that, Philadelphia cheese. Mum says she had strange food cravings when she was pregnant with us. With Hattie, sardines. With me, beetroot.

"Breakfast...?" she asks. "Any whites?"

I shake my head, open the fridge, and grab a mango smoothie. "Where's Hattie?" I say.

"Watching tele, I expect."

“I’m off to Millie’s?”

“What you girls up to?”

I shrug, watching her back. She stops, turns.

“You okay? You look different.”

“Fine.”

“Breakfast?”

“I’ll grab something at Millie’s.”

She turns back to the laundry. “Don’t be home late. Hattie wants to — ”

I shut the door. Halfway up the path, Mum raps on the living room window, mouths something. Looking up, the curtains to my bedroom are still pulled to.

*

I walk and walk and walk. Past Kings Heath park. Down towards Moseley Bog and I sit for a while on a tree stump and sip my smoothie. I stay until Casey’s voice digs again. *Piss poor skank.*

I get up, look at the old couple walking arm-in-arm, a short-haired grey dog sniffs at every stone, twig and balled earth. I carry on down the woodland running along the canal, climb over a hedge, onto the towpath. There’s a shabby shed nestled at the end of a line of trees. I walk round it. A dead bird. Intact, lying on its back, nothing in its eye-sockets. I place rocks and stones around it.

The shed door’s closed. Inside: wooden walls and ceiling and floor. A sleeping bag and rolled up blanket in the corner. On the other side, beneath a small boarded up window, a flat plank on crates like a table. An aluminium mug. I take a whiff. Something alcoholic. Fag-ends in a jam jar. A rucksack. I walk around and count feet lengths, but keep losing track. Millie’s Nana says keeping the mind busy with the mundane takes the sting out of anxious thoughts. Another smell: damp dog. In the small cupboard behind the door are stacks of tins. Baked beans, peas, sweet corn, kidney beans, spam and tinned fruit.

I peer through the gaps in the boarded window. A bird flies and perches on a tree. No squirrels. The sound of footsteps. Then the door swings open.

A woman stands in the doorway.

We eye each other.

Awkward, zany, boyish, with cropped copper hair, she's dressed in a long leather coat. Muddy lime-green Kermit-The-Frog-trainers on her feet. A nose piercing. When she enters, in the thin sunlight, I notice a purple lilac tattoo lacing her neck. Like a daisy chain. Etched all round.

“Who the fuck?”

She moves across to the plank-table in hurried, heavy steps. Lighting a roll-up, she finds a crate, sits and stares. I cough, clear my throat. Cough again.

“What the fuck you doing here?”

She scratches the ridge of her nose, and takes another sharp puff.

“I'm just walking,” I say, my back against the window.

“This is my gaff.” She glances around. “For now that is... fag?”

I shake my head.

Millie and I have tried smoking. Twice. The first time was in Kings Heath park. She'd pinched a couple from her Nana. The second time was in All Saint's churchyard, sitting on some dead person's headstone. Millie's Nana says smoking's a filthy habit – obliterates the polyps on your vocal chords. I shake my head for a second time. She inhales and exhales. She gets up and moves towards the cupboard. She roots around for a few seconds. “Beans, methinks.” She takes out a pen-knife from a cloth waist-bag, and opens two cans. She retrieves a spoon and holds it out to me. I take it, sit on a crate. She scoops beans with her fingers.

“How old are you anyway?”

“Almost fifteen.”

“What the fuck you doing here?”

I've never had cold baked beans, but it sort of tastes alright. She lights up again.

"There's a dead bird round back."

"Not another one," she says, "That's the third this week. It's a good thing I'm not superstitious." She rifles through her rucksack, and motions for me to follow. Outside, she asks, "You did this?" and points at the circle of stones.

I nod.

In the outdoor light she looks much younger. She collects the bird and puts it in a plastic bag. Older than me, but younger than she seemed inside. I watch as she digs up some earth and places the dead bird in the ground, covering it up again. She reclines against the tree and starts to sing a song with no words. I pick up a twig and break it into smaller pieces. The wind picks up and I tug at my hood.

"It's time you went home," she says. "I don't need any search parties stumbling on all I've got."

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Fergie," she says.

"Anna."

"Do you fish?"

I lower my head.

"Next time you come, I'll take you fishing, Anna." She goes back into the shack, singing her strange tune. When the door closes, I head back down the path.

Chapter 6

I paint my nails a dark green. Another coat. I blow. And wave my fingers in the air. It looks purple when it dries.

From the window, I count squirrels. Two and half. Half, because I'm not sure if it's the tail of a squirrel I saw. Lots of birds around. But I don't count birds. Millie's Nana says all folk have their foibles. She collected marbles when she was my age.

I take out my Private Pad, sit on the floor and start to doodle. Straight lines, spirals and sundials. Lines curl and loop into four misshapen faces. I tear the page out. On another, they emerge again. Like a pop-up book of vampires and wolves. Shadings deepen hollows of ears, nostrils and mouth. Elongated forms whirl and gyrate. I wrap a snake round them. A cobra or viper. I imagine their expressions writhe and recoil. I rip the page, scrunch it up, and hurl it into the bin.

Footsteps. Mum's. Flat and heavy and slow.

I push the pad under the bed, and dive beneath the duvet.

A knock.

Silence.

Another hurried rap then she opens the door.

"Still in bed? Anna? It's gone noon."

I stir and make a sleepy moan sound.

"Still feeling rough?" She doesn't wait for an answer. "Where are we? Tuesday." She pauses. "If you're not right by tomorrow, I'm taking you to the doctors."

I sit up, fold my arms.

"A shower might do you good." She places a hand on my forehead. "Fresh air," she says, moving away, as if she's made a diagnosis of some sort.

She draws the curtains, opens a window, and turns again.

"You look different," she says. "What've you done?"

She frowns, raises her eyebrows, but doesn't make me explain.

"It suits you," she says, her voice lowered. "I'll bring a tray up." She glances around the room, picks up a bra and sock and school tie, straightens the pile of magazines, and leaves.

I think it's safe to get out of bed again when I hear another knock. Quiet, hesitant, insistent.

"Hattie! What d'you want?" I shout.

She nudges the door. Her bright face peers in. She makes a slurping noise with a straw as she drinks from a juice carton. Dressed in colourful leggings and a coral dress, she reminds me of Mum. Millie's Nana says it's bizarre how parents dress their kids up to resemble them. Mini-me. Mini-clone. Then they're surprised when they grow up and *become* them.

"Fix this," Hattie says, holding a charm bracelet. Ian bought it on our last visit. I got a necklace. Apparently his idea, but Gina's choice of jewellery. 'She's got real taste,' he said with pride, as she handed over two small ivory boxes. Mine's still in its box. Hattie wears hers all the time.

"It's the clasp," she says.

Reluctantly, I take the bracelet and fiddle with it. She slurps again, crosses her arms, and purses her lips. I get a pair of tweezers from the dresser, use it to bend widened ends. Fiddly, but it finally works. I fasten the bracelet back on her wrist.

"Thanks," she says. "Come watch tele with me."

"Later, Hattie. I'll be down later."

"We could watch a film," she says, "you choose."

She remains for a few minutes. Tells me about the owl project and the school trip to the owl sanctuary. "The Boobook Owls were my favourite. The African Spotted Eagle Owls a close second," she says.

I smile. My phone vibrates. Millie. Reject.

"I'll be down later," I say, shooing Hattie out of the room.

Another call, followed by a text: *Not seen you in days. I'm coming over. After school. Millsx*

I get back into bed, then get out again, and go to the window. A squirrel dashes through the gate and disappears behind concrete. Mrs Hussein, in a marigold headscarf strolls to the end of the path, stops at the hedge, and scans round. I look out for her children, Ruqayya and Mustafa, at their window. They aren't there. She reaches into her large handbag, and dabs her nose with a hanky. Hay fever or fluff or tears? A taxi pulls up. Mrs Hussein gathers her clothing and enters. The cacti. I haven't watered them in weeks. They look flat. I must remember to water them, I say, shutting out the hazy afternoon sun.

Mum reappears with a tray. Carrot soup, a chunk of fresh seeded bread and a glass of water.

"Eat it while it's warm," she says, placing it on the desk. "I need to start on my next project." She pauses. "De-clutter the attic. All that junk. I'm scared what I'll find. Take a shower," she says, "it might help."

Although I don't feel hungry, I eat it all. The soup, the bread, and drink the entire glass of water. Before Ian left, Mum used to bake cupcakes and mini muffins. During half-terms and school holidays she'd push the boat out and bake layered chocolate cakes. She hardly bakes these days. She's always engaged in a project or other. Homeless Shelter, Food Bank, Befriending Refugees. Or doing a course: photography, mosaics, sewing. When she did the sewing course, she was always on the lookout for things to mend. Loose jacket buttons, cushion covers and hemlines. When she's not volunteering or studying, she embarks on other projects. Clearing out weeds or painting a room. Millie's Nana says what your mum needs is a lover. Perhaps she's right. But Mum's been alone for a while now and I can't imagine her with another man.

*

The next day, Mum remembers my dental appointment. So instead of going to the doctors we end up at the dentist. It's not long before I'm seen. Mum decides to stay in the waiting room, flicking through faded and dog-eared magazines.

A scratch. Liquid anaesthetic soaks into gums. Release. Minutes later, my lips detach from my mouth. Like watching a Japanese lantern ascend.

After a few pleasantries, the dentist blows her nose, pockets the tissue, and settles her slight frame at the desk. Back-and-forth from computer to high stool, she moves purposefully. A Pakistani lady with a firm expression, she rises again, and taps the keyboard at a furious pace. Her assistant enters: fake-blonde, fat, with bleached chin hairs. She collects a clipboard, jots something down, and returns it to the worktop. She sits, smiles morosely, and waits for the dentist's instruction.

"Friday. Maggie's moving out. The amount of stuff she's got. Ridiculous. She's only been in eighteen months," the fake-blonde assistant says.

Still typing, the dentist says, "It's really happening then?"

"Dropped me right in it," she says. A bit of paper flutters to the ground. "How I'm meant to find a flatmate at such short notice." She picks up the blue slip, rearranges her extensions, and sniffs loudly.

The dentist grunts, says nothing.

"Only two people so far. To view the flat." She tucks flyaway hair behind an ear. "An Eastern European couple and a girl with a couple of hens."

The dentist slides behind me, asks, "Numb?"

I nod. The assistant hands me a pair of goggles and fastens a bib. Her finger nails; falsies, painted lemon with silver studs. Her smile; broad and reassuring. She rattles on about her no pets policy, depleting finances, and a planned summer holiday in Corfu.

I switch off, take in the room. White on white, metallic instruments on a trolley, and a green reclining chair. An ugly painting. Light panels that give me a headache. Through the open window:

a Jesus freak shouts about hell. Millie's Nana says missionaries, nuns and priests are all dangerous and deluded. She can't stand JWs and Mormons. Says they're a scourge. They're impossible to shake off. Mum's kinder. Says, they're a naïve and harmless lot. Religious people? I'm not sure what I think.

Nkechi's religious, and she's normal. The Husseins are religious, and they seem alright. Millie says she's agnostic, says she'll bother with religion when she's older.

The smell of disinfected steel, latex and a perfumed scent makes me giddy. The dentist sneezes, recovers, asks again, "Numb?"

She doesn't wait for a response, prises my mouth open. The assistant trails with a suction instrument. When the dentist inserts the cold metal grip, I flinch. The drilling begins. I flinch again.

"Sensitive?" she asks.

It's so easy to forget how awful things are. Like Marmite dying, Ian leaving, and —

The drilling starts again.

Tight pulses of dread travel from my stomach to my jaw. I resist the temptation to gag, and close my eyes. The dentist and her assistant are talking, but I'm lost in a world of Manga characters. Kyoto races through a cemetery. Dusty headstones hidden in overgrown weeds. A squirrel scuttles up an apple tree. A sudden wind carries dead leaves and Kyoto into a whirlpool. She slips. A labyrinth of dungeons. On all fours, Kyoto crawls through mud and slime. She scrapes an ankle. Winces. Mice crawl up and down tubular pipes. In the darkness, they bloat up, their luminous eyes glow like crystals. A sound. Small, singular and stringed. Kyoto stops. Listens. Nothing. She stands up, pats the wetness on her denim. Another porthole. A rooftop. The city's lights below; a sparkle of domes, towers and spires. She spreads her arms, raises her head, and steps off.

"Almost done. Try not to swallow," the dentist says.

I sit up to rinse. Ignore the dribble. Rinse again and wipe my mouth.

“Suction.” My head pounds with the scraping sound. “Almost there,” she says. After a few moments, “Done.” She wheels her stool over to the desk.

“Rinse.” Her assistant holds out a plastic cup. I take a gulp and gurgle. She now extends a hand. I give back the goggles and bib. I take another gulp of water, wash my mouth and spit. Mercury chippings slip down the plughole.

Chapter 7

Friday. Millie comes at four o'clock carrying a plastic wallet. When she arrives I'm still in my jammies, in bed. She dumps her bulging schoolbag on the floor beside the desk, and hops on the bed.

"Hey watch it," I say. "Ouch!"

She hands over the wallet. "All the work you've missed. What's going on?"

I peer inside, take in the worksheets. English, Geography, French, and Art.

"What the hell's happened?" Millie asks, sitting cross-legged. She munches gummy coke bottle chews, pulls a handful from her blazer pocket and offers me some.

"Had a filling on Wednesday."

"You alright?"

She gives me a look in her Millie way. She's dressed in a pair of jeans, and berry-pink T; her messy hair tucked under a corn-coloured beanie.

"What's going on with you? You've been ignoring my texts..."

I want to tell her, all the words pile up behind my lips.

"I'll get it out of you eventually..." she says. "There's been a ton of aggro in school..."

I can't help myself, I'm curious.

Millie jumps off the bed, searches her school bag, and takes out a couple of tangerines. She throws one to me, starts peeling the other as she talks.

"Loreen's been suspended. For a week. A fight with Casey. Apparently she found out Casey's been trying it on with Noah..." She pauses for breath. I'm not sure if to observe my reaction or to suck on another tangerine segment. She eats the fruit as if sucking on a lollipop or chewy sweet. "You should see Casey. Bruised up. Her mum's apparently kicking up a huge stink."

I want to say, serves her right, but I don't. I begin to peel the citrus slowly, its juices splatter on my hands.

"And you won't believe what that new girl's gone and done...?"

“Kazia?”

“Set the fire alarm off. Twice already. Has issues with authority, apparently...”

Despite myself, I laugh. It’s the way Millie keeps saying ‘apparently’. It sounds so like her Nana.

“What you done to your hair?” she asks suddenly, mid-flow.

“Shorter. Bangs,” I mutter.

“Different. Suits you.” She gets up and puts the tangerine peel in the bin. “She’s a nutter. That Kazia. But I like her. My mum would have a fit if I cut my hair that short.”

“So, Casey’s been sniffing around Noah?” I say.

“It’s been the talk of school. The whole Loreen-Casey saga. Everyone’s taking sides.”

The tangerine is sweet. I imagine how Noah must be feeling. Pissed off. His expression dark and brooding.

“Any progress with the search for your real Dad?” Millie asks, changing the topic.

I shake my head. Funny, but it’s the last thing on my mind. Up until everything happened with Casey and her boys, it’d been all that mattered. Finding him. And getting Noah to notice me. None of that seemed significant anymore. All that mattered was paying them back.

“I’m not sure there’s any point...” I say. Not entirely sure that we’re talking about the same thing. “Some things get broke and can’t be fixed. Maybe it’s the same with biological Dads. They get lost and can’t be found. And even...”

“Even...” Millie echoes, wiping fingers on her jeans.

“If I find him, then what...?”

A silence.

“What happened last Friday?” she asks.

My gaze falls, and I twist the corner of the duvet.

“We tell each other everything, don’t we?” she says.

I feel the lump expanding in my throat. I cough, in a bid to dislodge it. Cough again. It refuses to budge. I want to tell her. Tell someone. Anyone.

“Miss you girl...” she finally says. “When you back?”

Perhaps she means back to school. Or back to my old self? Is either possible. I don't know.

“Soon...” I manage, even smile.

When she leaves the dry sobs turn into tears.

*

The next day, I force myself to watch a couple of movies with Hattie. Toy Story and Finding Nemo. We've seen them that many times. Hattie echoes the lines; she knows what's going to happen before it happens. When Mum pops in to check on what we're doing, I promise her I'll go to school on Monday.

“It's just a bug,” I say.

She gives me a strange look. “If there's anything going on at school, you must let me know,” she says.

“It's nothing,” I say. And she leaves it at that, about to return to the attic. She's in the middle of sorting out two trunks full of clothing a couple of decades old, photographs, and journals.

“Will anything of Dad's be there?” I say.

“Ian?” she asks.

“No. My Dad.”

“What's brought this on?” she says, giving me a strange look.

“Forget it...” I say, getting up, “I'm going for a walk.” With that, I collect my denim jacket from the hallway and head out.

There's a stillness in the air. The blueish sky seems to be holding the sun in place. I amble back down the same route. Find myself at the edge of the woodlands, the shed in the distance. I ap-

proach to find the door being held open with a boulder. Inside: Fergie sits on a crate, smoking and drinking. Her expression, distant and bleary, she whistles a tune. Dark eyeliner and shimmering greens smudged round her eyelids. The khaki dress-shirt she's wearing is torn and worn. Underneath, thick leggings and boots.

"You're back," she says, holding out the fag, then the drink.

"Thanks. No."

She motions for me to sit.

I settle on a crate opposite her. On the plank-table there is a fresh bunch of blue flowers in a jam jar. Beside it, an empty can of sweetcorn and a newspaper cutting, but I can't make it out from where I'm sitting and I don't want to pry.

"Picked those this morning," she says. "It was a pissing cold night."

She allows her gaze to linger. I must look a mess. In jeans and sweatshirt; hair loose around my face.

"You have sad eyes," she says.

I look out through the slits of the barred window. The weather report had promised sunshine with the possibility of showers. If it rains, perhaps there'll be a rainbow. I love the way rainbows have no beginnings and endings; just seem to appear from nowhere and disappear to somewhere. Millie's Nana once said, I'm not religious or nothing, but rainbows suggest a greater mystery.

"Too beautiful a day to be stuck indoors." Her voice interrupts my thoughts. "Wait here..." she says, and vanishes outside. Minutes later, she's back. "Let's go..." she says, grabbing her leather coat.

Back outside, she collects a fishing rod, a fold-up chair, and a plastic bag. I trail her. We walk in silence. Up a steepish path, down the flat, until we meet the canal. She stumbles on a rock and instinctively I reach forward to her. She smiles, and we fall back in step together. A bird skips across the water, takes off in low flight and vanishes behind a bridge.

“Lots of Canada Geese and Coots,” she says. “This time of year...”

Further up, at the far edge of the canal, a tallish grey bird stands still, an unmoving living statue. Ian took us to Covent Garden one Bank Holiday. It felt like being in a 1900s circus. The hoards of tourists, singers, levitating beings, tarot card readers and living statues. Hattie was frightened and clung on to Ian, her expression naive and baffled. Mum and I laughed at the illusory and the magical world we had climbed into. I dare it to move. It spots something in the water and plunges its beak downward.

“Herons are carnivores — frogs, birds, insects — though they mainly eat fish,” Fergie says, “I think we’ll pitch ourselves here.”

The water is littered with debris: cans, bottle tops, crisp packets, chocolate wrappers, clinging to algae and duckweed. I remember a lot of this from Geography. There’s a smell of pigeon poop, pondweed and marshes. Millie’s Nana travelled to Venice and says it stank of diesel, garbage and shit. I’ve always thought I’d love to travel to Venice with Noah. For a fleeting moment, his broody lop-sided smile flashes in my mind. He probably hasn’t even noticed my absence.

Fergie puts the rod together. She eases the line through the small eye at the base of the float and places it on the water. Finally she fixes a hook, unfolds the chair and sits. I rest against the fold-up while she unties the plastic bag.

“What’s that?”

“Maggots. Bait for the fish...” she says. “Gramps taught me...”

I want to ask her lots of questions. About her family. About her. But I’m not ready for *her* questions. I like how we are at the moment. Respectful strangers. Not quite friends yet. She shifts slightly, and pats the space beside her. “Sit...”

And for a long while we sit in silence. The water is dark and sombre. Its stillness interrupted now and again by geese.

“Life doesn’t have to be complicated,” she says, to no one in particular. “Out here everything makes sense ... Shouldn’t you be somewhere?”

The drone of workmen sound in the distance, and a bike whizzes past.

“Nope,” I say. “Isn’t anyone looking for you?”

Her smile broadens into laughter. She pulls out a bottle of water, rinses her fingers, then takes a gulp.

“Not too hard,” she pauses. “Daddy’ll think I’ll go back when I run out of money. Mummy’s too caught up in her own stuff.”

“Will you go back?”

She watches the water, as if she’s seriously thinking over the question.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she finally says, hurling a small stone into the canal. “There’s something liberating about choosing to get lost and staying lost.” She laughs again; a spun-out conical sound, if I was doodling it.

*

That night, there is a phone call from a number, I don’t know. When I pick up, I recognise the soft lilting voice. Gina.

“I hope you don’t mind, Anna,” she says, “I took your number from Ian.”

I don’t say anything — imagine her, at this time of the day, to be dressed in a long satin dressing gown.

“I want you to know that I love your father very much.” She sounds close to tears. “I won’t do anything to hurt him.”

I sit down, and tap a finger on the desk. Millie’s Nana says step families are a psychological and practical nightmare — hell on earth. If Ian and Gina are together, where does that leave Mum?

It'd be nice if Mum could find someone. Maybe she could join a dating site or something. Though Millie's Nana says it's only weirdos and wackos who use those sites.

"You there..." Gina says.

"Yes —"

"I hope you don't mind me calling out of the blue like this," she says. "But I just wanted you to know that your father makes me very happy. And, I'll never take him for granted."

I don't know what else to say, so I mumble, "Okay. Thanks." I am thankful she doesn't continue with any chit-chat and rings off. I send a text to Millie: *See you in school on Monday*. Then I pull off my clothes and get into my jammies and under the duvet.

I fall asleep and land in a thick forest. I gaze up at a fleck flitting in circles around the moonlight above a dark lotus-shaped plant. I move closer, and the plant opens up — spits out Casey and the boys. I close my eyes and when I open them again, they have turned into sculptures, and the whole landscape has fallen away around them.

Chapter 8

A metallic-blue Monday. A slight drizzle veils the sunshine. Double English with Mrs Osborne. I meet Mille at the school gates and she gives me a hug, links an arm in mine, steers me towards the main building. I feel small – squeezed into a bird box. When the school bell rings, I jump slightly. Millie hasn't let go of my arm, and we continue up the stairwell, past groups of kids moving in this direction, that direction, no direction – the second bell goes.

At the door of the classroom, I freeze.

An aerosol can sits on my desk.

My breathing quickens, head pulsates. I want to walk straight out. I refuse to look out for them. I know they are there but I don't want to see them. If I could, I would back away, rush to the toilets, lock myself in a cubicle, and stay there for the rest of the day. Instead I edge towards my chair and take a seat. Kazia mumbles something unintelligible.

“Good to have you back, Anna,” Mrs Osborne says.

I want to fall into a hole but I'm forced to pretend. To sit up straight. I put the aerosol can in my bag, write the date in my notebook and begin to doodle.

Mrs Osborne spends minutes explaining what Atticus means by: *You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.* She asks the class to discuss in what way might any of the characters be considered mockingbirds?

Kazia gazes out of the window, a bored expression on her face; she picks on a blister until it pops. I carry on doodling. Four owls stuffed in a washing machine. They spin and spin and spin. A blur of beaks, beads, and feathers, blend into a pool of soapy nothing.

“Anna. Kazia. Make an effort.” Mrs Osborne surges forward, fingertips on desk. In a vintage dress, with a large belt across her waist, she looks worn out.

Kazia speaks in her heavy harsh accent. I'm not sure if I like it. Her chat doesn't interest me.

Casey lets out a shriek.

I don't want to look, but everyone turns. To see her racing around a desk being chased by Nate. He squirts water on her again. She lets out an even louder screech. Now, it's Nate being chased. "Pillock," she says.

"Casey. Nate. *Enough*," Mrs Osborne says again, moving to the front of her desk.

They dash out of the classroom, two hyenas squealing all down the corridor. Mrs Osborne buzzes the on-call system.

Although the other two are still in the room, I'm relieved Casey's gone. And for the rest of the session, I contribute to the paired discussions.

*

Later that morning, the inevitable happens. After History, I decide to go to the loo. The bell rings and I make a dash for it. Mr Puttock half-smiles when I walk past the Art room. Perspiration and salt-and-vinegar crisps fills the air. I forgot to take my packed lunch today. Mum will be irritated. I follow the bend of the corridor and push open the toilet door. It swings, I enter, and my entire body stiffens.

At the sinks, touching up her lips – Casey Mitchell.

Before I can duck out, she spins round. Her eyes dare me to make my next move. I enter a cubicle, and sit on the toilet seat. Too scared to piss, I wait. And wait. The contractions in my chest are strong, sharp – my mouth is dry. I listen. She turns on the tap, rinses her hands for what seems an age. My stomach turns over itself again and again. The hand-dryer fires up, drones for a few seconds. Starts up again. I wait for the door to go. It doesn't. I half-expect her to start banging on the cubicle door, or to find a way of climbing up to look down on me, and demand I get out. I sense her circling. Negotiating her next step, she paces. Without warning, the door swings open and closes behind. Silence. I'm unsure if she's really gone when I let myself out of the cubicle.

“I was wondering if you planned on staying in there all day,” she says, wiping her hands on her skirt.

I say nothing — frozen.

“You tell anyone anything,” she says, edging closer, “you’ll regret it.”

Before either of us can say anything else, a group of girls come into the toilets in fits of laughter. Casey steps back, checks her face in the mirror and walks out. I count to ten. Then with my bag tucked under my arm, I walk swiftly, but do not run. At the school gates, I toss the aerosol can into a bin, glance around furtively, make my exit and wander down the road. I keep walking until the distance between me and school is significant. I enter an alley. Wait. It’s only when I’m sure no one has followed me, I chuck up.

I make my way home. I dodge behind a tree when I spot Mrs Rossi on her scooter. She talks animatedly to a small spidery woman wearing a large hat. A Big Issue seller hovers beside them. When they haven’t budged for several minutes, I take a side street. A church bell chimes. Noon.

The church is at the end of the road, on the bend. Pale stone, high arches, tall towers, solemn spire and stained glass windows. Carvings of gargoyles and angels makes me think of a dystopian battle. Them and me. Locked in a torrent of fire. I stare at a thick-lipped bulging gargoyle perched in the centre, and it glares back, carved sockets beckon. I push the heavy timber door, not expecting it to open. But it does. A musty odour mingled with dust hangs in the air. It’s smaller than I imagined. Fixed pews face a large tilted cross hung above a raised area. Jesus looks like he’s about to bungee jump. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My fingers run along the edge of a row of pews. I walk down the side, avoid the centre aisle, turn left into another space. Chairs in a semi-circle scattered around another cross, large and wooden. Layers of fabric and mesh drape over the cross and spill around the floor, like a wedding dress trail. Scattered on the fabric: thick and ta-

pered candles, pomegranates in a bowl, twigs and leaves and pebbles, cut-out star and heart and flower shapes, three open bibles, a tiny figurine of a woman with her head bowed down, and a vase of yellow flowers. I walk around the display a couple of times before sitting down. Underneath a chair, droppings. Pigeons or mice? The stained glass windows glint in the afternoon light.

After a few minutes, I wander through the cemetery. Reaching for a mint in my jacket, I discover a piece of paper. Unfolding it. *Slag. Stinking dirty Slag.* I blink away threatening tears – squint – and look up to find a squirrel nibbling on something. Its proximity startles me. Our gazes lock. Then it dashes up a tree. I crunch up the note, consider throwing it away, in a hedge or something, instead I put it back in my pocket. “Fuck them,” I say, again and again, making my way along the path. I almost trip over a loose slab. “Fuck them,” I say, waving away a wasp.

*

That night, they are not far behind; hunting me like a wild llama. Uphill: I run. The clearing closes in with stretches of thick trees. Through the green and brown, I race up a steep slope. Their taunts soar louder and louder. I reach another clearing – leading to a ledge overlooking a river – and stop. I’ve run as far as I can. Cornered. Gasping, soaked – I wait.

“What now, Slag?” Casey shouts.

Behind: four vultures. Ahead: a sharp drop into a purple-lilac pit.

“What you going to do Skank?” They edge towards me. Casey pushes me. I lose my balance and wake up to a ringing telephone.

Chapter 9

A thin film of drizzle begins to fall outside Nkechi's counselling room. I don't really want to be here. But I'm seated in the armchair, watching the movement of her knuckles as she leafs through her notes. The box of tissues, almost empty. The room smells as it always does: spiced tea and perfume. Braids hang loosely around her oval face and before Nkechi speaks –

“Ian's got a new girlfriend. Gina,” I say.

Her pen scratches on the pad, and she looks up. “How does this make you feel?”

“Dunno.”

“Tell me about her.”

“Gobby. Pretentious. Too much.”

“How do you feel about your step-father moving on?”

“Dunno,” I say, wriggling my toes in my sandals. “I've not said anything to Mum.”

“What would your Mum say?”

I hold this question momentarily. There are fresh flowers in a round vase, on the window sill. A Chinese-looking mask on the shelf – it's the first time I'm noticing it.

“She's lonely,” I say.

“In what way...?”

“Dunno,” I say, fidgeting with the friendship bracelet on my wrist. Woven in greens and blues. The one I'd given Millie, in browns and burgundies. “She's always doing something. Busy with a project.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

I rub a dry patch on my forehead.

“The window,” I say. “Can I open it?”

She nods, gestures. I rise and unhook the latch. The air is still and soothing. Returning to the seat, I search for a piece of gum in my pocket, unwrap it and pop it in my mouth. I yawn.

“Not been sleeping?” she asks.

“It’ll hurt ... Ian, I mean. Mum loved him.”

“Love doesn’t have to end when a relationship ends, does it?”

I allow what she’s just said to settle as a possibility.

“Sometimes it has nothing to do with love why people choose to stay or leave...” she says.

I remain quiet.

“And tell me... how’s school going?” She places the pad on the table, and pulls on a cardigan, does up a couple of buttons.

I eye her suspiciously. “Has my Mum spoke to you?”

“Anything you want to talk through,” she says, crossing her legs, with her standard soothing smile. Her triple-hooped earrings clink when she reaches for the pen.

“It’s nothing,” I say, because I know she won’t let it drop. She’ll just ask the question in a number of different ways with that fixed smile. I’ve never seen such straight teeth. I can’t imagine her having a single filling. “But I think they know...” I whisper.

“Know what?” she says.

“... about Mum’s HIV, I can’t be sure, but I think they know.” My eyes fill with tears.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I shake my head. “It’s nothing — just friendship issues.” I can’t think of what else to say to get her off my back. “And, I’m still trying to get Mum to help me with my search for Dad.”

“How’s that going?”

“Stalled. Trying to work out an approach with Mum.”

“Any idea why your Mum’s resisting the idea?”

“Dunno,” I say, allowing my shoulders to rise and fall. “Maybe it’s hard for her going over the past like that.”

“Can you describe your feelings?”

I hate these questions. Ignorant. No, moronic. But I squeeze a sweet smile.

“I’ll deal with it,” I say. “It’s nothing.”

“You’re making incredible progress, Anna. But if there’s anything you want to talk about, I’m here ...”

The kindness in her voice makes me want to cry. But I can’t. It’ll only make things worse. Like when honey congeals and you try and squeeze it out, but it’s impossible, then you try and use a knife to cut through its top to scoop a dollop and it doesn’t work. Or like when you spill a drink over a piece of coursework and the ink runs, and you try and clean it with a napkin or pat it dry with the sleeve of your shirt, and it’s worse. Millie’s Nana says there are some things that just can’t ever be made right.

“I’m good,” I say. “Mum’s up all hours of the night, rooting around in the attic.”

She scribbles more notes. Uncrosses her leg. For the remaining few minutes, I talk about the school trip to Japan. Planned for next summer. I’d like to go. But there’s a lot of money to be raised. For a good cause, an orphanage.

*

That evening, I pop round to Millie’s. Her Mum and Nana are in. Her Dad’s sleeping, resting up before a night shift later. We go to the kitchen, collect a couple of cans of Diet Coke, and make our way up to her room. She switches the light on. I settle myself on the large bean-bag.

Millie’s room – a mishmash of stencilled cubes, quotes and lyrics on cream walls. Looped around the oval mirror, fairy lights and tinsel. On one wall, a deep berry colour, newspaper and magazine cut outs of news stories, non-stories, from the sublime to the absurd. A Mexican type rug on the wood-panelled floor. A pile of cushions on her bed, including the Union Jack cover her Nana knitted for her birthday. There’s a citrusy fragrance in the air.

“Any progress...?” she asks, sitting on the bed. Then seeing my confusion, she says, “Your Dad?”

I take a sip from the can. It goes down quickly, tickles my throat. “Feel trumped. The internet’s got us nowhere...”

I stare at a flickering fairy light. Blink. Take another gulp of my drink. Not much has changed in Millie’s room. Apart for a line of rope running along the wide bookcase, photographs pegged on. Mostly black and white.

“It’s for Art. The portfolio,” she says. “There are other ways...” She places her drink down, picks up a soft ball from under the bed, and tosses it to me. I catch, lob it back. And for the next few minutes we talk and toss, back-and-forth.

“A private detective?” she says.

“That costs. Not sure my pocket money will stretch that far,” I say. “Though I could use Mum’s credit card.”

“A missing person’s noticeboard?”

“Except he’s not exactly missing,” I say, as she scrambles to collect the ball from the corner of the room. “He walked out.”

“Facebook?” She gives an under arm throw. “I read a teenager in New York found his biological Mum that way.”

“Possible... lots of assumptions though.”

“Everyone’s on FB... surely,” she pauses, bounces the ball on her lap. “Or you could ask your Mum to help.”

“Dunno...” I look away. A noisy snore from the room next door interrupts our thoughts.

“That’ll be my Dad. So embarrassing.”

“Maybe it’s worth a try. She’s clearing out the attic at the moment. Her current project.”

“Your Mum’s so cool. I can’t believe she didn’t say anything about your hair. Mine would have had a super crazy fit.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t bother,” I say. “If he walked out then what’s to say he’ll be interested now.”

Millie says nothing, throws the ball back at me. This time, I throw it up in the air a few times. Millie gets up, grabs her laptop from the desk, and gets some music playing. A JLS song. Then Will.I.Am.

“Isn’t *Hall of Fame* wicked,” she says, when Adele comes on. “Why you missing so much school?”

She watches me carefully as if I might give away a clue through a careless gesture or expression. Then a knock on the door, and before either of us respond, her father’s head pops in. Dishevelled, his shirt wrongly buttoned up, he smiles. “Ah, Anna... we’ve not seen you in a while.” He turns to Millie, “Seen my sock? Your mum says it might have got mixed up with yours in the last wash.”

Millie grunts, goes to her sock drawer, and rifles through. She holds two up, stretches them in the light, and places back. “Soz, Dad...”

“Don’t be a stranger, Anna,” he says, shutting the door behind him.

“Facebook,” I say, “I think that’ll be my next move. Perhaps ask Mum too. See if she’ll help.”

“What’s going on with you at school?”

I wish I could tell her about Casey and her boys. About Fergie. About how angry I am. She’s my bezzie mate, yet I can’t seem to form the words. Where would I start. Millie’s Nana says our emotions can make us physically sick. I feel physically sick.

“I’m thinking of going red.”

“That’s you all over,” she says. “Wild. Crazy. Free.”

When she says this I laugh. And laugh and laugh. Almost hysterical. Because I know it's so far from the truth. I'm like that dead bird Fergie buried; phoney, deader. Millie joins in, and laughs, falls back on the bed and laughs and laughs and laughs.

Chapter 10

Saturday afternoon. The wind has picked up, the sun is high and bold. I am sitting crosslegged on her sleeping bag. Fergie is on her knees facing me. She wants to make me up. Her make-up bag, large, messy and faded, lies beside her thigh. “Weighs a ton,” she says, dragging it between us.

“Mum doesn’t let me wear the stuff,” I say. “But Millie and I sneak on some liner in the school lavs.”

“Isn’t it great we only go through adolescence once...” she says, with a strange giggle. She rummages in the make-up bag and retrieves some concealer. She squeezes a dollop, rubs it between her fingers, dabs and blends it on my face. She smudges my forehead, around the ridge of my nose and beneath my lower lip.

“A bit too light for your complexion. Not to worry, some bronzer will sort that out,” she says. “Your skin is beautiful.”

She’s gentle. She arches backward to inspect me. Asks me to move to catch a stream of sunlight. For the first time, as she speaks, I notice her crowded bottom set of teeth. Her striped lycra dress over leggings tucked in boots, hair wrapped under a silk scarf. She pulls out liquid mascara, uses the ball of her palm to inch my chin back. She gives a careless laugh. Dipping the brush in the bottle, she draws it out again and traces the top of my lashes. I blink.

“Be still, donut.” She brushes them lightly for a second time, and blows. Her breath smells of toffee and coffee. My eyes flutter shut. “That’s right, keep them closed for a couple of secs.” When I open them again, in her hand is a chunky eye pencil. With her thumb she pulls down each lower lid and draws along its outline: slowly, measured, carefully. When I jerk, she licks her thumb and uses it to wipe the jagged run. She holds my skin in place and draws a line. “That’s done,” she says, moving back to peer at me. She hands me a mirror.

“Pucker your lips like Nemo,” she says. She tilts my chin again, uses a fluffy blush and dusts my cheeks. “Now the finale.” She holds out three lipsticks. Ruby. Copper. Plum. I point at the plum. She pats it. I smack my lips. She whistles. “Job done,” she says.

I pick up the mirror again. Right, left, right. I see myself in jigsaw pieces. I look less pale, less young, and less gaunt. I bite my lower lip. She grabs a fag, lights up and lies on her back. The swell of her breasts stretch the fabric across her chest. I wonder if her nipples are brown or rose coloured. She catches my gaze, and I blush. The damp on the walls seems pronounced, even though temperatures have reached nineteen degrees. A book juts out of her rucksack. From this distance, I can't quite make the title. A fragment: Buddha or Buddleia.

When she finishes smoking, she hands me some nail polish, a cola colour.

“You don't mind, do you? It's the one thing I used to do with my Mum,” she says, undoing her boots and extending her foot. Small, arched and clammy. There is a scar along her ankle. I'm curious but decide against asking questions. I begin to paint her toenails. Big toe right down to the pinkie. The other foot. A second coat.

“I didn't start walking until I was fifteen months,” she says, and falls back on her elbows. “Now I'm forever walking.”

“I have a sister,” I say, “Hattie... younger than me.”

“Lucky you,” she says.

A butterfly lands on the wall above her head. It's a brilliant blue. “A beauty.” It flies off, across the room, and out through the gap in the window.

Fergie lifts her feet up, one at a time, gives each a wiggle. “Not bad,” she says, “thanks”, rolling on to her stomach. After a few minutes, she falls asleep. Her breathing, a rolling purr. I watch her sleep. It's weird watching a stranger sleep. I take out a folded sheet from my pocket, a pencil, and start to sketch her face. It isn't right. So I begin to doodle. Her. Then them. They are always there. The four of them.

I still haven't told Millie what happened. Maybe I won't.

And I haven't quite decided what I'll do to them.

I doodle and place them in a spinning pod – imagine their bodies pirouette round and round and round. Before I know it, they are completely shaded in. The pod is blackened. Their expressions dead. Behind the black, they are bent and broken and hushed. The tightness in my chest sharpens. I need a plan. Gasping for air, I leave Fergie sleeping, and step outside. Into the static sun-kissed day.

