

**The Liminality of Autofiction:
Deep and Dark Play in the Search for the
Writing Self**

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DECLARATION

I Natasha Bell declare that the work presented in this dissertation is my own and that all references have been cited accordingly.

Signed

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ABSTRACT

This is a work of practice-led research examining autofiction as a charged middle-ground with the potential to offer more expansive access to the writing self than either memoir or fiction.

The creative work comprises a metafictional and metaleptic novel about an author called Tasha writing about another author called Harry, who is herself writing about a character called Natalie. Through an examination of the relationships between these three characters, the work hopes to raise questions about the purpose, ethics, and limits of writing about the self.

The accompanying critical commentary examines the question of why writers write autofiction, positing its liminality and self-referentiality as particularly fertile grounds for the examination not just of the *self*, but specifically the *writing self*. It asks whether autofiction can be used (by both readers and writers) to access psychological and emotional truths that cannot be found in either memoirs or novels. This question has been personally pressing in terms of my own practice, but is also potentially key to understanding the current popularity and critical reception of English-language autofictions, especially by female authors.

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MAYBE THE WORLD WILL END

SO WE WON'T HAVE TO

a novel

Natasha Bell

for Sarah & Josh

A complete list of quoted material can be found
at the end of this novel.

I will tell you everything—the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth—someday soon, I promise. I'm still just figuring out what exactly the truth is, you know? Sometimes fiction is truer than facts, and the trouble is knowing which fictions are facts and which facts are fictions

—Kai Cheng Thom, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*

I truly believe that if I came completely clean I would be telling the biggest lie of all, and at heart I am not a liar, I am passionately dedicated to the truth, which, by the way, is not necessarily the same thing as fact, so loosen up!

—Lauren Slater, *Lying*

This truth is the novel's truth. The novel is a place where that which cannot be thought elsewhere can be thought and where the reality we find ourselves in, which sometimes runs counter to the reality we talk about, can be manifest in images.

—Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The End*

But there's no such thing as truth. Truth doesn't exist.

—Delphine de Vigan, *Based on a True Story*

OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!

—B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*

Like our world, fictional worlds are delicate. They're built as long labours of love, yet can be brutally and instantly levelled in moments of frustration, desperation, or following particularly harsh feedback. And, like us, fictional characters live obliviously – or perhaps just carelessly – within these fragile worlds. Each imagines theirs is a singular and singularly important existence. Each believes the ground beneath their feet is solid and that behind them lies no trail of corpses. But what if they, and we, owe our very existence to the drafts that didn't make the cut?

After three glasses of wine and an evening spent salivating over Olivia Laing at the London Review Bookshop, Tasha begins to write something new. She scribbles in a faux-Moleskine notebook on the top deck of the 172 hurtling down Old Kent Road, certain that this is the most genius project she has ever come up with. It is definitely the piece that will garner her literary acclaim and make up for the dismal sales of her debut novel. It will get her a literary prize nomination for sure, a spot on *Book of the Week*, an invite to apply for a Gladstone's residency, and a teaching spot in a Creative Writing department somewhere. It is a simple yet satisfyingly truthful project. She will write about herself, except as a character. She'll write about being an entirely average thirty-three-year-old middle-class cis white lesbian who knows she's unexceptional, yet also (like everyone else) thinks she might, deep down, actually be quite special. She'll write about trying to be a generally okay person but still having hurt people she loved. About navigating identity politics and theory and mental health and sexuality and the trauma she's still carrying around from the thing that happened to her as a teenager that everyone who loves her seems to think she should have gotten over by now. And about wanting to write about all these things even though she knows she shouldn't. She will write every day for a month, maybe two. And then she will have a book. It is so simple, she can't believe she hasn't thought of it before.

The next morning, worry arrives. What if she can't do it? Or just doesn't? This is a fair question. She knows she's lazy. She might write for a few days, a week perhaps, but then she'll almost definitely give up. Or she'll find a way to make it less simple, to tangle the words around her messy thoughts so she has another epic, seventy-thousand-word document that makes no fucking sense and she can't possibly send to her agent. Or she'll get sad and depressed and lonely and think *what's the point?* and delete it all.

Sitting on the toilet, she reads a *Guardian* article titled, ‘Why have novelists stopped making things up?’ and realises her genius autofictional idea is not just blatantly stolen from Laing (who, given her own homage to Kathy Acker and Christopher Isherwood, Tasha thinks should be fine with it), but actually derivative of almost every writer she’s ever admired. No ideas are new, she tells herself as she butters a piece of toast in the kitchen. No writers are the same, though, right? David Shields says plagiarism is organically connected to creativity. Good poets borrow; great poets steal. ‘You own every single thing that happens to you,’ Anne Lamott said in that TED Talk Tasha watched at one of the many points last week when she should have been but wasn’t writing. ‘You get to tell it.’