28. Get a tattoo (like Fergie's).

29. Revenge/Payback.

I exhale; allow myself to take in the colour of the leaves, trees, berries and bramble. For the first time today, I turn on my phone. A couple of missed calls from Mum. There's also a text from Millie:

Rumour mill. Casey's spreading stuff about you. Really odd shit. What happened that Friday!!! Then another: *You coming over today. We need to talk. WTF are you?*

Before I can text back, Fergie emerges from indoors, stretches and lets out a loud yawn. "You still here?"

She moves towards me, fumbles for something in her pocket, hands me a fortune cookie, and sits on the ground. We both read the messages but don't share.

"Crap," she says. "I used to believe in all of it."

I tell her about my bucket list, about Millie and my search for my biological Dad. About Ian and Gina, and Casey and her boys. I think I will cry, but I don't. My hands are hot and moist. Fergie listens intently, rolls stones around on the ground. I speak quietly; my voice is steady and calm. "It's all I can think about. Making them pay for what they did," I say.

When I glance up, I realise she is looking straight at me, her chin resting on clasped hands. I expect her to ask many questions, but she doesn't. She stretches her legs, closes her eyes, throws

her head back, and is silent. I'm afraid she thinks I'm pathetic, a loser, a nutter. I place my hands under my bum, try to ignore my embarrassment, my awkwardness.

Then without opening her eyes, she says, "I'll come up with a plan."

Chapter 11

“Lock them in a room. Start a fire,” Fergie says. “It’ll be easy.”

I’m not sure what she means by ‘it’ll be easy’ but I nod.

She sits up, her back against the wall, and lights a fag. Her head tipped backwards, she breathes out fat smoke upwards. The smell of burnt tea leaves fills the air.

My gaze falls on her tits, shoulders, and neck. Flat-chested, sloped, and long. Her creamy skin marked by a tattoo. Then upward to her face. Smoking in her usual way; her expression, banal, bored. She runs a finger along her brow, laughs and coughs. Jerks her head forward, and splutters into a palm. When her fit subsides, she says, “I’m going to get another tattoo. We should get one together after the deed is done.”

She draws in breath, holds it in, and exhales. She holds out the joint. I hesitate, but take it. She watches me mimic her: inhale, exhale, and splutter. I try again. More splutters. She dissolves into laughter.

“Stub it out,” she says, taking a pair of clippers from her belt-bag, and starts clipping her toe-nails. “It’ll be easy once we get them in a room. Make sure they can’t escape. Light the place up.” She talks as if she’s describing a cheese-and-macaroni recipe. Or as if she’s telling me about a dress she bought for a party. I’ve only seen her in a dress three times. A knee-length onyx sweater dress, the khaki shirt-dress and the Lycra striped one.

I stay silent. I’m scared if I speak, I will mutate. Become that thing I never thought I was. Or could become.

“They brought this on themselves,” she says. “Dog-eat-dog and all ...”

She gathers her nail clippings into a palm, and goes outside.

“I think about my real Dad all the time,” I say, when she returns. She brushes her trousers down, removing ash or nail cuttings or both. “Millie and I have hit a brick wall. Tried Facebook and nothing.”

“Mums, Dads... so overrated,” she says. “Biological or otherwise.” She returns to lie next to me.

I feel myself welling up, but hold back the tears. I don’t want to cry. Not in front of Fergie. She places a hand on mine. “It’s alright,” she says, “just let me know when you’re ready. Let’s agree to this. If... when... you want the plan to go ahead, simply dye your hair purple.”

“I count squirrels,” I say. “Ever since my Dad left...”

“Weirdo,” she says, with a chuckle. She brushes her lips on my cheek. Dry, chapped and cold. “We’re such nutters,” she whispers; her breath, tinged with the fragrance of candy stick. “We’re the same – you and me...”

She rests her head on my belly. It’s as if she’s listening to the gurgles and growls. I feel myself tighten, self-conscious. But I like the feel of her body against mine. Limp, yielding, supple. We stay like that for a long time. At a point, I think she’s fallen asleep. Her breathing is ragged and muted. I decide against checking the time on my phone. A wasp buzzes around. It takes me a while to spot it. I’m tempted to get up and swat it. That would mean disturbing her. I remain still – an unmoving Banksy painting. Me, her, and the wasp

*

Mum’s homemade pizza is in the oven. She’s prepared a salad and is shaking tinned sweetcorn into the salad bowl. I graze on some grapes. Sweet, just as I like them. Millie’s Nana says grapes are good in preventing cancers. I’m not sure how true that is. Hattie comes into kitchen and hands me a large piece of card. It’s the project she’s been working on. A board game. A chameleon child is trapped in an island full of a colony of flying-foxes, and Pipistrelle, the hero, has to find a way through each quadrant to save the chameleon child.

“That’s very imaginative, Hattie,” I say, taking note of the four quadrants: phantoms, waterfalls, a lighthouse, and magical beasts. “We should have a go at the game when you’re done.”

She goes to show Mum her work. “Not now, Hattie,” she says, “I’ll have a look after dinner.”

Hattie skips out of the room singing a tune.

“Mum,” I say, “I really want to try and find my Dad.”

She stops what she’s doing, and says, “Is that what’s been bothering you? You haven’t seemed yourself for a while now.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about him?”

“Not much really. You are a lot like him.”

“Why isn’t he looking for me?”

“He really wasn’t the settling type,” she says. “He never wanted children.”

“Maybe he’s changed his mind.”

The phone rings and Mum goes to the living room. She isn’t long. I’m still chewing on grapes when she comes back.

“That was Ian,” she says. “Trying to arrange for you and Hattie to go down next half-term.”

“Do I have to go?” I say. “After all, he is Hattie’s Dad?”

“What’s brought all this on,” she says. “You’ve always had a good relationship with Ian.”

I’m suddenly filled with anger. When was Ian going to tell Mum about Gina and how serious their relationship was getting. Last week, Hattie almost let it slip, but I’d managed to guard his secret. I flinch at the strength of my emotions. I want to go to Fergie, but it’s too late.

“I could give you his last known address,” she says, checking the pizza, and turning the oven off. “He didn’t stay in touch long...” Mum looks tired, her cheeks flushed and she seems embarrassed.

“I need to try, Mum,” I say, getting up to set the table. “I need to try and find him.”

*

It's the last class of the day. Double Art. We've been painting our papier-mâché projects. Masks. Millie has gone for an African mask and I have created a Japanese one. Noah has designed a Mexican mask; lots of smudged reds with a greenish horn. My favourite is Kazia's; an Indian peacock mask painted in sapphire blue with a red tongue hanging out of its mouth. Genius.

The first bell rings. I watch Casey pack her things in her bag. The crumpled bit of paper falls to the floor and comes to rest under Casey's desk. She hesitates, picks it up.

I'd written: *Got something of yours. Want it back? Monks Cave after school.*

She swivels round. I look away, turn to the window. There are men working on scaffolding. They talk animatedly, mugs in hand. Mr Puttock stops in mid-flow.

"Casey, I need you seated and ready to be dismissed."

Casey mutters something, hides the note in her exercise book, and sits down. Mr Puttock wipes the whiteboard and writes down the homework for next week.

NKECHI

Chapter 1

“What the *fuck* am I doing?”

There was a time when the last place Nkechi wanted to be was in her own skin. She slows her breath down, splashes water on her clammy face, and tucks away a dreadlock. She peers at the mirror and says out loud, “I should’ve put some foundation on,” rubbing the puffiness around her eyes. The blemishes on her cheek and bloodshot eyes appear exaggerated. She roots around in her wash bag and retrieves a Vaseline tub. She dabs the jelly along her lips, uses some more to smooth down a fly-away strand. Her thirty-sixth birthday fast approaching and nothing planned. She sprays some deodorant, flushes the toilet, washes her hands, and holds them beneath the dryer. “What the *fuck* happened to me?” She shuts the door behind her and crosses the carpeted landing.

The room is bright and light and quiet.

Tasteful lemony cushions are scattered on the three armchairs arranged around a low oak and glass-topped table. It reminds her of the counselling room at the Woodbrooke Centre. Except, the smell is different. A hint of caramel and coffee. She wanders over to the wide bay windows, overlooking a stone church with a spire, and dark gravestones casting shadows in the churchyard. Tufts of grass gleam, a yellowy green, in the last spilling light. The stained glass window gives the effect of broken shard jewellery. A small bird flits across a wall and perches on the large pine tree.

A young thin woman pushes a buggy violently round the bend. Behind her, in the distance, a group of youths hang around a bench. One, on a bike; the rest on the bench smoking and laughing. On the far side, a woman dressed in a charcoal abaya floats by, pulling a small child along with her. They disappear behind a high wall.

“A drink – tea or coffee?” Mrs Claringbull pops her short perm through the door. For the first time, Nkechi notices her slight lisp. She has communicated with this woman three times in six

weeks. To make an appointment with Reverend Tobias. To cancel the appointment. To reschedule. All done via email.

“Coffee – white with two, please...”

Nkechi turns, moves toward an armchair and settles herself, placing a cushion on the carpeted floor. She tucks her handbag against her thigh, then shifts it and places it beside a foot. Her thumbs drum on her lap.

Mrs Claringbull, in a modest blouse tucked into a flared skirt, returns with two mugs and a selection of biscuits: chocolate digestives, custard creams, and garibaldi. She puts the tray down. She rises, straightens her glasses on waif-like ears.

“Tobias will be with you shortly.”

Nkechi nods, and collects a mug. It needs more sugar. She decides against a biscuit.

To disclose or not? She won't disclose. Unless, of course, it comes up. Maybe she can avoid it somehow. Avert it in some way. Lie even? Another voice from deep within her conscience interrupts. There was no way she could justify an outright lie. Maybe it wouldn't come up. Undecided, Nkechi takes a garibaldi. And another.

Four garibaldi later, a gaunt and smiling Reverend Tobias, in a pale blue shirt and tan Chinos, enters.

“Ah, N-kechi – sorry to have kept you...” he says, extending a hand.

Nkechi doesn't correct the mispronunciation. She half-rises; takes and releases his narrow, cold hand; knocks her handbag over with the movement. She hadn't expected him to be over six-foot.

“Please do have a seat. I hope you found us alright. The journey comfortable?” he rattles out, arranging papers on the table. He sits down and crosses his long limbs.

The circular route of the 11C bus journey had been uneventful. She’d had plenty of thinking time. In the seat in front of her, two niqabbed women spoke in hushed, fast-paced Arabic. Halfway along the journey, a young feline-looking boy with a tattoo on his neck and stretched ear lobes had plonked himself beside her. She looked out of the window, watched the world roll past. Whether she should disclose or not – revolved in her mind like the *he loves me/he loves me not* game she had played as a child.

“So, a vocation as a priest?” He uncrosses attenuated legs. “Please don’t worry. Any notes I make are to jog my memory.” The two-day old beard softens his angular features. His eyelashes, whitish grey, are long and full; giving them a feminine quality. The cold-sore on the corner of his lip is drying out.

“Should we start at the beginning?” he prompts.

Her gaze sinks into his intelligent eyes, flecked with gold.

“What led you on this path?” He says, tapping the pen on the pad.

Nkechi sinks deeper into the armchair. She doesn’t know where to start. She is nervous that somehow this man of God will detect her sin. Her shame. There was no sugar-coating the truth. No, she wouldn’t say anything about living with HIV. Only answer the questions put to her.

“We used to live next to a nun once. From the window I would watch her taking early morning walks around the neighbourhood. To pray, I think. She always seemed so serene. And, I always thought that I’d like to have some of what she had.” Nkechi pauses, clasps her hands. “All right maybe I was never cut out to be a nun, but that desire to serve God in a particular way was there.”

“And, the call to priesthood,” he stops writing, “how did that crystallise?”

Nkechi knew this question would come up, but when it came to it, it was quite hard to articulate. “Not quite Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus. More a dawning realisation that this is the path I feel God wants me to explore.”

Nkechi watches his pen scratching the pad, and continues:

“...while doing so many other things. I’ve had a number of jobs: a Chiroprapist’s PA, a receptionist at a Vet’s. I even worked at a bar for a while. Then there was the door-to-door sales work which was bloody awful...” She laughs at the memory.

“You say you were thirty?”

“That’s right! It’s been on my mind for six years...” she pauses. “I began this process of exploration some years back. At the time, I was working as an administrator and training to be a counsellor. Before –” She inhales, feels the embarrassment heating her cheeks.

I can’t disclose. I’m not ready to. I can’t say it.

“Before...?”

“Before I received an HIV diagnosis.” She exhales. The words stumble out, as if with a mind of their own. She licks her lips. Breathes. With the back of a hand, dabs the sweat on her brow.

She remembers. Two years prior to diagnosis she’d had various bouts of illness. Shingles. Glandular fever. General feelings of malaise. She’d made countless trips to the GP. And he had referred her to a whole host of specialists at the QE. Examination after examination revealed nothing sinister. In the midst of all the toing-and-froing from doctor to doctor, she kept working as an administrator. Some days were harder than others.

Her health weakened. She was no longer able to change the duvet cover – too heavy, too cumbersome. Puffed and out-of-breath, she resorted to placing a sheet above the quilted comforter and falling into a sweat-soaked sleep. She moved from the upstairs bedroom to the downstairs living room. Every evening, she worked up enough strength to fill up her hot water bottle, laid it on aching limbs. Within easy reach: a jug of water, packets of paracetamol and an NIV pocket Bible, though God seemed far away.

Daylight hours, filled with work-place monotony, she staved off the need to lie down by taking a lot of breaks. She walked through the high-ceilinged open-plan office with a scattering of motivational posters on whitish walls, and made a B-line for the elevators that would take her to the green courtyard. She avoided the gaze of colleagues; not wanting them to query her bleary eyes which suggested an all-night drunken binge. She requested to move desks, to the cubicle positioned between the door and window. She needed easy access to the toilet. Her request was granted with little fuss. On diminished health, she worked flat out, refused to give rise to questions. She was fine. Or would be when she got home.

After an eight-hour day, back at home, she fell into bed until the next morning. Rising only to piss, shit or put the kettle on. Flat on her back, the walls dulled and brightened and dulled again. The window shrank and expanded. The branches outside transformed into flailing hands caught in a tidal wave. The darkness took different shapes; at times human, at times demon. Even the silence spoke, sang, hummed and threatened. More tired in the mornings, she was never quite sure if she'd even slept. And so in the end, she'd gone for the test.

Then, there was that last phase of illness before the diagnosis. Another bout of shingles. The pain across the left side of her chest so acute she thought she'd pass out. Another test was scheduled. This time, at Heartlands. And, the doctor, an unassuming man in his fifties, examined her neck. Jawline visibly tensed, he insisted she take an HIV test, there and then. 'Let's rule that out,

before we go any further' he'd said, as his vitiligo fingers tapped at his computer keyboard. It was only then, she saw the same patchwork of vitiligo on the back of his neck — reminding her of the albino who lived in her grandparents' compound in Umugbede. The nurse who took her blood, a heavy-set woman from Zimbabwe, chatted non-stop about her recent visit to Zim as she extracted enough blood for seven vials. Such an expensive trip. The cost of living is impossible. Imagine how much a head of yam is these days. Nkechi nodded through the numbness. A week later she was back for the results. The wait in the waiting room hadn't been long, before she was called into a small consultation room. Nkechi's gaze moved from the cactus plant, to the box of ribbed condoms, to the brown eyes of the health adviser. 'It's positive' she'd said through thin lips, in a matter-of-fact way. 'There's life after an HIV diagnosis' she'd added, handing Nkechi a tissue. When Nkechi got home, she spent three days in bed and allowed the tears to fall and fall and fall.

The movement on the pad stops momentarily, and their eyes meet.

It returns in jagged sketchy lines.

Nkechi fixes her gaze on his cold sore. His noncommittal expression reveals nothing. He eventually looks up; eyes encourage her to go on.

"It shattered me... the diagnosis... a real curve-ball... shook my world." She stops to smother the threatening sobs. "Life stopped for a long while."

He hands her a box of tissues.

"You're on antiretroviral therapy?" he asks.

She looks at him with surprise; her clenched fists relax with relief that he is not shocked.

"I'm involved with a group of people living with HIV here in Birmingham," he says, "For some years now I've also been travelling out to Swaziland to help out with an HIV project."

“I was put on medication right away. My CD4 was well below two hundred... and viral load in the thousands,” Nkechi says.

“How are things now?”

“Better! Much better. It’s incredible what modern medicine can manage these days,” she stops again; takes in his pockmarked chin and salt-pepper hair.

“Going back to your sense of calling? What prompted you to come forward again?”

“I’m in a healthier place,” she says. “Recently, a girl I was counselling died. It’s made me rethink everything...” her voice trails away.

“Oh?”

“She was only fourteen,” Nkechi continues. “I guess her death gave me the kick up the proverbial I needed. So here I am.”

“And the counselling? Are you still doing that?”

“The whole situation has been pretty crazy. An investigation is under way and her files have been confiscated. They’re trying to work out if her death was accidental or suicide. I’m still working as a counsellor part-time. I can’t afford not to earn.”

“Going back to the HIV...”

Nkechi rubs the back of her neck, squeezes her shoulders to stretch out the tightness. She wants to get up, to go to the window, to not talk about it anymore.

“Yes?”

“What support do you have? What I’m asking is... how are you being looked after emotionally?”

He was the fourth person she'd told.

Her best friend, Ardella. Her sister, Rosie. Her therapist, Natalie. And now Reverend Tobias. Should she mention she had a therapist? That she'd been on Prozac for three months. She rises, walks to the window, and enjoys the embrace of the silence. Outside, the light has faded. The street lamps and spotlights around the church give an ethereal ebb.

"My sister knows..." She says, without turning, plays with an earlobe, wonders what sort of wife he is married to. "My parents don't."

"Ah...?"

"They're getting on a bit," she sighs. "I'm not sure they would forgive me."

She frowns. Hears her father's recriminations of failure and disobedience. Sees her mother's expression, bulging with pity. She re-ties the scarf around her neck, and watches a largish boy cycle past. "I'm operating on a 'needs to know' basis," she shrugs, "And, anyway, we've never had that kind of relationship."

He places the pen on the pad, sits back into the chair, says nothing.

"It's been a bereavement. But, I've come through the other side," Nkechi says.

"You've been so candid with me. Thank you. I'm sure it can't have been easy." He pauses, strokes his stubble. "Perhaps I'll explain how the process works. We could then discuss where we go from here. If you have any questions at the end, you'll have the opportunity..." He gets up and goes to draw the curtains.

"Right..." Nkechi says.

“Normally you’d be allocated a Vocations Advisor. But in your case, and because of your particularities, it may be that I support you through this process.” He pauses, as if making a decision in that moment. “We would meet a few times over the course of the year. To give us an opportunity to get to know each other and reflect on the nine vocations criteria. I’ll give you a leaflet outlining the expectations of each criterion –”

He breaks for breath. Nkechi is conscious of the sweat rising on her brow.

“A recommendation would be made to the Bishop’s Advisory Panel, if I thought you suitable for ordained ministry. Fondly known as BAP,” he chuckles at this. “BAP is a three day selection process. The panel makes a decision, based on what they discern during the course of the weekend, on whether to recommend you to train for priesthood or not...”

“That’s when theological training commences?” Nkechi says, aware of a sharp pain lodged at the bottom of her spine. Possibly a result of the spin class she did yesterday. It’d been hard going, her body reluctant. Yet she’d pushed herself. Since her last three-monthly visit to Heartlands, she’d been working hard on establishing a more consistent exercise routine, especially as her cholesterol level (of the bad kind, Doctor Harrison had said) was high again. She really did need to get back into her running.

“That’s right. When you’re recommended, training would start. Two years. Then ordination. Time-frame from this conversation to beginning at a theological institution can take anything from eighteen months to two years.”

“I’d be interested in training part-time, I think...” Nkechi says. “I’m not sure where yet.”

“There are a number of colleges you can choose from... still, we don’t have to make any major decisions just yet.”

“Sure...”

“Have you heard of the South African Anglican priest who openly lives with HIV?” Reverend Tobias asks suddenly. “Reverend Emmanuel Chipo.”

Nkechi shakes her head.

“If you like, I’ll locate his contact details and pass them on to you?” he says. “In the meantime, I suggest we start with a few reading recommendations. *Being a Priest Today. The Life and Work of a Priest.* You say you’re attending St Agnes...?”

“That’s correct...”

“Good! Immerse yourself in the church, and acquaint yourself with the way things work within the Church of England. We’ll meet again in a couple of months.”

He ruffles through his paperwork and hands her a leaflet. She scans it: *Criterion A: Vocation, Criterion B: Ministry within the Church of England, Criterion C: Spirituality, Criterion D: Personality and Character, Criterion E: Relationships.*

She lingers at the statement: Candidates must be willing to live within the discipline of Issues in Human Sexuality. Fuck, there was no way she was going to get through this process. She carries on: *Criterion F: Leadership and Collaboration, Criterion G: Faith, Criterion H: Mission and Evangelism, Criterion I: Quality of Mind.*

He takes a few more notes, schedules their next meeting, before Mrs Claringbull knocks on the door and announces his next appointment has arrived. Nkechi collects her handbag, rises and follows her out.

*

Nkechi lies on a hospital bed, her legs drawn up and her knees wide apart. Coolness fills her vagina, followed by a tingling. The brush sweeps around her cervix while the two nurses make small talk.

“What a tiny cervical os!” The colossal black nurse suddenly says to the older. “Have a look at that. See how tightly shut it is.” Her accent: choppy, east African.

The older nurse, dumpy and dour, moves in to look closely at Nkechi’s vagina.

Both are silent for some seconds. Nkechi stares at the frosted glass windows. It’s three months since Anna died. Willowy, pale and wide-eyed, Nkechi had been counselling her for a while now. She isn’t looking forward to the meeting she’s been asked to attend by the officials investigating Anna’s death.

“That *is* small. Mine would fit a whole load of washing, I’m sure...” the older nurse says, letting out a loud chortle.

“I’ve been told...” Nkechi says, forcing a smile.

It was the same routine: undress, arrange limbs in an unsightly angle, anticipate the speculum slide and slot into position, take a breath as icy steel meets warm moisture, listen to the gasps and comments of the nurses as they witness a supposedly non-existent cervical os.

“I hope we get enough of a sample...” The colossal black nurse says, diving again below Nkechi’s eye line. “I’m sure you’d rather not go through this again anytime soon.”

She hadn’t wanted to have this smear. Doctor Harrison had insisted; repeating people with HIV were more at risk. It had to be yearly. She hated it. It reminded her that she didn’t have kids. She’d always believed by this age she’d have two.

“That’s it.” She pulls off plastic gloves in one swoop. “All I need from you now is a signature.”

Nkechi signs and dates the form. She waits until the nurses have left the room. Hurriedly, she dresses: pulls up undies and jeans, buttons the red frilled blouse. The prescription Doctor Harrison had just issued at the HIV clinic next door falls to the floor. She picks it up, slips it into her coat pocket and checks her phone. Twenty-five to two. Impossible she's going to make her 2:15 dental appointment. At this time of the day, the traffic into Kings Heath would be a nightmare. She still had to go to the pharmacy at the main hospital site to collect her pills, and there was usually a wait. She wanders back down the corridors, still undecided as to whether to cancel her dental appointment.

She blanches when she re-enters the HIV clinic's waiting room. Sitting at the far corner, beside a silent flickering TV — Tolu.

He hasn't seen her. She stays hidden. Can she escape to the adjacent toilet, without being discovered?

Edging forwards, she stops. The toilet is occupied.

The pharmacist rushes past. Her expression suggests the children's clinic is exceptionally busy. Nkechi's stomach tenses. Hunger or pre-menstrual pains? She hadn't managed breakfast this morning. Though this week, she'd been stuffing down sizeable amounts of Snickers bars, banoffee pies and gingernuts. Such indulgences normally suggested her time of the month was just round the corner.

A nurse passes her; fair-skinned tallish woman with a clipped South African twang. Engrossed in a conversation with a patient, an impish man, her father would have thought was gay. They walk steadily towards the entrance of the G.U.M. clinic.

The toilet door opens and Nkechi dashes in. White on beige on white. Beige-and-honey tiled floors, porcelain surfaces, and the fragrance of anti-bacterial soap, bleach and Dettol. She props her

wrists against the sink, feels the dampness on her forehead. There is a strange sensation in her fingers. If it was him – why hadn't he told her? It couldn't be him. If he knew, he would have told her – right?

A knock on the door. Nkechi turns on the tap, lets it run. The staccato patter of heels fades. A part of her needs to know. But what if she is the one who passed it on to him? What if he is here because of her? When she was diagnosed, her CD4 had fallen to a critical level. She may have carried the virus for 3 to 7 years. She couldn't face Tolu. Not here. Not now.

There must be another way out of here. It meant going back through the G.U.M clinic. It was the only way out. She would have to call to book her next HIV appointment.

She walks the five hundred yards towards the main hospital. Zigzags between rows of cars in a busy parking lot. Her jacket catches the side mirror of a silver Renault. Underfoot, the gravelly sound of pebbles and stones. A malnourished cat disappears underneath a white Peugeot. Workmen climb up scaffolding outside the Diabetes clinic; below, machinery grinds and growls. A group of interns walk in a huddle, listening intently to a nicely groomed doctor – fifty-something woman with red hair. They walk at a leisurely pace. Nkechi passes a smoker's station. Two trim bottle-blondes puff on roll-ups and giggle at a newspaper article. A Mercedes toots. Nkechi jumps between two cars. It starts to rain – a warm earthy shower. Nkechi enters the main hospital and rides the escalator to the first floor.

She queues at the hospital pharmacy. Buttered popcorn fills the air. She makes the call to her dentist; cancels the appointment. After handing in her prescription, she wanders around the store and picks a few bits: toothpaste, toothbrush and interdentals. She asks the store assistant to check her Boots point card, offers up her debit card, and returns to the queue. She looks furtively over her shoulder, half-expecting Tolu to make an appearance.

She should have spoken to him. Said something. Anything. Fuck!

The wiry Asian lady with burn scars on her hands calls her to the counter. As she speaks, a waft of garlic and cumin and pepper.

“I’m sorry we don’t have the amount of the Nevrapine you require.” She scans the prescription again, “If you’re happy... we can post it out to you.”

“That’s fine...” Nkechi says, glancing around.

“I’ll need your signature here...”

“How long is the wait for the rest?”

“A few minutes,” she says, “I need to label them.”

Nkechi watches her disappear into a side room behind the glass screen. An elderly man, in a wheelchair, with a wild cough arrives. Each fit causes his cheeks to redden. Nkechi moves away from him, almost tripping over a chair.

“Careful...” an assistant says, touching her elbow gently.

She takes the escalator down to the café.

People are milling around, waiting in queues, or sitting in pairs or family groups, having a late meal or snack. Toasted paninis, curries on rice and jacket potatoes. A Taylor Swift tune. A Chinese child flaps round in circles with a toy plane. A sumo-sized pregnant lady puffs her way to a corner seat. Another queue. Nkechi can’t be bothered, resists a cappuccino.

She returns to the pharmacy. The Asian lady calls her to confirm her address for a second time. She goes through the medication instructions. Nkechi places the bulky brown package into a Sainsbury’s eco-bag and heads off.

At the top of the escalator, she freezes. Tolu is at a table by the pillar. His head buried in a newspaper. An Emile Sande tune. He strokes his chin, picks up a cup. His mobile rings. On the table: his wallet on a prescription form. He answers. Laughter – a cirrus shaped sound. His head bops up and down. He throws his head back and lets out another weighty laugh. The Chinese child weaves around Tolu, the pillar, and two squat policemen.

Nkechi imagines he is en-route to Boots. To collect his supply? Maybe she's got it all wrong. There must be a way of finding out which doesn't involve confronting him.

She was ready to accuse, but she wasn't ready to be accused. How many people had she infected? She had no clue. What if someone came after her – searching for answers, accusing her? Would it be enough that she hadn't knowingly infected anyone? When she had initially found out about her HIV, she had wanted to know who infected her. Felt it was her right. She refused to have a relationship. It wasn't that she didn't want a partner, she simply wasn't prepared to disclose to potential partners. Couldn't bear to tell the story.

Chapter 2

Nkechi, at the window, weaves her thin dreadlocks into a chunky braid. She twists bulked lengths into a bun, piled high on her head. Moving to the dresser, she collects several pins to secure the mass. Reminiscent of Marge Simpson or an African balancing a water jug. She'd been transfixed by this sight when visiting her grandparents – all dead now – in Umugbede. Twelve pins. She decides against a scarf and returns to the window.

The two garden gnomes with identical hats sparkle with last night's rain. Nkechi hates early starts. Especially on a Saturday. Even as a child she'd struggled with mornings; diving deeper under the duvet when her mother bellowed she'd be late for school. Seven o'clock. Michael, her driving instructor, was due in an hour. Enough time for breakfast. Muesli, toast topped with peanut butter and apple slices, and a steaming mug of coffee. She returns to the dresser, takes three pills and downs them with sparkling water.

Some days she forgot the disease completely. She'd moved on from being sick, to simply dealing with it, managing it. She hadn't felt sick in ages. The antiretrovirals worked. Within weeks of taking the meds, a regime that had taken her months to get used to, she'd begun to feel better. Years of fighting off what had started out as mild flu-like symptoms, which developed into general myalgia, and deteriorated into painful lengthy spells of debilitating fatigue and night sweats — gone. At the peak of her illness, confined to bed for hours at a time, at the worse of it, Nkechi had devised a pain-o-meter. A scale scoring her levels of discomfort and pain at any given hour of the day. Always there, the pain never left her. At times she willed herself to die. Though now she no longer remembered how it felt – really felt, to be in that much pain. If I were a dog, I'd be put down, she lamented to Ardella, her best-friend. They'd met at a social anthropology lecture at the University of Birmingham. It had been a boring talk, delivered by a professor dressed in a waistcoat and a bow-tie. Afterwards, Ardella and Nkechi had gone for a drink at one of the campus bars.

Thankfully, it hadn't come to that. It felt good to be able to do the mundane again. To both-er with hair and make-up. Walk down the stairs. Make breakfast. Eat breakfast. Take a phone call from Ardella (they were meeting up for lunch later that day). It felt good to enjoy the house she rented from a bullish Bangladeshi couple. The two-bedroom terrace on Springfield Road. When she had started feeling better, she painted the bedroom and living room in a mushroom blue. She bought new bedding, a rug and large antique mirror. It was as if she needed to rid the place of sickness. A cleansing of sorts. And suddenly she was buying fresh flowers every week for the kitchen and living room. And it felt good to start back with her driving lessons.

The doorbell rings.

Michael, stocky, dressed in his usual khaki slacks and long-sleeved shirt, rolled up to his elbows, says, "Ready?"

Nkechi picks up her handbag, slips on her glasses, and follows him out.

*

Another failed attempt. Her excuse – the murky rain, the angry clouds. For months now Nkechi has been determined to restart her exercise routine. Every morning she wills her body to respond to the alarm clock. Set at seven, she hadn't managed a run yet. The last time she'd kept a fitness schedule was before her diagnosis. Her life had become defined by the phrases 'before diagnosis' and 'after diagnosis'. Before, she usually went for a run three times a week – for thirty or forty minutes – depending on other commitments. Every other week, she pushed herself hard and went for a longer distance along the canals.

Another bite of a muffin. Chocolate with hazelnut chunks. Then another.

Maybe if she signs up for a 5K it would inspire a return to fitness. It would give her the kick-start she needed to regain her old form. She switches on the Mac. Listens to it groan. Waits. Until it comes to life. She surfs the Running Bee website. Two races take her fancy, the Cannon Hill and Solihull 5K. Both offer a 10K but that's simply too ambitious. With several clicks, she makes a payment of fifteen pounds. Twelve weeks to get herself in shape for the Cannon Hill race. Twelve weeks to shift the padding around her belly and buttocks.

She takes another bite of muffin. Note to self – training starts next Saturday irrespective of weather.

Perhaps Ardella could be roped in. Not that eight-and-a-half stone Ardella needed to lose any excess bulges. To think the weight had been shed so easily during her illness. She'd dropped four dress sizes. At the time, she'd even joked with Ardella that the one good thing about all this was losing all the weight.

*

Fifteen minutes late. Ardella is always late. Nkechi asks for a glass of water just as Ardella steps into Ponte di Legno. An angular Kenyan-Asian, she shakes off her brollie, tottering on leopard heels, with a large magenta handbag on her shoulder. She waves as she walks.

"Always tardy by fifteen," she says, and gives Nkechi a peck on both cheeks. She takes a seat and retrieves a mirror from her bag, checks her face, before patting down her hair.

"Just threaded my eyebrows," she says. "Thoughts?"

"Looks super..." Nkechi says, addressing: green contact lenses, a pout for lips, and a bird-head birthmark above her left cheekbone. There is a Masai elegance to her features, although in places she is far too knobbly and sharp. An ample man with a wide holdall brushes past and Ardel-

la's elbow slips off the table edge. She glares, tosses the mirror back into her bag, and picks up a menu.

“So, what's the goss – hun?”

Nkechi smiles at this signature opening line.

“Let's order first,” Nkechi says, scanning the menu again. “Thought I'd go for the lasagne, but maybe not.”

“The anchovy and tuna for me –” Ardella says, sweeping thinning hair over her right shoulder.

“Seafood linguini for me, I think –” Nkechi says. “Yes, best to go for the healthier option.”

They place their orders and the waitress walks off. A hint of scallop and garlic in the air, Nkechi overhears the conversation from the neighbouring table. Students. Heavily accented. Spanish or Italian. The taller, the less animated of the two, pierces an olive with a toothpick, dips it in olive oil, and places it delicately in her mouth. The curvier, more confident woman is speaking:

“He wasn't even a student...” she says, gestures wildly.

“Really –”

“Living in the basement of Halls for a whole term and no one suspected anything.”

“Really? Nothing?”

“Didn't you notice how he just disappeared...” she laughs – a delicate plume.

“My God – I thought he went back to the States. I haven't seen him for weeks. He's normally always around...”

“No, he wasn’t even a student. But he was found out...” She burps, excuses herself, and says. “Apparently, he was Canadian... not American, imagine that.”

“What’s going on with you, hun...” Ardella asks again, drawing Nkechi’s attention back to the table.

“Popped in for my three monthly visit at Heartlands...”

“Uh-huh?”

“You won’t believe who I bumped into...” Nkechi scratches a sudden itch on her nose. Ardella raises an eyebrow, takes a bite of her salad.

“Tolu... Well, I say ‘bumped into’...” Nkechi says.

“Your Tolu?” Ardella retrieves a tissue from her handbag and blows her nose. “And?”

“I was shocked,” she says. “It took me by surprise, seeing him there.”

“What did you say to him? What did he say?”

“I didn’t... he didn’t...”

“What?” Ardella says.

The wiry waitress, hair hung loosely in a ponytail, returns with a tray. She places the plates on the table, and pours the bottle of wine into their glasses, before moving on to the next order – a business party of four. The black guy catches Nkechi’s glance and reveals a set of nicotine stained teeth. Nkechi looks away.

“I hid. Humiliating, I know. But that’s what I did. Like a pathetic idiot, I hid in the toilet.” Nkechi says, allows the embarrassment to pass. “I mean, what if...? I just couldn’t face him.”

Tolu had been a fast and furious affair. It lasted eight months. They met at an end-of-year party. An I.T. teacher, he refused to bind himself to a mortgage. Refused to drive a manual car. Refused to give in to his ex-wife over their daughter's visitation rights. Following an argument over an office party – Nkechi hadn't invited him to an end-of-year work's do, even though partners were allowed – in a matter of hours, their relationship had gone from discussing a possible future to a full-stop. In Nkechi's mind, it felt like an excuse to end things. It came the day after she mentioned she was fed up with the endless court dates, phone calls from his ex, and never-ending conversations about increasing visitation rights. She was tired of playing third-fiddle to his ex and his daughter.

Ardella scoops salad into her mouth, places the fork down again, dabs the corners of her lips with a napkin.

"I didn't know what to say. How do I confront him about it? I mean, he could have been there for a different reason. After all, it's not just an HIV clinic. It's other infectious diseases as well..." Her voice lowers at the utterance of 'HIV' and 'infectious diseases'.

"I see!" Ardella's brows dip in a V. "Right –" she repeats, picking out cucumbers and placing them on a side plate, before tucking into another forkful of salad. Ardella's eating habits were bizarre. Once Nkechi had watched her pick off sweetcorn from a tuna sweetcorn salad mix. Another time, Ardella picked off mushrooms in a mushroom and chicken pie. "I'd have spoken to him," she says.

Outside, the May showers have started again. The tarmac shimmers an oily black. A workman in a fluorescent jacket and a yellow hard hat walks by, an ear pressed against a phone. A languid lady in a turquoise coat leads a dog wearing a coat across the road. They pause on the other side. The dog sniffs around a yew tree, a sign advertising the Farmers Market attached to it. They

carry on. A lanky man with a laptop bag walks into the Bull's Head. A homeless man, balled like a snail, is asleep on a bench in St Mary's Square.

The sudden rumble of a coffee machine draws Nkechi back. A sleeping baby wrapped in a polka-dot blanket is being wheeled out in a push chair.

"What would you have said?" Ardella asks.

"It was strange seeing him there. I wouldn't have known where to start," Nkechi shrugs.

"Is it him?"

"No idea," she shrugs again. "It could be, couldn't it? But then it could be me," Nkechi lowers her forehead into a palm, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

Another wave of silence sweeps over them.

"Do you want to know?" Ardella asks, running fingers through dark tresses.

"It's not that simple. Sure, a part of me would like to know. But –"

"But?"

"Perhaps its irrelevant. After all, it doesn't change anything," her voice falls to a hush again. "I've slept with quite a few people over the last couple of decades. I'm not sure I fancy the idea of trawling that history."

The two fall silent again. How was she ever going to discuss the ins-and-outs of these sexual encounters with Reverend Tobias? There's no condemnation in Jesus Christ – or so the Bible says. She felt damned.

"Everyone's got a past..." Ardella interrupts her thoughts.

Nkechi had read a Facebook post recently: Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future.

“I guess what I’m saying is, though I’ve calmed down loads in the last five years, I’ve been far from an angel. I want to know. But equally I’m terrified at the thought of being confronted or accused,” Nkechi says.

“No harm in giving him a call,” Ardella says, retrieving her mirror, checking her make-up again.

“Tolu –” Nkechi asks absent-mindedly.

“Yes, Tolu,” she says, applying some blusher. “Either way it would be good to eliminate him from the list.”

There were lots of good memories with Tolu. Times when they relaxed and enjoyed each other’s company. The walks around Cannon Hill Park; social events at various venues in the Custard Factory; day trips to Tewkesbury and Cheltenham; and a first Christmas where they spent an entire day cooking a turkey and pheasant that could have filled the stomachs of a small Nigerian village. A smile tugs her lips at the memory. But none of it had been enough. His mother got involved, through several phone calls and Skype chats from Lagos. Over crackling lines, lengthy conversations ensued, punctuated by awkward silences. In the end, Nkechi decided the courtroom war with his ex-partner wasn’t her fight. For all their declarations of love, it hadn’t taken either of them long to move on. Not once did she miss his slender fingers, the tribal scar on his temple, or the way he begged repeatedly for her, before climax, to touch his nipple.

“I’m not sure which is worst,” Nkechi says, as Ardella rises and heads for the Ladies. “The knowing or not knowing.”

*

Ten days later, Nkechi sits at the kitchen table in front of her laptop. She decides against making another cup of tea when the phone rings three times.

“Hello...”

“Nkechi? Tolu here...”

Nkechi catches her breath. Her heart races. She glances at the clock. Four o’clock on a breezy Wednesday afternoon. Three school-age children, in shorts and T-shirts and trainers, glide past the window on skateboards.

“I hope you don’t mind me tracking you down...”

“No, no – of course not,” Nkechi says. “It’s been a long while...”

“How are things?”

“Fine...”

“Really?”

Fuck! Did he know? Had he seen her at Heartlands? Impossible! “Yes, fine – really,” Nkechi says, “You?”

He laughs – a rich apricot sound. “I’m good. I’ve missed you.”

Nkechi says nothing.

“Can we meet up?” Tolu says.

“Meet up?”

“To talk,” he says. “Catch up on old times.”

Fuck! She wasn’t ready to have this conversation. Let alone meet with him. Fuck!

“I need to talk to you.” There is an urgency in his voice — brittle and bold.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“It’s important.”

“Sure. Tell me where and when.” The words come out strained, strangled.

“Friday. Seven. Let’s meet at the Bull’s Head.”

Nkechi nods, mutters, “Fine, see you then!” She hangs up first, collects the laundry basket — a mixed load of cotton. She loads the washing machine, and turns the knob to eco-run.

*

The car alarm cuts through her. She jumps, pauses momentarily outside the Bull’s Head. The lamp lights glow dimly in the darkening sky. She enters the pub. He is already at the bar — watching and waiting.

She lets him kiss her. On each cheek. The familiar Versace cologne. The ruddy lips. Has he put on weight? His haircut gives him a youthful appearance, although the neat beard he’s grown since they last met gives him a reverent air.

“Let’s find seats...” he says.

She ignores the niggle in her molar — a loose filling, and allows her heels to trail his boots. They settle for a corner table, on the other side of the Male toilets, overlooking the beer garden. Too nippy to be outdoors. A John Legend tune. The instrumental reminds Nkechi of a lad she kissed at a school disco. For the life of her she can’t recall his name.

He heads to the counter to order their drinks — a glass of white for her, a pint of ale for himself.

“How are things with you?” he asks when he returns.

“Not bad,” she says. “You and Skye?”

“She’s growing. I think she’s going to be as tall as her father.”

A group of twenty-somethings stumble in loudly. They head straight to the bar. For the first time, Nkechi notices a couple; though they could pass for brother and sister. The girl reminds her of Anna – delicate with heavily made-up eyes. They talk in quiet tones, listening intently to each other. The girl reaches forward and he takes her hands in his.

“So, what’ve you been up to since *us*?”

“Did a counselling course,” she says. “I work as a part-time counsellor now.”

“You were always good at listening to other people’s problems.” He adds, “I know it was no picnic being with me. All that agro with Skye and that bitch...”

“How are things now?”

“I get to see Skye every other weekend. Not where I’d hoped things would be by now. But it’s progress. From hourly supervised visits every few months... we’ve come a long way.”

“A crazy time...”

“Pure evil,” he says, shaking his head. “She put me through hell.”

Nkechi stays quiet. She doesn’t want to fuel his irritation.

She takes in the old-fashioned décor of the pub. Beatles paraphernalia. Copper pots and pans hang upside down. Rows and rows of empty liquor bottles. All manner of vintage radios and cameras dotted around. A Bee Gees’ tune. Staying Alive.

“I’ve missed us...” Tolu says, licking his lower lip.

Touch my nipple. Touch my nipple. She hasn’t missed him or his nipples. She sips her wine.
Too dry.

“I went to Lagos a couple of months ago,” he says.

“Oh –”

“My feet hardly touched the ground at Heathrow when I fell ill,” he says. “Naturally, I thought it was malaria. It wasn’t...”

“Oh –”

Nkechi wipes her palms on her denim.

“I was sick as a goat...” he says. “You won’t believe it, but I was ill with TB.”

“TB?” Nkechi feels short of breath. She wants to excuse herself to the bathroom but her jaw refuses to produce any words.

“That’s not the worst of it,” Tolu says – breaking their gaze to watch Anna’s lookalike and boyfriend rise up from their benches, put on matching leather jackets and leave the pub. “The doctor at Heartlands advises I take an HIV test.”

Nkechi’s saliva sours. She needs to get away.

“It’s been a nightmare. Making the decision to take the test. I’m not sure what to do,” Tolu says.

“Oh –”

“I’ve spent the week writing down a list of all the girls I’ve been with...”

A toothy youth, with acne and dank hair, clears the empty beer bottles on the table. A glass topples and liquid runs off the table. A string of apologies follow, he rushes off, and returns with a cloth. He wipes the table in hasty circular motions. “Sorry,” he says, and retreats.

“I’m not sure I can do the test.” Tolu places both hands on his head.

Fuck! She had to say something. This was her opportunity. *Fuck!*

“Tolu...”

Maybe he hears her panic. Maybe he sees the sweat beads running down her temples. But he gestures – he wants to carry on.

“I don’t mean to worry you,” he says. “I just needed someone to talk to. It’s driving me crazy.”

For the first time, since they’ve sat down, Nkechi allows her shoulders to slacken. She stills the tap-tap of her fingers.

“Should I get in another round?”

Nkechi nods – exhales when he leaves.

A tubby man with yellow hair heads to the jukebox. Definitely single and still living with his parents, Nkechi thinks. He scratches his head while spinning the song-wheel. Finally he pops three coins into the slot. Kicks it once. And begins to sway to the Cure’s Just Like Heaven.

Tolu returns.

“The reason I called...” he says as he hands her a drink, and tears open a packet of nuts.

“None for me...” Nkechi says, with a wave of her hand.

“As I was saying, the reason I tracked you down was to...” he pauses. “To talk this HIV stuff through with you, but also to ask if you wanted to give us another go. Pick up where we left off.”

The way *us* rolls off his tongue. Nkechi rotates the wine glass in a clockwise direction, watches the liquid swish, lets his words sink in.

“After the scare I’ve had, it’s made me realise just how important you were – *are* to me.” He takes another handful of nuts and chomps noisily.

That was Tolu all over. Assured that they could just pick up where they’d left off. An arrogance that came with being the only child of a wealthy Lagos property developer.

“Will you at least think about it?”

“Nothing to think about, Tolu. Our moment passed – don’t you think?”

“I know I was a real fool with all that nonsense with Skye and my ex. But as I’ve said, things have settled, and –”

She wants to scream: I’ve been sick for a fucking long time. I’m living with HIV. I’m fucked off with the prick who gave me this shit. In fact, I thought it might be you. It most likely isn’t, but I certainly don’t want to date you again. I’ve got a whole load of other shit to deal with. And being in a relationship is not high on my priorities. So, no – I don’t want to ‘pick up where we left off’.

“Tolu, I can’t. Things have changed for me,” she manages in a tiny voice, as she gets to her feet. “I’m just going to freshen up.”

Chapter 3

The smear you had performed is inadequate... needs to be repeated in three months. The sweat pours off Nkechi's face as her feet work the pedals. Shoulders jerk left to right. She pushes down hard with her heels. Lifts her knees up. Slams down hard again. A Madonna song. A whiff of amonia. Her legs go fast – faster still. Teeth gritted: she wonders if her heart might give up. Out of the saddle. Weight straddles from side to side. The instructor calls for the knob to go up. Eyes blink at the disco-ball light effects: luminous green, orange, white and green again. Another steep hill. The soles of her feet press down. Loreen's Euphoria. A tightness clamps round her thighs with each rotation. Breathing ragged, she forces her limbs to continue. Dinner with Mum and Dad at 7... must tell them about Reverend Tobias. *The smear you had performed is inadequate... needs to be repeated in three months.* She wipes her face, pushes forward, clenches her teeth, and flies.

After her workout and shower, she bumps into Reverend Tobias. Without his collar he looks different; reminds her of an airline pilot.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says, a smile warms his jade coloured eyes.

“Spinning,” Nkechi says, takes his hand. “Twice a week.”

“Ah! I'm off to the gym. For my workout.” He strokes his top lip. “I try and make it daily. My escape from the joys of ministry – if there is such a thing.” He chuckles – a low, raspy sound.

“Indeed...” Nkechi says again, checks her mobile.

“Looks like you're ready for a lie-down,” he says.

It had been a mistake having alcohol the night before. “I needed the exercise,” she says, “I'm sorry I'm going to have to dash – dinner with the parents –”

“Not a problem. Look forward to our next meeting.”

Nkechi smiles; zips up her sweatshirt. “It still feels slightly surreal. Exploring ordained ministry, I mean. I feel a bit of an imposter.”

“We’ll take it at your pace,” he says. “One thing I’ve learnt over the years is that God’s timing is usually right.” He lets out a deep throaty chortle and walks off with an enthusiastic wave.

*

Nkechi arrives at the house she grew up in. A detached five-bed Victorian in Solihull. The tree-lined building seems smaller with every visit. Not often — four or five times a year. The garden: trim and tidy, a splattering of summer flowers decorates the circumference of green on green. Mr Sherrard’s handiwork. Well into his eighties, he wore a hearing aid and was blind in his left eye. Instructions had to be repeated several times at shouting level. Nkechi cuts round the side of the house, avoids the pebbled pathway, and goes round the back, to the patio. She enters the open French doors.

Plantains. Jollof rice. Stock fish. Goat. Each scent reminds Nkechi of a distorted childhood. Smells she craved when she boarded at Queen’s Park School. Aromas she longed for every half-term and Easter vacation. Her parents were abroad at the time. Her father: a Petroleum Engineer. Her mother: a housewife. Her father’s work had taken him to all seven continents. Brazil, Norway, South Africa. Every couple of years saw them in a different place. Canada, Malaysia, India. The constant for Nkechi during Christmas and summer holidays spent in unfamiliar lands was her mother’s home cooking. Crayfish, ogbono soup and gari. On her school bunk bed she often daydreamed: imagined her fingers shaping the gari into marble-size balls – perfectly moulded – dipped into a vegetable soup before swallowing. Five years in a church school on the Welsh borders and her defining memories: the dull ache that came from missing home-cooked meals; being trapped in a trunk box; during a midnight feast jumping off her top bunk, knocking six boater hats and crushing them underfoot; and the God-awful school uniform — brown capes, brown skirts, brown ties. On

brown skin, she resembled a brown penguin. Bloody awful! And, of course, Mrs Tolkien, the headmistress, an unpleasant Margaret Thatcher lookalike who reeked of vinegar and terrified most with her officious and no-nonsense lilt.

She remembers her boarding days. Fragments, teased embers of long-lost thoughts. The boy, she and her dorm mates had dragged up from the grave, through a Ouija séance – his birth and death marked on a crumbling gravestone in the Parish church at the centre of the school. Pushed off the school tower, ten when he died. Nkechi hadn't slept for a week after his manifestation – where an upturned glass cup dashed between letters, spelling out his fate. The whole encounter had scared her silly. At night she heard voices and on one occasion, saw a mug travelling unaided across the length of the dorm. She swore never to involve herself in such games again. The spells in sick bay – usually brought on by homesickness. The red-faced bloated matron – who acted as nurse, housekeeper, warden, and spy – would place a hand on Nkechi's forehead (as she did with any other child who made an appearance in her sick bay), and arranged her face in a displeased fashion; as if to say: I don't appreciate these trivial interruptions in my day. Her lifeless eyes shifting as her jaw tensed with irritation and boredom. Then she'd motion to the narrow bed with white starched sheets and say: 'An hour. Then we'll see how we go.' Matron believed water, an aspirin, and an hour's lie-down were the cure to everything and anything. Surprisingly, the statistics proved her right. Only once did Nkechi have three nights in the sickbed. Excused from all lessons, she lay tucked into the bed, the sheet and blanket drawn tightly below her chin.

Nkechi steps into the open plan living area, looks around. Not much changes year on year. A waft of mango-wood polish. She unbuttons her corduroy jacket and tosses it on the arm of the leather sofa. She drops her bag on the glass centre table, slips off her shoes and allows her feet to enjoy the soft shaggy carpet. She checks her dreads in the supersize mirror in the hallway.

“You’ve arrived.” Her mother reaches over for a kiss and returns to the pot she is stirring. Pots, pans and dishes are strewn along the kitchen worktops. It’s as if her mother is preparing for a wedding party. Or Sunday lunch.

Her mother coughs; adds a dash of pepper into the tomato stew. She uses her kitchen-hanky to wipe her face. Her mother has long given up the braids and weaves. In her late-sixties, she now sports a short Afro in the style of Maya Angelou. Her only concession is hair dye. At the moment, a warm auburn colour. Each year her shoulders slope and stoop more. Her once full-figure halved by age – though the curves on her hips seem reluctant to dissolve without a fight. Soft and sanguine by nature, over the years a steeliness has carved itself into her demeanour. No longer an eternal optimist — now a dreadful fatalist. Life takes its toll, she often repeated listlessly. But now, here, she is vibrant, full of youthful energy that takes over when she has a purpose, busy preparing to look after her offspring.

“Help yourself to a drink.” She gestures towards the fridge covered in postcards held up by magnets.

Nkechi glances at one she sent a year ago from Crete. An all-inclusive holiday with Ardella. A sort of treat following her years of ill health. They’d made a trip to a working farm and it had been fantastic to sample a variety of fruits and cooked vegetables. She’d loved the grilled aubergines. Nkechi opens the fridge and roots around, decides on cloudy apple juice.

“Your sister’s running late,” her mother says. “She’s bringing the new boyfriend with her!”

“What about Dad?”

“Your father’s probably in the shed. He spends a lot of time there.” She pauses, tastes some sauce, and falls into a contemplative expression – as if to ask: did it need another Maggi cube or a

dash of salt? “Set those on the table. Then go and see what your father is doing,” she eventually says, crushing another Maggi cube between her fingers and sprinkling it into the pot.

The doorbell.

“I’ll get that...” Nkechi says.

Her sister and a new man. Rosie: 5’3, hair in short twists, a scar above her left eye (a childhood accident in the back yard) – has lost five pounds in weight. Tom: 6’2, bulked up in a US Army sort of way, with a piercing in his right ear. He smelt of soap. Not her sister’s usual type. Though she no longer knew what her sister’s type was.

Nkechi beams – a broad toothy smile.

“Hey, sis...” Rosie rises on tiptoes for a hug and kiss. “Tom – Nkechi.”

Nkechi shakes his hand and steps aside. They trail after Rosie to the kitchen.

“Man, something smells good,” Tom says, in a Jamaican accent.

“Mum, meet Tom,” Rosie says, grabbing their mother from behind, and planting a kiss on her shoulder. Their mother turns, and is immediately pulled into a hug by Tom.

“Oh, oh — good to finally meet you, Tom,” she says, when he disentangles himself from her frame and the ladle in her hand. “Rosie, help your sister with the table.”

Nkechi and Rosie begin to take dishes through to the adjacent dining room. In a hushed tone, Nkechi says, “Where did you pick him up from? Not your usual type.”

“I didn’t pick him up from anywhere,” she laughs – patting Nkechi playfully on her shoulder. “We met at work. He’s the new Accounts guy.”

“Uh-huh...”

“His office is up on third. We went out on our first date a few months ago and we get on.”

“Any bad habits we should know about?”

“He’s vegetarian.” Nkechi and Rosie burst into a torrent of laughter. “I’m sure Mum has had to think outside the box to cater for him.”

As they cross the hallway the third time, their father descends the stairs.

“Great timing,” Rosie says, giving him a peck on each cheek, before carrying on to the kitchen.

Nkechi follows suit. After kissing her father, she asks, “What’ve you been up to? Mum says you’re stuck in that shed.”

“It needs a good sort out. So much junk. A lot of yours and Rosie’s school things.”

“Are our trunk boxes still there?” Nkechi asks.

“Where else would they be? You and your sister should really find time to clear your stuff out.”

Her father: stark and stern, had two distinguishing features – a sawn-off pinkie and a tribal mark lining both temples. Dressed in a bluish shirt unbuttoned at the collar; tucked into a pair of dark smart trousers. Nkechi had never seen her father in anything as casual as jeans. The dress maketh a man, he often quoted.

“Yes, we’ll have to make time to do that,” Nkechi says. “Come meet Tom.” She grabs her father’s hand and encourages him into the kitchen where Tom, his head tilted backwards, gulps down a bottle of Yop.

At dinner, conversation conforms to the norm. Their father spouts wisdom from Coelho's *The Valkyries*. "To spend time in the wilderness is the making of a man," he says.

"Is there enough salt in the Jollof rice?" her mother says, "Not enough pepper? When was the last time you had a proper meal?" she adds, glancing at Nkechi.

Rosie gushes about work events. "He says we should now call him Barbara – no longer Bob. And can you believe it... he – oh, I mean she – insists on using the female toilets. It's really awkward." She pours a glass of water. "I mean I'm all for equality and people doing what makes them happy but he looks dreadful dressed up as a woman."

"Declarations of end-times and the ruination of what was a civilised society. Men becoming women; men marrying men; women rallying to be Bishops. Tattoos and piercings. All condemned in Leviticus. I've lost all faith in the Anglican Church," her father says, as if having a separate conversation. "The Church has contributed to the death of modern society." He pummels a fist on the table.

"Perhaps we shouldn't throw away the baby with the bath water," Nkechi says as Tom helps himself to a second helping of fish and yams.

Her father interjects with another Coelhoism. "We're all on our own individual trajectories. Wherever we end up is of our own design," he says, then adds without warning, "Did they ever get to the bottom of your health issues?" Nkechi's father stares hard at her – releasing his grip on a chicken leg.

Nkechi doesn't flinch. "Nothing conclusive. But I'm back on track health wise."

"You've lost weight," her mother pipes.

"So has Rosie..."

“Difference being she’s been trying to lose the excess but you haven’t...” her mother says.

“Nothing to worry about. I’m doing just fine.” Nkechi takes a bite of plantain, and asks, “How are you finding your new role, Tom?”

Tom lifts his head, still chewing, “Great! Great! All the better for having met Rosie.” He smacks his lips, and says, “Hey, why doesn’t Rosie have an ethnic name?”

“She does,” Nkechi says. “Eberechi.”

“Eb-e-re-chee...” he repeats.

“That’s why you only know my English name, darling,” Rosie says, tapping him gently on his leg.

“I like the sound of that,” he says. “Mrs Ok-a-foo, this food is absolutely delicious. You’d give my Ma a run for her money.”

“It’s Okafor,” Nkechi says.

“What about you, Nkechi? Whatever happened to...what was his name again?” Her father addresses her again, taking a swig of Heineken, and lets out a wilful belch.

She is reminded of the father she has learned to tolerate: parochial, pig-headed, and prejudiced.

“Wasn’t it Tolu?” Her mother fills in and hurries to the kitchen.

“To be unmarried at your age...” her father says. It hangs between a statement and a question.

They’ve had this conversation too many times.

“Before you start proposing a match-make from some unknown person of interest in Nigeria – can I interject and say... I may never marry. In fact, I might decide to become a priest.” Nkechi gets up. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“Her disobedience has cost her...” her father carries on. “Thinking she can play the role of a man. The West has *devoured* her...”

Nkechi escapes to the stillness of her childhood bedroom upstairs. The purple and blue wallpaper hasn’t changed.

She sits at the window.

A stray rag flapping on the branch of the cherry tree. She unclenches her fist. Times like this, she’s reminded why she dislikes her father. He reminds her of the type of man she despises. Those controlled by their insecure egos.

Her first sexual experience, at nine, was with a man three decades her senior. Her father’s brother. ‘He forced himself on me,’ she told her mother years later — she couldn’t bring herself to use the correct word, ‘rape’. Eighteen or nineteen, on a long weekend back from Uni. They were in the kitchen. Her mother stirred ukazi soup while she lingered in the doorway and waited. Nkechi thought she hadn’t heard. She repeated herself. ‘He forced himself on me.’ Her mother used the corner of her wrapper to wipe the pebbled sweat off her face, still holding the soup ladle, and she said, ‘It’s our curse.’ She turned back to stirring the pot. ‘Is that all you have to say?’ Nkechi asked. ‘Did you do anything to encourage it?’ her mother asked, and her eyes – sad, world-worn – scrutinised Nkechi’s for a long time. Then, her mother half-shrugged, and returned her attention to the pot, adding a sprinkling of pepper. ‘Your father will be home soon and his dinner can’t be late,’ she tutted. For a few minutes, Nkechi watched her greying hair, bound in plaits, the roundness of her

dimpled shoulders, and the inelegant drag to her gait as she moved from sink to cooker and back again.

By her twenty-fifth birthday Nkechi knew there were five types of men she couldn't stand.

Men who indulged in porn.

Men who used the services of prostitutes.

Men who generated clutter. (Her mother always admonished 'a cluttered house is a cluttered life' and on this she agreed with her).

Men who lived with their mothers.

Men who couldn't be arsed to use a condom.

She'd fucked all five types. Several times over. Even Tolu had confessed to enjoying the occasional porn-flick. Though he'd never admitted to using the services of prostitutes. Nkechi's innards had churned. He must've noticed the change in her demeanour because he added, 'Don't be such a prude. Live and let live.' Perhaps she should have encouraged Tolu to take the HIV test.

A squirrel scurries up the cherry tree. It stops. Eyes dart – before it vanishes behind a tangle of browns and greens. A sluggish silent rain starts and Nkechi shuts the window.

When she returns downstairs, dessert is being served. Citrus trifle. Her father and Tom are deep in conversation about African politics. Rosie is telling their mother about a charity event she is planning: a 100km trail walk across the South Downs. Nkechi takes her seat.

Before long, Anna mingles into her thoughts:

Anna sitting cross-legged on the rug on the floor. In a strange sulk. Inexplicable. She hummed an undecipherable tune, stared at a coffee stain on the rug, and hummed. She inched her

weight back against the armchair, and stretched her legs. Minutes passed before she leaned forward and with her index finger began outlining loops on the carpet as if spelling out a word. ‘There’s this guy in school, Noah. I quite like him. He reminds me of a cocker spaniel with magic eyes. He looks at me in this way. He loves pickles, and his beanie hat is ridiculously cute.’ Nkechi smiles at the memory.

“Dessert for you, Nkechi?” Her mother’s voice brings her back into the room. She shakes her head and takes a mango. Like Anna she had made mistakes. It happens. The thing was that it wasn’t too late for her — she had a second chance.

*

The next evening, Nkechi goes to visit Leroy, the musician-cum-social worker. They met outside the court house some months back. He’d asked her if she wanted to grab a coffee. They popped into one of the chains not too far from Chamberlain Square. It had been a particularly sunny day and Nkechi ordered an iced tea. Theirs was a casual affair. They met now-and-again for a date and a fuck. Nothing serious. He was far too young and frivolous and idealistic. Someone she might have had a serious relationship with a decade ago. Not now.

After dinner, Leroy tongues her. She kisses him back, enjoying the strength of his biceps under a cotton shirt. He edges her towards the sofa and reaches to kiss her again: wet – hard – long. His calloused hands caress the dips in her waist, and navigate to trace the outline of her breast. He kisses her again. He tastes of dried dates. His fragrance – a mix of chai tea and Irish Cream – grows on her. He kisses her lips, earlobes and neck. She groans. His index finger massages her labia playfully before entering her vagina. Her dampness increases. She moans. Digs her nails into his fleshy hairy buttocks. He winces and re-enters. She sinks into the sensation of tingling warmth. His hardness surges. He reaches for a condom, tears it open, and hurriedly sheaths himself. He plunges into

her. She runs a hand through his hair. He lunges again, groans. Another kiss. He eases himself up slightly; squares his chest against hers. She releases. He whimpers, falls heavy on her stomach, pulls off the condom, and the stickiness spills over her thighs.

She closes her eyes as Reverend Tobias looms behind shut eyelids. She understood what Apostle Paul meant by suffering from a thorn in his flesh. Sexual sin – was this her thorn?

*

In the morning, she jolts awake. The sun isn't up yet, but the night lamp is still on. Leroy snores gently, an arm dangling off the bed. A familiar sensation fills her stomach. She tries to swallow but her throat is dry. Another succession of sensations: glass splinters, dull jabs to her chest, fiery heat pushes on the inside of her abdomen. Like sharks biting the lining of her muscles. She feels faint. Inhales. Exhales. Fear. She is afraid. She concentrates on slowing down her breathing.

Out and in.

In and out.

She gets out of bed, and goes to sit at the top of the stairs. From the hallway window, the speckled glow of a sunrise. No sound of birds. The silence is calming.

Nkechi has spent most of her life being afraid. Not the daughter her parents wanted: an A-grade, all-round gifted student, akin to a Chinese Mensa prodigy. She didn't play the violin. She fell off horses, and in fact, nearly got herself killed trying to stay on. She hadn't taken to German or French. Far from being exceptional, she'd only ever managed to be an average child. Bang in the middle average. As a woman she was never the lover her boyfriends expected. Too sensitive. Too stubborn. Too intense.

She makes her way downstairs. On the way to the kitchen, she picks up a throw from the living room, and wraps it around her. She pours milk into a mug and heats it up. The microwave pings as the milk froths over. Nkechi clears up the mess with a wipe. She opens the back door and lets herself into the garden, sits on the barrel-bench and watches the sun begin to rise.

Chapter 4

On the corner of Alcester Road someone calls to her. She turns round, buttoning up her jacket, to find a tallish man in his early-thirties staring at her. She frowns, tries to place him: Sainsbury's? A counselling session? The gym?

“On the bus? A month ago?” he says.

Nkechi looks away, and smiles.

“Actually, that's not entirely true,” he says, “we kind of bumped into each other.”

Tired after a long day at the diocesan office, she doesn't want to engage with this man. Reverend Tobias had asked many questions. Had anyone challenged you about your sense of calling? Unless she counted Mum and Dad who were against everything she did — the gap year in India, a summer on a kibbutz, the parachute jump for charity — No. Had she thought about the implications of an HIV-positive status and ordained ministry? At that point, she had been quiet. There was no getting away from the contradiction between her lifestyle choices and this path she was exploring. She'd answered, ‘Does God mind?’ Did she understand the Church's stance on sex outside of marriage? Eventually, she'd nodded in response, but hadn't admitted she wasn't entirely in agreement with the Church's views on sex. After the questions, all she wants is a glass of wine, a shower, and some shuteye. In that order.

“Bus 50. I got off at Moseley.”

She doesn't remember him or the bus ride. But it would be rude to say so. She forces a wide smile as she drops her hand in his: cold, nails well-bitten, reveal pinkish flesh.

“Paul...” he says, shaking her hand. “Our eyes met that day.”

He rolls a cigarette, side-steps to let an elderly lady with a large basket pass by.

Nkechi doesn't know what to say. He reminds her of a guy she encountered briefly at a conference in Manchester. Tortured, tantalising and full of theology. They hadn't made it into bed, and couldn't find a way to 'just be friends'. She reaches for a pack of Airwaves and pops a piece of gum in her mouth.

"Fancy we should meet here again. Where you headed?" he asks, words trailed by puffs of smoke.

She doesn't mean to stare, but she does. Uneven lips, a café-au-lait stain on his cheek, and a brogue that sounds faintly Irish.

"Home. It's been a..."

"I don't mean to impose. But can I walk with you?"

Nkechi lowers her gaze, ignores fragments from last night's nightmare. A knife attack by an unknowable assailant. She recollects the jabs to her forehead, clavicle, belly button, thighs and knees. A frenzied attack, she woke up before she had a chance of knowing whether she died or not.

She shrugs, "Sure."

A hijabbed lady pushes past, trailing a pram laden with brown Primark bags. Nkechi peeks for a baby – there isn't one.

"It's been a strange day..." he starts, placing a hand in his pocket. "I was sacked today."

"Oh?" She falls into step with his long steady strides.

"I've not been in the job long." He glances at her between each word. "It's crazy how it's all happened. Not quite sure how I've managed that. I've only been there a month."

It's dusk. He's thin, gaunt. Mum would love to get her hands on him. A starving man makes for mischief, she often said. For someone who's just lost his job, he's dressed well – in a careless artsy way, where everything clashes but makes sense together as if by stroke of genius. A tan shirt over red denim. A striped purple scarf. A leather satchel slung over a shoulder. Matching loafers. She wonders if he isn't feeling the evening chill.

“Sorry to hear that,” she says.

“Thanks.” He stops abruptly and reaches again for his packet of tobacco and rolls another cigarette. They continue down Moseley Road. “It's been a God awful day. To think I've been so nice to everyone there. There's this Croatian girl, very pretty, very young, and I encouraged her with her English. Tried to help her settle in quickly and make her feel a part of the team by learning a few Serbian words. And this is the thanks I get. I'm going to appeal.”

Nkechi doesn't see the connection he's making. “Where were you working?”

“The café at the Botanical Gardens,” he says. “Have you been?”

“Once,” she says.

“It's a great place to work. I never finished my Uni degree. Journalism. Had high hopes of being a photo journalist. Kept at it for two years but I was forever worried about money and bailed.” He drops the cigarette, steps on it. “I need to give up. I've tried twice. When my father was in hospital for throat cancer. And last year after a trip to Inverness. Nothing works: patches, e-cigs. I have no willpower. Fags and a feisty filly – I get caught out every time.” For the first time, he laughs: a loud, coarse sound.

They stop at the traffic lights. An ambulance passes, sirens blazing. A waspish man with a reddish beard that tapers to his belly-button zigzags on a bike between cars. A girl, no older than

four, drops her lolly and starts squealing: 'I want another one, I want another one.' The light goes green.

The sun has dropped low in the distance; a liquid honeycomb against the darkening sky. Nkechi is grateful to be in a place where everything is familiar, where if she lost her sight, she could still find her way home. She imagines lowering her limbs into the sunset, revelling in it, and riding it home. Burning wood tinges the air. Nkechi inhales. It reminds her of childhood bonfires in Solihull.

"I've been babbling nonstop. Tell me about you?"

Nkechi sneezes, almost stumbles. "Sorry, allergies." She blows her nose. "I've been looking after a colleague's cats – Cappuccino, Mocha and Espresso."

"Cool names," Paul says.

"I've always liked the idea of cats. But whenever I look after them it dawns on me I'm not a genuine cat lover."

"Really?"

"Years ago, I once house-sat a friend's cat," she sneezes again. "Its hair got everywhere."

"You've had experience then?"

"Hate sorting out their litter tray."

"I used to have a cat once. Morris. My mother's lesbian lover took her when she left."

Nkechi swallows her surprise and manages an unfazed tone. "A lesbian lover?"

“It’s complicated. Maybe that’s why I’m so messed up.” He stops at the corner of Reddings Road. “I live down there,” he gestures. “But I’m happy to walk you into Kings Heath.” It’s not quite a question and they carry on walking.

Nkechi raises a palm to the sky. The forecast had been scattered showers, heavy in places. Nothing definitive.

He exhales. A plume of smoke travels ahead of them. “She came into our lives when I was six. Within months of my father upping-and-leaving. Elaine. A cross between Hagrid and Gollum. We didn’t get on.”

Nkechi wants to probe, but decides to leave it. “Can’t imagine what that must’ve been like,” she says.

“She stayed nine years. When she left she took Morris. My mother moved on to Elaine’s nephew. Fifteen years younger than her. And no better. A bunch of deadbeats, drunks and bullies.”

“How long were they together?”

“Another nine years of hell. Mum’s lucky number.” His shoulders visibly rise as if releasing the years in that single action. “Such a relief when Mum got rid. The day my half-sister was born, I was there at the hospital. Not in the room, mind. That would have been too odd. To watch my mother push another screw-up into this world.”

Paul bends down to pick up a penny. “I’ve never forgiven my father for leaving.”

“Never stayed in touch?”

“Not really. He’s a nasty piece of work. Real scum! Lives with the woman he left Mum for and their three brats in Bradford. I’ve been up to see him a handful of times. Nothing’s changed. A real nutcase. I stay away because I don’t want to become him.”

Reverend Tobias had asked her why she wanted to be a priest. It wasn't so much a want, she thought, but a need. She needed her life to count for something. To make sense as the dots were connected, between her experiences, and those of others. Like Paul.

“Bonkers... that’s what we are,” Paul mutters. “The whole lot of us. Mad or bad or sad.” He laughs. “Don’t I sound so pitiful!”

They pause outside the Hare and Hounds. A black man with matted hair, stinking of alcohol, sits at the bus shelter, shouting gibberish. A couple of white lads shout, “Shut up you nutter.” Nkechi and Paul press on.

“Need to figure out what I’m going to do next. I can’t believe they gave me the sack. Just like that. No warning. No nothing. Just a letter as I walked in this morning.”

For the next fifteen minutes they talk about the traffic on the High Street, the market stalls closing down, and gigs at the Garden Cafe and the Rainbow in Digbeth.

“My partner, Leroy, plays there once in a while. A solo guitarist. I don’t have a musical bone in my body.”

They dodge a car at the shared space roundabout.

“Drivers on their mobile phones,” he says. “I used to pop in at the Rainbow. The live bands are so different.”

Outside her house, Nkechi hesitates. She’s desperate to bring the day to an end. In the darkness, Paul’s gaze lowers – as if he’s dropped a pound coin. His fingers slide up and down the strap of his satchel.

“How about a drink?” she asks.

“You sure I’m not imposing? I’d hate for me to be intruding because you feel sorry for me.”

“Don’t be daft,” she says, unlocking the door, and letting them in.

Inside: she hangs up her coat, drops her handbag, and sits on a stair to remove her boots. She rubs her feet, releasing the tension in them. She thinks of the Vocations exercise she has to complete by her next meeting with Reverend Tobias.

A priest is...?

A priest does...?

What qualifies the vocation?

How do you see your role as a priest taking shape?

When is she going to tell her parents about Reverend Tobias? A dust ball on the wall catches her eye. A cobweb sways across the doorway. She must do a full house clean this weekend. The Polish girl, Svetlana, who’d been helping her out this year had long disappeared. The last time she came, she appeared with a younger girl; an overweight peroxide-blonde who bulged out of a tangerine tube dress. Svetlana claimed she was her cousin on holiday. Nkechi had left them for the couple of hours, and when she returned, several items were missing. Her diamante slipper-shoe, a pair of pearl-drop earrings, and her leather watch – which she’d put aside for repair.

“Nice and homely,” Paul says, making his way into the living room.

Nkechi stares at the lithe man.

“Wine?” she asks, placing her jacket on the bannister. “Make yourself at home.”

“Defo,” he calls out, “I could do with a drink.”

Nkechi decides against turning the heating on. She can't afford another huge bill this year. She'll fill a hot water bottle later, and layer up for now. She dashes upstairs and throws on a knee-length cardigan. Back downstairs, she pours a couple of glasses of wine. Red.

"Smells very pretty. Very you," Paul says, taking a glass. "That you and..." he says, pointing at a framed photograph.

"Vanilla Spice. I'm into my fragrance sticks," she says. "Me and my best friend, Ardella. We took that in Crete."

"Ah, nice one," he says. "I've never been abroad. There was a time when I thought I'd go into the army. That would have taken me places. It never worked out."

In this artificial light, he looks paler, more delicate. She begins to panic, to feel there is no air. She wants to ask him to leave. Instead she focuses on the loosening thread on the rug she picked up in Camden years ago. She vividly remembers the toothless Afghani who sold it to her. She resists the temptation to yank it, or smooth it down. It's too far to reach with her toes.

"You okay?" His finger traces the base of the wine glass. "You seem uncomfortable. Should I go?"

"I'm alright. Just tired." She scratches her forehead and yawns. "Should I put a pizza in the oven?"

"I'm fine. No appetite after the events of today."

"What are you going to do?"

"Not sure! Drink and drink and drink! My father hated gays. I think my Mum got with Elaine to get her own back."

“Such a cynic! It could’ve been love.”

“No one could love that piece of fuck.” He groans, and clears his throat. Then, placing the wine glass on the floor, he gets up and walks to the window. He stays there for a couple of seconds before returning to sit down.

“I used to play,” he says, pointing to the painting on the wall.

“What happened?”

“I sold my guitar. And that was the end of that.”

“That’s a shame. Were you any good?”

“Not bad, I guess. Not great, but not bad.”

“Shame you gave up.”

“Don’t know... I have a habit of making things give me up.”

Nkechi laughs, “I think I get what you mean.”

*

Nkechi rolls on her stomach. She dangles an arm over the bedside and roots round for her phone. Gone ten. She uncurls herself into a seated position and yawns. She watches Paul, fully clothed, oblivious to the stirring world.

They had drunk and talked and drunk. She listened to his sad tales. In the end, they fell asleep on the sofa – limbs splayed on either end. At some point, she needed the loo and had managed to cajole him upstairs to the only made bed. Both of them had promptly fallen asleep – him to the right, her to the left.

She gets up, goes to splash some water on her face, pops her pills, and shuffles downstairs to make some coffee. Tempted to cancel her two o'clock appointment, she checks her phone again. A message from Tolu: *Call me — let's touch base soon.* The kettle clamours and clicks off. She fills the cafetière.

Outside the window, a young brunette in a scarlet onesie walks by with four children. A girl rides on the handlebar of her brother's toy bike, holding a rainbow umbrella above her head. An older girl, eleven or so, holds the woman's hand, helps her push the pram. Nkechi watches them until they vanish round the corner.

With two mugs of coffee and buttered toast on a tray, she makes her way back to the bedroom. Paul stirs, yawns, and raises himself into a sitting position. She smiles, so glad that they hadn't fucked each other.

"Can't believe I crashed into your life the way I did," he says. "I must've been in a bad way."

She hands him the tray and takes a mug and slice of toast for herself, before sitting in the armchair by the window.

"Lovely. Thank you," he says, chewing on the toast. "I'm really sorry for my intrusion."

"Don't worry about it. We've all been there..."

"I must get off after brekkie," he says. "What're you up to today?"

"I've got to attend an Open Day at 2. You?"

"No job – nothing! Drink. Bed. Drink some more. Don't know. I need to get my head together. Figure something out."

“What about appealing?”

“I could try, but I don’t think I’ll get very far. I’ve only been in the job a month. I haven’t even worked out my 3-month probationary period.”

Something about Paul reminds Nkechi of Anna. A sense of fragility, an air of futility. There is an irony in their need to resolve an injustice. Both are tadpoles, weak and trapped in a water bowl.

Twenty minutes later, Paul throws the duvet to one side, places the tray on the side table. He rises and disappears to the bathroom. When he returns, Nkechi hands him a towel and he presses his face into its softness, before using it to rub his hair dry.

“First things first, I must get a shave,” he says, stroking his stubble. He tosses the towel on the bed, and goes downstairs. “Nothing like a haircut and a shave to make the world right again.”

“You’ll be okay?” Nkechi asks, at the front door.

“I’m always okay,” he says, planting a kiss on her cheek.

*

After a light lunch – salmon and blue cheese bagel – she makes her way to Queens Theological College. On the grass, in the middle of the courtyard, a couple of curly-haired children are playing with a frisbee. The buildings at the college need a face-lift. Square, grey, and dour – they resemble a Brixton estate. Nkechi crosses the green and heads to the chapel, where she is greeted by an angular lady wearing skinny jeans and a Keep Calm top.

“It’s an unusual chapel. You’ll see what I mean when we go in later,” she says, offering a hand. “I’m Khayla, a second year student.”

“Nkechi.”

“We’re here to look after you lot. About six or seven of you today. You travelled far?”

Before Nkechi can respond, Khayla heads off and she follows. Through the main entrance, up two flights of wide stairs and into a foyer. There’s a strong waft of bacon and cheese. They enter a narrow room. Khayla unlatches the glass door and slides it across. It opens on to a spacious balcony overlooking the green.

“You’re the first, but I’m sure the others will be arriving shortly. Tea? Coffee?”

“Water. Thanks.”

As she goes off to the kitchen, two heavy-set men stroll in: late forties, dressed smartly. Nkechi wonders if she made the wrong choice with her jeans, T-shirt and cardigan. A young girl emerges through the door. Head bowed, she fiddles with the crucifix on her long neck. When she looks up, she scans the room furtively and takes a seat beside Nkechi.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready for this,” the girl says. “Leanne.”

“Nkechi.”

At this point, a couple enter, deep in conversation. Every inch of visible flesh on the woman is covered in blue and green tattoos. On her arm: J-E-S-U-S. A piercing on her eyebrow – a single silver stud. Her husband, in contrast, resembles a games programmer – thick glasses, shirt and tie, a thin gold band. They nod to the offer of coffee and carry on chatting while writing name labels. Sylvia and Rowland.

A portly woman hobbles through, aided by a walking stick; in her other hand, a box. “One or two may join us later. But here’s the schedule for the day. I would have communicated with

many of you. Marjorie Coombe. The Administrator here at Queens. Though not for long! I'll be retiring soon."

She informs them where the toilets are, what to do if the fire alarm goes off, and reads the schedule outline: several sessions, followed by worship in the chapel, an evening meal, and interviews. Nkechi feels her body temperature rising.