And I will, Tasha thinks as she heads downstairs to her desk.

What if her agent thinks it juvenile? She can’t worry about that now. The point of this project is not to over-analyse, just to write. To try to capture what it is like being Natasha Bell at this moment in time. No, not Natasha Bell, because this is a character, not her. Olivia Laing said last night that writing in the third person felt completely liberating. Tasha wants to be liberated. So she, like Laing, will assert the distance of the third person and choose another name.

Harriet Payne.

Good, that was quick, decisive. She normally hates naming characters. More than once, she’s found herself changing them at a late stage and laboriously combing through a document to see what the Find and Replace tool has missed. A therapist might connect this to Tasha’s own onomastic ambivalence. ‘I wanted to call you Richmal, after Richmal Crompton,’ her mother told her repeatedly when she was young. ‘I wish you’d called me Claire,’ Tasha started replying after falling in love with two of the four Claires in her primary school class. And at every parents’ evening she squirmed at the mix-up of surnames in her family. ‘Her father and I are together, but not married,’ her mother always hurried to explain

to the confused administrators. When Tasha herself got married she thought little of ditching her father's surname in favour of her partner's, but when she got divorced she couldn't face going through the process with the DVLA and banks all over again. She kept her ex's name but decided to at least publish under something else. Her maiden name and all other family names only led back to more patriarchy, so she made one up: Bell.

'Like Acton, Currer and Ellis?' people asked, '...or Vanessa?'

Sure, she replied, or the thing she tings on her bike to make people get out of the way. Whatever, a name is just a name; a signifier, not the signified. And today's quick, firm decision about this character's signifier feels right. Harriet Payne was once her after all. Back when she was sixteen or seventeen and inventing an alter ego. Did it start with the Gaydar Girls profile? Or did Howard encourage her to think up a false name before that? This is not what she's supposed to be doing, but if she sits back in this chair for a moment, she can conjure a scene:

Main character: Howard the Horror.

Time: Sunday morning in June.

Place: small, generic Somerset town; a study, the door closed.

Props: green chaise longue; books stacked on shelves, desk, floor; velvet curtains (drawn); standard lamp (on).

Howard leans against the arm of the chaise. "Harriet Payne," he repeats, "I like it, she sounds naughty."

Sixteen-year-old Tasha has come up with the name to aid their Bunburys. A year or so ago, Howard, her neighbour and a family friend, leant her *The Importance of Being Earnest* and nudged her attention to the fictitious invalid friend Algernon uses to avoid social engagements. He

explained that a Bunbury was an excuse, a fiction wrapped into the fabric of your life to allow you to do whatever the fuck you wanted. They have a few already. Right now, Tasha is here under the pretence of ‘working’ for Howard. She tells her parents she comes here at the weekends to ‘sort his books’ and sometimes to ‘help with his betting tips,’ though she’s no idea how to read a race card. She’s invented a fake boyfriend in school for her parents, and a fake boyfriend outside of school for her friends. Howard has more accomplished Bunburys: credit cards in different names, various scams and tax dodges. He’s a 60 year old fucking a 16 year old...he knows what he’s doing.

“Harriet Payne it is then,” Tasha says, pulling at a thread on her cut-off shorts. And Harry is born. Or perhaps only extracted – hasn’t she always been inside her? This rebellious, more adventurous version. This second self.

That is just a scene, though. And it’s one Tasha’s written elsewhere. Fashioned and moulded in an effort to make sense of herself. Meaning: there’s a high probability it’s no longer true.

This is true:

- at the age of sixteen, Tasha was seduced – groomed, she’s learnt to say – by a sixty-year-old neighbour;
- for three years she lived inside his poetry and lies;
- ever since, she’s wondered who she is.

She’s not sure she can be bothered to go into all that again here, though. People can go read her memoir if they’re interested. And, anyway, it’s half her life ago – isn’t it time she moved

on and wrote about something else? The idea here is not to wrap fiction into the fabric of life, but life into the fabric of fiction. This is her chance to reclaim Harriet.

Okay then. Here goes.

Wear loose fitting, comfortable clothing. No jeans.

You will be asked to take off your shoes.

Harry re-reads the pre-session instructions as she rides the Overground from south to north. She went three times before she left the house, but needs to pee again. She crosses her legs, worrying that her exercise leggings are too tight and these trainers make her socks smell. The man sitting opposite with his knees splayed catches her eye and Harry has the absurd thought that he knows where she's going. He smiles and she returns her attention to her phone.