A text message arrives: *Sorry for my intrusion last night – Paul.*

She imagines him at the Hare and Hound, downing his third or fourth pint. She is about to text a response when the college's Principal comes in; a bald man with bright blue eyes, in a clerical collar and navy suit.

"So, tell us... why are you here?" His gaze on Sylvia and Rowland.

She'll have to drop Paul a text later.

"I've been doing ministry work in prisons for years now. And in the last few months I've felt that chaplaincy might be the next step for us," Sylvia says, eyes darting round the group. "He's here for moral support," she laughs, patting her husband's knee.

"Adam – and you?" he turns to the wider of the Shrek-types.

"Got through BAP and I need to decide on which college to do my training. Ecumenical or Evangelical?" he pauses, and pinches his nostrils. "Matt's my brother and he drove me across from Sheffield."

"I'm a Youth Worker at my local church in Harborne, but now considering full-time ordained ministry. My BAP will be coming up soon," Leanne says.

"And you, Nkechi?"

“No BAP date yet. Very early stages in the exploration process.” Nkechi stops, suddenly aware at how different she is from these people. “Simply testing the call to this vocation.”

Around five o’clock Nkechi and the others on the Open Day go to the chapel for a college-wide service. In silence, people enter the modest, circular space. At the North window, an elevated altar area, a communion table at its centre. This opens up to a rectangular nave.

Nkechi finds herself sitting between Khayla and Leanne who looks as if she’s been crying. Across from her, a woman with grey bouncy curls sits with her palms open and eyes closed. To her left, a big African man stares at the ceiling – as if he’s spotted some chewing gum and is working out how to remove it. To her right, a short smiley man, with an uneven jaw and a stain on his shirt; his hands are clasped tight, legs crossed.

When would the peace come?

A hymn is sung. A psalm is read. The word is preached. Another hymn is belted out by the hundred strong congregation. Communion is taken. A prayer of release is spoken. Nkechi wipes the tears, ignores the vibrations of her phone. Leanne follows Nkechi out, falls into step with her. They head over to a bench.

“Mum says a church without an organ is no church,” Nkechi says, with a gentle chuckle.

“Such a beautiful service....” Leanne says. She runs her hands through her mousy locks, and pulls it back into a ponytail. Her face is blotchy, flushed; bleached tufts on her chin visible and pronounced.

“Still. Stirring. Perfect.” Nkechi looks away.

“My mother’s not been to church since she lost her mobility...”

“Oh?”

“Diabetes...” She inhales sharply. “Never admits it, but she blames God.”

“Oh,” Nkechi repeats. “Guess we all have our own way of dealing with pain.” She watches a dog walk sluggishly across the green. It seems to be following Sylvia and Rowland towards the canteen.

“A youth leader? How’ve you found it?” Nkechi says.

“Fun. Hard. But it keeps me sane.”

“How so?”

Leanne fiddles with the crucifix on her neck, twiddles her bracelet. Matt and Adam take a seat on the bench by the statue of a distorted Jesus.

“Caring for Mum most of my life has been tough.” She turns to face Nkechi, “I’m not complaining, but the fact is, it hasn’t been easy. My work with the kids has been a life saver.”

“What’s going to happen to your Mum when you come here?”

Leanne laughs: a tiny flimsy echo. “Not sure if I’ll get through BAP. I’ve heard horrors about those interview panels. I look around at you guys and I must confess I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Nkechi says. “Too many insecurities.”

“You too?”

“Priest material? Me? No way.”

“Thought I was the only one who had those feelings...” She raises her hand, rubs her face and smiles. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

Nkechi has an answer. She can think of a string of worst things that could happen.

“Let’s go queue,” Nkechi says, rising to her feet. “I’ll meet you in there. Need to drop a friend a quick text.”

*

That night she dreams of her mother, sees her in an unfamiliar kitchen, moving silently between stove and sink. The aroma of bitter leaf soup and dried fish fills the room. She lingers at the sink, stoops down, retrieves a pair of yellow gloves and eases them on. She washes two pans and places them on the drainer. Onions and peppers sting Nkechi’s eyes. Her mother removes the gloves, returns to the stove, dips a ladle in the pot and tastes it. Her expression is radiant. Nkechi tries to speak to her mother. She can’t.

When she wakes, Nkechi calls her mother. A coffee in her hand, she sits at the kitchen table, watching two black birds on her neighbour’s roof.

“Rosie and Tom are coming over tonight.”

“Ah –”

“They seem to be getting serious...”

“Good for them,” Nkechi says.

“We would have you over too, but...”

She waits for her mother to finish her sentence. But... it’s too much of a hassle. But... we’d like to get to know Tom better. But... it’ll be awkward since you don’t have anyone in your life.

But... it'll make you uncomfortable when we start talking future plans and all that. But she doesn't finish.

"No worries, Mum. I've got loads on tonight anyway." Without meaning to, she adds, "I've met someone."

"Really?"

She imagines her Mum's eyes narrow in disbelief. She waits for her to kiss her teeth. Not a sound.

"Really," her mother repeats. "Person of interest..."

Nkechi stifles laughter. Her mother never understood why she found her POI phrase ridiculous.

"He's normal. Not gay. White."

There it was, the kissed-teeth sound.

"Working?"

"Educational psychologist..."

"What's that?"

"Works with psychologically damaged teenagers..."

A dust mite crawls round the edge of the phone's black base. She presses down on it with her thumb. Notices another and another. Squash. Rotate. Sticky specks of silver. Nkechi wonders if she is cursed. Every place she's lived has been plagued by various infestations: slugs, black flies, and now dust mites.

“What’s wrong with him?” her mother finally says.

“Nothing,” Nkechi says. “Why should there be anything wrong with him?”

Her mother begins to cough uncontrollably. Nkechi listens to the spluttering, the phone slams against the table, the tap runs. Then her mother returns, and says something unintelligible.

“You okay?”

“Fine, fine,” her mother says, smothering another cough. “Will we be meeting him soon?”

“Maybe. Early days, but we’ll see...”

“Now that your sister and Tom are making a go of things, it’d be good to see you settled,” she pauses. “Such a shame your father and I may not live to see any grandchildren.”

Nkechi, tempted to make a joke, decides not to comment.

“So, why the early morning call?”

“It’s nothing. Just wanted to check you and Dad are okay. I’ll call again after the interview next Monday.”

“Interview?”

“Remember? The internal investigation on Anna.” She licks her lips. Have I taken my meds this morning? “Mum, I need to go. Lots to do before tonight.”

“So, you’ve got a date with this new man?”

“Sort of...” Nkechi says, with a hurried goodbye and hangs up.

Another text from Paul: *Not heard from you. Are we not communicating?*

It’s been mad crazy hectic! Meet up on the weekend? – Nkechi.

Friday at 8? A bottle of red? – Paul.

Deal! – Nkechi.

Chapter 5

When Nkechi settles on the bus, she checks her phone: *See you later. 7'ish? – Paul.*

The bus driver's shouts interrupt her texting.

"Must signal! Next time no stop." Each Polish-accented syllable, thunderous. He addresses a youngish girl. Pigtails escape a knitted hat. Her face changes from white to rosé to red. She rubs the ridge of her nose, while struggling to hold on to a lever arch folder. She doesn't speak, nods. The driver repeats himself, even more slowly, as if talking to a Korean student just landed at Heathrow. The girl dips her head rapidly, her face bright crimson. She drops three coins into the ticket machine.

"No change. 2.70," the driver says, wagging a thick finger against the glass.

The girl nods again, yanks her ticket, and makes her way to the back of the bus. Nkechi checks her watch and smiles at the girl.

Her expression is vacant. She stuffs the folder in a jute-bag, struggles to wrap her scarf around her neck, while steadying herself on the railing. Her jute-bag brushes Nkechi's knee. The girl mumbles something. She finds a seat next to a hoary woman with pink hair, nails, and lips; stroking a small terrier on her lap. The young girl sits down and plugs her ears.

*

A coffee machine brews noisily in the corner of the room. The water jug on the table half-empty. A pad and a recorder is set in front of squinty-squirrel man and his colleague, a broad man with a disfigured ear. She's forgotten their names. Nkechi sits down.

“Frank Bacon,” squinty-squirrel says. “Douglas McGough...” he motions to the second man, stifling a noisy sneeze.

Both men are dressed in dark suits. Bacon in a lime-green tie; McGough in silver-blue.

“Appreciate you attending, Miss O-kafor.” He stresses on the ‘O’ for far too long. Another sneeze. This time, he retrieves a hanky from his back pocket and blows loudly. “Douglas will take notes. We’ll be recording this meeting.”

Nkechi nods. Turns. There are no windows.

She feels warm. Heating must be on full throttle. She takes off her cardigan. Wishes her headache would subside. Her gaze falls on Bacon. He takes off his glasses and begins to wipe them. Puts them back on. Streaks.

“Because of the sensitive nature of this case, I’m sure you can appreciate, we’ve got to be thorough,” Bacon pauses. “We need to know *everything*.”

“I’ve told you what I know,” Nkechi says. “It’s all there. In her file...”

“Yes, yes – we’ve read the file. Some things we hope you can help us with,” he sneezes again. Tiny particles escape between his fingers.

Nkechi flinches, slightly, as if protecting herself from his germs.

“Ready?” McGough asks, and presses a button at a signal from Bacon who, having regained his composure, clasps both hands behind his head. Nkechi follows his movement, amazed at the span of his hands. They remind her of a guy who’d fingered her at the Tropical Delight’s nightclub in East London. Right there on the dance floor as Sweet Mother was playing.

“We’re particularly interested in anything out of the ordinary about her behaviour,” Bacon starts.

“I’m not sure I can add anything more to what I’ve already communicated with you,” Nkechi says, wanting to ask them to turn the heating down.

“Did she say or do anything that was slightly off?”

“She was an odd girl in many ways,” Nkechi says. “But not crazy, just strange. A teenage girl trying to find herself.”

“When you reviewed your case notes, no unusual patterns to speak of?”

“Nothing, as far as I can see.” Nkechi collects a face towel from her bag and wipes her forehead. She’s tempted to wipe her underarms. Since being diagnosed she was constantly sweating. She even considered a procedure to block her sweat glands, but Ardella had dissuaded her from going ahead with it.

“Can you explain this...?” He hands her a doodled drawing. Four children swirl in a cauldron. Flames whoosh. A witch-like character stirs – laughter in her expression.

“Anna was an artist. Imaginative.”

“No alarm bells? Nothing?”

“No – nothing.” Nkechi glares at Bacon, unsure of what he is implying.

“She let nothing slip in her sessions?”

“Nothing, Mr Bacon,” Nkechi stands, and pours a glass of water. “Those were private and confidential counselling sessions.” She takes a drink.

“You sure?”

“Anna was a teenager. The usual troubles: school, relationships, sex.”

McGough yawns. Bacon fires an irritated glance.

“Troubled enough?” Bacon says, “to harm herself?”

“At our last session, she arrived with a picture. She’d painted it.” Nkechi says. “Didn’t think much of it at the time...”

“What was different about it?” Bacon asks, staring at McGough’s drumming fingers; fat, calloused.

“Black flames. Billowy smoke. Black figure.”

“The figure was Anna...?”

“I’m not sure. It might have been. She never said.”

Bacon gets up from his seat. Is he going to sneeze again? He walks to the coffee machine, collects the carafe, returns and empties it into three cups.

Nkechi accepts hers; adds two sugars, milk.

“Said she hadn’t finished it,” Nkechi says, checking her mobile —10:45.

McGough slurps his coffee, burps, and mutters an apology.

“Why would she show you her work?” Bacon says.

“Maybe she was trying to figure out an ending?”

“You’re saying it was an accident?”

“Accident or mistake, I have no idea.”

“Her journal suggests otherwise.”

“I wasn’t privy to her journal, Mr Bacon. She was very private.”

Nkechi recollects the time her mother read her diary from cover to cover. She’d found out about her going to Shrewsbury to buy her first bra, making out with a boy at the school dance, and describing her desire to visit a convent.

“Have you spoken to her mother?” Bacon asks. “Anything there?”

“I haven’t had any contact with Anna’s mother” Nkechi says. “I’m not sure I will.”

Nkechi remembers Anna at their last session. Anna in a knitted dress. Yellow leggings. Hair hidden under a maroon beret. Raven. UGG boots resting by an armchair. She doodles on her pad – ashen, pensive. She talked a lot. The fireworks display. Summer school prom. Her mother’s ill health. Reincarnation. The Telegraph cartoon competition.

The questions carry on, back and forth, until they dry up. Bacon assures Nkechi that it is unlikely they’ll need to speak to her again. When she is outside again, she sends Paul a text: *Looking forward to later – Nkechi.*

*

That evening she fixes a meal. Pasta and prawns with a cheesy sauce. Slightly heavy on the cheese. With the red wine Paul brought, it tastes like something out of a Nigella cookbook.

“Years ago, I took one of my step-brothers to the Morrisons. The one on the Coventry Road. Saw his Dad. When we came out, I asked him if he knew his Dad worked at the check-out. Said, ‘yeah but we pretend we don’t know each other’. Can you believe it? Fucked up! Well and truly,” he smacks his lips.

Nkechi shrugs, “It takes all sorts, I guess...”

“I’ve been on Prozac on-and-off since my teens,” he pauses, “runs in the family. Saw my shrink this afternoon. She’s written me a prescription.”

“Maybe it’ll help,” Nkechi says, adding some hard cheese and pickled chilli to her pasta.

“Had depression at Uni. Hid it from everyone. Stayed in bed for a month, then got up and had a large plate of curly fries.”

“What about lectures?”

“Got up for the bog. Lived on fags. It was like an out-of-body experience without being out of body.”

Nkechi remains silent, rubs the ends of her fingers.

“When I got up. From the fog. For the curly fries. That was the end of that,” he says.

He looks at her, as if expecting her to speak.

“Hate medicating myself. Prefer drink and drugs,” he laughs. “Any reason why you’re single?”

Caught off guard, Nkechi nibbles on a pickle.

“Not a priority...”

“Lesbian?”

“Not at all –” Nkechi says. “The phallus does it for me. Always has.”

“So *why* single? I’d date you. If I wasn’t so messed up...” he winks, uses the back of his palm to wipe his mouth.

“Too complicated...”

“What is?”

“Me. Relationships. Life.” she says. “In any case, I do have a lover of sorts.”

“Doesn’t have to be. Does it?” he pauses. “Mind if I go for a smoke?”

Nkechi shakes her head, gets up to clear away the plates. “M&S cheesecake for afters,” she says, as he goes into the garden.

She turns on the radio and begins washing the plates. She hasn’t spoken to Leroy in a while. Perhaps, she should call him. But she wasn’t pining for him, she was in no hurry to see him just yet.

“Fucking freezing, and it’s supposed to be summer,” Paul says, when he comes back in. “My last relationship, proper relationship, was Ayesha. ”

“Oh?”

“Muslim girl... can you believe it? Wasn’t strict or anything. Caused lots of conflict with her family. We carried on. Eighteen months. Never fucked. Did everything else - ”

“Why did it end?”

“I got bored with the no sex thing.”

“Ah —”

“I fucked other girls. ‘Course I did. Thought if I waited. Anyway,” he exhales, “it never happened. Her brothers came first. They hated me. She was gorgeous.”

“Nobody since?”

“No one important. Miss it though. I think that’s why I enjoy your company so much.”

Nkechi almost says, we've not had sex, but catches herself and coughs. "I'm not cut out for relationships. My parents don't approve —"

His phone vibrates.

"My shrink," he says, reading the message, before replacing the phone on the counter. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"My parents want me married and popping out grandchildren."

"I could do with a shag. The Croatian girl would've done me nicely. Fuck them!"

"More cheesecake?" Nkechi nudges his empty bowl.

"No, no – I'm good..." He suddenly leans into her. "Can I kiss you?" His breathing is raspy, "Please...?"

Nkechi pulls away, and laughs. "Stop flirting, Paul..."

His face drains of colour. "Bad idea. You're right," he laughs, a short-lived thick sound, and draws a lighter out of his pocket. "Need another fag," he says.

Nkechi collects the laundry basket under the ironing board and places it on the counter. She switches on the iron. Then, turns on the kettle before making a start on the ironing. She's ironed three skirts when he comes back in.

"Sorry," he blurts, "I'm such a pest. No manners."

"Forget it..." Nkechi says in mock-resignation. "We've all been there. Hot drink?"

"You're so beautiful." He peers at her. "There's something about you...."

“We’ve all got a little crazy in us,” she laughs. Contagious – he starts laughing. Nkechi likes the way his expression has become flushed.

Their laughter subsides. Embarrassment dissipates. He talks while she makes two cups of tea.

“Spent a day in a prison cell. Two years ago. Southampton.”

“What happened?” she says.

“An argument. Met a girl at a club. Tall. Thin in that anorexic way.” He brushes crumbs off the sofa. “Half an inch taller than me.”

“Ah — ”

“Danced. Smoked. Drank. Went back to hers. A posh studio flat in Hartley.” He pauses, scratches his temple. “Chatted for ages. Had lots in common. Vintage posters. Cuban movies. And she collected things: masks, buttons, mirrors. Fell into bed with her. That’s when she got all weird.”

“How?”

“We were cuddling and kissing and getting it on when she weirded out. Suddenly jumped out of bed. Asked me to leave. Couldn’t believe it. Middle of the night in an unfamiliar place and she’s asking me to leave. Fucked up. Well and truly.”

“Sounds like it got out of hand,” Nkechi says.

“Totally pissed me off! Slagged each other. Scuffled. She called the police. Told them I was refusing to leave. Both of us ended up in a cell.”

“Were you charged?” Nkechi is tempted to interrupt his story, ask if he wants some biscuits or chocolates.

“No. Decided to cut my losses. What a nut job. Stunning to look at, but...” His eyes darken with the memory, “...fucked up!”

“Did you ever see her again?”

“Not a chance. Came back to Brum. Forgot all about it,” he reaches for his tobacco, and rolls a cigarette. “Sorry. Do you mind...?”

Nkechi collects their bowls, and he disappears. By the time he comes back, she’s made them more tea. Hands him a mug. Paul talks. A poem he wrote about Athene and Arachne. The time his mother went into self-imposed coventry; for three months she refused to speak to anyone. He studied the Druze religion for six months, but decided it didn’t make sense to him and started ticking the ‘Catholic’ box again on forms, rather than ‘Other’. His grandmother, Lois; the only person in his family he has any time for. Maybe he would go back to Uni and finish off what he started. Unemployed, he’d have to sign on. Hadn’t got anywhere with the appeal: No point and in any case, he’s thinking of moving to Gloucester.

Drowsy, Nkechi watches his diaphragm rise and fall as he speaks. She imagines her hand stroking his penis, drawing it to plug her mouth, like a cork on a wine bottle. She tastes his hard flesh: salt, tobacco, vinegar. She resists the temptation to touch his cheek, finds his eyes again, and presses her thighs together. For the rest of the night, they talk and drink, listen to rock and jazz on Youtube, talk and drink some more, until he leaves at two.

*

“Is it serious?” Ardella launches, placing her handbag on the ground.

Nkechi laughs. “Nothing serious. Not my type, if I’m honest.”

“Since when do you have a type?” Ardella says. “So, what’s wrong with him?”

“Everything,” Nkechi says. The waitress – pint-sized, piercing above her upper lip –arranges their order on the table. She goes away and comes back with a bowl of sugar cubes and two forks.

“Everything?” Ardella says.

“Jeremy Kyle show type...”

“Then what’s with all the time you’re spending with him?”

“Don’t know. Can’t explain it,” Nkechi says, takes a bite of pastry. “He’s... he’s... I don’t know, Ardella...”

“If it’s not going anywhere what’s the point?”

“We’ve got a lot in common...”

“Like?”

Nkechi takes a breath, half-expecting a list of commonalities to gush. What do we have in common?

“Hard to explain.”

“Why do you routinely do this, Nkechi?”

“What?”

“Attach yourself to dead-end guys. Unavailables. Deadbeats. Marrieds.”

Nkechi frowns.

“Name me one guy not in those categories,” Ardella says, checking her phone.

“Tolu?”

“You were never going to get far with a man caught up in legal battles,” she says, “I’d put him in the unavailable camp.”

“That’s not fair. He was fighting for his daughter.”

“Too complicated.” Ardella says. “So, what category does our Paul fall into?”

Nkechi hesitates, and says, “Deadbeat? But there’s something sweet and generous about him.”

“Done the naughty with him?”

“No.”

“Kissed?”

“No.”

“Sooner you get rid, the better. What about Leroy?”

“We have an understanding. No strings.”

“That’s a shame,” Ardella says.

“You’re probably right about Paul. Need to focus on my priority.”

“Priesthood?” she sighs, “how’s all that going?”

“Surreal. Feel out of my depth.”

“How do you mean?”

“You know the Open Day I went to? Met a bunch of people? Super-spiritual. Super-perfect. I don’t measure up.”

“Stop doing that,” Ardella says, “you’re always putting yourself down.”

“Right.”

“It’s holding you back...” she pauses, fastens a loose hair pin.

“You’re right,” Nkechi repeats, “So, what’s your news?”

“Treatment worked. I’m pregnant,” she blurts.

The two rise for a hug. Nkechi whispers, “Well done you...”

“Don’t you dare set me off,” Ardella says, kissing her friend on the cheek.

“When did it all happen?”

“Sorry I didn’t tell you before now. Wanted to be proper sure.”

“Fifth time lucky,” Nkechi says. “I’m really thrilled for you.”

“Tons to think about. Of course, I want you to be godmother.”

“Godmother? Really?”

“You’re my best friend,” she says.

Nkechi looks at Ardella. Different. Her expression; bright, expectant. She focuses on Ardella’s stomach. Flat, deceptive: a ball of cells grows.

“Psychic says it’s a girl. I’m hoping for a boy. Either way, you’re godmother. Right?” Ardella says.

“Yes...” Nkechi says, with a whoop, as they laugh and fall into another hug.

Chapter 6

Anna once told her she loved counting squirrels — apparently, spotting a red one was good luck. It reminds Nkechi of the game she and Rosie used to play on long car journeys. How many yellow cars could be spotted along the way? Inevitably, there was always a hoo-ha about how yellow a car had to be to be counted. Even now, it was hard for Nkechi not to see a yellow car and say, one yellow car, two yellow car, three yellow car.

Paul is already at the swings. He is sitting on the middle swing, leg outstretched, but he isn't propelling himself.

“Long or short route?” Paul rises when he sees her, and tosses a cigarette-end.

He's lost a lot of weight. His eyes are pinched, red.

“I've not been sleeping well,” he coughs; phlegmy, protracted.

“Let's take the long route,” Nkechi says, wrapping her shawl tightly around her shoulders. A faded ice cream van parked by the lake – empty of geese and swans and ducks – lies silent. At the far side of the lake, a cyclist peddles hard, narrowly dodging a man and his dog.

“It's been a while...”

He looks at her and smiles. “Things haven't been good. I haven't been good.” He coughs again, presses a hand on his chest.

“Thought you might have gone...”

“To Gloucester? No chance. Skint. I can't even afford a jam doughnut,” he laughs, sputters.

“What've you been up to?”

“Holed away. Can’t face myself. Losing that job...” his voice trails. “Pathetic. I can’t seem to pull myself together.”

He stops walking. Looks up to the skies. Whistles.

“Why do people say that?” he says.

“What?”

“Pull yourself together. What does it even mean?”

Nkechi shrugs, grateful for a ball that has landed in front of their path. She picks it up and throws it back to a group of Asian and Black boys.

“I’ve made a mess of my life,” Paul says. “There are some fuck-ups that are hard to fix.”

They walk on.

“Birds. Bees. Beetles. As a kid I loved the outdoors. Felt safe. When was the last time you felt safe?” he asks, pulling up his trousers, and rolling its waistline over.

Nkechi turns away. Thoughts travel into memory.

“Summer holidays in Nigeria,” she finally says.

“Was there a specific moment?” He pauses, kicks a stone. “My Nan took me camping once. Anglesey or was it Norfolk? In a sleeping bag, in a tent, listening to Nan read. That’s my moment.” He rubs his eyes. “I always go back there when I need to feel safe.”

“I loved sitting around my grandfather’s ankles, listening to his stories about witches and wizards, while chewing on roasted pear and corn-on-the-cob.” Nkechi laughs. “There must be something about grandparents.”

“Visited my Mum a couple of days ago.”

“Oh?”

“Nightmare! She burnt herself on a pan. Started effing and blinding. Stressed me out completely.” He spits out a globule of phlegm. “You’d think I’d be used to her. But she totally freaks me. Didn’t even manage an hour. Three months since my last visit and I couldn’t stomach her for an hour.” He spits again.

Nkechi wondered what his Mum looked like. She imagines a slender lady with unwashed hair and leaking gums. She probably looked considerably older than her real age.

“Safe. I want to feel safe again.” He stops, looks at her. “Have you always got on with your parents?”

Nkechi laughs. “We have our moments.”

“I can’t imagine you not getting on with anyone.” He exhales. “You seem pure somehow.”

The path traces the edge of the lake. A couple of teenagers, carrying skateboards under their arms walk past. A child in a stroller throws bread into the water while his mother talks animatedly on the phone.

“Always liked the idea of building a tree house. Thought I could build one and live in it. Never managed it though. I could never find the right tree.”

“My parents aren’t the easiest people. They don’t get me. My sister, Rosie, is more their cup of tea. We’re only a year apart. But so different.” She finds a tissue and blows her nose.

“Rosie?”

“Good job. In a relationship. Lives in a nice terraced house. Not too far from my folks.”

Paul licks the outline of his lips. He retrieves balm from his pocket and applies it. “Why do I see you as pure?” he asks again, fixing his eyes on hers, but not addressing her particularly. She doesn’t remember seeing the grainy blotches in his cornea when they met last.

“Far from it,” she laughs.

“You’re religious, right?” He rolls another cigarette. “Maybe it’s that. I don’t know you that well. But you don’t strike me as someone who’s killed anyone, does drugs or sleeps around.” Lights up.

Nkechi looks into the distance. Ahead: an iron-wrought sculpture. Beyond it: a family speak in Arabic, crack and chew on pistachios, passing a bag round. The teenagers from before, now on their skateboards, whizz past.

“I used to have an unhealthy relationship with cigarettes, alcohol and sex, that is until —” Nkechi says.

It’s as if he hasn’t heard her. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend. I know religion is important to people. I think it – organised religions –,” he exhales a puff of smoke, “causes more problems than it cures. I love the austerity and serenity of church buildings. All that history and tradition. Sometimes I pray, but I don’t believe in God.”

Nkechi picks up a stick and runs it along the ground as they walk on.

“I’m not making a lot of sense,” he says.

“A life without God,” Nkechi says. “If I could do without him... her... I would. But I can’t, I need the delusion.”

“That why you’re single?” he suddenly asks. “Romance, falling in love is important – right?”

“I’ve just not met the right person, and not for lack of trying.” Nkechi shakes her head, tosses the stick into a hedge. “I’m actually exploring a vocation as a priest.”

“Seriously?” he says, unable to contain his surprise. “I don’t get folk who put chasing a career and money before love.”

“Everyone wants to find love. To be loved. Of course, it’d be great to love again.”

“My father isn’t capable of loving anyone or anything. Totally screwed up.” Paul’s face reddens. “I don’t know why Mum put up with him. I’m nothing like him. Maybe I wouldn’t have been such a fuck-up.”

“What are you going to do?” She interrupts.

“Not sure! The landlord has been threatening me all week. My fridge is empty. I need to sort myself out.”

“The medication not working? Maybe you need to talk to someone.” She takes a deep breath. “You must eat.” Nkechi tuts inwardly.

“‘So thin, you’ll soon vanish’, that’s what Nan keeps saying,” he smiles. “But then, she’s enormous. She has problems walking. She just sits in front of the tele most days. Gets wider and wider each year. When she isn’t watching tele she’s knitting or playing scrabble.”

Nkechi tries to picture this overweight woman with varicose veins and knitting needles.

“I do love my Nan. She’s one of the saner ones in our clan of crazy,” he says. “I do sometimes wonder why she’s so fat. Not fat. Obese.” He coughs again. “I can’t eat. But you’re right, maybe I should talk to my shrink.”

“Hm...”

“I hooked up with my ex again. Ayesha.”

“Hooked up?”

“Thought we were getting back together. We started making plans to start a new life together. I believed her. Hoped it would get me away from here. I was buzzing with plans, but...”

“But?”

“She texted me the other day. She’s moved to London. I read her wrong. Read it all wrong. It’s hit me real hard...”

They stop by the public toilets. Nkechi glances at her watch.

“I need a piss...” Paul says, and disappears behind the garish door with a lop-sided sign.

She and Tolu had enjoyed coming here for a walk, a picnic, or a bite at the café. She hadn’t heard from him. She still felt bad she hadn’t encouraged him to take the test. It was selfish of her. She couldn’t bear it if it came back positive. Still, there was no getting away from the waves of guilt that flooded her psyche from time to time. When Paul returns, they head towards the café. They order sandwiches and iced tea and sit on the freshly cut grass. For the first time in days, the sky is an exquisite blue.

*

That night, a phone call wakes Nkechi. Four o’clock. She recognises Ardella’s voice between sharp breaths:

“Something’s happening ... to the baby ... I’m at the Q.E.”

“I’ll be there.”

Nkechi hangs up, jumps out of bed, and hurriedly throws on a pair of jeans and her favourite T-shirt. She finger combs her hair and calls a cab. On the way, she stares into the black. Her mind refuses to settle on one thought. What had happened? Just last week they were trawling an on-line Baby store, dropping items into Ardella's Wish List. They spent an entire afternoon on it.

When the taxi pulls in, she makes her way inside A&E.

A woman in her twenties, with a gash on her cheek, paces the room – staggering from side-to-side. A discoloured Pakistani man, in a wheelchair, sleeps, snoring loudly; his plump wife, with an angry face, squeezed in a bright sari, chews on a piece of gum. A skinny black nurse dashes through a set of doors. An emergency team push a bed through, the elderly woman on it makes noises as if she is speaking in tongues. The clock above the reception reads: 4:35.

On the noticeboard, an assortment of posters. On one, a large cartoon condom wearing a baseball cap smiles, a speech bubble rises above its head, 'Get Tested!' On another, an exaggerated smile with bleached teeth; beside it, and in contrast, stained teeth and bleeding gums, 'Need Help Giving Up Smoking?'

The Pakistani man stirs, sputters, his head flops to the other side and restarts his drone. His wife turns away, an expression of disgust on her face.

An effeminate male nurse motions to Nkechi. She is taken to a cubicle. Ardella is on a bed, crying. Her eyes are puffy with dark rings around them. Nkechi sits, takes her hand. Ardella presses her face into the pillow. Nkechi watches her heaving frame, strokes her arm. They remain like that for a long while.

When her crying subsides, Ardella asks for some water, gesturing to the jug by her bedside. Nkechi pours a glass, and watches Ardella: blotchy face, bruised lips, streaming nose.

“I’ve lost it.”

Nkechi nods, takes hold of her friend’s hand.

“Just like that ... she’s gone.” Her eyes fill with tears. “Two abortions. Perhaps, this is my punishment.”

“I’m so sorry,” Nkechi whispers. “It’s not a punishment —.”

Ardella falls into Nkechi’s arms.

*

When Nkechi gets home there’s a message on her answering machine from Frank Bacon saying Anna’s file has been closed. If she has any queries she should get in touch. Thank you for all your assistance with our enquiries. Nkechi sighs with relief. She wonders what’s been determined by the investigation team, but doesn’t feel comfortable to call and find out. Her thoughts return to Ardella, who seemingly had it all, and yet the one thing she desperately wanted, was beyond her — both naturally and even with the help of science. Nkechi sits motionless as a pang of sadness washes over her. She was glad Leroy had agreed for her to come over tonight. She needed to have sex with him. She needed to feel wanted. Turning off the bedroom lights, she picks up her handbag, and goes to the living room to wait for the taxi.

*

It’s Sunday before Nkechi hears from Paul again. She has thought about him a lot. Wondered if he’s managed to sort work out. She wasn’t sure he could hold down a job, and not in the state she last saw him in. He was definitely in the Deadbeat category. Unstable and unsalvageable. Nkechi chides herself for her unChristian attitude. No one was beyond hope.

His words are slurred and slow. "I don't know how much longer I can go on." He sneezes.
"Sorry, I've got this cold. Can't seem to shake it."

Nkechi waits, plays with the phone lead, twiddling it between her fingers.

"I need to get away. Make a fresh start somewhere. I want to travel to Gloucester tonight."

"Oh –?"

"The National Express costs twenty quid," he says, hesitantly. "I know it's a big ask, but I need help with the dosh."

"Ah –"

"My friend, Si, says I can crash at his for a few days. Says he might be able to help me get work. Just need to get down there. I know there's no reason why you should help me, but..."

Nkechi feels a lump of irritation in her throat. She pulls open the curtains in the living room. A steady rain falls outside. Branches tremble in the wind. She hasn't prayed since visiting Ardella in the hospital. They kept her overnight because she lost a lot of blood. Anaemic. Marc had flown back from a work trip in Denmark to look after her. Paul was not her responsibility.

"You there?" Paul asks, his voice strung; a high-pitched violin. "Promise, I'll pay you back. Promise." He sounds like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum.

There's a metallic taste in her mouth. She doesn't want to help him. Why should she?

"Yes," she says.

"Great! If you could book the one-forty-five coach. One way." His breathing is heavy and raspy. "I must get away tonight. That's one-forty-five in the morning."

"What will you do? Sure you'll be okay?"

“I’ll crash with Si until I land on my feet. It’s what I need. Getting back with my ex did me no favours. It’s made things a thousand times worse.”

“Alright,” Nkechi says, and for the first time, a thought dents her consciousness. I’m not sure I want to be a priest. Where the fuck is God in all this?

“I really appreciate you helping me out. I didn’t have anyone else to turn to. I’ve spent the last three days drinking and sleeping. I can’t stand being awake. I’m a mess. But I can’t seem to shake it off.”

When he rings off, she goes online and books his e-ticket and sends the confirmation to his phone. She doesn’t get a response back. She sends a text to Tolu: *You up for meeting up? Old Joint Stock or Barber Institute*. A text pings back: *Let’s settle for the Old Joint darling*. She goes through all her bookshelves looking for the Poisonwood Bible. She eventually finds it behind the bookcase in the kitchen.

*

Midnight. Thin hospital walls. A sing-song of groans. Corridor doors swing. Tish tosh. The whining of trolley wheels. Ardella is awake – her ashen face forces a smile.

“I can’t keep doing this?” she says.

It’s Ardella’s second visit to the hospital in as many weeks. Since the miscarriage she hasn’t stopped bleeding.

“I’m scared,” Ardella suddenly says, fiddling with the corner of her blanket.

Nkechi kisses her forehead. “I’m here. Sure you don’t want me to call Marc?”

Ardella tears up. “I can’t keep messing with his work,” she says, staring at the wall. “Magnolia or buttermilk? I read in a design mag that neutral tones used in hospitals help people recover quickly.”

Nkechi hands Ardella a cup of water. She traces the rim of her cup with a thumb, and says, “Heard anything from Paul?”

“Not much,” Nkechi says. “Apparently he’s lined up a couple of interviews. Agency work. Catering.”

“Did he make it in Gloucester?” Ardella’s voice is flat – a statement rather than a question. “Has he paid you back?”

“I doubt it will happen.” Nkechi isn’t expecting her money back. After a couple of texts to find out where her money was, and having received no reply, she decided to cut her losses. “It’s no biggie,” she says, tossing the plastic cup in the bin.

“At least he’s out of your hair,” she says. “That relationship was getting a bit...” Ardella doesn’t finish the sentence.

“Stifling...” Nkechi says.

Tears begin to stream down Ardella’s cheeks. She looks away and closes her eyes.

*

Nkechi fails another driving test. She picks at a wobbly nail on her little toe. With a finger, she flicks and pings it from side-to-side. She ignores the sharp pain. She would have to book another test, but she felt incredibly deflated. Her mobile vibrates:

Sorry for the delay in getting your money back to you. Been in hospital. Mum didn't put the money I was expecting into my account. I WILL pay you back ASAP. PROMISE. Can we meet? Paul.

She grabs her clippers and snips. Blood oozes. Finding some tissue, she wraps the bloody mess and reads the text a third time, before turning off her phone. She's stopped listening to Paul. She doesn't want to know or care or help.

She takes a towel, a new bar of soap, and heads for a shower – steaming, angry. She imagines she's cleansing him out of her system. Her mind, pores and organs – all cleansed of his pity, pain, chaos.

The least, the lonely, and the lost – Jesus came to save.

She towels herself dry. She isn't Jesus. She can't save Paul. She'll text him later. Tell him to forget the money.

Downstairs, she sits in front of the computer. She wants to order food from Tesco. Instead, she sends Paul a message — *Tell me where and when.*

*

Saturday. One o'clock. Nkechi settles herself at a table by the window. The café, a clash of 1940's keepsakes and up-cycled junk from different eras, resembles a montage found in a magazine. She pores over the menu and waits.

A child plays peek-a-boo from her chair. She covers her eyes with her hand. Through plump fingers, she peeks through a slit and quickly disappears again. A flurry of giggles. Nkechi smiles, enjoys the game for a few minutes, before turning her attention back to the menu.

Paul arrives – hovers momentarily at the door. Boney, pasty, unkempt. He takes a seat, and rolls his head in a circular motion. Clockwise. A creak. Anticlockwise. Another creak.

“That’s better...” he grins. “I can’t believe it. I’m back in this dump.”

Nkechi hands him a menu. “Have whatever you want. It’s on me.”

“Sure?” He rubs his elbow – sore, peeling, red.

Nkechi nods. “You need fattening up,” she says, unable to help herself.

For some minutes he studies the menu, uses a teaspoon to guide him through what’s on offer.

“I’m sorry about the loan. I did have every intention of paying you back. But I ended up in hospital.”

“Oh –”

“It’ll be the vegetable lasagne.”

“I’ll have a jacket. Tuna and sweetcorn.”

A Somali man with a half-chewed ear comes to take their order. Nkechi includes a couple of Britvics – lemon and pineapple.

The peek-a-boo youngster traipses the boarded floor. She stamps round and round a greetings card stand. Fashionable suede boots match knee-length dress. Three or four? Her mother hovers over her, a sling bag over her shoulder. She holds on to a raspberry pink coat and two sets of gloves. ‘Amelia, be careful...’ she croons, bending slightly to grab hold of her child before she topples over from her noisy merry-go-round game. An older woman, in her sixties, a pair of bifocals

balanced at the tip of her nose, watches child and mother. She shakes her head. The youngster has picked up a flag, unrolls it and tosses it to the floor. Whack. Whack. ‘Amelia. Enough. Time to go.’

“Hospital?” Nkechi asks, “What happened?”

“It’s crazy how it happened. I was staying with my friend, Si. Well, he decided to take me out. Pub crawl. To cheer me up - ”

“Ah –”

“This all happened on the Friday. The day I arrived. Second or third pub in. I hadn’t even been drinking much. There was a live band. I got up to have a little dance. And that’s when it happened. I dropped – *collapsed*. Just like that.”

“Oh no!”

“Absolutely surreal. One minute I was vertical, the next minute I was horizontal.”

“And...”

“When I came to, I was mortified. Absolutely mortified. I ended up in hospital for three days.”

“What was wrong?”

“Never really got to the bottom of it. An infection of some sort. The main thing is I feel much better now.”

Nkechi nods.

“I can’t work at the moment. So, I decided to come back. No point being in Gloucester if I’m not starting my new life.” He coughs, grimaces. “Tightness in the chest.”

“You probably could do with getting checked over again. A second opinion.”

Paul shrugs. The Somali waiter places their order down. Nkechi stares at his ear. What happened there? A birth deformity? Torn off by a dog?

Paul takes a fork-full of lasagne.

“I must get my act together. I will pay you back. Just need some time to get myself sorted.”

Nkechi chews on some potato – slowly.

“You won’t believe it. But I heard from Ayesha again. She’s moved in with some guy. Finsbury Park.”

“Ah –”

“She’s made me sick. And she’s moved on. Sod’s law. There’s no justice at all.”

Nkechi sprinkles pepper on her jacket potato.

“How are things with you? I’ve been jabbering away.”

“I pick up a new mirror today - ”

“Oh?”

“Back at work on Monday after a lengthy break.”

“Uh-huh...”

“A girl I was counselling...” She pauses. “Oh never mind. But, I’ve decided I need a new mirror.”

“For work?”

“No, at home,” she says. “I keep needing to change things in the house.”

Paul uses a napkin to wipe the cheesy sauce from his mouth, before taking a drink of water.

“Ayesha was a bit like that. Forever changing things in her flat. I couldn’t stand it.”

Nkechi glances at the wall clock. Quarter to two. “I’ve seen one at the charity shop on the High Street. If it’s still there I’ll go for it.”

“Elaine *hated* mirrors, so Mum only had a small one in the bathroom,” he says, his mouth full. “And I suppose since she left, my Mum just got used to the idea of not having mirrors in the house.”

“You been in touch with her?”

“What — with my Mum?” he says, tilting his head to one side, “nah, it’s too much of a hassle.”

Chapter 7

“I’ve got to move out. The landlord’s given me a week.” Paul puffs out smoke.

“Surely, he isn’t allowed to do that.”

“Three months; I haven’t paid any rent.”

“Where will you go? Your Mum’s?”

“I’d rather live on the streets than do that.” He looks away. “I’ll figure something out.”

Nkechi doesn’t know what to say. What would Jesus do? Offer up her second bedroom? The thought is fleeting. She holds back from saying, I wish there was something I could do, and says, “A hostel, perhaps?”

“I might sofa surf for a while. Just until I get sorted.” He wipes his face with a hand. Exhales sharply and takes in another puff of cigarette. “Nan bought me this pack. Popped in to see her the other day.”

“Oh –”

“I would’ve crashed at hers for a few days. But she’s met this bloke.”

“Interesting...”

“Off the internet. He’s there all the time. Richard. We haven’t clicked. Has the look of an axe-wielding farmer.”

Nkechi laughs, and pats him on the back.

“I know what you’re thinking. I’m being paranoid,” he says.

“Aren’t you?”

“He’s only after her money. Tossler. Anyway, he doesn’t want me there.”

“What will you do?”

“Go back to Gloucester. Try again. I need to give Si a call.” He pauses. “Thought about moving down to London. Try and patch things up with Ayesha. But...” His words trail away, carried off by a sudden breeze.

“I’d hate for you to end up on the streets.”

“It won’t come to that... I’m sure of it.” He stubs out his half-smoked cigarette, and places it in his shirt pocket. “You’re such a good friend. Maybe if I wasn’t so messed up we could’ve had something.”

He scoops Nkechi into a hug. Her head sinks into the fabric of his quilted jacket. He kisses her forehead. He smells of tobacco and stale beer.

“Sorry I never got that money back to you,” he says again.

He feels sort of human. A bony human-ghost.

“Will you stay in touch?” Nkechi asks when they separate.

Paul laughs – a sudden high-pitched wince, “I never have any credit on my phone. If I can, sure I will. I guess...”

“Well, if you can,” Nkechi says.

“My father was right about one thing. Said, I’d never amount to much.”

“Look – it’s just a bad run you’re on. It won’t last forever.”

“I’ve not fallen far from the tree. Rot. Rotter. Rotten.” He laughs again, anger in his voice. “He used to say, I was no better than him.” He looks skyward, follows the flight-trail of a helicopter. It dips behind a cloud.

“Hmmm, parents – eh? Who made them god?” She reaches up to hug him. “You’re just in a bad place. Things will look up.”

His body trembles. It’s the first time Nkechi has seen him cry.

She stays, allows the silence to stretch between them. They remain like this for a long time. Enveloped by a Paul-shaped sadness. When he regains his composure, he takes her hand, squeezes.

“I better go...” he says.

*

“Just got up. Forgive me,” Ardella says, leading Nkechi to the kitchen-cum-living area. Nkechi unbuttons her coat, drapes it over an armchair, and takes a seat. Ardella moves across the room, turns the kettle on. “I’ve been sleeping loads.”

“Must be doing you good,” Nkechi says. “How are you?”

Ardella rubs her shoulders – sits next to Nkechi. “Been better. Everyone keeps telling me there are six stages of grief. I’m still trying to figure out which stage I’m in.”

The kettle hisses to a stop. Ardella makes a pot of coffee. She returns to the couch, hands Nkechi a mug, and settles back down, tucking her feet under.

“It’s a terrible thing... Grief,” Ardella says, turning away. “Marc says it’s time, but I can’t get rid of the baby things ... I’m just not ready.”

“There’s no rush,” Nkechi says. “He’ll understand, I’m sure.” But, of course, she isn’t sure about anything. She doesn’t have a clue how Marc is dealing with all of this.

“I’ve decided to sign up for a half-marathon. It’ll give me something to focus on...” Ardella reaches over, picks up a leaflet from the coffee table. Reads it out loud: “Birmingham Half. The race route starts in the city centre, takes in the sights, and finishes on Broad Street...”

“Sounds painful.”

They both laugh.

“What I really want is to have another baby. Is that stupid?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “Marc says it’s too soon. It was his idea. The half-marathon.”

“It might do you good,” Nkechi says.

“It’s been years since I entered a race. It’ll take a while to get me back in shape.”

“There’s time. October, isn’t it?”

“Fancy it?”

Again they dissolve into giggles. “I’m happy to train with you. Not sure I’ll enter the race though.”

Nkechi’s gaze falls on the large front bay windows. Outside: two kids – the older in a blue hoodie, the younger and fairer boy in a red hoodie, rest their skateboards along the wooden fence and stroke a black cat. Perched, poised – it licks its paw. Then, scratches the older. They both jump back. The younger reaches for his skateboard and raises it, egging the cat to run off it. It stares at the board, winds its neck backward and starts to lick its tail.

“I go through phases,” Nkechi says. “Ordained ministry might not be for me.”

The cat slinks off the fence and under a parked car. The boys disappear down the street on their skateboards.

“I’m not sure I’m good enough,” Nkechi says.

“What do you mean?”

“Penitence. Pride. Punishment.” Nkechi pauses. “I don’t know whether I’m wanting to punish or redeem my soul. Or both.”

Ardella places the mug she’s been cradling on the table. “It’s all that hell-and- damnation diet we were brought up on,” she stops. “Does everything have to be weighed up on those terms?”

“Good and Evil?”

“Honourable and dishonourable? Can’t things just be? Can’t you be a priest because it’s what you want to do?”

“Sundays will never be mine again. Sunday lie-ins gone forever...” Nkechi says. “I don’t know. Sermons and bible studies; visiting the sick and dying; hospitals and hospices; fun days and funerals... is it really me?”

Ardella glances out of the window. An elderly man on a mobility scooter whizzes past. A newspaper flutters into the middle of the road. A largish woman in a dressing gown comes out of a house and opens the boot of a charcoal mini.

“I’m sorry...” Nkechi says.

“But you’re good with people. Paul. Anna. Becca – the poem you wrote for her was...” she chokes up, “... beautiful.” They fall silent recollecting snatches of the memorial service. The sixteen white balloons released after the service. For every week she existed.

“Is it enough though?”

Ardella coughs, wipes her eyes, “I’m alright,” she says, with a gesture of her hands. “What would you do if you decide not to go forward with ministry?”

“Travel. Take stock.”

“And when you’re back?”

“Go back to Uni. Get a teaching qualification,” she laughs. “Crazy, I know. But I quite fancy the challenge.”

“Ah –”

A knock on the door interrupts. Ardella goes to answer it.

Nkechi’s hands are dry. She observes the flecks of white on every other nail. A blood blister on her thumb. Her mind floats to an earlier conversation. On the bus, she bumped into her neighbour. Silver haired, grey eyed, and stiff necked. ‘My arthritis is playing up. At my age, with modern medicine, I’m nothing more than a robotic’. They’d both chuckled.

Ardella reappears. “Postman. Flowers.”

“Marc?” Nkechi asks.

“He hasn’t stopped sending me flowers since... since I miscarried.” She places the flowers on the counter and returns to their conversation. “It doesn’t matter what you decide to do... as long as it’s right for you.”

Nkechi glances up. Almost noon.

“Teach. Preach. Pole-dance. It doesn’t matter. Does God even care? As long as your heart’s in it ... Isn’t that what it boils down to? We owe ourselves that, don’t we?” Ardella says.

“I texted Tolu the other day. Said I needed to talk to him.”

“Oh?”

“He needs to get tested. It’s as simple as that.”

“I’m not sure Marc wants us to try again. I’m not sure I can keep putting him through it. He keeps sending me flowers.”

*

When Nkechi arrives at the office – it’s gone noon. At her desk, she scans her email inbox. Eighty-two messages. For a couple of hours she opens up emails – responds, ignores or saves them in a folder. By two, she hasn’t managed to review half her in-box. The phone rings. She picks up on the third. “Mum,” she says.

“Where are you? I’ve been trying to reach you all morning.”

Nkechi munches on a baguette to smother her annoyance. “I’m back at work. My mobile was on silent. Too much to do.”

“When did this happen? You didn’t let anyone know?” By ‘anyone’, she means her and Dad. “Is all that unpleasant business done with now?” By ‘unpleasant business’, she knows she means Anna.

“It’s over...”

“Will you come over for dinner tonight?”

“Tonight?” She takes another bite. “It’s a bit short notice, isn’t it?”

“I wish you wouldn’t chomp in my ears. It’s important. Rosie and Tom have some news.”

“News? Any clues?”

“No idea. I can only guess. But we could all do with a bit of good news.” She can’t be quite sure what her mother is referring to. Her singleness or the lack of grandchildren.

“Alright, Mum – I’ll be there.”

*

The last ember of sunset fades. Seventeen degrees – dropped to seven. Nkechi is thankful for the scarf around her neck. She knocks on the door. Rosie is on the other side, in a cream sweater and jeans. She seems plumper, prettier.

“Sis – hi,” she plants a kiss on her cheek.

“Glad you made it.” They hug. Nkechi hangs her scarf and jacket in the hallway, follows Rosie into the living room.

“I couldn’t miss out on this ‘news’ of yours. So, what is it? Spill...”

Rosie laughs, “You never change. All will be revealed. After dinner.”

Nkechi trails her sister into the kitchen. Green plantains and yams stewing in a sauce seasoned with crayfish and spices. Nkechi coughs. Her mother hands her an onion and a knife and she begins chopping. Rosie takes a tray loaded with cutlery and disappears into the dining room. Nkechi wipes the sting in her eyes, places the chopped onions in a bowl. Her mother moves to sit on a stool.

“Your arthritis playing up?” Nkechi says.

Her mother nods. She had a habit of making a hot drink, getting on with chores – cleaning and cooking, then returning to the tepid liquid. She grabs a napkin and dabs at the spill. “And how has it been? Being back at work?”

Nkechi shrugs. “Mostly an admin day. Lots of emails.”

“This generation. Technology.” She tuts loudly, as if with those words she has explained everything.

Rosie re-enters, uses the tray to load up plates, glasses and cutlery and departs again.

“Any idea what Rosie’s news is?” her mother asks.

Nkechi doesn’t answer immediately. Pregnant. Promotion. A marriage proposal. Had they been going out long enough? Nkechi shakes her head

“Stir the plantain-and-yam porridge,” her mother says, before adding, “I suppose we’ll find out soon enough. And what about you?”

Nkechi stirs the pot – enjoying the smell of Maggi and dried fish. It always surprised Nkechi that although she loved foods from her African roots, she normally lived on a diet of brown rice and brown pasta. No yams, plantains, or fufu.

“Well?” Her mother isn’t going to let it go. She has started on the salad.

“This looks great. I should make an effort to cook traditional dishes for myself,” Nkechi says, replacing the lid on the pot – leaving it to simmer.

“Paul – was it?”

Nkechi inhales sharply. Why had she mentioned a person of interest to her mum? Only God knew where Paul was. He had gone quiet on her again; not responding to her texts or calls. She wondered if he had made his way down to London, into Ayesha’s purse-strings. She contemplates propagating the lie. It would be easier. It was always easier to lie to her parents.

“It’s gone nowhere. He’s left town.”

Her mother's expression contorts – she kisses her teeth. Rosie walks in, and asks, “Who's left town?”

“Paul – the man she's been supposedly seeing.”

Nkechi flinches at ‘supposedly’, goes to the fridge and pours Mango juice into a glass. She had an innate ability to suss out truth. Nkechi remembers the time she told her Mum she'd spent a weekend with her best-friend at the time. Her Mum had known a boy was involved. She'd refused to let it go – a terrier with a bird caught in its mouth. Finally, she'd got a name.

“He got a job in London,” Nkechi says. “He had to go.”

“Where does that leave you?” Rosie says.

“He wasn't ready...” Nkechi says.

“To settle down,” Rosie pipes, on her haunches, rummaging around in the cupboard.

“What are you after?” Nkechi asks.

“A water jug,” Rosie says, rising to her feet, turning the tap and filling it up.

“No one will ever be ready to settle down with your sister. She's impossible. Stubborn,” her mother says.

Rosie laughs, and says, “Not too unlike Dad then,” — and leaves the kitchen.

“What are you going to do in your old age? A time will come when all your options will be sealed. For good. No husband, no children – what will you do?”

“What do you expect me to do, Mum?”

Rosie reappears “Everything is set... all we need now is food. The men are hungry,” she says.

As if on cue, Tom follows behind her – and laces his arms around Rosie’s shoulders. Their mother starts spooning the yam-porridge into a serving bowl.

*

Over the meal, the discussion flows between the politics in Nigeria and the recent kidnappings by Boko Haram. “The kidnappings and killings are constant. Is there no shame left in that country?” her father says in his usual growl. “Unimaginable violence. To think what those animals have done with our girls and women.”

“What’s the government doing about it?” Tom asks.

“Nothing! What has the government ever done for Nigeria? The situation has deteriorated. I used to think it was a no-man’s zone, but it’s truly become the scourge of Africa.” Her father’s lips protrude in defiance. “Has a society ever been ruled successfully by a bunch of butchers and rapists?”

“The North – it’s not a place to be...” her mother says, wiping her blouse with a napkin, then scooping some more salad on her plate.

“Is anywhere safe in Nigeria?” Rosie asks. “A friend of mine just came back a month ago...” she sips her drink, “...she goes off regularly to do NGO work, shuttling between Jos and Kaduna. Says things were bad. The attacks on civilians – hideous.”

“Schools, marketplaces, homesteads, churches – nowhere is safe.” There is no mistaking the pent-up sadness in her father’s voice. “Isn’t it only the devil that attacks people in their place of worship? No – that country is rotten.”

Tom – shifts the conversation.

“Has Rosie told you our news?”

“Now or after dessert?” Rosie caresses Tom’s hand, and looks around the table, waiting for a consensus.

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” Nkechi says, “we can celebrate with dessert.”

“Well.” She glances at Tom and turns to address the rest, “We’ve decided to relocate.”

“Australia?” her mother echoes.

“Darwin, to be precise. We want to start a new life abroad. We’ll both get jobs out there – save up some money. Then, perhaps, set up a business in a few years.”

Nkechi decides against a second helping of yam-porridge. In childhood, she and Rosie would create dolls out of Fanta and Coke cans – they served as the bodies of the dolls. Their mother’s wool was sellotaped for hair – orange, purple, green – it all depended on what cardigan or sweater she was knitting that winter. Buttons or circular card cut-outs glued for eyes. Whatever else was needed – lips, noses, ears were created with markers. Foil was used for dresses and earrings. She’d never owned a doll – a teddy she’d won at a school Christmas Lucky Dip – but never a doll. Her parents didn’t believe in toys. Children should create their own fun, her father would say, after scolding them for sulking when they went into a toy store and hadn’t been allowed to buy the dolls they had their eye on.

“Nkechi, what do you think?” Her sister’s eyes are bright and bold.

“It’s a long way from home,” she says, pouring herself a glass of wine. Rosie had always been brave and daring. She remembers. The nights Nkechi would climb into her sister’s bed frightened by the dark. The tree house Rosie had built in the garden; she’d helped of course but it had re-

ally been her sister's idea. The gap year Rosie had made to Phnom Penh after her A-levels – she'd spent six months at a Conservation Base. The Korean man she'd dared to date at University. Hwan – was that his name? In any event, she hadn't dared to bring him home to the parents. Nkechi giggles at the memory.

“When are you both planning to leave?” her mother asks.

“In a month. We were waiting on the visas before we said anything...” Tom says, piling more vegetables on his plate.

Rosie walks round to Nkechi, puts her arms around her. “You can always come over for a visit,” she whispers.

“I'm sure it'll be a fantastic opportunity for you both,” Nkechi says, patting her sister's arm.

Chapter 8

Nkechi arrives ten minutes late at the Old Joint Stock. Not much has changed since she was last here. Her birthday last year. Was it a Jazz or Blues performance she'd come to see with Ardella? She can't remember. She walks towards the counter. A guide dog barks. She gives a wide berth to his golden mass sprawled at the feet of a bald man with a distended stomach. A woman wearing a beret on her dark mane, clutches a rolled newspaper, and says in a loud whisper, "Be quiet, Horatio!"

Perched on a high stool, Tolu has his back to the entrance – straight, stylish. His fingers drum against the counter. She touches his shoulder.

"You're here," he says, as he turns.

She smiles.

"A drink? I'll order. Why don't you find more suitable seating? Up there?"

"Raspberry Cider," she says, "Thanks."

Nkechi goes to the upstairs balcony area and finds a couple of free chairs in the corner. The lighting from the parade of lamps makes the space bright. A scattering of people: a silent youngish couple; a group of four chattering females; and a white-bearded man with a small dog, makes loud crunching noises with every crisp he pops into his mouth. Nkechi places an elbow on the table. It tilts. She tucks her handbag against her heel. The dog – a small black mound – looks dead.

Tolu appears, puts the drinks on the table. It tilts again. Nkechi folds a placemat and puts it beneath the table leg. "Better..." she says.

“You look well,” Tolu says. “The hair suits you.” Nkechi smiles. She trimmed her dreads and added a bit of colour. The hairdresser said the shorter style took years off her. He doesn’t look bad either. Smart shirt, tailored jacket, and a pair of jeans. Fresh-faced at forty, he looks good.

“It’s great we could meet up,” he stifles a sneeze. “I hated the way we left things.” His eyes linger on her clavicle. “How’ve you been?”

“I’m good,” she says. “I’m getting there.”

His left pinkie taps the table – an unconscious tick. He sneezes again, collects a hanky from his pocket and blows his nose. “That blasted dog,” he mutters.

“Should we move?”

He looks around. “No – no, it’s alright. I’ll survive,” he grunts.

“And you – what’ve you been up to?”

“I’m fed up with teaching. Same school, same students, relentless workload. I’m done,” he says. “Ten years hard slog. I’m thinking of doing something else.”

“You made lots of noises when we were together...”

“But now I’m ready for it to happen. I *need* to make it happen.”

“And your ex? Is she behaving herself?”

“She threatened to move down south. I kicked up a stink. After everything she’s done to keep Skye away from me – I wasn’t having that.”

“Where does that leave you?”

“We’re back in the courts,” his eyes darken. “But at least I get to see Skye every two weeks. Like I said before, she’s allowed to stay at mine now.”

Nkechi nods – fidgets with the chain on her wrist.

“Anyway, forget all that bullshit. I’m sure you didn’t ask to see me to discuss all this...” He holds her gaze – she looks away. “What is it, Nkechi?”

Nkechi has no idea what to say, or how to respond. A few months ago – she would have leapt across the table and punched him. A few weeks ago – she might have spat out a few choice words. Now, here – she feels nothing, wants nothing but to walk away; a non-emotion wedged in her gut.

“I treated you badly,” he says, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let things go off track between us. The damn situation with Skye’s mother really got to me.” His voice cracks a little.

Tears sting Nkechi’s eyes. It surprises her. She’d always thought she wanted to confront him about his behaviour. Find closure. And, yet, none of that was important now.

“Perhaps, I’m being presumptuous – but I’ve missed you. Really missed you,” he says – reaching to take her hand in his. “Is there a way back for us?”

She feels warmth rising in her face and pulls her hand away. “Tolu, you need to take the HIV test.”

She watches his face stiffen, and sweat beads rise to his forehead. “Why? — I’d already made a decision not to bother with all that.”

“I’m HIV positive...” She rubs her neck, as if trying to dislodge the lump in her throat. “Tolu...” she says, in the silence that has enveloped them.

“I heard you,” he says. His face, serious and stoic, reminds her of her father. “When? How? I don’t understand.”

“I was diagnosed three years ago,” she says. “I’m slowly piecing my life back together.” She ignores the sense of discomfort. She wants to stop talking, but she can’t stop. “I know we used condoms, but...” She doesn’t feel able to finish her sentence and uses a knuckle to dab her nostril.

“You’ve never looked ill?” he says, looking at her closely as if for the very first time, really seeing her.

Nkechi, taken aback by the question, pushes a lock back from her face. A group of women get up noisily as they leave. A chair falls against the bannister. The shortest of the group stumbles on three-inch heels. “I’m sorry,” she finally says.

*

A chalice appears in Nkechi’s dream, silver plated with a floral motif around its middle. Her eyes focus on a procession of lips – thin, thick, rouged, chapped. Heads dip forward, taste the alcohol, then jerk backward. She finds herself at the front of the queue. Her heart pulsates, a sheen of sweat on her brow. To sip or to dunk? She clutches the communion wafer in her hand. All those mouths. She flinches — wakes to the drone of her mobile.

“It’s me. It’s Paul. Call me back.”

He hangs up.

Nkechi cleans the corners of her eyes, and rubs her right shoulder. The gnawing pain is still there. She’d noticed it at her swim session a couple of night’s ago. The first of six. An Adult’s Improver’s course she’d been meaning to take for years. Finally decided to take the plunge. The instructor, a gap year type girl, bubbled with motivational mantras. You’ll be diving in no time, she

said. Nkechi left feeling pleased with herself despite the nagging pain in her shoulder. Now, it spirals up and down her neck, occasionally drilling into her clavicle.

“Paul –” she says, when he picks up her call. It’s a half-question, half-statement. “Where are you?”

He doesn’t answer straightaway. He stifles a snuffle. “I’ve not been good,” he exhales sharply. “I’m in a unit.”

Nkechi swings her legs over the side of the bed, takes a deep breath, and waits for him to continue.

“I got myself in such a state. Every night my head would burn. I couldn’t sleep. Thought I could handle it. But –”

“You’re safe?” Nkechi says, “that’s the main thing.”

“Things went from bad to worse. Ayesha got herself a new boyfriend. He’s Muslim so she’s happy.” He laughs; a parched, lost sound. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“I’ve been worried about you.”

“I need a favour,” he pauses, snuffles again. “I wonder if you could visit.” His words are hurried, tumbling after the other, in a panic.

Nkechi places two fingers on her shoulder and begins to massage – deeply, trying to release the tension.

“You there?”

“Yes –”

“I know it’s a big ask. But I’ve not had any visitors since I came in.”

“I’ll come,” she says. “How long are they keeping you in for?”

“I need to be here for now...” His words fade.

“How about Saturday? After lunch? Will that be alright?”

“I know it’s a massive ask,” he says again.

Nkechi imagines him fiddling with the telephone cord, or a loose thread on his jumper sleeve, peeling cuticle skin. “I’d better go,” she says.

“Sure. It’s The Arches.”

“Yes – I know it. Right. I’ll see you on the weekend.”

*

Gibb Street. Nkechi arrives at a Pop-up Vintage Tearoom. Round tables laid out: fresh flowers, bone china sugar bowls, and milk cups placed on floral table cloths. On the shelving dotted around the warehouse space: square candles; butterfly decorations; hand carved rose soaps.

Ardella is in a kaftan-style paisley dress. She looks healthier than she has done in weeks. She meets Nkechi in a hug. They order. Americano coffees and a maple-walnut cake to share.

“How did it go with Tolu?”

“Strange.” Nkechi uses a napkin to wipe crumbs off the table. “He seemed very apologetic for everything, then sort of asked if we could give ‘us’ another go?”

“Oh?”

“After everything,” Nkechi sighs. “The moment’s passed.”

“Ah...”

“Told him to get himself tested.”

“You did it then.”

Nkechi nods. “It was the right thing to do.”

“I still see her,” Ardella’s silence says everything. “I’m sorry...” Eventually, she clears her throat. “Last night was the first time I’ve seen Marc cry – since she died.”

“It’s bound to be hard on both of you.”

“He wants me to move. To Denmark. His contract has been extended.” She breaks off when the waitress arrives with their order. “I think he’s scared for me. Worried I might do something stupid,” Ardella says, using a napkin to blow her nose. In spite of the rosiness in her cheeks, her eyes are worn, detached.

“Do you want to go?”

Ardella cuts into the cake. “I think he needs me more than he’s letting on,” she says.

“You probably should talk to him...”

“The race is coming up soon.” She pauses. “That’s all I can focus on at the moment.”

Nkechi places her hand over her friend’s.

“He doesn’t want us to try again,” she says.

“Perhaps in time,” Nkechi says.

A mother and daughter – brunettes with endless suntanned legs – enter, chatting loudly. A youngish woman in an all-in-one summer suit follows carrying an instrument case in her left hand.

“I finally heard from Paul,” Nkechi says.

“Which hole did he crawl out of?”

“Checked himself into a unit. I’ve agreed to visit.”

“Wise?” Ardella says.

Dark Dark Dark lyrics’ *Who needs Who* play in Nkechi’s mind – She says nothing.

*

Saturday. Paul is waiting for her in the foyer. Sunlight streams through circular portholes on the ceiling.

“This looks nice.” Nkechi motions to the skyline with an arm.

“You should see the rest of it,” Paul says. “But let’s have a wander outside first. There’s an allotment.”

He leads her through two sets of swing doors. Outside again, they make their way down a narrow path. Two men on mowers cut the grass. A woman, on her knees, having a conversation with herself, pulls weeds from a square bed.

“That’s Beth,” Paul says.

They pass through a corridor of trees – redwood, blossoms and beech. Paul turns into a narrower path which opens up into the allotment. He opens a wooden gate and they enter. The footpaths run between raised beds, grooves of dug-over soil, and rows of caterpillar netting. At the far edge of the wall are two greenhouses.

“We need to re-pot some of these Chrysanthemums,” Paul says.

“Those need staking...” Nkechi points at a cluster of green bulbs beneath a wooden sign. Paul, hands in pocket, heads towards a bench between the greenhouses.

Nkechi takes her time – enjoys how the shy sun shines on the floppy corn stalks. It reminds her of road journeys from Aba to Port Harcourt where en-route her mother always insisted on stopping to buy roasted corn and ube from street hawkers. Against a growing box lined with rocket, spinach and spring onions, there's a pile of ripped-up nettles. She walks the short distance to where Paul has settled himself. There is more weight on him. Legs outstretched, head leaning back against the wall – he resembles a gangly teenager. She sits beside him.

He stirs, and spits.

“My Nan used to say pansies have faces,” he grins. “I spent entire summers trying to work out their facial expressions. Y’know like the Mr Men.” He laughs – a light, excited patter. The sparkle is back in his eyes.

“You look loads better...”

“I’ve started taking photos again.” He suddenly rises, squats beside a strip of purple and lilac flowers, and pokes the soil. “Part of my therapy.” He scatters a handful of soil back on the ground.

“Well, it’s pretty scenic here,” Nkechi says. “I can imagine it’s a great place for photographs.”

“It’s an old camera.” He returns to his seat, and closes his eyes. “But it works.”

A ladybird edges along the stalk of a pansy. And another. And another. A black and white cat slinks across the slabbed pathway on the far side – scrambles onto the fence, and scuttles into the woodlands. Paul flicks a wasp away from his ear.

“And how are things with you?” he says, as if it’s an afterthought, and turns to face her.

Nkechi runs a hand through her twisted locks. “I’m back at work. Though still undecided if it’s where I want to be. My sister and her partner are off to Australia.”

Low voices, broken by singing, interrupt them. Between the trees, Nkechi makes out the silhouette of a couple.

“That’ll be James and Laura.” He checks his watch. “Yes, it’ll be them.”

They emerge – draw closer. A slim twenty-something woman in an ankle-length dress; holding hands with a man with matted locks and a thin goatee. He stops singing, and says hello. The woman waves, and they carry on to an oblong patch of cabbage.

“They only grow root vegetables...” Paul says. “They met here.” He stops, deciding how much to reveal. “They’ve been good for each other.”

“You still taking your meds?”

He nods, “No choice. I’ve got to.”

“What’s that over there?” Nkechi points at a cylindrical contraption made of timber, twine and tarpaulin.

“A shed. Handmade by the residents,” he laughs. “They encourage us to keep busy – do a full day’s work. Carpentry, woodwork, the allotment.” He swipes at another wasp. “They even organise day trips and walks in the countryside. They try and keep us sane. I don’t plan on staying here forever.” He gets up, stretches with a grunt. “Your sister is lucky. I guess it gives you a reason to go to Australia?”

“Maybe,” Nkechi rises and stretches her limbs. “I hate long haul flights.”

“I hate travelling on trains,” he breaks off at the sound of a high-pitched voice. Laura is gesturing wildly, then she walks towards the shed, a hoe in her hand. James follows behind.

Nkechi wipes sweat off her forehead.

“Feels like I’m on holiday,” he says. “Though when we were young, Mum’s idea of a holiday was making Marmite sandwiches, a boiled egg each, and some lime squash, and having a picnic in the park.”

Nkechi laughs.

“Sometimes, we’d head off to the canals... find a patch to sit on.”

“Different, I suppose.”

“I’d watch the narrow boats and wish they’d take me away to Greenwich.”

“Greenwich?”

“The Observatory. Standing a foot in each hemisphere. I like the idea.” He stops, unbuttons his shirt and says, “It’s like being at the cusp of life and death. I watched a friend of mine die some years back. And, there was a moment when his life was on that boundary line — a foot here, the other there...”

A whiff of alfalfa, cow dung and lavender is carried on a gust of wind. “I know what you mean,” Nkechi says, allowing her stride to fall in sync with his. “So how long do you think you might be here?”

He clears his throat, and spits again. “No idea.”

*

Nkechi is at Manchester International Airport. Café Nero. Tom goes to order while Nkechi and Rosie settle themselves at a cushioned window seat. A slight, dark man – from Sri Lanka or Goa – eats hurriedly: a baguette, a pinkish-hued cake, and a banana milkshake. His feet tap to a rhythm blaring through his headphones. Behind him, a teenage boy licks sugar off his fingertips; half-eaten doughnut on a plate.

“I hate airports,” Rosie says, placing her head in her palm.

A toddler screeches at the top of her lungs. The mother, a woman with dyed burgundy hair, drags her towards the toilets. An announcement. Flight TK1995 to Istanbul is ready for boarding.

“Will you be alright?” Nkechi asks, observing her sister closely, the baggy rings around her eyes.

“Tom’s so good to me,” Rosie says. She reaches down to straighten her handbag. “I don’t know how I could have managed this move without him.”

Both of them watch him, still at the counter: dressed in a white shirt and white pants, his buttocks round and taut; draped on his arm, a linen jacket.

“You must come out and see us.”

“When do you start work?”

“In a week.”

“I guess you’ll be pushing babies out soon,” Nkechi says, smiling.

“We’ll see...” Rosie says.

Tom returns, places a hand on Rosie’s shoulder. He puts the tray on the table and winces.

“You alright?” Rosie says.

“Cramps.” He straightens up slightly, cuts a Danish pastry in half and hands it to Rosie.

A drizzle has started outside. A muted siren whirrs past – an elderly Chinese couple and their luggage are being transported to a boarding gate.

“I won’t miss this grey and wet,” Rosie says, slipping her hand over Tom’s.

“Sitting on a veranda. Lounging on the beach. Heaven,” Tom says.

“Surely there are some things you’ll miss?”

Tom and Rosie look at each other. “Scones and cream,” Rosie says.

It didn’t feel real that Rosie was going to Darwin. She was the first person she told about exploring ordination. She knew about Tolu and Leroy. No longer would Rosie be there to buffer her against her parents’ demands. Their desire for an in-law and grandchildren and a lifestyle they could show off to their friends. She can’t imagine her being so faraway.

Chapter 9

Nkechi gets up and throws off the duvet, feeling as if she hasn't slept. The same dream. The chalice. The lips. The panic. There is only one difference. This time, the wine changes to blood. She moves up the queue of parishioners. When it's her turn, she takes hold of the silver cup brings it to her lips. And the wine is blood. She refuses to drink and pours it to the ground until she is woken up.

On the L-shaped desk, a basket of wool, and another larger basket piled with laundry. Plant pots and flowers in vases: green and gold, fading crimson and dead browns. She allows her finger to trace the outline of a limp yellowing leaf. She runs a knuckle along the window's ledge, a thick layer of dust. So unlike Ardella; it was hard seeing her so lost.

Downstairs, she rifles through the herbal teas, decides on strong coffee. Eight o'clock and it doesn't seem as if Ardella is up yet. She adds sugar, and stirs. She goes to the conservatory, which looks out into a back garden overrun with weeds, nettles and long grass. A squirrel emerges from a thick hedge, then retreats. Nkechi pulls a window to. A bird, the size of a kiwi, black with a red beak, flutters on to the roof of the dangling birdhouse. Nkechi sets down her mug, looks up again, the bird has gone. She massages the basal joint of her left thumb. Hands placed side by side, she stares at the protrusion.

A knock at the front door.

A postman in shorts, a singlet and sunglasses stands on the doorstep. He smiles, hands her a clipboard and pen.

"Was that the door?" Ardella asks. She has a picture in her hand. "I don't know who took this," she says, passing it to Nkechi.

Sixteen or seventeen – plump in that edge-of-womanhood sort of way; her expression is yielding, affable. The young Ardella peers into the camera lens as if she’s lost something behind it. She is dressed in a denim skirt and ‘Life Sucks’ T-shirt.

Ardella picks up the package from on the table, places it on the fridge.

Nkechi focuses on the picture: Ardella’s chunky shoes, a large fabric bag falls across her chest. Someone’s shadow cuts across the grass.

“Looks nothing like me, does it?” She fills the kettle.

“You not going to check what’s in the package?” she asks, handing back the photograph.

“I wish I could go back...” She flicks on the kettle. “Another present from Marc, no doubt.”

They watch the kettle boil.

“Your Rosie and Tom are so lucky,” Ardella finally says, pouring water into a couple of mugs. “To start afresh. To reinvent themselves.”

*

Three months later, Nkechi receives a phone call. She checks her watch: 4 pm. What time was it in Darwin? Rosie is full of news. The Greek neighbours, their three children, the Lebanese restaurant in the city, the crocodile cruise, and the visit to Fogg Dam.

“What time is it there?”

“Gone midnight...” she says. “Did you know that kangaroos and emus can’t walk backwards?” she coughs. “Apparently, it inspires Aussies to be a forward looking nation.” A nervous laughter follows.

Nkechi isn't sure if it's the image of kangaroos and emus attempting to walk backwards which sets her off and she starts laughing too.

"Tell me – what have I missed?" she asks. "What's going on at home?"

"I'm planning a weekend away in a couple of weeks. Tewkesbury."

"Sounds great," Rosie says. Before Nkechi can ask her about Tom, she says, "I saw my first kangaroo –"

"Amazing..."

"Strange creatures. It's as if they're not sure what they're supposed to be."

"Dad's been ill..."

"Nothing serious?"

"An infection – he's been in bed for a week."

"On the mend?"

"Cranky. Mum's had enough."

"He can be a tyrant," Rosie pauses. "Have you got round to telling them?"

Nkechi shakes her head.

"Have you?" Rosie repeats.

"There never seems to be a good moment..." Nkechi glances at the flickering light from the lamp post. A woman, stooped and sullen, passes by. The neighbour opposite is hanging out laundry.

"Will you ever tell them?"

“I should. But probably not.”

“Tom didn’t come home last night,” she says, a desperation in her voice.

Nkechi picks up a pen from the kitchen countertop, tears away a piece of paper from the pad on the microwave, and begins to draw shapes. Circles within circles; cubes; and teardrops. A car alarm keeps going off.

“It might not be what you think?” Nkechi asks. “Have you talked to him?”

“It’s not the first time,” Rosie carries on. Tom had grown on Nkechi like tofu had. He seemed considerate and sensitive. He regularly changed Rosie’s car oil; took her to Truro on her birthday; and bought her a ticket to see Ibsen’s ‘Lady from the Sea’.

“The job isn’t what he thought it would be...”

“Right...” Nkechi watches a fat fly on the wall. It doesn’t move. She is tempted to wave her hand over it, or use a newspaper to swat it.

“Every evening he ends up in a bar. Says he needs to unwind. Most times he comes home, but...” She sniffs – a faint small sound. Nkechi wonders if she’s imagined it. Now: fish shapes; the eternity symbol; and cube on cube on cube.

“Sounds like he’s not coping,” Nkechi says. “But surely he’ll get another job soon.”

“He refuses to let me use the car. Just flat out refuses,” she pauses. Another succession of sniffles. “It’s like I never knew him.”

Nkechi is quiet. Not sure what to say.

“Sorry, sis – I shouldn’t be dumping all this on you,” Rosie says abruptly. “I don’t know what to do.”

“He’ll come home. Try not to worry,” Nkechi says.

“Not a word to Mum.”

Nkechi’s drawing dominoes. She looks up. The fly hasn’t stirred. Where did her repulsion for flies come from? She imagines them to be the plagues and pestilence of Old Testament Egypt. They remind her not of death itself, but of disease and dying.

“Kangaroos can’t hop backwards. But they’re good swimmers,” Rosie says.

“I’ve been swimming a fair bit with Ardella,” Nkechi says. “She’s been training hard for the half-marathon.”

“And the redecorating?”

“Mum’s been moaning about the builders. They should be done in a couple of weeks.”

“You really should tell Mum and Dad...”

Before she can respond, there’s a sudden rustling at the other end of the phone. For a few moments, there are muffled voices.

“He’s back...” Rosie finally whispers. “I better go,” she says, and hangs up.

*

A hazy August morning. The bus stinks of Doritos and musty vomit. The conversation from a group of four American students laden with backpacks provides the only sound. An Asian woman with blue extensions in her hair and a ring on her thumb moves her roller-skates. Nkechi closes her eyes. She’d tried to contact Paul several times. Texts, phone calls – nothing. She’d hesitated to ring again this morning. She didn’t want him to feel pressured, stressed. Perhaps he checked himself out of

The Arches. She wonders if he finally got the tattoo he'd been going on about. He'd showed her two designs: a rattle snake and *inshallah* in arabic.

MAYA

Chapter 1

Maya gulps down five pills with a glass of cranberry juice when the doorbell rings. She opens the door to Reverend John, a short man with a sedate expression. He follows her to the conservatory. Reverend John unbuttons and takes off his coat. Maya motions him to take a seat on the sofa. She hated the cold, sterile, brown leather. Every year, for the past five years she kept promising to change it, but it hadn't gone. Partly, financial. Partly, her inability to get rid of the familiar. A hoarder, like her mother. It had taken months to clear her mother's shed — full of musty and mildewed stacks of clutter.

“I'm feeling the cold at the moment. My arthritis...” she says, rubbing her knuckles. “Tea?”

“Coffee – weak, no sugar.” He places his coat on the armrest, settles into the sofa. “Hattie around?”

“Upstairs,” Maya says, “I'll get the drinks...”

Arranged around the room are plants of all sizes. From one, springs a pinkish flower. From another, a golden brown. On a round glass table, in the corner: stones and shells; a dangling bell plant; dotted beneath it, black-and-white photographs. Anna in a purple T and skinny jeans; her deep black hair, tied loosely in a bun. Anna's arm loops around Hattie's shoulder protectively; pale skin and intense eyes stare back at the lens. Anna and Maya lick ice-creams, as if caught unawares by the camera; behind the bench, a square silver clock; above, a red kite flutters on a branch.