Bodywork is fully clothed. Working deeply with visualisation, mindfulness and subtle body practices, we will explore pathways to dissolve numbness and help you become present with yourself.

The language reminds Harry of the cheesy yoga videos she sometimes streams from YouTube. 'The instructor's really good,' she told her mum over the phone last week, 'although I want to punch her every time she asks me to repeat a mantra like "I am alive".'

Harry's mum apparently misheard because, after a moment of silence, she asked, 'Are you okay, sweetheart?'

'Yeah. Why?'

'You just said you were a lie. Is everything okay with you and Ellen?'

Harry laughed and tried to explain, but her mum's worried silence continued. 'I'm fine, Mum,' she said eventually. 'We're fine. Everything's fine.'

She navigates now to her messages with Ellen. They *are* fine, of course they're fine. Ellen's working a stint at an event-catering company on the other side of the city. The sixteen-hour days mean it makes more sense to stay in a hotel with her boss than schlep back and forth to south-east London, so Harry hasn't seen her girlfriend in almost a week. It's not Ellen's fault that Harry feels rudderless when left to her own devices, or that her *phew, I'm exhausted* texts do little to relieve the claustrophobia of being stuck by herself. It's not her fault that when she's away Harry drinks too much coffee, checks and rechecks her emails, then books something ridiculous like this.

Harry glances up as they pull into Hoxton. Two more stops. She inspects the corner of the nail on her middle finger, poking it with her thumb to prise the edge away from the skin before bringing it to her mouth to bite. She uncrosses, then re-crosses her legs, exercising her pelvic floor to relieve the pressure in her bladder that may or may not be psychosomatic. She thinks about the answers she gave to the pre-appointment questionnaire, feeling strange about having revealed so much to the stranger she's about to meet.

What messages about sexuality and love, that you're currently aware of, came from your mother or any female caregiver?

What messages about sexuality and love, that you're currently aware of, came from your father or any male caregiver?

Do you have siblings, and if so, what messages about sexuality and love came from these relationships?

In your early life, did you experience any of the following (please tick and describe as appropriate):

- Traumas
- Separations
- Difficult early relationships
- Troubling atmosphere at school
- Troubling atmosphere at home
- Neglect
- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Unwanted sexual contact

Write five words to describe your childhood:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Write five words to describe your feelings about your body:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

When did you last have sexual relationships with another person/people?

When did you last self-pleasure?

*

The woman who opens the door is not the bendy, tie-dye-wearing, incense-burning earth mother Harry has pictured, but a small, plump, cardiganed librarian type. She says a quiet hello, adjusts her glasses and leads Harry up several flights of stairs to a neat practice room featuring large sash windows overlooking a park.

‘This session I mostly just want to make you feel comfortable,’ she says, handing Harry a cup of peppermint tea and encouraging her to sit back on the oversized couch. The first time she says the word ‘yoni’, Harry has to bite her lip to stop herself laughing, but by the woman’s third question, she finds tears rolling down her cheeks.

‘I don’t know why I’m crying,’ she says.

‘Because it’s emotional,’ the woman replies in a soft, maternal voice that makes Harry cry more. ‘We’re not often given space to consider our most sacred selves. Think of your yoni as a flower. She has the potential to be a beautiful, passionate bloom, but only if she’s nurtured. If we don’t water her or if we leave her in the shade, or if someone tries to

roughly pluck her, then she'll never have a chance to show us her colours. As women, we're taught to disconnect from our flowers, to disconnect from our sexual essence.'

Harry imagines how she'll describe this experience later, mimicking the woman's voice and gentle hand gestures and taking the piss out of her clichéd flower simile. But some part of her remains connected to the moment. She feels a heaviness in her limbs as she's asked about her sexual experiences, her understanding of her own pleasure and the things that stand in its way.

'We hold trauma here,' the woman says, placing her hands at the tops of her own fleshy thighs. 'Most people go their whole lives without addressing it.'

After an hour of talking, she asks Harry to stand up.

'I'm going to teach you how to shake. It will feel silly at first, but try to trust me. Have you ever seen a nature documentary where a lion is running after a gazelle and if the gazelle gets to safety it stops and suddenly does this?'

The woman jerks her entire body as if having a fit.

'No?' she asks when she's done. 'Well, they do. And it's to release the trauma. After that, they walk away as if nothing has happened. As humans evolved, we forgot how to shake trauma off, so now we carry it with us.'

Harry presses her lips together and glances out the window at a woman pushing a child on a swing. She tries to banish a thought about what happens when the lion catches up with the gazelle. 'What do I have to do?'

The next day, Harry stands in the middle of her bedroom in a sports bra and underwear. It's midday but she's lowered the blinds so the room is bathed in a pinkish gloom. Her housemate is home, so she's closed the door and selected a Nadine Shah album as both soundtrack and

noise cover. She's been feeling low all morning, but in that unpinpointable way. It could be a hangover from crying for most of yesterday's 90-minute session, or it could just mean her period's due. She's never been good at keeping track.

She tries to remember the woman's instructions. To relax her body and begin from the toes.

'Just small movements in the feet to start, then allow it to grow organically up through your legs to the rest of your body.'

Harry feels even sillier alone than with the woman watching her.

'That's it,' she said yesterday as Harry began to judder. 'Close your eyes, part your lips, keep going. Now you've got it, try to concentrate your energy into your pelvis, send love to your beautiful flower.'

Harry closes her eyes, trying not to cringe at the memory. She rocks back and forth from her heels to the balls of her feet, allowing her knees and arms to go slack. Soon her torso is moving, then her shoulders, and, last, her head. She shakes to the music, getting lost in the beat. She doesn't know how to send love to her flower, but she does feel something in her body. A memory. Of being off her tits in a field. Of wanting to dance. Of needing to move.

The woman has asked Harry to try doing this for ten minutes every day until their next meeting. Harry does it today until the alarm on her phone sounds, then turns the music off, gets dressed and opens the blinds.

She descends to make a cup of tea, tripping over a pair of her housemate's shoes at the bottom of the stairs and sighing at the mountain of washing up stacked on the drying rack. Her landlady is an advertising manager with a rich daddy who helped her buy a family home on the proviso that she rented out the spare rooms to lodgers. Harry and Ellen have the master and a bookish Lebanese graduate student lives beside them, while the landlady occupies the

more separate back bedroom. They all get along pretty well and there's no way Harry and Ellen could afford as much space under other circumstances. It's three years now since Harry left her marriage and the one-bed flat she and Louise shared. She and Ellen have been together for two and a half years, minus the five weeks they broke up one Christmas. Harry has just had to tick a box on a form to do with her divorce stating she has no intention of remarrying or cohabiting at this time. It's technically true, she told herself as she signed next to her name; for reasons to do with their landlady's mortgage, Ellen doesn't legally live at the property. And, anyway, what does her and Ellen's living situation have to do with Louise?

She carries her tea to the basement and wakes her computer. Before Ellen moved in, Harry worked from a corner of her bedroom. Once they were splitting the rent, Harry could afford to pay for a separate office space in the community centre attached to the church at the top of the hill. The odd little converted room featured one round church window and two walls of cheap plexi-glass partition. She strung fairy-lights and fabrics for privacy and wrote most of her second novel in there. Then one day the priest, who apparently used to be a soap-star sometime in the nineties, knocked on her door and told her that unfortunately the church needed the space back. The soap-star-priest told Harry they were expanding their outreach programme and required this room for extra admin space. Harry nodded and said she understood, but couldn't help wondering if somehow the soap-star-priest knew about that one afternoon she was reading Nina Bouraoui and got so turned on by the frustrated tension of the text that she masturbated on the beat-up leather armchair she'd rescued from the street. Did they have secret CCTV cameras? Or could it have been you-know-who watching and dobbing her in? Either way, she had to leave and now rents this basement room from her landlady for an extra £200 a month. It's a small, badly plastered box in the corner of the larger basement space with a slit-like window looking onto the patch of concrete outside the

kitchen where they keep their bikes. Neighbouring cats sometimes press their noses to the glass, trying to work out what Harry's up to at her subterranean desk.

'Not a lot,' she murmurs this morning to the tabby with the V-shaped markings on its forehead. No emails, no messages. She's delivered her second book and is out of contract.

'I'm excited to hear what you're working on next,' her agent said last time they spoke.

Me too, Harry thought. She has this room of her own and for the first time in her life feels able to answer *writer* when someone asks what she does, but she sits down here every day doing all sorts of things except write. Another book feels possible when she's going to sleep each night, or after a couple of glasses of wine, or when she's sitting on the bus without a notebook, having ideas and thinking, *yes, tomorrow I'll start on a scene or jot down a section of dialogue*. It feels much less possible in front of her computer each morning.

'This is the dream!' her agent said when she called to tell Harry about the pre-empt for her debut novel. And it was a dream. Before that she had made a living cadging jobs in coffee shops and cinemas; she'd been made supervisor, projectionist, then manager, but never seen the open sky Virginia Woolf spoke of. This was a dream Harry had barely allowed herself: money to buy time and space to write.

Time and space.

Time and space.