“She was always changing her hair colour,” Maya says, smoothing the cloth on the table.

“Once she even cut it off, and gave herself bangs. It drove me crazy. But...”

“Teenagers,” he says, with a tender jellied laugh. “When I think back to what mine got up to at that age. My youngest, Hannah, is already wearing makeup. She's eleven.”

“Hattie’s different,” she says. “Anna, on the other hand, has always loved experimenting. Makeup, hair, clothes. She was always trying something different.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” he says. “In many ways that’s the problem with our society. Too many sheep.” He picks up a coaster from the centre table, and puts it down again.

“I can’t remember where I picked that up from,” she says. “Actually, it might have been my mother’s. We cleared so much stuff when she died. Excuse me.” She disappears again.

Maya returns with two mugs and a plate of fig rolls. She puts the tray beside the photographs, pulls a side table to, places the plate of biscuits down, and hands a mug to Reverend John. She wraps a thick shawl around her shoulders, takes a seat opposite. For a time, they are both quiet, staring out of the window. Muted sun rays fall on the garden, cluttered and overgrown. Potted plants to the west of the uneven boundary. An upturned patch to the east, as if ready for planting, except it isn’t planting season. On the north side, a copper-orange shed. Beyond the shed, an apple tree with a large bird-cage hanging off a branch. Creepers crawl in every direction along the wooden fence.

“It’s a mess,” she says. “Never been much of a gardener. Sometimes I do keep on top of it,” her words tail off into the sip of her drink. “It’s been three years...”

Reverend John says nothing, dips a fig roll into his drink, and eats.

“The girls and I...” she says, “we moved in three years ago after my mother died that year.” Her fingers play with the tassels on her shawl.

“Transitions. Change. It’s easy to fall into cliches, so I won’t.” He stops, allows the hush to rest on them like a balm. “I remember when I came to this parish all those years ago. From Newcastle to Birmingham. A real upheaval. It took a long time to settle into this foreign land.” His laughter,

sudden and short, punctuates his chatter. “I hated everything about Brum. In a way, it represented all we left behind. Now, I can’t imagine not living here.”

“It’s on the list,” she says, tracing the ridge of her nose. “My next project, making sense of the garden. I’m on the waiting list for the allotments.”

“Staying busy? That’s a good idea.”

“Nothing makes sense,” she says. “The fire. Anna dying. My thoughts are all a jumble.”

“How’s Hattie coping?” he says. “Has her sleeping improved?”

“Anna wasn’t keen on this house,” she says, turning again to face the garden. “Thought it was too ordinary. Maybe if we hadn’t moved here. Hattie’s still having nightmares.”

“There are no words...”

Maya says nothing. Silence wraps them in its cadence. They watch a cat. It concentrates on a shrub among the weeds; overgrown and unkempt chaos. A tawny-beaked blackbird hops along the fence, and flies to perch on the feeding box. Until: spooked by a shadow, it dives behind the trees.

“I almost didn’t have her,” Maya says. “Not that she wasn’t wanted. Just inconvenient.”

Reverend John’s eyes open with expectation, encourage her to go on. For a moment, she takes him in: pug-faced, with a subdued expression.

“The relationship with her father was nowhere,” she pauses. “He’s the only man I’ve loved. In that true kindred spirit way. But after a while it stopped working.” She exhales sharply, “We stopped being enough for each other.”

“Ah –” Reverend John says, reaching for another fig roll. Crumbs fall on his lap, onto the rug, and his leg jerks slightly. Maya hasn’t hoovered or cleaned the house or cooked all week. “These things are often more complicated in in practice than in theory.”

“Never knew I wanted kids. I spent half my life not wanting them. Then Anna happened. It was bloody awful. The whole birth experience. And after all that...” She takes a bunch of keys from the coffee table and holds it in her hand. “Fibroids. That’s what they discovered when I was pregnant with Anna.”

Reverend John brings the mug to his lips, swallows, and returns the drink to the table. A steady, slow movement. He undoes the sleeves of his shirt and rolls them up, tugs at the top button and pulls out the white clerical collar. “You don’t mind do you? I’ve never got used to these things. Suffocating.”

“The counsellor says Hattie’s nightmares will run their course. That’s what grief does, apparently.”

“It affects people differently,” he says, “That’s an interesting picture of her,” he adds, pointing at Anna.

“Ian took that. Windermere. Anna didn’t care much for photographs, but she liked that one. Said it made her look normal.” Maya moves to pick the frame up, and stares hard at it. “I think it’s because Ian took it. She found this frame for it, and for a long time, she had it on her windowsill. Next to the turtle,” she stops and laughs a heavy angry sound “– some daft object she picked up from a charity shop.”

“A collector,” he says. “Every generation of youth goes through that phase. Stamps. Football cards. Stickers. Magnets.”

“Would you like to see her room?” Maya says. “I’m sure she won’t mind.” Her voice is scant, almost strangled.

She leads him: through a narrow kitchen, down a short passageway, and up a flight of steep stairs. Along the walls, a mix of ethnic canvases hang in collage fashion. At the far end, up a couple of steps, she opens the door.

“This extension’s not been long done.” She closes the window and draws the curtains. The room is compact – but not too small. Framed Manga posters run vertically down the west wall above the bed. A candle and a granite turtle on the windowsill. A striped black-and-beige dress hangs on the curtain rail. Stickers run down the middle of the wardrobe. Spilling out of three decorative trinket boxes on the dresser: necklaces, bracelets and rings. A wooden, stone and knitted squirrel. A stack of vintage hat boxes. On the armchair, silk scarves and leggings and a pair of jeans. A pile of papers and folders under the bed. Maya bends down and reaches for a book. She hands it over to him.

“Japanese...” he says, thumbing through it.

“She wanted to grasp the basics,” she stops, pats down the blanket on her bed. “She was really looking forward to the temples and shrines in Kyoto and Nara.”

“Not an easy language,” he says, placing the book on the desk. “I tried learning Greek during my gap year. I still can’t string a phrase together.”

She picks up a pair of trainers, looks around, puts them down again in exactly the same spot, beside the small wastepaper basket. Reverend John touches the make-up bag, the 1940s-styled radio, and holds up a colour photograph.

“A camping trip in Criccieth. Anna and Millie. Her best-friend. She was at the funeral.”

“Ah, I remember.” Anna on a boulder – her chin tilted upwards, as if a hot air balloon or a show plane had caught her attention. Her demeanour: unguarded, trusting and childish. “She looks happy.”

Maya remembers their last conversation. Something inconsequential. An argument about clearing out the loft. Anna insisted she would do it. Maya wondered why. There was something suspicious in her smug and self-assured expression.

“I don’t know what happened. I lost her somehow, along the way,” she says. “God is punishing me...” Her voice chokes, a stunted raspy breath.

Reverend John doesn’t respond straightaway, but finally says, “I find it hard to believe in a God who would do that.”

They return downstairs and when Maya asks if he would like another drink, he declines. “I’ve got the midday service at the hospital to sort out. But please remember, I’m just at the end of the phone. And the church is praying for you and Hattie.”

Chapter 2

Maya allows him to enter her using a condom. Eyes shut tight as he thrusts her legs apart. She inhales. Exhales: David's menthol mouthwash and spicy sweat. Another thrust, he gyrates in clockwise motion – a hand falls across her chest – pumps, fast and frenzied, until he ejaculates. Limp, he presses his head on her chest. Her abdomen stiffens. Sticky phlegm rises to the base of her tonsils. She stifles a spasm.

Everything's changed. Just as it did when she was diagnosed. HIV positive! The two words fell like bullets, lodged in her spine. As the nurse explained what would now happen, she found herself no longer in her physical body. An out-of-body experience. It wasn't really happening to her. It was only when she realised the sobbing belonged to her, did she understand it *was* happening to her. Her whole world stopped, and she gasped for breath. The nurse gave her a tissue. Maya hadn't wanted to reenter her body. Should I call your husband in? Ian came in, held her, and cried. Maya imagines Anna floating somewhere. What was the other side of life like? She pictures Anna playing a bouzouki, dancing around a lit fountain, strutting across a high-wire.

David heaves – she opens her eyes; his deep browns bear down, lips turned in a strange smile – and rolls over on his back, yanks off the latex sheath. “How are you, love?” he asks, tossing the condom into the paper basket. “I'm sorry about —” She waits for him to complete the sentence: The Funeral. Anna Dying. Everything.

“I can't imagine how you must feel,” he finally says. “It's a shitty thing to be going through.” He is now lying on his back, facing the ceiling.

Maya turns away. Spidery-shadows created by a dimmed lamp dance on the walls. The sudden wail of an ambulance pierces the quietness. David's heavy breaths erupt into snores.

She goes to the bathroom; desperate for a shower. She scrubs down with sea sponge, soap and Dettol – lots of it. She'd needed to get away from the house, from her thoughts, Anna's room. She'd made a quick call to Mrs Hussein, and she agreed to have Hattie for the night. David had taken her to the Thai restaurant in Moseley. The green curry and soft rice balls, she'd forced herself to eat, tasted bland and chalky. She didn't fancy going to a wine bar after the meal, so David had driven home, and led her straight to the bedroom. Stripping off, to reveal his pasty skin and reddish moles.

Maya gets out, puts on a dressing gown, and goes to the kitchen. They'd been off-and-on for a couple of years now. Although neither of them really thought they should make a go of the relationship, it seemed easier to be with each other, for the company and sex. Though tonight, Maya hadn't wanted sex. He had misread her need. Misunderstood her want. Sasha and Sailor trail her footfall, a couple of Halloween ghouls. She serves them a plate of cat biscuits and a bowl of water. Rifling through the cupboards, she decides to bake a banana cake. A midnight feast. Her mother wouldn't approve. But then there were a lot of things her mother had never approved of. The only thing they had agreed on was Maya's pregnancies. When both girls were born, her mother had doted on them.

Maya switches the oven on, collects a large bowl, and pours in flour, milk, overripe bananas, sugar, eggs, cinnamon, walnuts and raisins – mixes until a film of moisture rises on her forehead. She greases a loaf tin, transfers the gooey mixture, and places it in the oven. Nudging Sasha away from the bowl, Maya licks the dripping spatula for a few minutes before stepping outside for air. There was a time when she would have lit up a cigarette. But everything changed when she became pregnant with Anna. Maya hovers by the door frame, breathes in the crisp night air. Its coolness soothes her numbness. Earlier, the tidy BBC weather woman forecasted showers. Sasha runs after Sailor – her tail sweeps the concrete slabs forming a pathway in the garden.

Maya re-enters the house, makes herself a cup of hot milk, and settles into a stained couch in the living room. If her mother were still around, she'd tell her, she should never have let Ian go. As if a person could be captured and held against their will. Took you on with Anna, you should have held on to that one. They talked about the wedding. A low-key affair, with the girls as bridesmaids, and the strapless taffeta dress she had her eye on. A spring wedding, white shimmers against the stained glass windows of All Saints. It would have been beautiful. But one weekend, Ian had taken her to the Lakes. And on the Sunday, he told her he was leaving – the relationship, her and the girls. It was as if he hadn't made his mind up until that exact moment of telling. There were no tears, or anger, or rage – Maya had simply allowed him to drive her home where he picked up his already packed bags and walked out of their lives.

The oven timer bleats. A toothpick through the middle tells her it's ready. Piping hot, she cuts a slice. The banana cake, soft, sweet and sticky. David will probably have a few slices for breakfast before travelling down to London. She makes her way back upstairs. Through the ajar door, she steps into the room, and watches him, his features smoothed by sleep. He stirs, and an arm strays to her side of the bed, his breathing heavy. She turns from the room and closes the door behind her.

*

Maya stirs in waves to David rubbing her shoulder. At first, Maya thinks she is someone else. The world is wrapped in brume. Shapes float in the distance. The grey web she tries to grasp – shifts in her awakening.

“Morning, sleepy,” he grins. “How did you end up down here?”

“Hey...” Maya says, with a noisy yawn. She stretches her arms and sits up.

“Coffee?”

Maya nods, rubs her eyes; her tongue soured by sleep. “What time is it? Have Sasha and Sailor been fed?”

“Eight o’clock,” he says. “Yes.”

Maya picks the book she was reading off the floor, returns it to her handbag, follows David to the kitchen, and sits on the high stool. Moving nimbly, he prepares fluffy eggs, salmon on bagels, and cuts melon slices.

“I baked last night.” Maya watches the swell of his buttocks stretch his jersey boxers, and remembers the hardness of his penis. She pours herself a glass of water, takes five pills from her stash in the cupboard, and pops them in her mouth, before opening the back door. Outside, it’s raining; light and rhythmic. Sasha sweeps past, her short-haired tail tickles an ankle. The air smells sweet and fragrant, a mix of tar and earth and birch.

“Couldn’t sleep?” He scoops coffee into the cafetière, reaches for a couple of mugs, plunges, and pours. The waft of Guatemala, reassuring and inviting.

“You should’ve woken me up earlier,” she says, scouring the newspaper. A knife crime in an Aston pub. The loss of city council jobs. A new gallery installation. “What time do you leave?”

“An hour or so.” He hands her a mug, sits down. His hair slightly wet, clean shaven, there’s an uncluttered simplicity to his appearance. She imagined him as a child; a go-getter, wearing optimism like a halo. “I’m sorry,” he says.

She’s not sure what he’s apologising for. The coffee. Anna. His departure. “I’m going to track my brother down,” she says, taking a bite of her bagel.

“Never knew you had a brother,” he says, surprise painted on his expression. “He wasn’t at the funeral?”

“Seems like the thing to do,” she says. “Let him know what’s happened.”

“I’m sure he’d want to know about Anna...”

“I’ve not seen him in years. He couldn’t even be bothered to show up for Mum’s funeral.”

She sucks on a piece of melon. “But I need to find him.” She laughs; a gushing, almost hysterical sound. Helpless, her laughter dissolves into tears. David moves to hold her heaving frame. Maya’s throat constricts. She wants to say something, to tell him everything has changed. Instead, all she manages is, “The eggs will go cold.”

*

The rain clears and a greyness settles over Birmingham. Maya, on her way to a four o’clock appointment with the bereavement counsellor, pops into Sainsbury’s. In the cereal aisle, she bumps into Mrs Hussein; Ruqayya and Mustafa, not far behind, each holding a box of Frosties.

“Sorry we’ve not been round,” she says apologetically, stopping the trolley, and glancing back at the children. “Wasn’t sure if you were up for visitors.”

Maya smiles weakly. Mrs Hussein, in a bright headscarf, her expression darkened with charcoal eyeshadow. “Thanks for having Hattie.”

“I’ll bring round some food.” She reaches to touch Maya’s arm, rustic-henna design lacing fingers to wrist. “I’ll keep the curry mild.”

Maya blinks. In an effort to hold back tears, she turns to see Ruqayya and Mustafa using their Frosties boxes as swords.

“Stop that you two,” Mrs Hussein says sharply, then returns her attention to Maya, “Eight o’clock, if that’s okay?” Without warning, she wraps Maya in a hug. Maya stays rigid in her hold,

as if strapped in a body brace. When Mrs Hussein releases her, she says, “Ruqayya, Mustafa, have you decided who’s having what?”

“Thank you,” Maya says, glancing at her list. “I’d better get on.”

“Good to see you.” She collects the cereal boxes, tidies Mustafa’s shirt collar, spits on her thumb and wipes chocolate off Ruqayya’s cheek. “Your front door. I love that green.”

“Ah, the Kiwi. On sale at B&Q,” Maya says, navigating herself around Mrs Hussein and the now red-faced Ruqayya who’s just dropped a packet of Maltesers.

*

Four o’clock. Cedar House. In the counselling room, a single candle quivers on the mantle-piece. The scent of sandalwood, strong – she sinks into an armchair full of cushions. A modern and floral room; the wallpaper pattern, geometric treescapes, subdued in the lighting.

“How are things?” Connie asks; her shiny hair pulled in a ponytail; the blue around her eyes make her expression eager and full of empathy.

“Up-and-down,” Maya says.

“And Hattie?” Connie waits for her to continue, places her clipboard – Maya’s file notes – on the side table. Her fingernails are tidy and square, wrists cluttered with stone-studded Indian bracelets: silver, turquoise, and red. “She sleeping better?”

“Not much... the bed-wetting hasn’t eased.” Maya licks her lip. Her throat tightens and her mouth stiffens. She opens her mouth to say more, nothing comes out.

Her mother didn’t believe in therapy. But she insisted Anna see someone after Ian left. Anna never said much about her sessions with Nkechi. Maya thought it best not to intrude, so never

asked. Though Anna's behaviour had changed, she still attended Nkechi's sessions. Brooding, silent, intense, she seemed disconnected. Why hadn't Maya picked it up at the time? She straightens herself, and coughs.

"I thought it was a phase," she says. "With Anna..."

"Ah. Ah," Connie says, handing her a tissue, before returning to her notes.

When Maya spoke to Ian about it, he told her not to worry. All teenagers go through it. But I'll talk to her if you think it'll help. She wished he had talked to her. Found out what was going on. She never followed it up, hoping it would pass. Millie stopped coming over. Anna spent endless hours in her room or disappearing for long walks.

"She might have been depressed," Maya says. Connie arranges her specs on her bijou nose, and waits. "How didn't I spot it? The signs were clearly there."

Maya closes her eyes and then opens them. Outside: the skies are full of rain. Maybe it was something to do with that boy. She'd overheard Millie and Anna talking. A crush. She never asked Anna about it. Didn't want to interfere. It was the first boy Anna had shown an interest in.

"I expected to see more of her school friends at the funeral," Maya says. "Millie, Kazia, her form tutor and the principal. There was no one else." Maya bends her knuckles until they crack, ignores the threatening tears. She traces the circumference of the glass; enjoying the calming effect of this repetitious movement.

Connie picks up her clipboard, waits for Maya's composure to return. A phone rings from somewhere. There is chatter, lowered voices, sudden laughter, in the communal kitchen behind the closed door. The popping, high-pitched whistle of a boiling kettle ends.

“I’d like to make contact with Nkechi, her counsellor.” She picks fluff off her foot. “She might have answers.”

“It’s not unusual for parents to be the last to know,” Connie says. “Teens have a knack for hiding things.”

“She wanted to find her biological father. We fought about that a fair bit. But there may have been issues at school. I just don’t know.” She reaches into her bag, retrieves her diary and makes a note. “Ian said it was nothing. I chose to believe him.” She holds the diary on her lap and taps absently.

Chapter 3

Saturday. Maya, at the grave, breathes in the peat clinging to the damp. She deposits a plastic bag on the ground and crouches in front of the headstone; an unremarkable slab with a simple bronze cross. She traces the cursive engraving, and props a lilac rose against the granite stone. She'd decided on a Spring Blossom coffin, the pink flowers reminded her of Anna in primary school when she loved bright colours. Inside, she lay in a navy blue dress and a locket Ian had bought her. It had been strange seeing her lying there. Stranger still, knowing she was underneath the earth no longer breathing or arguing or laughing.

A peel of barks; a large English Setter, a short distance away, chases a stick. A grey man wearing a soft conical cap appears. Maya turns her attention back to her daughter, hand pressed against the headstone as she whispers inaudible words.

“Such a peaceful place,” the grey man says, throwing a stick west for his dog. “Been visiting the wife. She’s on the far side,” he gestures with a gloved hand.

Maya rises, says, “My daughter...”

“Cancer. Took her in less than three months. We had many good years together.” His tone is matter-of-fact, tinged with a certain wistfulness.

For a while they stand in silence. Maya doesn't want to explain.

When the pregnancy test had come back positive, she spent a week deciding if and when to tell Russ. Just to be safe, she took two more tests, moved between excitement and fear. Was she ready for the tiny seed sprouting inside her? What kind of mother would she be? Her head pounced and her heart danced. Flushed and hands shaking, she plucked up the courage and finally told him in the carpark after a pizza meal. Russ tensed up, became distant. Anna had been conceived after a

row. The three years that followed were a fog. Until one day, Russ emptied his side of the wardrobe, packed a bag and left a note on the fridge. He wasn't ready to play happy families. He quit his job to travel the world. When he arrived in Auckland, Maya received a postcard. A few months after Anna's fifth birthday, another postcard came from Brisbane, he was looking after horses on a ranch.

The grey man raises his head to the sky, lets out a single whistle, and chuckles as if an intimate joke has passed between them. "So much we still wanted to do. Visit the Emerald Buddha in Thailand."

Maya considers telling him about Anna and Japan and her interest in Manga. The places she was looking forward to seeing. The foods she wanted to taste. The experiences she talked non-stop about, when she still talked. Instead, she clears her throat and rubs her dry hands.

"She was a fighter..." His dog bounces back noisily, dancing about their feet with a stick locked in its jaw. He lowers his wiry length, collects the stick, and throws it east. The dog gives chase again in a flurry of barks and howls. "Better this way." He gives a nod skyward, then retrieves a hanky and blows his nose. "I'm not a religious person, but..." His voice has travelled with his thoughts; far-off, faint.

Maya tilts her neck, takes in the silver-blue sky, and exhales. What she wouldn't do to have more time with Anna. She'd never been a spiritual person either — not in that sense. But she liked the idea of Anna being somewhere, being looked after.

*

That evening, Maya resolves to go and visit her brother, Dan, in Portsmouth. She wants to tell him about Anna. Understand why he didn't attend Mum's funeral. They'd been close once. She remembered him in an orange bumble-bee jumper being pushed by her in a wheelbarrow. The time he locked himself in a cupboard and she rescued him. She remembered teaching him how to kiss with

tongues using jelly-ring sweets. And the time he built a toy boat and they went to the lake to see it sail; it sank, and he cried for a week. She remembered him picking at his toenails while he watched television, and his decision at eleven to go vegan. Dan was selfish. Spoilt by Mum, he got away with average marks at school and ended up, at eighteen, living in a quasi-religious commune in Milton Keynes. In postcards, he talked about the tranquillity of the lake, gardens and bird sanctuary. He soon jacked it all in. That was Dan all over, just like the time he flushed his goldfish down the toilet. Said he was bored. Nine at the time, he could be forgiven. Swept into a world of heavy drinking and recreational drugs, he started dating Anita. Maya met her once. He brought her up for a visit. Both of them: berry-brown, dishevelled, and underweight. The last she heard from him, he'd ended up in a commission-only advertising job.

Maya falls asleep. A grey man whistles. His dog barks. He carries a lantern through the inky landscape. Maya follows, made curious by the stench of mushrooms. After a long while, she stops. Behind her: darkness. Ahead: the grey man turns and with two fingers motions for her to come closer. Maya senses his dog circling her feet, his tail brushing her calves.

*

Maya wakes up to a noisy vacuum cleaner. She turns on the light and goes to close the curtains. She waves at Mrs Hussein. An Asian lad cycles past on the pavement. The street lamp twitches. A young boy walks a nervy Great Dane. A motorcycle rides boisterously up the street. She pulls the curtains to.

“Hattie...” She calls out.

Upstairs, she raps gently on Hattie's room door. No answer. She nudges the handle open. Hattie, lying on her stomach, on a bean bag, headphones plugged in, eyes on a screen. Maya closes the door. She pauses outside Anna's room. Enters. She picks up her school jumper, sits on the bed.

She hadn't noticed the stain. She traces it with her finger. The phone calls have died down. Pomegranate juice, brown sauce, or ink. Paint, perhaps. The summer term seemed packed full with project after project. The end of year play. Anna had a small part; a minor character in *Shrek*, a multicultural rendition. There was also the integrated skills project, where her group set up a fundraising drive for a charity. Anna wanted to support an animal rescue charity. In the end, a cancer charity won the vote. Too many dead aunts, Millie chimed when they reported back. Maya picks up her portfolio. The art project. Japanese Manga characters in various acrobatic poses – scaling skyscrapers, fences and a clock tower. There was something garish about the Manga characters clambering the British landscape. That's just it, Anna said, it's unexpected. She puts the portfolio down again, takes the school jumper and presses it against her nose; a hint of mint and tangy lemongrass. She exhales.

Ian came to the funeral. He'd filled out. His partner, Jeannie, or was that Gina? handed him a tissue, and a hand on his elbow, as if holding him up with that single gesture. She wasn't his usual type and Maya wondered what he saw in her angular frame, fake lashes and blond extensions. A real-life mannequin, Anna said, when Hattie inadvertently brought up Ian's new lover. She resisted the urge to quiz them about Jeannie – no, it was Gina. Out-of-bounds. Anna and Hattie wouldn't want to hurt her. She understood that. It did hurt. She'd always half-expected they might get back together. Strange that the first time she saw Ian with Gina should be at Anna's funeral. In a navy dress suit, with her hair pulled back, she resembled a cross between royalty and an air hostess.

Their laughter fills the room. Millie and Anna. Maya wonders if she imagines it. Millie hadn't been around for a while. A month or so. She came round to drop off a pair of earrings. Borrowed, apparently. She didn't stay long. When she tried to talk to Anna about it, Anna stayed silent. Lips pursed, eyes on her book: *To Kill A Mockingbird*. She hadn't been right for some time now. Maya wasn't sure when it – whatever *it* was – had happened. The change in her arrived like mould

on stilton, or yoghurt suddenly soured. The mood swings, disappearing for hours, skipping classes, staying in her room, and being short with Hattie. Without any preamble, Anna had shut the world out.

The shape of the stain changes. A butterfly, flower petals or watermelon seeds. It should be washed. But she can't bring herself to put any of Anna's clothes in the washer.

A pair of leggings hangs on the wardrobe door; striped, colourful and woollen. A whiff of floral perfume. Anna wore leggings with everything. In year 7 she wore a different pair for an entire week-long sports tournament. Her team made the finals, but not Anna. A fall landed her in A & E. Three stitches. She cried and cried. It wasn't until Ian picked her up and whispered something did her sobbing subside. For the next three weeks she showed off the bruised protrusion on her chin. Barely noticeable in year 9; a slither of paleness on her caramel skin. As she lay on the mortuary bed, it was all Maya focussed on.

She hangs the leggings back on the wardrobe, exactly as before.

Anna had wanted a dog. I've already got a name for it, Pippin or Giovanni. Maya had sighed inwardly. There was no space or time. But instead of saying, no, she said she would think about it.

There's a knock at the front door. Maya waits, hoping the person will go away. When it continues Maya forces herself downstairs.

Mrs Hussein, on the other side, holds out a dish.

"Lamb kofta and rice. Decided against the curry," she says. "Made it this morning." She trails behind Maya, sniffing. "These allergies, they don't let up. Sorry, I didn't make it the other evening."

Maya lifts the lid of the dish, inhales the Middle Eastern spices. “Smells divine,” she says, returning the lid. “Drink?”

“Never as good as my sister’s...” Mrs Hussein says, in a halting and high-pitched English, setting her handbag on the worktop, and clambering onto a high stool. “Just water. Been drinking tea all day,” she waves her hand. “Sore throat. Started with headaches and a runny nose. Now, it’s the throat.”

Maya pours out two glasses of water and sits on the stool opposite.

“She lives in Austin now,” Mrs Hussein says, sipping from the water. “With her husband. An opera singer. Were you asleep?” she says, eyeing Maya’s dressing gown.

“Texas – oh...?” Maya rubs her neck. “Earlier. I keep napping at odd hours in the day.”

“They’ve got an amazing ranch out there. Acres of land, swimming pool and a massive house,” she says. “I try not to get jealous but I can’t help it.”

“See much of her?”

“His work takes him to Europe now and again. She used to join him before the twins arrived.”

“Twins?”

“Adopted from Ethiopia,” Mrs Hussein laughs, tucking in the edges of her veil. “They’re a ‘melting pot’ family. Middle Eastern woman, Russian husband and two black babies.” She stops short, checks to see she hasn’t offended Maya. “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to...”

Maya waves a hand and laughs. “Sounds like a fascinating setup. Very now.” Maya rises and puts the kettle on the boil. “I’m making myself one, sure you don’t want one.”

She shakes her head, says, “Leila has all the luck. My mother – rest her soul – always said life was thirty percent luck, thirty percent hard work and thirty percent character...”

“The remaining ten percent?”

“Ah – that would be Allah!” Mrs Hussein sighs. “She ends up marrying an opera singer and I end up married to a taxi driver. Fate or Luck, take your pick.”

Maya laughs. It’s the way Mrs Hussein says it – comical, even though she’s sure it’s not meant to be. “Ruqayya and Mustafa alright?”

“Home with their father. He can look after them for one evening ... I saw the police car yesterday.” There’s no lilt in her tone suggesting a question. “I’d hate the constant intrusions.”

“The liaison support officer.”

“Ah –,” she says, “They’ve not cut that funding then?”

“Not sure I need it... all this fuss,” Maya says, “but they keep insisting ‘under the circumstances’.”

“I still see her face. Looking out from the window,” she says, stifling a sob. Maya places a hand on hers. “How’s Hattie?” Mrs Hussein says, wiping her nose.

“We’re getting through each day.” She looks away, makes a mental note of the overflowing recycling bins which need sorting. “A slice of cake? I bought some the other day.”

“On a diet. After having the children, I’ve found it impossible to shift the weight.”

The baby weight had come off easily after Hattie was born. A different story with Anna. The stress and anxiety of raising a child on her own no doubt played a part. With Hattie, she had Ian.

The two had been such different babies. Hattie, mild and placid; Anna, energetic and temperamental. A reversal occurred as they grew up.

“I’m thinking of going to visit my brother, Dan.”

“Never knew you had a brother,” Mrs Hussein says, resting her chin on a hand.

“We’ve not been in touch for years.”

“Death does put things in perspective.”

“Portsmouth.” Maya rises, switches a lamp on. “That’s his last known address.”

She ignores the clatter Hattie’s making upstairs and cuts a slice of fruit cake for herself.

Chapter 4

A stuffy and sticky Monday. If only it would rain. The smell of cinnamon fills the room. The letter box flaps with a thud. The morning paper? Post? Maya opens a kitchen window. The door knocker sounds. Maya turns down the current affairs commentary on Radio 4. After the third rap, spatula in hand, she heads through the living room, into the hallway, picks up a brown envelope, opens the front door. A boy, no older than sixteen, hovers on the stone steps, chewing gum.

“Yes?”

He allows the large stereo headphones to slip down his neck.

“I’m knocking on doors, looking for work. Odd jobs, that sort of thing.”

He uses a pinkie to scratch his chin.

“Not sure,” she says. “What can you do?”

“Anything ... I’ll do whatever.” He pulls out a phone, stares at it momentarily, smiles, and returns it to the pocket of his faded skull-print shorts. A foot hidden in muddied trainer, he places on the second step. “I’m good with my hands,” he says. “Clear out the garage. Help with the garden. Chores around the house.” He spits out the gum, pops another in, and licks his lips. “I’ll do whatever.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen next month,” he says. “I’m saving up for a school trip.”

“You look older,” she says. Well...” she says, glancing behind her. “I might be able to find something.” Maya invites him in. Before he answers, she smells burning. “Shit – the pancakes.”

She dashes back into the kitchen, turns off the stove and scrapes off the burnt dough. When she turns – he is there, leaning his length over the work surface. He says nothing, stops chewing for a moment, smiles.

The smoke alarm goes off, flashing as it sounds.

“Damn thing.” Maya flaps a dish cloth under the blinking red while the boy unlatches the other window, takes a newspaper from the counter, and fans. The back of his shirt dappled with sweat, his breath quickens. Seconds later, the alarm is silenced.

“Thanks,” Maya says, putting the kettle on the boil. “Drink?”

“Hot chocolate, if you’ve got it.”

Maya, taken aback by his confidence, puts a couple of crumpets to toast. She can’t remember Anna being so confident. When did she get so angry?

“I could use some help with the garden.”

His lips curve, open, reveal a blob of white between irregular teeth. She covers the ruined pancakes with cling-film, honeys the crumpets, places grapes in a bowl and stirs two drinks. The fragrance from the jasmine tea soothes her.

“Help yourself,” she says.

He cradles the mug with one hand. With the other, he runs his fingers through his hair. He pops a grape in his mouth.

“It’s a mess. Haven’t had time since...” Maya stops herself. “Truthfully, I’ve never been much of a gardener.”

Gardening was Ian's thing. He spent hours pruning shrubs, planting and repotting. He loved growing vegetables, couldn't bear the thought of being defeated. Obsessed by tomatoes, he planted them every year for three years. Until the seeds took. He spent hours in the garden. That became part of the problem. It hadn't always been like that. In the beginning they did everything together, cleaved in that proverbial biblical way. There was a time when they noticed each other's absences. Then Hattie and HIV happened.

Four months pregnant that's when she got the news. That day she'd been wearing lace up sandals and carrying a fabric bag. She had felt sick for a few weeks. Cold sores and a fever. But had put it down to a viral infection. The middle of summer, it couldn't have been the flu. Ian insisted she go to A&E. Before she knew it, she was at the antenatal unit. Ian held her hand while they sat in the noisy waiting room. Finally a heavily pregnant nurse came, guided her to a small bright room and took her blood. We'll confirm the pregnancy and screen for all STIs. It's routine, nothing to be concerned about. In the same way she hadn't worried about Anna. Buried her head in the sand, pretended what was happening wasn't really happening.

Ian tested negative. Maya had watched as he tried to hide his relief. She wanted to hurl herself over a bridge or in front of a train. Anything but face up to the disease. She stopped talking and Ian had an affair. He came clean about it a few months after it happened. She didn't blame him, felt lucky he chose to stay. They saw a therapist for six months; it only pushed them further apart. Reduced to strangers, what had gone wrong couldn't be undone.

"The cat's gone awol," the boy says, wipes his mouth with a paper towel. "Mum's losing the plot. It's been gone overnight."

Maya gets up, clears away breakfast, piles dishes beside the sink, wipes down surfaces.

“I’ll help with those.” He takes a sponge, squeezes soap into the bowl. “Mum’s always cleaning. It’s insane.” He scrubs a pan hard, rinses, and places on the drainer. “I’ve put posters all around our neighbourhood. If it doesn’t show Mum will really freak out.”

Maya starts to dry the cutlery. She wipes her forehead with a sleeve, takes a mug between the towel. It slips and falls to the floor. The boy sinks to the ground and gathers the broken fragments. Maya sweeps them into a dustpan. It’s the Santa mug Hattie won in some raffle. Maya, using the newspaper, collects and wraps the pieces. She throws it in the outdoor bin, to avoid Hattie finding it. When she returns, the boy’s still washing, sleeves rolled up, the sink full of suds.

“Mum makes me do the washing up at home,” he says. “She’s always cleaning. It’s messed up. She’s a real OCD.”

“I’m sure the cat will turn up.”

“I read about some woman who set up her own cleaning business because of OCD,” he says. “Whacko.”

At the fridge, Maya circles a date on the calendar. Seventh August. She scribbles. Portsmouth. The car had to be sorted: wheels tracked, bulb changed, and it needed a clean. There is a lot to do. Get her hair done. Braids took too long. Weave. Or twists. She refused to wear wigs. They made her head hot and she didn’t like the drag-queen effect. She’d worn one to a parent-teacher evening once. Never again. Twists, that’s what she’d go for.

They go into the garden, stand on the pavement slabs snaking through the centre. The dense scent of earth. Drumming and rock music blares out of a neighbour’s window. The sky, a deep clean blue. A red-beaked bird pecks at the bird feed dangling from the apple tree. A squirrel disappears over the wooden fence.

“It really needs help,” Maya says. She points at the unruly weeds strangling the perennials and peonies. The potted geraniums, foxgloves and wisteria lining the elevated stone ledge, dead and dying. “Last year, these did much better.” She stoops down beside a bed of poppies. “I do have some seeds that need planting. Vegetables and herbs. Been meaning to grow them for a while.” The alarm stops. They fall into step together, walk to the end of the garden. “You’ll find all you need here,” she says, opening the door to the shed.

“I could clear a patch over there.” He signals at an area to the left of the dirty mini-pond. “There’s room for a make-shift green house.” He shields his face from the sun.

“Do what you can,” she says.

“Saturday?” he asks, crouches, and turns over the earth. “I’ll start at nine.”

Chapter 5

It isn't until he comes again Maya finds out his name. "Rest or comfort. That's what it means." He puts a stick of gum in his mouth. "I'm the only Noah in school."

"I loved the bible character," she says. "All those animals. And ignoring all the nay-sayers."

"Mum's not religious or nothing. No idea where she got it from," he says.

They stand under the apple tree, surveying the garden. Wind chimes. Next door's bed linen flails in the gentle breeze. The cries of a toddler drowned out by the traffic on the main road. The heady fragrance of sweet pea.

Maya makes a mental note: return Mrs Hussein's dish, make an appointment with Nkechi, get hair done, sort the car.

She swipes at a wasp.

"Better make a start," he says. "Much to be done."

*

Back in her bedroom, a melancholic mood washes over her as she opens up the wardrobe and begins to sort out clothes for the trip. The memory, a sharp light reflecting against a crystal, takes Maya to another time. Anna was going to be a linguist, Hattie a historian.

A load of ironing still to be done. She packs: wash bag, towel, medication, jeans, silk blouses, maxi-dress, lingerie and cotton sleepwear. The last time she wore the dress, saffron-blue, was to David's fiftieth at Le Truc. They drank champagne and cocktails until they tumbled into bed. Their laughter stretched into sleep. Maya throws in three pairs of shoes: an open-toe sandal, trainers, and flats. From a drawer, she retrieves the damaged postcard. *July 2007. 21 Hartley Road, Portsmouth.*

The phone rings.

Ian.

He sounds tired, strained.

“Been meaning to call,” he says. “Need to run something by you.”

“Oh?”

“Hattie...” he says. “She’s not in a good place. It’s been tough on her.”

“What do you mean? She’s been through a lot.” As she speaks, Maya isn’t sure what *it* refers to. Her grief. The nightmares. The bedwetting. “She said something to you?”

Ian makes a cryptic remark. It’s muffled and she can’t be bothered to ask him to repeat himself.

“How’s Gina?” she asks.

“That’s why I called,” he pauses, makes another strange noise. “We’ve set a date.”

Maya is silent. She swallows the resentment. “Congratulations.”

“Gina says it’ll be good to have you and Hattie at the wedding. We’re keeping it simple. Close friends and family.”

Maya swallows hard, ignores the tug of guilt, and tries to regain a sense of composure. Fuck him, fuck her. How could they think of getting married with everything that had happened.

“A December wedding. Gina thinks it’s romantic,” he says – Maya imagines him in their living room, with a can of beer, rubbing his neck – and adds, “We’re thinking of asking Hattie to be a bridesmaid. Gina says she’ll look super in lime.”

Maya resists the temptation to scream down the phone. She paces between window and bookcase. The mobile line crackles with interference. She goes to the kitchen. The crackling increases, quietens. At the window: Noah, on his knees, bowed over a shrub, digs up the ground. He straightens himself, scoops the soil to one side, adds to a growing pile, arches over again.

“Maya? You there?” Ian asks. “Also it might be good if she comes and stays with us. A change of scene.”

Maya clenches her fist, and releases. “She’s at Mrs Hussein’s. Babysitting Ruqayya and Mustafa. I’ll talk to her.”

She imagines his relief. His sense of accomplishment. His flushed cheeks. “Great,” he says, clears his throat, and rings off.

*

Noon. Maya goes into the garden. On a tray: bowls of spicy tomato soup and bread rolls. Noah, on the grass, spits out stale gum, sticks it on his thumb, and dives into the meal. Maya, on the bench, dunks a chunk of bread and eats.

“Tastes great. Not like the lame crap they serve in the canteen,” he says. “A fine day to garden. My uncle taught me all I know.”

Maya wants to ask if he knew Anna. But she decides against. It wouldn’t be fair on him. Knee-length khaki shorts, a baseball cap, worn backwards. She notices a bruise on his ankle. He slurps the soup.

“I’m planning a trip. I’ll be away for ten days or so,” she says. “You can collect the key from Mrs Hussein. Across the street.”

He burps, covers his mouth. “Sure.”

“I’m going to visit my brother.” Her tone is confident. She is hopeful he’s still in the country. “She’s a lovely lady, Mrs Hussein.”