Time and space.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Timeandspace.

Both are running out.

She plucks an Ibuprofen from the strip in her stationery drawer and Googles:

lonely writers

Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf top her screen. Rachel Carson, she learns, said only the person who knows and is not afraid of loneliness should aspire to be a writer.

Adrienne Rich claimed the impulse to create begins – often terribly and fearfully – in a tunnel of silence. Harry glances around her basement: more coffin than tunnel, so maybe that's her problem?

Elsewhere, she reads that the choreographer Martha Graham identified a 'queer divine dissatisfaction' at the heart of all creative work and asserted that it's this 'blessed unrest' that makes creatives more alive than others. Harry copies down *queer divine dissatisfaction* and *blessed unrest*. She turns to her chair and wonders if an orgasm might make her feel more alive. She pictures the mousey yoni healer instructing her to water her flower and the desire dissolves.

She scrolls on, dismissing quotes from Hemingway and David Foster Wallace as male and uninteresting. She reads a *Writer's Digest* article titled '10 Ways to Overcome Lonely Writer Syndrome'. It tells her to meditate, listen to upbeat music and get out of the house more. She moves on to an article about millennials being the loneliest generation yet, about the structure of cities fostering a loss of communities, and online lives feeling crowded and loud while physical selves remain neglected. Harry wrinkles her nose. She spent her twenties in a small, cheap, northern town. Moving to London felt like waking up after a long sleep. She'll rave to anyone who'll listen about the necessary cultural stimulation of the capital, about living here allowing her to use her brain and imagination in ways she never did watching box sets and sitting in pubs chatting about box sets with her old group of friends.

Harry swallows another Ibuprofen and turns away from the screen. She picks up her phone and swipes through her contacts. What she's not very good at admitting is that she

misses the friends she used to talk to about those box sets. She has new friends here, but arrangements must be made a month or more in advance and, lately, when she does manage to meet up with someone, their big news is that they're about to move away. Life in this city is transient, everyone on borrowed time. Harry misses being known by people she saw often enough to grow bored of.

Or maybe she just misses Ellen.

She puts down her phone and closes her tabs one by one. At the top of the last one there's a Hilton Als quote:

Loneliness is what every writer deserves
for all their ruthless betrayals.

Harry closes this too. She already suspects she won't get any work done today. She'll sit here for a few more hours, doing nothing, feeling something. At some point she might cry, or pick up a book, or scroll through RightMove imagining lives she'll never live. A nub of guilt will fatten and congeal in the pit of her stomach at the wasted time, wasted chance, wasted potential. Her thoughts will spiral towards shame at not being a functional member of society, at not contributing, at not mattering. She'll fixate on a need to get a real job, which will prompt more hours of scrolling rather than writing, but result as always in the conclusion that she can't get a real job—that she's qualified for nothing. Nothing except this.

Harry opens a blank document and writes, *I am scared to be alone.*

You are never really alone, a character types back.

Then maybe I'm scared to be alone with you.

She looks at her bookshelves, thinking of Sylvia, Virginia and Emily and their ruthless betrayals. The work they left behind made their suffering and the suffering they inflicted acceptable. Romantic even. Mental health problems are fine, in the past tense. As are

mistakes and selfishnesses, even affairs. The present tense might work for novels (debatable), but not for life. ‘This will pass,’ we tell our depressed, divorcing, grieving, hurting friends; ‘you won’t always feel this way.’ As if that ever helped anyone while they did.

After another cup of tea and two dark chocolate digestives stolen from her housemate’s cupboard, Harry finds an email from her old MA supervisor. She wrote to him last month asking if he would support her application to do a PhD. His reply is brief.

From: f.spencer@gold.ac.uk

To: hpayne72@gmail.com

Subject: Re: PhD?

Harry,

Why do you want to do a PhD? Why not just write?

Yours,

F.

Harry hits reply and types the word *Because* but nothing more. Because she wants to write something smart? Because she wants to feel legitimate? Because she doesn’t seem to be coming up with anything alone? Because she enjoys being institutionalised? Because she’d like an NUS card again?

She discards the email and leans back in her chair. A decade ago, living with Louise in that small northern town, having cycled through NHS counsellors and meditation classes and various gifted books on mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy and mental

wellbeing, she quit her graduate job and got a part-time role at Starbucks so she could get up in the mornings and write. That cathartic vomit – her memoir, though what an absurd word for something written by someone under the age of 25 – was published by an experimental imprint. Nobody read it, but it served a purpose: she'd written something out of herself and, in the process, written herself *into* something else. Afterwards, she moved on to fiction. Or so she thought. She spent six years writing a novel about a woman leading a double life—a wife and mother delighted by her domestic bliss only because she had a secret second existence. Harry worked and reworked that narrative, convinced that she was moulding a fictional world. Until she and Louise broke up and she realised she'd written herself into that world. 'I've been happy, but that's not all I've been,' she found herself saying to Louise, then reading word-for-word in her page proofs.

For her second novel, she lurched away from herself, burnt by the realisation that she could subconsciously reveal so much through what she wrote. This time she set out to consciously invent, to write about characters far from her, failing to predict the issues of authenticity, appropriation and confidence she would encounter along the way. That book will be published soon. It's a novel that came from and is, of course, *of* her – like a severed limb, or a child – but that deep down feels much less *hers* for all its extraction.

Honesty, she now thinks, is actually a better policy. Truth. Reality. Non-fiction. She keeps reading and falling in love with books by women writers writing about what it is like to be themselves. She would like to write about what it is like to be herself. She would like to write about what it is like to love women, to pass through these endless mood cycles, to cry most Mondays and sit inside paralysed, unsure if she can bring herself to go to the shop or the swimming pool or to see a friend. To watch those around her buying houses and having children and turning into adults like their parents and their teachers and the people in stories and on TV—and to not know if she wants all that too or wants to run far, far away from it.

These things feel real and important and specific, but she worries they are not. She worries everyone feels exactly the same but has somehow figured it all out. Or nobody feels the same and in admitting such things she will open herself to more isolation.

And, anyway, there's still the issue of ruthless betrayal. She cannot write about Louise—that's not her story to tell. But how can she snip ten years out of herself? She's thought about returning to the topic of her memoir and rewriting it as a revenge fantasy, venting some of her frustrations about the disappointment of its publication along with the impossible pressure she feels to 'get over it already'. Could she put her family through all that again, though?

Harry was in Vietnam burning through her advance when everyone got excited with their hashtags. She was several weeks into a nine-week mission to travel, draft a novel and learn to be alone. She'd been swimming in the pools of posh hotels, using their gyms, eating well and feeling lonely, but finally learning something at least about that feeling. Then her timelines exploded with *#metoos* and she sat at a restaurant table thousands of miles from everyone she knew. While women around the world felt united and heard, Harry poked her chopsticks around her bun cha Hanoi and wondered what part of her experience belonged to others. Did not sharing the status mean none of it had happened? Did this moment of the world seeming to pay attention make up for all the moments it had not? She thought about the lawyers who'd spoken to her before her memoir was published. They'd made her change every name, every date and every place. They'd also asked her to get written confirmation from her parents saying they would support her if Howard sued, and left her feeling that even in the act of claiming her experiences there was still something shameful, something to be hidden.

In a fit of empowerment, Harry sent her agent an essay she thought could be a new introduction if they were able to get the rights back and republish it with the truths she'd been forced to cut restored.

Yes, great, maybe, Dana wrote back. *The thing is it's hard to get republishing deals, and there would still be legal issues.*

Harry hadn't even read the thing in years. It was probably crap. Who wouldn't cringe at something they wrote in their early twenties? She let the essay drift into the sea of her Dropbox, along with the jottings she imagines might make *New Yorker* columns or think-pieces for the *Guardian* if she ever manages to understand how one becomes a writer of those kinds of things. She suspects it has something to do with Twitter followers, knows it has something to do with book sales. She has a secret hit-list of female debut authors under the age of thirty-five who live in south-east London and have topped the *Sunday Times* best-seller list. She hates those women, especially the ones she'd most like to be friends with.

Harry knows she's doing well. Better than most. Better than the millions stuck at borders and climbing aboard unsafe boats. Better than her housemate who might be facing deportation. And better than Louise, whom she's heard had to go to HR after finding a death threat written on the back of a memo left in her in-tray at work. What would Harry do if she found a death threat? Curl up and cry.

It's almost midday now. She gets up to make a sandwich, remembering there used to be a hairdresser's near her and Louise's old flat called Curl Up and Dye. She wrote once somewhere about a fact she read, or possibly just made up: that the body regenerates every cell over a cycle of seven years. She was thinking at the time that that meant there was no portion of her left that Howard had touched, no inch of skin that had touched him. But what if one day there's no part that Louise has touched, no cell that remembers her?

Back at her desk, Harry picks up a biro and begins to doodle in the corner of the page. Would it really be so bad to tell their story? Who does a shared history belong to? She remembers Amy Liptrot writing about Andy Warhol fashioning a blanket form of anonymity in his diaries by reducing every Other in his life to the letter 'B' and allows the nib to creep towards the lines.