“A holiday?” he says. “I’ve never been out of Brum. Mum hates travel. Tell a lie, Mum dragged me up to Stoke once. Hated it.”

Maya laughs, and says, “Which bit? Being dragged or Stoke?”

“She won’t sign permissions off. Thinks the coach or plane will crash. She obsesses about stuff like that.” He takes another spoonful. “I’ve still not told her about the school trip.”

“That’s what mums are. Neurotic,” she says, allowing herself to enjoy the laughter that flows.

“Like I want a tattoo...”

“... and she says no.” Maya finishes his sentence. If Anna had asked her for a tattoo she’d probably have allowed it. Maybe if she had been more neurotic ...

“Nothing ridiculous. Not yet anyways. Something on my upper arm. Then build it up.”

“Like a montage.”

“Mum hates the idea. Says it’s dirty.” He bites into another chunk of bread. “She’s mental.”

“She must have her reasons.”

“Do you get to visit your brother often?”

“Not seen him in years...”

“I’ve not minded much being an only child. But sometimes it sucks. Really sucks.”

Maya laughs. He suddenly looks younger. Sounds obstinate, like Anna when she didn't get her way.

"The wall's falling apart," he says, pointing at the misshapen loose bricks. "It could be that tree causing it." They both stare at the tree spreading across the disused alley between the two terraced houses.

Maya wanders across, pokes at an unattached brick. It crumbles and leaves a gap. "I better get on to the council about it," she says. "I've got a ton of ironing to do."

He pops chewed-up gum back in his mouth, rises to his feet, stretches, and yawns. "The garden's going to look great before long."

"Did your cat ever come back?"

"Yes," he says. "M.I.A for forty-eight hours. Mum was all ready to send out a search party. Thankfully, he showed up."

*

That evening, she visits David. After a light supper of fish and salad, they fuck. It happens in the kitchen. Actually, it begins in the kitchen and ends up in the bedroom. He wraps his arms around her waist while she is washing the dishes. He kisses her neck, nibbles an ear. His breath, shallow and warm; his lips sweet with the caramel dessert. She allows a ladle to fall back in the soapy bowl, turns, and kisses him back. Fingers trail up her spine. She relaxes into his strength, enjoys the scratchiness of his stubble. She groans, and leads him to the bedroom. The coolness of the sheets. The warmth of their skin. He kiss-bites the flesh of her buttocks. Head hanging over the edge of the bed, her gaze follows the trail of dust along the floorboards. David weaves a leg between hers, wedging a knee against her thigh. Shit, she needs a cigarette. She hadn't spoken to Hattie about

staying with Ian. David caresses a shoulder, massages her neck and back – gentle gliding strokes. His limpness swings teasingly against damp skin. She trembles. Shivers at his rising hardness. His touch, eager and determined, turns her around. He licks the arc between her breasts. A moan escapes. Her nipples harden, and he captures each in his mouth. He lowers himself. Uses his tongue to part her mouth. Then pleasure.

After they fuck and wash down, they head over to the pub and order a pint and wine spritzer. There's nothing like the feel of liquid coolness after sex. Maya sits at a corner table overlooking St Mary's square. She takes in the colourful flowers in the fading light. David returns to the table with the drinks.

"I've got someone to help me out with the garden," she says.

"Oh?"

"A school kid after odd jobs for the summer."

"You alright?" he asks, with a crunched-up expression. It's a look Maya is noticing more. Since Anna died.

"Ian wants Hattie to stay with them," she says. "And they've set a date."

"How long for?"

Maya scratches her forehead. "Not sure."

He places svelte, tapered fingers on her arm. In the dimmed lighting, he looks fragile and drained. He didn't talk much about his job, but the late nights and endless European trips told a story.

“I’ll be leaving soon to track Dan down,” she says. “I imagine I won’t be gone more than a week,” Maya says.

“You’re sure about this?” he says.

“I’m not sure about anything.” She’s surprised by the sharpness in her voice. He strokes her hand. “Do you believe in second chances?” Maya asks.

“You’ll find him.” There’s a note of uneasiness in his voice. “We do need to chat when you get back.”

Again, they sit in silence.

Anna’s body – horizontal, translucent, lifeless. The morgue smells of silver and gelatine. The sweet-metallic scent makes Maya nauseous. She needs air.

A quiver runs through her and she squeezes a hand – David’s.

*

Two days after, Maya walks into the coolness of the morning, the leaves a refreshing and clear green. The cream cardigan feels prickly on her skin. She contemplates going back inside to change, decides against. She enters the car, curses as she pulls out of a tight parking spot, and makes her way to Aston. She opens and closes her hands, taking each one in turn, trying to ignore the pain in her joints.

Inside the hairdresser’s house, the smell of fish stock and spices makes her eyes water. Fatima, a dark-skinned big-boned woman from Rwanda, picks up her snot-filled child, eases him on her back and secures him with a cloth. Her English, punctuated with French words, is incessant, as she talks to the baby, to Maya, and into the phone when it rings. The baby starts to cry. Fatima

bounces him up and down for a few minutes. When this doesn't work, she unstraps the child, mumbles apologies in French, and withdraws into another room.

Maya picks up the packets of extensions, opens them with a pair of scissors. The room is bare, except for an enormous TV, extension chord, and lamp. Mould-spots fleck the ceiling. Cling-film and cardboard taped around the window. Across the road, a taxi driver, Turkish or Iranian, speaks into a radio. A stooped elderly woman, pulling a trolley bag, shouts to herself, stops and stares at the taxi.

Fatima returns, and deposits the boy on Maya's lap.

"Merci," she says. "He okay now."

She combs Maya's hair, takes care around the edges of her scalp. She divides her hair into four, and braids each section. "TV on?" she asks, and without waiting for a response, puts on a music video channel. A white girl in a tight jumpsuit dances around a pole slowly, bends down, and wiggles her behind. Maya looks down at the baby. His round face, eyes still brimming with tears, thumb plugging his mouth. Maya resists the temptation to wipe his nose. His nappy feels heavy, but there is no stench.

"You want twists?" Fatima asks, pushing her head from side to side. "How many packets?"

"Three..."

"Why no perm?" she asks. Maya sighs. They have this conversation every visit. she stopped perming her hair years ago. It wasn't something she phased into. Went cold turkey. She would never perm again. She had, at the time, decided it was time to chuck out the chemicals and go *au natural*.

"I've got a two o'clock appointment," she says. "To sort the car out."

“You travel?” Maya winces when she begins to cut and divide her afro into minuscule sections. With extension strands, she starts to twist. “Nice colour.”

Maya watches the child’s eyes flutter. He fights with sleep, drooling. His plump body slackens in her arms, and Maya tightens her grip. Fatima’s phone goes off again. She answers with a flow of Francophone pidgin, her voice rising with each syllable. She rings off, and pulls at Maya’s hair.

“These people,” she says, as if Maya should know who she’s talking about, “they make me crazy.”

“Problems?”

“I have no money to send home. Every time they ask for money. Me, I have no money,” she pauses, takes another clump of extension. “They think I rich. They don’t understand in England nobody rich. Everybody poor. Me, I single mother. Just this hair I do help me. Every time somebody needs money. This person sick. This person want money for business. This one die.”

Maya nods.

“I want bring my son over,” she says. “I tell you before. He stay with my mother and father. I send money. But I need him here.”

“How old?”

“Small boy. He no well. Every month sick, sick, sick. I need bring him. But my immigration problem.”

“Ah,” Maya says, stroking the baby’s chest. He starts to snore, tiny wistful gurgles.

“How your children?” she suddenly asks, massaging some balm into her scalp.

Maya catches her breath. “Fine,” she says.

*

Vicarage Road. Kings Heath. At the service station, two men attend to her. A Filipino man, wearing sweatpants and zipped hoodie; smoke-stained teeth bared. Following him, a dour Eastern European man; a yellow bucket in his hand, he strolls with a lopsided gait. His shaved head glistens. The Filipino opens the door and clambers onto the backseat. He clears out rubbish: a receipt, AAA batteries, Twix wrapper and a newspaper. From under the seat, he pulls out a pair of sunglasses, and hands them to Maya.

From Primark. Anna had bought them a few weeks ago. That morning they went to the dentist. Maya suggested an afternoon in town, to cheer her up. She seemed withdrawn. More than usual. Retail therapy would do them both the world of good. As far as she remembers, she wasn't having a brilliant week either. Shop, then grab a bite – that's what they needed. Give the numbness in Anna's mouth time to subside. Anna bought only one thing, the sunglasses. Maya places them in her bag, and mumbles a thank you.

“Full clean?” The Eastern European man asks, gesturing at the wheels.

“Yes,” Maya says. “How long?”

“Ready in an hour,” he says, extending and turning on the power hose.

Maya jumps back slightly, and says, “I'll pick it up then.”

Chapter 6

That morning Maya tells a lie. She calls the school and hangs up. What lie should she tell? Red: Hattie's grandmother had died. Amber: Hattie wasn't coping since Anna. White: unforeseen circumstances meant Hattie would be out of school for at least a week. She dials the number again. From the kitchen window, the dawn sky is tinged with mauve. On the far side of the garden, now cleared of weeds, a fleece covers a length of soil, and against the protruding wall, a scaffold Noah put up.

"Mrs Heywood's office." Maya recognises the tingle in Valerie's voice.

"Ms Sharpe," she pauses, "Hattie's mother."

Valerie's tone, suddenly muted, like a radio turned down low, says, "Ms Sharpe."

"Hattie won't be in school this week. She's not coping..." she exhales sharply, wonders if she should explain. She imagines Valerie – precise in a trouser-suit, brow furrowed, lips pursed – jotting bullet-points on a yellow pad.

"I'll inform the Head and her Personal Tutor," she says. "It would help if you could follow this up with an email?"

"I'll ping something across later today."

"Not sure if Mrs Heywood has been in touch, but..."

"About?"

"Anna's friend, Fergie, dropped a package off at the school reception."

"Fergie?"

"Apparently she didn't say much more than that."

Maya racks her brain. She can't recall Anna mentioning a Fergie. Millie might know – she'll try and find out when she's back.

"A package?"

"I'll make sure it's kept safe for you. It'll be at reception whenever you come in." Maya hangs up and goes upstairs to help Hattie with the last bit of her packing.

*

Twelve o'clock. The Bullring. Maya's heart beats in tandem with the footfall of the crowds. Her stomach gives a low rumble. She digs around for a Mars bar, tears open the wrapper, breaks half for Mrs Hussein, and bites into the other. The chocolate melts in her mouth, tasteless. An unexpected drizzle starts. They jostle through crowds, find an archway to stand under. Ahead: the gothic architecture of St Martin's looms, the circle-on-circle facade of Selfridges, a pink advertising balloon bobs in the clouds.

"But Mummy you promised," says a girl with ivory hair, her mouth twitches in a fit of tears. Her petulance makes Maya smile. The mother relents, steadies her brollie, takes hold of the girl's hand, and they walk over to the mobile doughnut stall.

"You're off today then?" Mrs Hussein says, cheeks flushed, wiping the corners of her mouth.

"I've decided to take Hattie with me," she says. "Feel guilty though."

"It's a long shot?"

"Hattie wants to go live with her father," she says. "It's killing me."

"Might not be a bad thing. For you. For her."

"Don't know," she says. "I'm not sure I'll cope."

"Could just be a reaction to everything. Talk to her."

"I really wish Mum was still around. Or Dan."

"Can't imagine being estranged from my sister," Mrs Hussein says, fiddling with the clasp on her jacket. "We fight. But it's never gone that far."

"At the very least it'll be good to know why he went underground."

"Not to show up to your mother's funeral. *Haram*. That takes some doing."

"We got on as kids. Told each other everything."

"My sister and I fought like a couple of hyenas."

They laugh. Two girls, university age, wearing fairy wings, and carrying red charity buckets sidle alongside them, chatting loudly. A dumpy Caribbean woman rests against a walking stick, holding on to a large shopping bag. A bearded man, in a navy jalabiyya, at the Islamic Society table, shouts, 'There is only one true God'. He stuffs leaflets into the hands of passers-by.

"Hattie doesn't even remember her uncle."

"You taking the train?"

"I'll drive. It'll give Hattie and I a chance to talk."

"Finding your brother might be something Allah uses to bring healing," she says. "My mother always says expect the unexpected."

*

From the front mirror, Maya glances at Hattie, head leaning back, eyes shut, ears plugged. Her delicate braids twisted like a tiara. The darkness around her pupils hint at another interrupted night. These days when Hattie can't sleep, she goes into the garden, sits on the bench, and watches the darkness. Though more recently she's taken to going into Anna's room, turning on a side lamp, lying on her bed, or sitting on the beanbag, or on the swivel chair, and being still.

Last week, Maya found her going through Anna's school bag. She hadn't heard her come in. For a few minutes she took items out, traced her fingers along folder, mobile phone, make-up bag and purse. She raised each to her nose, as if breathing Anna in, then placed them back in the bag.

A red BMW overtakes. Hattie opens her eyes, turns to face the motorway traffic, humming quietly. The afternoon sunlight on the horizon dazzles and Maya pulls down the visor.

Maya's thoughts drift:

She travels to a time in the distant past. She watches as Anna rides her bike in the park, chasing their ginger labrador, Ringo, across overgrown fields. Anna's copious laughter. The dog chases the child and she chases the dog. Maya smiles.

A lorry honks its horn as it swerves back into its lane. Halfway to Portsmouth.

*

Maya and Hattie pull in at a service station. A group of women, a hen party, cluck in the foyer. Dressed in purple all-in-one bunny outfits and pink netted tutus, carrying neon banners and fairy sticks. A woman bulging in her getup carries a dog dressed in similar tutu. Maya and Hattie make their way to Costa. Maya orders a flat white and a hot chocolate topped with marshmallows. Drinks in hand, they buy a packet of biscuits and sweets at Smiths.

Back at the car, Hattie jumps in the front seat. In her green shirt-dress over leggings she looks older, in a surly way. She takes out her I-pod, pushes down her checked rucksack with her feet, squashes it.

For a while neither of them speak. Maya ignores the pressure in her scalp. She should have gone for the weave. She's taken a couple of paracetamol, but they haven't helped.

"I'd like to go spend time with Dad," Hattie says suddenly. Her tone is firm, battle-ready.

Maya takes a sharp breath. She winds the window down, lets some air in, winds it back up.

"I'm not talking about a visit," Hattie says. "I want to stay."

The tension in Maya's shoulders tightens. She grips the steering wheel, feels Hattie's eyes watching her every move.

"What's brought this on?" Maya says. Her mouth feels dry and her scalp begins to itch. "For how long?"

Hattie heaves, and her narrow shoulders rise and fall. She takes a boiled sweet from the dashboard, unwraps it, and slides it into her perfectly shaped mouth. "Dunno."

"I'd miss you," Maya says. "For sure, things are awful at the moment..."

"I've spoken to them," Hattie says. "They're happy to have me. Gina says I can stay for as long as I want."

Maya imagines the conversations. Ian's voice full of empathy, nodding at the end of every sentence. The phone being passed to Gina to discuss the wedding. The coffee from the service sta-

tion rises to the base of her throat. She imagines Hattie in the lime bridesmaid's dress. Her thick hair loose around her ears.

"Didn't know you got on with Gina," she says.

"It's Anna who couldn't stand her." Her voice is steady, unfaltering. "I need to go, Mum. I can't stay here anymore."

The hurt in her throat is too much. What the hell were Ian and Gina playing at?

"Is that eye shadow you're wearing?"

"Anna's. I borrowed it." The way she says it, as if Anna's at home waiting for them.

Maya is tired. Perhaps, it's a phase and would pass. She doesn't want to fight. "I need time to think it through."

"Whatever. It's happening. I'm going," Hattie says. "There's nothing you can do to stop me."

Hattie plugs her ears again, forehead against the window, and closes her eyes. Maya reaches for the bottled water, uncaps it, and drinks.

*

It's almost four o'clock when they arrive. The cottage: spacious and light, with a large and bright front-facing garden. At its centre, a bird feeder. Along the fencing, flamingo-coloured roses; white, crisp. To the far side, a makeshift swing; a knotted rope attached to a wide leather padding. Hattie immediately heads in that direction. "Be careful," Maya calls after her.

From conversations with the manager, Maya understood the family who owned the cottage were temporarily living abroad. Spain or Portugal, she couldn't remember. She unloads the car and opens the windows in the kitchen inviting in the sea-salt air washing up from the coast. In the distance, the gentle lapping of blue-green waves. She heats up some milk, opens a packet of biscuits, and watches Hattie on the swing.

Hattie seems to have grown taller in recent weeks. Slimmer, her short hair redder in this light, made her jawline less round. The bed-wetting and nightmares had dissipated. The counselling sessions were helping. But now Hattie had taken to walking in her sleep. The last time, she had ended up in the cupboard under the stairs.

Chapter 7

The next day, by late morning, Maya tracks down where Dan is now living. At the canals, a woman cleans the window of a narrowboat. The Dutch barge, a glorious pea-green and sweetcorn-yellow; plants in pots decorate the middle of the roof. Gremlin, in white curlicue letters, sprawled on the side of the boat. Hattie at a distance, stares at the ground, arms swing from side-to-side.

A woman turns.

Japanese, sylph-like, sparkling blue eyes. Maya wonders if she's wearing contact lenses. Pink lips against milk-white skin. In a long dress, barefooted.

"Can I help?" she asks, rising.

"I'm looking for Dan," Maya says. "Dan Sharpe."

"What business do you have with him?"

"Is this where he lives?"

"Dan..." She tosses the sponge in her hand into a bucket, bends over and ties a knot in her dress. "He's at work," she says, upright again, eyeing Maya suspiciously.

"Ah –"

"At the Old Canal Inn. Shirley Avenue." She gathers her straight fine hair, ties it in a plait. "He's the chef there. You are?"

"Right. Perhaps, we'll come back later. I'm his sister, Maya, and..." She glances back at Hattie, now sitting cross-legged on a patch of grass, ears plugged in, nodding to some beat. "... that's my daughter, Hattie."

"His sister? He never speaks about his family," the woman says. "Would you like to come in? I've got some fresh orange juice."

Maya calls out to Hattie, follows the woman's slight frame up on to the boat, climbs down a couple of wooden stairs, through a doorway framed with fairy lights, into a compact living area. The room is made bright with glass panels. On an orange couch a toddler sleeps. His head sunk into

fabrics and cushions. The woman strokes his dark hair, and continues to the kitchen. Maya, not sure where to sit, takes in the space. Running along the upper walls, two levels of shelving. The top, lined with books and storage boxes. The lower, filled with decorative pieces: pebbles, lanterns, and a clear bowl of beads. Opposite the sleeping boy: a fireplace and a pile of wood in a box. Next to the fireplace: a table and a walnut lamp. Under the table: a sitar and a set of bongo drums.

“Let’s sit outside,” the woman says. “On deck.”

Outside again, she opens two pull-out chairs and a table. She disappears back inside, and returns with a tray carrying a jug of freshly pressed juice and three glasses. Maya calls out to Hattie again but she doesn’t stir. Maya, sits down, careful not to knock over decorative vases stuffed with flowers.

The sun, surprisingly bright, makes the dark water shimmer. The shine on the trees reminds her of a holiday in Kandy. A sudden cry of seagulls overhead as a train rattles across a bridge in the distance. She sips her drink.

“I’m sorry we’ve just turned up like this,” she says. A mother duck plops into the water, trailed by squealing ducklings.

“He’s never mentioned a sister,” the woman says, leaning back in the chair, to cast a glance at the child.

“We fell out of touch,” she says. “Not quite sure how it happened.”

“I’m Miko,” she says. “His wife. That’s our son, Kane.”

The graffiti art – ruby heart with wings – on one side of a canal wall. Another narrowboat pulls by, and Miko gives a little wave, to an elderly couple; their dog lies on a blanket on the rooftop. A black man, dreadlocks hidden in a cap, jogs by.

“Certain times of the day it gets quite busy,” Miko says. “Sometimes you see the same faces. It feels like a real community. Transient, but there.”

“When did you and Dan get married?”

“It wasn’t a big thing,” she says. “Just us and two witnesses at the registry.”

“Ah –”

“Dan didn’t want a fuss,” she says. “He’s wired that way.”

“How did you all meet?”

She throws her head back, and laughs, a sharp paper-thin tingle. “At a commune. We were living in Wales at the time. Met and got married within six months. That was five years ago.”

“And, Kane...?”

“Just turned three,” she says. “He’s lived all his life on the boat.” She laughs again, brushing fluff off her dress.

“The last time we talked he was in advertising or marketing or something,” Maya says. “He’s always been a wanderer. Could never sit still as a child.”

“He took a catering course,” Miko says. “We wanted something different. Sold the flat and bought this. I help out with the jewellery.”

A couple and their two children, all on bikes, wearing helmets, ride past. The younger of the two girls stops, and the mother hops off her bike, supports it against a tree, tightens the strap of her daughter’s helmet.

Hattie, stands and stretches, “Mum...”

“There’s a drink here for you,” Maya says.

Hattie walks over, takes a glass of juice. “Can I have a look inside?” she asks.

“Sure.” Miko says, and Hattie enters the boat. “She’s very quiet.”

“She’s alright. Just adjusting.”

“They say it’s unlucky to change the name of a boat,” Miko suddenly says. “I’m not keen on Gremlin. But Dan believes in all that superstition stuff.”

“He’ll have got that from Mum,” Maya says. “She had strange whims. Always reading tea leaves. Never walked under a ladder, that kind of thing.”

“How is your Mum? Dan never talks about her.”

“She’s dead,” Maya says.

Hattie climbs back up the wooden steps, and goes to sit on a raised part of the deck. She takes out a notebook and starts scribbling. A mobile phone rings and Miko goes inside to answer it. She spends a few minutes talking in rushed tones.

“You alright, Hattie?” Maya asks.

“So where’s this uncle we’re supposed to be seeing?”

“He’ll be here soon,” Maya says.

At that moment, Miko reappears. “That was Dan. The evening chef’s had an accident. Fallen off his motorbike. He’ll be covering his shift tonight.”

“Right,” Maya says. “Any chance we might catch him tomorrow?”

“I’ll let him know you’ll be here. Late afternoon. After the lunch run.”

“Great,” Maya says. “Thanks for the drinks.”

She and Hattie descend off the boat and carry on up the canal, take the path and head into town.

*

They find themselves in the middle of a festival. Under a temporary canopy, pop-up boutiques and market stalls. Hattie hovers by a stall selling carved toy boxes. She opens the lid of one, etched in native Latin American lines. She replaces the lid, moves on ahead. Maya falls in step beside her. The fragrance of fresh hazelnut brownies floats in the air. People wander between stalls, pausing occasionally to have a chat with a shopkeeper or to touch merchandise: a felt purse, a handmade ornament, studded silver bangles. Paper and jute bags jostle against the bustle of thighs and sweaty palms. A man with a long braided beard plays a stringed instrument, his begging bowl full of coppers.

Maya and Hattie head to the seafront. A group of young people on rollerblades, wearing luminous colours, ride past, in train formation; almost knock over a white-haired woman on a walking stick. They cross over to the cobbled path.

Maya takes in Hattie's sunken cheekbones. She recollects her sullen expression after a school photo for the hockey team. When the photographs came back, stood next to a thin model-girl, Hattie said, I look like a walrus. Maya thought how beautiful she looked. Her smooth complexion, the dimpled smile and the dark shade to her lips. They pass a smoothie stall. She decides on mango and kiwi; Hattie goes for the strawberry and banana. They sip their straws, make their way to the sea. A young girl in a red dress, sitting on a blanket, stares ahead. There's a hint of Anna in her demeanour, the intensity in her eyes, sallow cheeks, the tautness in her jawline. She looks up, smiles and waves at a boy walking towards her.

Hattie has reached the water's edge, slipped her shoes off, and inches her feet in.

"It's freezing cold," she says. "But it feels good. Come on, Mum."

Maya takes off her sandals. Looks back. The girl in the red dress is no longer there. She feels tired. Drained. The coolness of the water seems to open up her pores.

"Come in further," Hattie calls out, breaking through her thoughts. Hattie rolls up her trousers to her knees. Maya pulls her summer dress to one side and ties it. She moves in further. The sea line disappears with the horizon. A dingy bops in the distance. To the left, a tower – no, a lighthouse. Without warning Hattie splashes water at Maya and wades off in laughter. "You little munchkin," Maya says, doing her best to chase after her.

They move around in circles, cupping and flinging more water at each other, laughing until they are both completely drenched and fall beside each other on the beach. A lone seagull wails above. Maya draws Hattie into her. For many minutes they sit in silence, watching the waves. Maya squeezes Hattie in, tighter, and says, "I will miss you."

Hattie moves away slightly and looks at Maya.

*

The next day, Maya and Hattie return to the narrowboat. A mild day, there is an inviting stillness in the air. A squall of white birds scatter across the sky. Dan is on the roof watering the plants. Hand raised to his forehead, he looks down, holds Maya's gaze momentarily. With abrupt movements, he places the watering can to one side, and climbs down to the stern; and eyes them as they walk towards him. In a pair of shorts and a faded T-shirt, he is tall and tanned. No longer clean shaven, his thick hair thinner and longer. He's changed. Not only physically, but there is an assuredness in him. Miko comes out, and he places an arm around her shoulders.

“Come on in,” Miko says. “I've made us a light lunch.”

Maya nudges Hattie, and they step onto the narrowboat. The gold-yellow flowers glint in the bright sunshine. Workmen in high-vis jackets huddle by the bridge; their chatter carries indecipherably in the air. Hattie climbs down the steps into the cabin. Maya follows. Inside: Miko gestures for them to sit around the table that's been set up. On a blue patterned table cloth, steaming bowls of soup, freshly baked bread, and iced tea. Yesterday's sleeping boy emerges from behind a panel. He tugs Miko's skirt, and she picks him up. He hides his round dusky face in Miko's chest; peeks again at those gathered in the room, hides again.

They eat in silence. On his mother's lap, Kane giggles at something, then scrambles down Miko's leg, and scurries out of sight.

“Cute,” Hattie says, dipping a chunk of bread into her bowl of mushroom soup.

“He's so wriggly,” Dan says. It's the first words he's uttered since Maya and Hattie have arrived. “Gets into everything.”

“Mum says Anna was wriggly when she was that age,” Hattie says.

“Anna?” Miko asks.

“My sister,” Hattie says.

“Ah, yes – Anna,” Dan says.

“We came round yesterday,” Maya says.

“Miko mentioned...”

“You’re looking well,” Maya says. “I can’t quite remember when we saw each other last.”

Dan sips from a plastic cup, wipes his mouth with a napkin, and takes another spoonful of soup.

“What are you up to these days?” Maya asks.

“Shift work at the local pub,” Dan says.

“He’s a great cook,” Miko says, rubbing his knee. “He does an excellent casserole.”

“We had a wander in town and went all the way up the beach front yesterday. It was fairly busy,” Maya says.

“It’s been busier. Not our best year. But the festival helps. And, the pub where Dan works has been pretty busy. He’s had more shifts this summer.”

Kane plops himself on the floor banging a wooden ladle, as if drumming an invisible barrel.

Miko opens a window, reenters the kitchen, and returns with a cake. She slices the cake, disappears again and returns with a pot of tea and mugs. Kane sidles himself beside Hattie, kneels, facing the window, and blows an O. With a plump finger he draws a line through the O and blows again. He turns to Hattie and starts to laugh – a curly floaty gurgle.

“Is this your first visit to Portsmouth?” Miko asks.

“Yes, well, as far as I can remember...” Maya says, “Dan, we never came here as kids, did we?”

He seems startled by the question. “No, I don’t think we did,” he says.

“Do you remember that Rabbi who used to visit us when we lived in Pembrokeshire. What was his name?”

“Rabbi Levine,” Dan says.

“That’s right. He resembled a penguin and smelt of liquorice,” Maya says. “I think Mum was exploring Judaism or something.”

“Mum was always hopping from one thing to another. This week, Jews. Next week, Buddhism. The week after, Judaism.”

Kane uses his wooden ladle to bang against the window.

“Mum had her issues,” Maya says. “But don’t we all?”

Dan leaves the table, goes off the boat, having said something about wanting to pick up the day’s paper. Maya gets up to help Miko with the dishes. Hattie, left with Kane, plays ball with him. “Careful with him,” Maya says, carrying a tray load of plates into the kitchen area. The compact space is homely; it smells of onions and garlic. A triple fruit basket swings off a peg above the open window; apples, clementines and pears. Miko puts on a Miss Piggy apron, and passes a towel to Maya.

“Do you like living here?”

“On the boat?” she says. “I hope Hattie doesn’t mind minding Kane.”

Maya peeks through the doorway. “They’re fine,” she pauses. “Dan has always been so alternative. Always had itchy feet.”

“It was sort of a compromise.”

“Oh?”

“He wanted to live permanently on the water. Like a sea gypsy.” Miko hands Maya a pan. “But I wanted something more –”

She doesn’t finish her sentence, opens a cupboard and collects some more dish washing liquid, squirts some into the bowl. “Put it this way, I prefer being on land. I get sea sick. Still this lifestyle suits both of us.”

“How did you find yourself in a commune?” Maya says.

All of a sudden, a peal of crying comes from Kane's direction. Miko wipes her hands on the apron and vanishes behind the beaded curtains. Maya continues drying the dishes.

"He's alright," Miko says, when she returns. "Has no sense of dimensions."

"The last time I heard from Dan he was living in some sort of quasi-religious community in Milton Keynes," Maya says.

"I'd been travelling. I started with a community in Japan, then went on to Israel, Brazil, Australia and eventually found myself in Wales — a great little community, full of the bizarre and wonderful." She wipes her forehead with the corner of the apron, "I was actually seeing someone at the time. A German guy – Hendrik."

"My daughter, Anna, loved everything Japanese. She'd have loved to have met you."

"It's a shame she couldn't come," she says.

"Yes," Maya says, shaking her head. "It's a shame."

"It's strange Dan never mentioned you," Miko says. "If I'd known we would have visited."

Dan makes a reappearance. Maya and Miko are sitting on folded chairs on the deck side. On a blanket, Hattie and Kane play with lego. They build a tank, a fire engine, a plane. Kane makes hooting sounds, then hisses like an engine dying, and a loud crash as the lego pieces scatter all over the floor. Dan goes to the kitchen and comes back with a can of beer.

Miko tops up Maya's glass with freshly squeezed grapefruit juice. Maya enjoys its sourness, sweetened with honey. Miko had been in the middle of showing Maya some of her jewellery. Necklaces, bangles, earrings and rings crafted out of recycled copper and gemstones. In Maya's hand, a coral necklace.

"Beautiful," she says. "You're really talented."

"Pity I don't sell enough. I need to market myself more. But it takes time and money both of which are in short supply." She turns to Dan. "Shift tonight?"

“Yup,” he says, looking at the paper.

“Any chance we can talk?” Maya asks.

He raises his head, furrows his brow. “What about?”

“Come on, Dan. You’ve not seen your sister in years. It might do you good catching up with each other,” Miko says, touching his hand lightly.

He takes another sip of his drink, and stares at Maya from across the table. Her stomach cramps, and she looks away. Hattie is reading to Kane. She makes animal noises with the turn of each page. A crocodile, dinosaur, elephant, gazelle. A narrowboat, the Laughing Buddha, passes on the other side. Two men in their fifties carrying flasks, wave with a smile.

“We could go for a walk,” Maya says.

Dan, for a second time, puts down the paper he is reading, clears his throat.

“Give me a sec, I’ll change my shirt.”

They walk in silence down the canal path. A team of ducks dive off the edge and into the water. The water is dark and green and still. Quite different from the water on the seafront which was clear and blue and energetic.

“You hated the water as a child. Strange you should end up on it,” Maya says.

“Why are you here?”

“You’ve done really well for yourself. Miko is lovely. And, Kane...”

“... is a handful.” Dan lets out a short laugh and it startles Maya as he hasn’t had anything but a sour expression since they arrived. “We didn’t particularly want children. Miko is an only child and doesn’t have a good relationship with her parents. They had dreams of her becoming an architect. Did she tell you?”

Maya shakes her head.

“She’s got a real eye for design but couldn’t stand the corporate world.” They watch another group of ducks, in a conga-trail, travel upstream. A police siren sounds in the distance. “It’s hard to find someone you connect with. I got lucky with Miko.”

“It was hard not having you at mother’s funeral,” she says. It’s a question, but she doesn’t want him to clam up. She wants to understand where the distance between them has come from.

He carries on walking and she quickens her step to keep up. “Do you remember Doug the tortoise?” Dan says.

“That awkward creature you insisted on treating like a pet?”

“Ma hated it...” Ma – it had been ages since she’d heard that. He’d always referred to her as that. “... allowing Doug to sleep in bed was the last straw.”

“Why didn’t you come to the funeral?” she asks.

“I couldn’t. After all the lies.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She lied. Ma – she lied.” He motions for them to sit on a bench. A bike whizzes past, and two college girls, arms linked, walk by, deep in conversation. “I busked for a while. Just trying to make ends meet,” he says. “Then, I ended up on a farm in Aberdeen.”

“You still play?” Maya says.

“Miko’s always trying to get me back into it.” He stops, picks up a stick and uses it to draw shapes on the ground. “There isn’t the time. Between the shifts, looking after Miko and Kane.” His voice is distant, wistful. “What about that bloke you were with. Ian, was it?”

“He’s getting married,” she says. “Hattie’s going to live with him.” They stop and she looks directly at him.

“Too bad...” he says, “he seemed decent enough.”

They are lost in their own thoughts as they fall into step again. A sudden gust of wind picks up. A tall thin man jogs past fiddling with an I-pod.

“Ma had an affair,” he says, with a tone of irritation. “I’m only your half-brother.”

Maya turns to face him. His eyes strained, he looks away, as if afraid she might read more in his face. Incomprehensible. There was no way her mother had an affair. Impossible. It just wasn’t what their mother did. She collected things, waifs and strays. Helped out with the Mothers’ Union, made pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, attended life drawing classes and came back with sketches that resembled angelic beings on clouds. An affair? Impossible.

“She confessed,” Dan says. “At least she gave me that. Didn’t deny it.”

“How did you find out?”

“A letter I found.” He wrings his hands together – tapered fingers with bulging knuckles. “I hated her dishonesty. Couldn’t stomach it. To let a lie stand for so many years.”

Maya is struck by the girlishness in his voice. His eyes shimmer in the thin light. There was a time she would have hugged him.

“I shouldn’t have left you to deal with the funeral on your own,” he says. “It’ll be good for Miko and Kane to get to know their relations.”

“She’s buried in Lodge Hill,” she says. “Maybe when you come up we can visit her together. I can’t believe she had an affair.”

“How’s Anna doing?” he suddenly asks. “She must be doing her GCSEs. Why isn’t she here?”

Maya bends down, picks up a stone, and tosses it into the water.

“She was excited about going to Japan next summer.” Her chin tilts as she says this. “I told Miko she’d have loved meeting her. She’s completely crazy about all things Japanese.”

“We’ll have to make it happen. We’ll come up and visit. Kane should get to know his cousins.” She fumbles for a menthol sweet.

“The last time I saw her she was this high.” Dan motions with a hand, waist level. “Does she still have that sheep I gave her?”

“Anna’s dead,” Maya whispers. “She’s dead.”

Chapter 8

Maya drives up to the Forest of Bere. Shadows of clouds chase over the valley and surrounding wilderness. She parks up in the near-empty car park, and walks through the woodland. A slight chill in the air, Maya wraps the shawl more snugly. The quietness, stark and clean, compels her to amble up a windy path slowly. She enjoys the feel of the ground underfoot – leaves, stones, twigs. On the cusp of autumn, the colours of the earth and woodland seem softer and brighter and sharper, in the way that new rain makes everything sparkle. The amber arc of the sun on the horizon reminds her of the documentary she watched last night after Hattie had gone to bed. A couple had migrated from Cheshire to start a new life on a Finnish archipelago.

Maya sidesteps a throng of midges, passes pine and silver birch trees, and spots an enclave cut out from rock, a scattering of wild mushrooms at its entrance. She takes a seat on a boulder and watches squirrels dart through the grassland, up bark and branch.

A collie wanders up the path. Its owner, a top-heavy woman, in a maroon polo-neck, padded gilet, and large earrings, follows behind. Her hair, wispy and wild, is gathered untidily in a bun. She nods as she passes. They disappear down the path. Images of her mother flood back. Her slim angular figure hunched over a jigsaw puzzle, crocheting a piece of tapestry, writing letters to one person or other. For sure, her mother had been active and vibrant before arthritis had seized her legs. For charity, she even climbed up Ben Nevis, Tryfan and Grasmoor. Her mother: flighty, flirty and independent. Perhaps it wasn't surprising she took a lover. Strange to think of Dan as a half-brother.

*

Back at the cottage, she switches on the coffee machine, makes her way upstairs, knocks at Hattie's bedroom door.

“You all packed?” she asks.

Hattie, sitting with legs outstretched on the floor is painting her nails; she lifts her head and yawns.

“I’ll make us breakfast.”

Maya, back in the kitchen, takes off her shawl and puts on a jumper. She decides against porridge and pours a mug of coffee for herself, and pomegranate juice for Hattie. She opens the window and turns the radio on. A robbery at a local-run business. A councillor’s email leak. An assault in an alleyway.

She calls out for Hattie, puts in a couple of crumpets to toast. She switches to Radio 4 and makes a start on the eggs. Ten minutes later, Hattie makes an appearance. Maya watches her daughter. Dressed in an orange shirt-dress over a pair of jeans. On her feet, her favourite panda slippers; her fingernails, now painted a deep mauve. She sits down, texting on her phone.

Over breakfast, Maya scans the local newspaper. A house fire killing three. A local climber needing rescue. A pub threatened with closure. A new housing development that’s got people up in arms. A woman shoplifts a trolley full of goods from a supermarket.

Maya bites into her crumpet. A black crow perches on a branch, its head darts from left to right. There’s a knock at the door. Miko is stood on the other side, in a white summer dress, with a basket full of fruit and vegetables: apples, tomatoes, and potatoes.

“For your journey,” she says, handing Maya the laden basket. “It’s been good to have you and Hattie over the last few days.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Maya says. “Time for a cuppa?”

Miko follows Maya in. “I can’t stay long. I’ve left Kane with Dan.”

From the window, they watch Hattie flinging her frame on the swings. She rises high in one direction, and comes through in the other.

“It’s been good to see Dan after all this time,” Maya says.

“I’m sorry to hear about Anna,” she says, drawing the mug of tea Maya has placed down in front of her close to her chest. “What an awful thing to happen.” She pauses, as if unsure on what to say next.

“You must bring Kane up for a visit.”

“Everyone talks about the world getting smaller. But it seems our lives are getting more disconnected, disparate somehow.”

“Toast?”

Miko waves a hand. “Nothing for me. I have to get back to the boys.” After a few minutes, she gets up, and moves to hug Maya. “We will make the trip up soon.”

*

Three hours into the journey they pull up into a service station. Sat in a Costa, from the glassed walling, the sunlight pours down on rows of metal and rubber in the carpark. Inside, the smell of baby lotion mingled with burnt milk in the air. A fat child in a pram squeals while its fatter mother plunges a burger in her mouth. She speaks with a mouthful while her greasy-haired partner listens attentively. The automatic doors swing open and an elderly man held up by a walking stick trips. A security guard moves forward to help, but he gestures him away with the stick. A group of blind people surrounded by guide dogs shake yellow charity buckets. The greasy-haired man bends down and hands a chip to the still howling child. The volume of the music playing increases. A Mariah Carey song, but Maya can't remember the name.

“Did Anna kill herself?” Hattie suddenly asks, taking her headphones off, munching slowly on a chip. Hattie always ate her chips dry, while Anna had enjoyed sauce.

Maya takes a napkin and wipes her lips.

“That's what everyone's saying...” Hattie says.

“Who?”

“Everyone. At school.”

“She'd never do that,” Maya says. “She didn't kill herself.” Maya catches her breath, feels the weight of each word.