A + B met on a bar crawl in Melbourne, Australia – an unnatural habitat for both. Twenty-two and twenty-three and on separate but similar blow-out, round-the-world tours between graduation and adulthood, each had been conned into joining the bar crawl by more extravert Bs who'd instantly ditched them in favour of other Bs more willing to gyrate around lampposts and drink shots from body parts. As they followed the fluorescent-tank-top-wearing guide from the second to third drinking stops, they fell to the back of the crowd and discovered they'd attended the same university. They'd only been a year apart but in disciplines that rarely encountered one another, even in the sticky-floored SU bar. A had just graduated with a two-one in English, while B had scraped through 12 months earlier with a third in Graphic Design, which didn't matter because her cousin was in the process of opening a start-up and had offered her a job. They talked about where they'd been so far and where they still wanted to go, and ended up flying to Bali, then Phnom Penh, then Bangkok together. They parted briefly so A could meet up with another B in Phuket, but met again for a trek in Nepal, and by the time they returned to England they'd decided they wanted to live together.

Five years later, A proposed, B said yes, and they married each other in a tasteful, non-religious ceremony at a National Trust property surrounded by all the Bs who loved them. When B's cousin's business went into receivership, they talked about making a new start, so B applied for jobs in London and A secured a place on a Creative Writing MA. They moved into a one-bedroom flat in Forest Hill, where for a little while they were happy, then for a longer while they were less so.

After they broke up, A found a place in a house-share with three Bs off New Cross Road and B moved out to a suburb. They met regularly, hashing out what had happened and what was left between them in cafes and parks all over London, alternating holding hands and saying they would always be friends with whisper-shouting lists of the ways the other had harmed them.

One day, B didn't turn up. A waited on the edge of Clapham Common for almost an hour, sending messages and leaving voicemails. She worried all the way home and was even considering calling B's mother, whose last contact had been to tell A she was dead to her, when an email came through from B that said simply: *Enough, I can't do this anymore. Let's get on with our lives.*

Harry puts down the pen and sighs. That's not how Louise would tell it. She tears out and crumples the page, then tosses it in the bin and calls one of her oldest Bs to ask if she wants to bunk off.

*

Liza and Harry walk along the Thames, discussing Liza's confusion about whether to end her relationship or not.

'He keeps saying we'll work things out, we'll get through it, but then he does nothing, changes nothing. When I bring it up again, he asks me what he can do, what I think is wrong. We haven't had sex in months—how can he ask what's wrong?'

Harry nods and tries to give her friend comfort, struggling to think of advice that isn't influenced by projections of her own relationship history. She and Liza have known each other since secondary school, fallen out and back together too many times to count, and seen each other at their very best and worst.

'It's not that I don't love him,' Liza says, dabbing at her false eyelashes.

'I know,' Harry says. She loops their arms together, struck again by the parallels. Sometimes it sounds ridiculous, immature even, that she chose the sweaty rolls on her duvet with Ellen over nine years of loving Louise. She loves Ellen too, of course, but – as it should be – it's different. She strokes Liza's loud, floral sleeve. 'If you think about it, the love you have for him has to be extraordinary to withstand what you lack. That's why this is hard.'

Liza unhooks herself to bend down. Harry stops and watches her pick a penny from beside her GoGo boot. She straightens up, hands it to Harry, and they continue walking. They've been doing this since they were kids, though they stopped reciting the rhyme long ago. Harry grows distracted by someone by the bridge up ahead. The back of their head looks familiar. She squints, trying to place them, but they turn left and disappear behind a building.

'Shit, I almost forgot. Have you seen this?' Liza taps at her phone before handing it over. Harry clocks the *Liverpool Echo* header at the top of the screen, then the mugshot underneath. A woman with grey hair and no make-up stares directly into the lens. Harry frowns. Dye this woman's hair, wind back the clock a couple of decades and place her in a

small, terraced kitchen asking if Harry wants fish fingers or jacket potato and this is Bryn's mother.

'What the fuck?'

'I know, right?'

Bryn went to their primary school. She and Harry once did a project about snail habitats together. She got her period one break time in Year 3 and was thereafter called Carrie right the way until she left in the middle of Year 6. She used to come to Harry's house and Harry used to go to hers, especially when she and Liza fell out.

Harry touches her finger to the woman's cheek and drags the headline into view.

Fifty-three-year-old woman arrested on
suspicion of murder

'There aren't many details yet, but poor Carrie, hey?' Liza holds out her palm for her phone. Harry hands it back.

'Send me that, will you?'