“It's weird though...” Hattie says, lowering her gaze.

“What’s that?”

“That no one knows for sure.”

“It was an accident,” Maya says. “It must’ve been.”

A toddler strokes one of the guide dogs, his mother pulling gently on his harness. The fat woman, her greasy-haired partner, and child get up noisily and head towards the toilets.

“Maybe we can stop by the cemetery on our way...”

“Whatever,” Hattie says, replacing her headphones.

*

Maya pulls up into the school drive and parks under an oak tree. The bike railings stand empty. There are only a few cars around including a camper-van with a lobster hanging from the front view mirror. Maya slams the door, leaving Hattie in the car. She walks down a narrow path, and into the front entrance. At the unattended reception, she presses a bell. A wide-hipped woman with a pair of severe glasses appears from behind the glass wall.

“Yes?” She takes off her specs. “Can I help?”

“I understand a package has been left –” Before she completes her sentence, she interrupts:

“Ah, Anna’s mother?” Her expression softens. “Such a lovely girl. We were all so very fond of her. A terrible thing that happened...”

“The package?” Maya says again. “I’ve got Hattie in the car,” she adds.

The receptionist enters another room. When she returns, she is holding a brown envelope. Maya collects it, takes a seat in the foyer, and opens it. A group of students dressed in sporting gear trail past in pairs. A girl with braids lets out a shrill laugh as the doors swing behind her. A journal. Maya takes it out and stares at the doodles, interspersed with stickers. She returns the journal to the brown envelope. She isn’t sure what to do with it. She had never been one to snoop in her daughter’s personal stuff. But maybe it had the answers she needed.

A painting on the wall catches her attention. Emerging from the shades of green, blue and black: a large octopus descends in a deep watery abyss surrounded by plant life. Anna's signature in the corner. Maya doubles over in pain, gasps for breath — sits. The receptionist brings her a plastic cup, half filled with cold water. "I'll be fine," she says, and leaves the building quickly, clutching the brown envelope.

*

That night she dreams of Hattie and not Anna. She stumbled — steadied herself in the darkness engulfing her. Slowly, her handprints traced the glass panels hemming her in. Left, right, left; her palms criss-crossed each other on ice-cold marble; inching herself through the darkness. She turned right, noting the squareness of the room. Trailing the cool surface, she walked the second length of the room. After a few steps, she stopped, listened, looked up — searching for clues. Hattie tripped, cutting her elbow on something sharp. The wound deep; she winced with the jarring pain. The liquid trailed down her wrist to the floor. Wiping the blood on her jeans, her palms registered the unusual warmth of the tiles. Crawling a few paces, her outstretched arms remained her compass. Again she stopped and listened for anything that would give her a clue as to where she was. Nothing. Rising to her feet, she walked on until she reached the end of another length of glass panelling. She stopped, and leaned back against the glass. Hattie bowed her head and gasped for air. Biting her lips, she pressed a hand on her chest. From the other side, Maya knocked desperately on the glass barrier, desperate to get Hattie's attention.

*

Maya meets with Nkechi. She still hasn't managed to bring herself to read Anna's journal. At the cobalt blue door she hesitates. Normally she would have watched Anna hop out of the car, be buzzed in, before she drove off to complete an errand.

She presses the bell and is buzzed in. Following a series of labelled arrows, she climbs up the broad stairs to Nkechi's counselling room. In the kitchen opposite, a coffee machine brews.

Maya knocks gently on the door. Nkechi – in an African print dress, her hair wrapped under a scarf – gestures her in with a full wide smile.

“Please do take a seat,” she says. “A drink?”

“Just some water,” Maya says, taking in the room. Her attention on a textured copper vase.

Nkechi returns with two glasses of water, places one on the table, and settles herself in the armchair opposite.

“I picked up Anna’s journal from the school the other day,” Maya says. “Apparently some girl – Fergie – handed it in.”

“Ah, Fergie –”

“It’s like I didn’t know my daughter at all,” Maya says, her hands stroke her laps in an unconscious motion. “Who is Fergie?”

Nkechi hesitates, “A friend.”

“She never mentioned her.” Maya clasps her hands, and turns to face the window. The earlier sunshine has dimmed, lost behind low hanging clouds. A door from within the building slams.

“I think Anna looked up to her...” Nkechi says. “Someone she could confide in.”

“Why couldn’t she talk to me?” Maya says. “I’m afraid that this is somehow my fault.” She tries to keep her voice from trembling, and looks away.

“It’s a terrible thing that happened,” Nkechi says. “She was in a lot of pain.”

“I don’t know why she was there. In that industrial unit. What was she doing there?” Maya says. “I want to read her journal, but I’m frightened at what I might find out.”

“I’m sorry, Maya,” Nkechi says, “I’m not sure how I can help.”

“Maybe if I could find this Fergie. Talk to her.”

“I’ve never met her,” Nkechi says. “It was good Anna found a friend.”

Maya looks up at Nkechi. She is surprised at how attractive she is — penetrating eyes, prominent cheekbones and a plump mouth. “She and Millie were friends.”

“I can’t begin to imagine what you must be going through.” She waits for a few moments before carrying on, “Maybe reading her journal might help you find closure. But that has to be your decision.”

“Did she tell you about her wanting to find her biological father,” Maya pauses. “Did she tell you about her planned trip to Japan?”

“I can’t...”

“She burned to death,” Maya says, getting up from her seat, and looks directly at Nkechi. “I need to know why?” Maya’s hands shake. She turns abruptly, moves to the window. She sees nothing through her tears. “Did she tell you about my HIV?” she finally says.

“She talked about many things, but...” Nkechi says. “It’s not your fault.”

Maya returns to her seat, takes a tissue and dabs her eyes. “I tried to protect her from everything. Russ — her father, the HIV, everything.”

“It’s awful what happened,” Nkechi says.

“Are you moving office?” Maya asks suddenly, motioning at the three boxes stacked by the door.

“I’m moving on, so to speak,” she says. “I’m training to be a priest.”

“Anna never said. She never talked much about her sessions with you.”

“It’s something I need to do,” Nkechi says.

“I’m thinking of going away...” Maya suddenly laughs – a cloddish restrained laugh. “Sounds like I’m off to be sectioned at an institution or something.” She laughs again. “What I mean to say is that I’m thinking of travelling.”

“And after?”

“No idea.”

“Perhaps you don’t need to think about the future just yet.”

“What did Anna do in these sessions?”

“She talked. Doodled. Sometimes we sat in silence.”

“Did you know she was always counting squirrels?” Maya says.

“Everything that mattered came up,” Nkechi says. “But I can’t say anymore than that. It wouldn’t be right.”

Maya waves a hand. “Forgive me ...”

Anna, nine-years-old, in a shoe shop, sat on a low bench, trying on a pair of rainbow wellingtons. But it’s the one with butterflies and caterpillars and bees she wants. There are none in her size and she’s in tears.

“The police say she started the fire. The door was locked from the inside. It’s a strange way to die.” Maya says, checks her phone and pushes it back into her handbag. “I’ve taken enough of your time.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Nkechi says. “Anna – she was lovely.”

Maya leaves the building. The sun is shining and she welcomes its warmth.

*

She decides on a bunch of tulips. The sunlight dances between the black and granite headstones. The occasional colour of a knitted teddy, wilting flower, and candle votive glints in the haze. A helicopter flies high breaking the peace. On the far side, by the boundary wall, a gardener yanks at weeds, every now and again, wipes his forehead with his shirt sleeve. Maya kneels down in front of Anna’s headstone, arranges the flowers in the slightly dug-in vase. She places a blanket down and kneels on it. For a long while she doesn’t speak.

Anna, five years old, runs around a play area with feline face paint: dark black lines, white nose, red lips, and orange shimmer. In her mouth, a lollipop. She stops running, gives Maya the lollipop, dashes off again and climbs onto the bouncy castle. Maya watches her jump and squeal. The sudden sound of a mower. The gardener, lean and muscular, weaves the noisy machine up and down the strip of grass. Maya stretches herself on the blanket. The thick clouds are back, hanging low.

She closes her eyes. Why do clouds look like cauliflower? she hears someone ask. To remind you to eat your veg, Anna replies, bouncing up and down, down and up, higher and higher.

Chapter 9

Maya is in the middle of having breakfast when the phone rings. She recognises the soft throaty voice.

“I’ve been trying to reach you,” Reverend John says.

Maya imagines him sitting at his desk, eyes narrowed with concern, with a cup of coffee gone cold. “We’ve been away. Visiting my brother.”

“Ah,” he says. “Perhaps, I could come round later this week?”

“Portsmouth,” she says. “This week?”

“How’s Hattie?”

Maya moves to stare at the calendar on the wall. She traces the days. Today: Noah. Monday: no plans. Tuesday: Dentist. Wednesday: nothing scheduled. Thursday: Heartlands, bloods. Friday: David.

“Wednesday looks good.” She moves to the other side of the kitchen table, opens a drawer and retrieves a pair of scissors. Back at the table, she cuts out an article: *Reframing Grief*. “Hattie’s going to live with Ian.”

“Oh?” Reverend John clears his throat, and says, “Sometimes a new environment does us good.”

Maya wants to scream, but she doesn’t. She pins the cutout on the fridge with a live-love-laugh magnet.

“Wednesday morning will be fine, Reverend,” she says and switches the phone off. It’s only when she hangs up, she realises she’s cut herself; a sharp angry gash on her palm.

*

Noah. Chewing gum, wearing tracksuit pants, T-shirt and a bomber jacket, headphones hanging on his neck. They make their way to the garden.

“It’s looking much better,” Maya says, glancing at the trimmed hedgerows, pruned and clipped beds. “You’ve managed alright then.”

He rummages in his pockets and says, “Melon seeds. For next season.”

“Never tried melon.”

“Better make a start,” Noah says, taking off his jacket. He collects an edger – a half-moon shaped, long-handled tool – and starts to dig a shallow trough a few inches wide along the length of the garden.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Maya says.

Maya goes up to the attic. The last time she was up here she had been looking for Dan’s last contact details. She opens up a leather suitcase and pulls out things long forgotten. Dresses and shoes and balls of wool. A paper folder full of receipts and postcards and train tickets. A leather bound baby book. She thumbs through it: Anna in an elf costume, Anna on a hammock, Anna hanging upside down from a tree. She throws the book on the floor.

Another photo in a cardboard frame. Anna in pigtails, dressed in her school uniform. Anna – wide eyes, button nose and toothy smile. She takes the picture out and tears it into a neat half. She shreds it violently into tiny little bits. She hears the scream which has filled the space. She is back in the mortuary: frosty steely and shiny. She walks down a series of corridors cloaked by the odour of medical alcohol and formaldehyde. She supports herself with the wall, and waits. Eventually her breath steadies.

*

A light wind has picked up by the time she serves up lunch. She uses leftovers of salmon, boiled eggs and cheese, to make sandwiches. She and Noah sit side-by-side on a stone ledge.

“Mum says when I was a kid I only ate the crusts of bread.” His mouth looks pinker than usual. Perhaps it’s the light. “When my uncle visited India once, at the hotel reception they asked him if he wanted a room with a gecko or not.”

Maya takes another sandwich from the tray. A ladybird crawls up a blade of grass. Behind a rock, an earthworm wriggles in the ground. A sparrow hawk hurtles between the branches.

“Apparently geckos eat mosquitoes,” he says.

“Oh?”

“Apparently, there are only three lizard species in Japan. One being Schlegel’s Japanese gecko –” He begins to sputter, tries to release whatever’s caught in his throat by massaging his neck. When the coughing calms down, he pats his chest for a few seconds before carrying on. “I want to be an Adventurer some day.”

He moves to take another sandwich, cheese and pickle, and his hand brushes against her. A fleeting tingle soars through her limbs and settles in her abdomen. She would call David later, see if he was still up for doing something on Friday. The theatre maybe.

“Your eyes are red,” Noah says. “You don’t look right.”

She strokes her eyebrows momentarily, then wipes her face down with a hand. An ache brews behind her forehead. “I met my brother for the first time in years.”

“That where you went off to?”

“He’s changed a lot.”

“Like the show Long Lost Families...”

Maya smiles, he is a child again. A cat appears from over the neighbours’ wall, stretches out on a patch of grass, and purrs. Katydid sound in the shrubs. The cat slinks off.

“I used to be attractive once,” Maya says.

“You’re still real pretty for an older lady,” Noah says, jumping to his feet. “Thanks for lunch, Mrs Sharpe.”

“I’d like to show you something,” she says. “If you don’t mind.”

He follows her back into the house, and they make their way upstairs. The film of dust on the skirting makes her sneeze.

“Hattie not in?” he asks.

“At a friends for the afternoon,” she says. “I think she got bored with the whole Portsmouth trip ... This is... was my daughter, Anna’s, room.”

At the window, she draws open the curtain. A hint of wax and lilies infuses the room.

“Some of these need repotting,” Maya says, pointing at the different plants along the window sill. “She liked to see things grow. We had this cat once. Marmite. She found him as a kitten and grew it up.”

Noah picks up a photograph from the desk. Anna, in a large floppy beach hat, looks away at something in the distance.

“I caught her off guard with that one,” Maya says.

Noah bites his lower lip, his face reddens, and he places the photograph down again. He is about to say something, but stops himself. He draws closer to her, and touches her arm. She trembles. Her eyes drift to his narrow jaw, meet his gaze. Her legs buckle and she sinks to the floor, in fits of tears. He kneels beside her and places an arm around her shoulders. When her heaving quiets down, she pulls away, shivers slightly. He grabs hold of her wrist, then reluctantly releases it, bows his head.

“When I’m done with the garden,” he says, “I’ll sort out her plants.”

*

Mrs Hussein visits the next evening. She arrives with a dish of zucchinis stuffed with flavoured rice. In the kitchen, Maya makes a quick salad while Mrs Hussein serves up the rice dish and fills a jug of water.

“How did it go with your brother?” She takes off her headscarf. It’s the first time she’s ever done this. She takes out the pins, and wavy, coffee-coloured hair falls to her waist. With her slender and sophisticated face, Maya hadn’t realised how sensual Mrs Hussein is.

“He’s married with a child now. Living on a boat. Working as a chef.”

“Leila, my sister, her husband...” she pauses, “they’ve had some terrible news. He had a stroke.”

“Oh no,” Maya says, setting down some knives and forks.

“He’s only forty. Two years younger than Leila. He’s still in hospital,” she says. “And, what was I saying the other day. She’s got all the luck.” She shakes her head.

“That’s tough...”

“I’m trying to persuade her to come over. We can’t afford to go across. Not on my husband’s wages.”

“I need to pack away her things,” Maya says. “But I don’t know if I can.”

“Sure you’re ready? I’ve always been told the grieving process should never be rushed.”

“I’m going to go away for a while. I’ve not quite decided where yet. I’ve been thinking Sri Lanka. But, there’s something Noah said and now I’m considering Japan.”

“How’s Noah working out?” she asks. “There’s something odd about him. When he came to collect the key while you were away, he just stood outside the door waiting. It was Ruqayya and Mustafa who told me there was a strange man outside.”

“He’s been a godsend. The garden is looking like a garden again,” Maya says. “Not quite a man yet.”

“And Hattie?”

Maya scoops rice on her plate. “She’ll live with Ian for a while.” Maya ignores the sharpness in her tone. “It’s what she wants. She’s lost a lot of weight.”

“Timing out from here – this place, this house – might not be a bad idea.”

“I’ve got a little money saved from my mother’s inheritance. It’s not much but it’ll get me away for a few months.”

“And after?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead,” she says. “You know the package I told you about, well I picked it up. From the school.”

“What was it?”

“Anna’s journal. But I can’t bring myself to read it,” Maya says.

“Do kids these days keep journals? I thought they’re all on their e-stuff.” She laughs, wipes her mouth.

“I’m letting her go,” Maya says.

“Anna?”

“No – Hattie... I can’t stand the thought of losing her too, but it’s what she wants.”

The calendar falls to the floor and Maya pick it up and puts it back on its hook. This month’s quotation: *To a mind that is still, the whole world surrenders (Chuang Zhu)*. She glimpses a squirrel dart through the foliage.

“If you like, I can help you pack away Anna’s room,” Mrs Hussein says.

Maya feels the sting in her eyes. “I’d appreciate that...” she says, wiping away the tears.

“Reverend John called. He’s coming round on Wednesday.”

“That reminds me. There was a community meeting the other day. More lead and copper pipings have been stolen from the church roof.”

“Oh? I’m a bit out of the loop.”

“I think he’s keen to set up some kind of neighbourhood watch. That’s why he called the meeting.”

“I wasn’t there for her.”

Mrs Hussein takes out her hanky and blows her nose. “Regret is an awful taskmaster,” she says, “If I had my chance again, I’d have explored Eastern Europe – Hungary. Croatia. Prague.”

“Maybe if I’d been a better wife, a better mother...”

“You have to find a way to live,” Mrs Hussein says. “Dying is easy. It’s the living that needs to be worked at.”

They talk about other things. Mrs Hussein’s niece’s wedding; an elaborate Bradford reception. Maya’s discovery of menstrual cups – less cumbersome than tampons or pads, though it takes a while to get used to them. Mrs Hussein had decided to pull Ruqayya and Mustafa out from their Kumon lessons, an expense she and her husband could no longer afford. The argument between two neighbours over a parking space. When Mrs Hussein leaves, Maya calls Ian, lets him know that Hattie can move in with him and Gina.

*

In the early evening, she goes to Cannon Hill Park. She follows the trail round the lake, the fountain, the bowling green, and the tennis courts. Her strides are long and brisk until she is about to do a second loop of the grounds. She stops to watch the ducks. An old lady wearing a woollen hat breaks bread in chunks and tosses it into the water. A flurry of squawking around the soggy stale specks ensues. Maya carries on, completes a second loop before making her way home.

*

Maya collects the brown envelope she stuffed in a shoebox at the bottom of her wardrobe. She sits in the rocking chair, takes out the journal and flicks through the pages. Intricate doodle art. Half-moons, heavy darkened lines, triangle wedges, squares on squares, squiggly shapes – emerge to create birds, galaxies, and underworlds boasting creatures of all shapes and sizes. A particular page holds Maya’s attention. Mermaid figures circle round in a dark abyss surrounded by sea dragons. On another page: a man with a top hat stands on a crescent moon and collects stars. Yet another:

Four faces, elongated ghoulish faces, peer through spirally and spiky flames. The occasional pages are filled with quick slanted writing:

N had lunch with her again today. He didn't notice me. He never notices me. [] I haven't told Mum what they (C-J-A-N) did. Fergie says what we're planning to do is karma. She says it's retribution; they deserve it. I've not told Millie about it. She wouldn't understand. School is unbearable. I want them dead. [] I wish I knew my real dad. Ian's okay but he isn't my dad. Not my biological one anyway. Mum doesn't understand. She gets so wound up every time I ask her a question about Russell (my real dad). I will find him one day. [] I went back to school for the first time today. It was awful. C-J-A-N were by the lockers laughing at me. C cornered me in the loos and asked if I told anyone. She said if I ever tell they'll post the photos of what they did. Fergie says hate is a good emotion. It motivates us to get even. Revenge is all I breathe, eat and sleep these days. [] I dreamt of N last night. He kissed me and I kissed him back. He smelt of toffee and treacle. We were at a funfair and ate pancakes. Just us. Then he said, 'wait here', and never came back.

Maya goes back a couple of pages, then forward several pages:

Fergie has thought of everything. She'll write the note so they (C-J-A-N) don't recognise my handwriting and I'll put it on C's desk or in her bag. Fergie will get the things we need. I've asked her to come with me, but she says it's better if I carry it out on my own. After all, they did it to me. It needs to be my revenge. [] Fergie did my makeup and painted my nails today. We sort of kissed. I liked it. I've never kissed a boy before so I don't know if it's any different. It felt weird tasting her tongue in her mouth. She tasted of peanuts. Her eyes were closed but I kept mine open. I'm going to dye my hair purple. I wish I could run away. Fergie says I can stay with her anytime. Mum's been getting ratty about my walkabouts. She keeps moaning about my grades. I don't care about school anymore. When it's all over, I can start again [] Fergie says I can reinvent myself— she did!

Maya closes the journal and her eyes.

Alton Towers. Anna, eleven, tugs at the sleeves of her jumper demanding a go on Nemesis. 'I'm not sure, Anna, it's too frightening for Hattie.' 'I'll go on my own,' she says, wide-eyed and determined. She did go on her own. And the whole time, Maya held on to Hattie with her gaze firmly fixed on Anna's red T-shirt.

Chapter 10

Maya wakes up from a restful sleep, and goes to draw the curtains. It is still early. Outside, on the pavement opposite the house, a girl in her twenties stands awkwardly, staring at the house. Her dark hair in untidy pigtails, dressed in a patchwork dress and camel coloured boots. Her glances, furtive and hesitant, she clutches a rolled newspaper. Maya pulls the curtains back some more, and the young woman bows her head, looks away. Maya puts on her dressing gown, decides to go out to see if she's looking for someone. But at this time? When Maya opens the door and steps outside, the young woman has gone; the street empty and silent in the early morning glow.

Back inside, Maya takes another look through the upstairs window. Two bin men in visibility jackets jump off a truck and dash to wheel bins across to the moving vehicle. A door opens. Mrs Rossi comes out, has a conversation with one of the bin men, and carries on down the street. Maya goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth and freshen up. In the mirror, her face is drawn and tight, with deeply shaded circles under her eyes, and a dry patch on her chin. She plucks her eyebrows, rubs in moisturiser, before heading back downstairs.

In the kitchen, she takes her pills, makes a cup of coffee. She opens the back door and goes into the garden. Maya likes the way Noah's created different levels in a once sloping area. With old slabs, he's created a stepped pathway leading to the shed. The trimmed rose and iris bushes look healthy and inviting. She takes a seat on the bench, watches the frogs and newts in the pond Noah hasn't got round to yet. It needs a good clean. Her thoughts circle back to the dream. It's been the same dream she's had the last three nights. Anna in a kimono walks into a temple, the main hall overlooks a hillside covered with cherry and maple trees. Hattie swings the kitchen door open, an apple in her hand, she comes and sits beside Maya.

“Do you think if we went to a psychic Anna would come?”

Maya turns to look at Hattie. “I've told Ian you'll be moving in with them.”

“Answer the question,” she says. “Do you think we can communicate with the dead? I’ve been reading stuff online.”

“I’m not sure I believe in all that,” Maya says.

Hattie says, “I dreamt of her last night.”

“Oh?”

“It was strange.” She bites into the apple again. “She was flying and laughing. It was like she wasn’t dead at all.”

Maya doesn’t say anything, puts an arm around Hattie’s shoulders, and draws her into her chest.

*

Later that morning, the phone rings in the middle of Reverend John’s visit. Maya leaves him in the conservatory and takes the call in the kitchen.

“Oh, Dan... how are things with you all?”

“All fine this end,” he says, “I’ve been thinking...”

“Go on...”

“I’d like to visit mother’s grave,” he says, “I know I’ve been a pig about all this, but...”

“That would be good, Dan.”

“I’ll need to negotiate time off work,” he says. “But I’ll keep you posted.”

She rings off, and takes in a bowl of pitted dates for her and Reverend John to share. He puts the diary he is holding back in his satchel, and takes one.

“I’m going to pack up Anna’s room. I tried to make a start on it the other day, but...”

“How’s the counselling going?” he asks.

“Not sure if it’s helping,” she says. “Mum didn’t believe in that sort of thing.”

“Give it time,” he says. “When my father died, it broke my heart. We were very close. Sometimes I wonder if we ever get over such loss.”

Maya smiles at the Bart Simpson socks peeking from under his trousers.

“I saw a strange girl this morning. Just outside. Staring at the house.”

“Strange?”

“A ridiculous time in the morning for her to be there. By the time I went outside, she’d gone.”

“Perhaps you should report it to the police. I’m not sure if you’ve heard, but there’ve been a spate of thefts at the church.”

“And say what exactly? She wasn’t doing anything really. Perhaps she was looking for a house. Who knows?”

“Well, if she shows up again, it might be worth reporting it.”

“I don’t know why she couldn’t talk to me.”

“Who?”

“Anna. I’ve been reading her journal. I didn’t want to,” she says. “Something happened to her — I’m not sure what, but it changed her.”

“Ah—”

“I can’t face giving her things away,” she says, “I just don’t know how.”

*

“I’m loving the new hair,” David says, opening the back door for Sasha and Sailor. They run into the garden, chase each other, until Sasha stops and sniffs the air. The sound of a crying child pierces the stillness. Sailor lies on a pile of leaves, licks its paws.

“Maybe I should get Noah to help out with my garden,” David says. “I spent the weekend sweeping up leaves. There’s still the front yard to sort out. A royal mess.”

Maya laughs, pulls him into her for a kiss. She inhales his nutty cologne, tastes pineapple on his tongue, enjoys the grainy texture of his day-old beard.

“I’ve missed you,” he says. “How did it go with your brother?”

Maya draws away from him, wipes lipstick off his lips, says, “Good! He’s planning to visit soon. He might come up with Miko and Kane, his wife and son.”

“Another glass?”

She nods, and he pours some red wine.

“They’re sending me to Scotland,” David says, the words fall out quickly, in an unexpected manner. “They’re expanding the business. They need someone to lead the team there.”

She feels nothing. There was an attraction there, animalistic in many ways, but nothing close to the love she felt for Ian.

“Say something,” he says. “I didn’t mean to land this on you, but...”

“Sounds like it’ll be good for you, your career,” she says, making her way to the living room. It’s just as she left it a few weeks ago – spotless – the cleaner must’ve been in recently.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” he says, grabbing hold of her hand. “Please let’s sit down a minute.”

He releases her hand just as the doorbell rings. He goes to open it. Maya doesn’t hear much of the conversation, but he is soon back.

“I know we haven’t discussed our relationship much,” he says. “But, you could come with me.” It’s somewhat matter-of-fact, yet falls in the form of a question. Maya takes in his eager and doubtful expression, his shirt collar not folded properly, fingernails that need cutting.

“I can’t, David,” she says.

“Is it Hattie? Isn’t she off to stay with Ian anyway?”

“That’s not it,” she says. “Me and you ...”

He takes a breath and pulls away from her, looks up to the ceiling. “I suppose you’re right,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“I thought it was worth me asking,” he says.

“When do you go?”

“Six weeks, give or take. It gives me enough time for a handover, pack this place up, that sort of thing.”

“What’ll you do with your things?”

“Storage, I think.”

He sits down again, leans in and kisses her. “I’ve missed you,” he says, pushing his tongue deeper into her mouth. A hand slides up her blouse and fondles a breast. He sighs, moves to kiss her chin and neck and shoulders.

*

Maya has lunch before her Heartlands appointment at two. She enters a café-cum-bar in Kings Heath and scans a menu before placing her order at the counter. A tall transgendered woman takes a number to her table, in the back area of the café. A baby, dressed in a jumpsuit, lies fast asleep in a high buggy. The chandelier, large and regal is lit, although its flicker is unnoticeable against the sunlight streaming through the large bay windows. A waitress brings freshly baked scones to the next table. A married couple talk quietly on the table next to hers.

Maya missed the sea. The sound of the water. What she wouldn't do to be on a beach – not sunning herself in that touristy sort of way – but to be swimming in it, allowing it to cover her. She wanted that sense of liberation the water offered. To life. To death. To self.

A waiter, a young toothy boy with hair sleeked back in a pony tail, wipes a hand on an apron, and places down her order. Tuna-melt panini and chips. She asks for a fresh cup of filter coffee. A woman catches her crutches on Maya's handbag strap. She apologises profusely and carries on in an ungainly gait.

For two days in a row, Maya had woken up at six, and waited at the window hoping to catch sight of the unknown woman. She hadn't come back. A discussion on Woman's Hour floats through her mind. Women of all ages being subjected to inappropriate sexual assaults by men. A twenty-five

year old talked about her thigh being masturbated against on a bus. She reported the incident. Felt she owed it to her eleven-year-old self when another inappropriate incident happened on her way from school. The coffee arrives and Maya stirs in some sugar. The phone rings.

“Ian...” she says. “How are you? Gina?”

“All good,” he says. “Gina wants to know if Hattie would be available for a dress fitting next week.”

Maya presses the handset to her ears, struggling to hear above the busyness of the café and the crackling down the line. “Sure. You'll pick her up?”

“Not a problem. We can finalise the arrangements when I come.”

“Ian,” she says, hesitates.

“Go on. Is Hattie doing alright?”

“Yes, yes, she's fine,” Maya says. “It's Anna. Did she tell you anything that was going on in school?”

“Not that I recall,” he says. “Why?”

“Something I read in her journal.”

“I know it's tough, Maya. But you have to find a way of moving on...”

“Do you remember the time we went to Anglesey?”

Maya feels him smile. “Yes, I taught her to ride a bike that trip.”

“Noah said something the other day –” she says.

“Noah?”

“That there's a Japanese word for a broken heart: *Takotsubo*.” She pauses. “It's when a person's heart expands so much it causes a ballooning of the organ. A Japanese doctor thought the phenomena resembled an octopus.”

“Oh?”

“I never believed a person could die of a broken heart,” she says.

“Maya, you should come stay with us for a while,” he says. “Gina wouldn’t mind.”

Maya winces. “Thanks, but I ... I’m going travelling.”

“Right,” he says. “Well, I’d better go. See you next week.”

The tuna melt now tastes rubbery and chewy in her mouth. She washes it down with tepid coffee. For the first time in her life, she understands how a person can die of a broken heart.

Chapter 11

Maya trawls volunteering holidays online. With a cup of tea and a couple of fruitcake slices, she spends hours reading through the information on websites. The possibilities are endless. An orphanage in Tohoku. Teaching English in Miyagi. Working on a farm in Kirikiri. What was it that Anna said? Geishas are often taught how to kneel in a position known as seiza; their legs folded beneath their thighs. She showed Maya pictures of their high wooden shoes, and wrote down the word 'okobo' in a notebook. There is something mythical about Geishas, she said. Maya understood what she meant – their painted elegance embodied Japan's world of monasteries and snow-topped mountains. After hours of surfing the internet, she considers two options: To volunteer at a guesthouse in Shimodo, or help out at an organic farm in rural Okinawan.

"I can't find my trainers," Hattie says, coming into the kitchen and opening the fridge.

"Shoe rack?" Maya asks, scrutinising Hattie – denim skirt, jersey top, her hair hanging loosely around her shoulders. "The conservatory?"

"What you up to?" Hattie says, sidling behind Maya, and placing her chin on a shoulder.

"Planning my sabbatical."

"Sabbatical?"

"I've been saying I'm going to time out abroad for a while. Well, I'm going to go for it. Especially with you going to stay with your dad for a bit..."

"Oh..." Hattie straightens up and moves to the stool opposite. "Dad says I'll like my new school."

Maya closes the laptop, places her notebook on it. "I'm sure you'll make lots of new friends." She wants to say, 'I'll miss you'. "Remember I'm always at the end of a phone."

"I know, Mum." She bites into a strawberry, her pinched expression suggests it's not very sweet. "Yuk! These need sugar."

"Mrs Hussein will miss you babysitting her two."

Hattie lifts a newspaper and looks under it. She puts it back down again.

“You need a haircut,” Maya says. “Let’s fit it in before Ian picks you up tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Hattie says, rooting around behind the stacked recycling containers. “I’m off for a swim later.”

The house, so much quieter without Anna, would be intolerable without Hattie; she couldn’t bear the thought of it.

*

Maya sits nervously at the Travel Agency on Edgbaston Road. The open plan office is warm and stifling. Maya takes the water she’s been offered by the twenty-something-year-old, in a trouser-suit. She eases herself back into the swivel seat and types furiously on the keyboard, eyes focused on the screen, with the occasional lift of her heart-shaped head.

“Japan, did you say?”

Maya nods, says, “Yes.”

“Quite exotic,” she says. “Have you been before?”

“Never.”

“A friend of mine visited last year. Loved it.”

“My daughter...” she pauses. “I want to visit the Shunkoin temple in Kyoto. There’s so much I want to do and see.”

“They’re not in short supply on temples,” she says, slate-grey eyes filled with mirth glance up briefly. “How long?”

“A couple of months,” she says. “I’ve been checking out volunteering opportunities.”

“Huge demand for that these days.”

“Some places refuse to accept people with tattoos or excessive piercings.” Maya laughs, straightens herself in the chair. “Thankfully, I don’t have any tattoos or piercings.”

“A return ticket? They vary,” she says. “Depending on when you’re planning to travel. An open return is more pricey but it gives you the flexibility you’re after.”

*

Maya pulls up the street and parks the car. Leaning against the streetlamp, the shadow of a slender girl, hair hidden beneath a wool bobble hat; she smokes. Is it the same girl? Maya winds up the windows, gathers her handbag, and gets out.

She moves towards the lamp post. Towards the girl. She backs away, quickly round the corner. Maya, now on the bend of the road, searches around. No sign of where she might have gone. A noisy car passes. As she walks back towards the house, she nearly trips over a stone. Perhaps she is mistaken. It couldn’t be the same girl. From a window Mrs Hussein gestures for her to wait. She emerges from the rear, through the alleyway and unbolts the gate.

“Mustafa painted the hallway. The front door is out of bounds,” she says, pushing her hair under the loosened veil.

“You noticed a girl hanging around?”

“Girl? No, I can’t say I have.”

Maya waves a hand, as if swiping at an imaginary fly. “Never mind. It’s not important.”

“Nothing to do with the thefts you think?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Maya says. “But, maybe, Reverend John’s idea of a neighbourhood scheme isn’t such a bad idea.”

“I had a phone call this afternoon. My sister says they’ll try and come. When he’s feeling stronger.”

“That’s great news,” Maya says, touching her arm lightly. All of a sudden, a howl disrupts their conversation.

“They’re at it again,” Mrs Hussein says, closing the gate. “They’ve been at it all day. Like a pair of Rottweilers. I’ll catch you up later.”

Maya crosses the road. The front lawn needed to be cut. She would remind Noah when he was next in. Opening the front door, she lets herself in and turns on the light. She's surprised to see Hattie sitting in the dark, in the living room. Lying flat on her back on the carpeted floor, she blinks when the light switch flicks on.

"What are you doing?" She doesn't answer. Instead, she hauls herself on the sofa. "You okay?" Maya asks. "How did the swim go?"

"Fine."

"You eaten?"

"Leftover pasta," she says. "I wasn't very hungry."

"I can make you something else, if you like? Whatever you like."

"I'm alright, Mum," she says.

Maya resists the temptation to stroke her hair which still looks wet.

"Can I have Anna's sketch pad?" she says, suddenly.

"Sure," she says, "I'm sure she'd like that."

"Mum, what does 'skank' mean?"

"Where did you hear that from?"

"Something I heard at school..." Maya waits for more, but nothing is forthcoming.

"If anyone says things to you at school, you must tell me. Won't you?"

Hattie says nothing, places an arm over her forehead. The purple sweatshirt she's wearing is rolled up at the sleeves.

"I'm going to make a start on Anna's room," she says. "I'll put the sketchpad aside for you."

Maya closes the door behind her; ignores the sensation in her legs, suddenly leaden and tired.

*

Her scent has faded from the room. She used to call it her ‘little palace’. Maya kneels in the middle of the room. She scans the space. Where to start? Under the bed, there are clear storage boxes and magazines. Maya pulls out three storage boxes. Shoes and handbags. Books and folders. Manga magazines and loose art sketches. She assembles a couple of flatpack boxes and transfers the items.

Maya looks under the bed again and pulls out a lone sock, a stained bra, and a pair of slippers. She wipes off the dustballs clinging to her blouse. She upturns books in another box, and decides to pack up the chest-of-drawers next. She assembles more boxes ready to be filled. Socks, bras, undies, tights and belts — she pours them in.

When Marmite died, she told her he was in heaven. Not that she believed in heaven and hell, but it was the only thing she could find to say. Anna’s eyes, filled with tears, looked up at the clear serene skies, and took her hand. Maya slipped her tiny hands into the pair of gloves she is now holding. Maya can’t remember the last time Anna had worn them. She puts them in the box. In the bottom drawer, an assortment of scarves – winter, spring and summer scarves. Wool, velvet, linen. Thin, chunky, and textured. Maya folds them carefully. There was a time she had considered Buddhism. The idea of rebirth intrigued her. Though karma would suggest she had done something pretty awful in her past life to experience the death of her daughter. She thought the same when her diagnosis came. Believed it was a punishment. Who was punishing her she couldn’t be sure since she didn’t really believe in a Supreme Being. How could any god exist when all that surrounded her was darkness. In the corner of the drawer, a collection of nail vanish. Purple Lilac. Raspberry Wine. Gold Glitter. Maya opens the Purple Lilac, sniffs it, and begins to paint her nails. Her movements, slow and steady; the rhythmic motion calming. She paints her fingers and toes. Two coats. She blows at her fingers, until she dozes off.

*

When she wakes up, it's nearly midnight. The light from the street lamp pours through the glass. Maya gets up, and makes her way to the window, stubbing her toe on a carton. The street is silent. Maya draws the curtain, turns on the light, and opens the wardrobe. On the top shelving there's a large sketchpad. Maya, on tiptoes, reaches, and gets it down. On the bed, she flips through the pages. More of Anna's drawings and sketches. She pauses. A horned creature holds a pike and pierces a naked woman. In the background are three laughing figures. Goosebumps rise on her arms. Maya shuts the book. She doesn't know what to do with it. Maya takes clothes off hangers, folds them carefully. Black wrap top. Floral dress. Faux leather jacket. Several leggings all on one hanger. Denim jumpsuit. More black dresses. Mini-skirt, leather and denim. Khaki parker. School uniform: skirt, shirt and tie. Maya strokes the length of the tie. Runs her fingers along its silkiness. Smells it. A hint of nicotine. But Anna didn't smoke. She puts the tie aside. Corduroy skirt. Two checkered shirts, short and long-sleeved. Lace top. Another hanger draped with more leggings. Maya starts to fill another box. The soreness in her muscles increases. She presses a hand to her chest and massages hard. The sharp pain stabs again and Maya pulls out the chair and sits down. A bit of paper falls from the desk. *Usual place. Don't be late. Fergie.* Maya reads the sentences several times before placing it in her cardigan pocket.

*

When Maya stumbles out of bed the next morning, Hattie's weekend suitcase is at the bottom of the stairs. A burnt smell fills the air. In the living room, Hattie munches on buttered toast while staring out of the window.

"You ready?" Maya says.

"Pretty much," she says with her mouth full. "Dad's late."

"He'll be here," she says. "Porridge?"

"Mum, it's not a big deal," Hattie says.

“Let me know when your dad gets here.”

A quarter of an hour later, the door bell chimes. Hattie opens the door, and Ian makes his way into the kitchen.

“The traffic was absolute mayhem,” he says.

“Drink?” she says.

“Better not,” he says. “Hopefully, it’s not as manic getting back down.”

“How’s Gina getting on with the wedding preparations?”

“Fine, I think,” he says, rubbing his neck. “She’s looking forward to Hattie’s fitting.” For a moment, no-one speaks. “We’d better make a move,” he finally says. “Sure you’ll be okay?”

Maya nods. She follows him to the door, watches as he carries Hattie’s suitcase to the car. Hattie dashes upstairs. Mustafa and Ruqayya beam with smiles from their window.

“Did you want anything of Anna’s?” she asks, when Ian closes the car boot.

“You’ve started clearing her room out?”

Hattie, now outside, a rucksack on her back. Her pink headphones on her head. She’s about to get into the car.

“Not so fast, young lady,” Maya says, tugging at her jumper. Hattie allows her to wrap her in an embrace. Her hair smells of coconut. “I love you,” Maya says.

Hattie lets go of Maya and climbs into the front seat. Ian starts the car, winds down the window and says, “Maybe the bracelet I got her.”

Maya blows a kiss to Hattie and steps away from the car. Ian winds up the window. Maya watches the car drive down the road and disappear. For a long time she stands on the doorstep. It is only when a gentle rain starts that she goes inside. She moves Anna’s plants into the kitchen. Noah would replant them today.