They dodge left to avoid photobombing a family posing before the wheel, then get caught up in a reflective-vest-wearing school trip preparing to enter the aquarium. Harry catches the eye of one of the pre-teens, who immediately looks away. She remembers the hammock of teddies that hung from Bryn's bedroom ceiling and how jealous she felt that Bryn was allowed a Mega Drive and a TV in her room. She remembers complaining once to her parents when they were telling her off that they weren't as nice as Bryn's mum.

'Remember the balloons?' Liza asks, apparently traversing her own set of recollections.

Harry groans. 'Of course.'

Harry's dad had offered his beloved 1953 Rover Marauder – one of only thirteen ever made and which he still polishes every Saturday – to the town festival to use for a raffle. They closed the crackly leather soft-top, stuffed the interior with multi-coloured balloons and asked the townsfolk for 50p each to guess how many were there. Eighty-six, Harry remembers, her birth year. Bryn's, too. The festival coincided with Bryn's birthday. The winner was announced during the mayor's speech, then Harry and her dad popped a handful of balloons so they could squeeze into the front seats. They drove slowly and definitely not legally over to Bryn's house on the other side of town. Harry's dad let Harry reach over and honk the horn until Bryn in her party dress and a gaggle of other girls from their class came shrieking onto the pavement. Harry opened the passenger-side door and tumbled out on a latex rainbow. She was squealing along with the others, caught in their laughter and delight, when Bryn's mother cut through everything with a single word.

'No!'

Harry saw her dad freeze. She looked between him and Bryn's mum. A second ago everyone had been happy. She'd been able to give Bryn this. Now it was being taken from her.

Tears came. Bryn's mother's, followed by Bryn's, then all of the other little girls'. Harry wanted to cry too, but she held it in. She stood on the pavement, only she and her father dry-eyed. The balloons had ruined things. That's what she understood and it's what she returned to when other things soured without her comprehension. When Liza called her stubborn, or Jenny said she was stuck up, Harry thought about the balloons and how something could seem to be one thing – happiness, joy, a balloon for god's sake – but actually be quite the opposite.

Bryn's mum met someone when they were in Year 5, Harry remembers as they pass under the bridge and emerge by the long wall dotted with hearts. Just before the end of Year 6, she pulled Bryn out of school to move up north to be with him.

'Leo asked me if I thought I should talk to someone,' Liza says, eyeing the wall. 'A therapist.'

'He's gaslighting you,' Harry blurts. 'Not on purpose. I know he's a good man. But this narrative that we're the crazy ones, that us bringing up the problems means that we're the ones who have them, is really damaging.'

Liza sighs. 'It all feels so impossible. Where would I live? How would I tell him? What about the things we have planned?'

Harry remembers. Separating her and Louise's books. Closing their bank accounts. Telling everyone. Even now, knowing she managed to do all those things, they still seem impossible. 'We're stronger than we think,' she says, 'even in our weakest moments.'

A while back she went to an activism meeting for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Harry found it overwhelmingly emotional that they let her in even though her experiences were on the cusp of adulthood and technically – legally – consensual, and sat in awed silence for the entire meeting. The women around her were inspiring. 'We want people to know we are strong,' one said. 'Of course we are strong,' someone else cut in, 'you don't survive this unless you're *fucking* strong.'

'You will get through,' Harry says now. 'I promise you won't always feel like this.'

'I hope not,' Liza says.

*

At 6 o'clock, Harry meets another friend outside the Prezzo near the London Review Bookshop. Faith has a voucher entitling them to 40% off food, so over 40% more food than they would normally order, Harry tells Faith about her yoni-healing session.

'Are you serious?' Faith says, swallowing a mouthful of linguine. 'Did she touch you?'

'Not yet.'

'Obviously didn't fancy you enough.'

Harry rolls her eyes. 'How's writing?'

Faith stabs a mushroom with her fork. 'Haven't done any in ages.'

They met on their Creative Writing MA and are notionally still part of a workshop group, although lately members keep cancelling and postponing sessions.

'Any word from your agent?'

Faith shakes her head. Harry loved both of Faith's first two books, but her agent failed to sell either. She's out on submission again, this time with something she's refused to let any of them read. She has an anonymous Instagram account dedicated to documenting her rejections and jokes that, with several thousand followers, it's the most successful thing she's done.

'What about you? How's writing?'

Harry makes a face.

'I got you something.' Faith rummages in her bag, then hands over a small gift. Harry unwraps it to find a plastic pen topped with bright orange feathers and a beak. 'Have you read Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*?'

Harry shakes her head.

'Damn, I thought you would have. She has this whole thing about writing just being a case of sitting down and taking it "bird by bird".'

Harry smiles, shaking the pen's feathers. 'Thanks.'

'She also says every single thing that happens to you is yours and you get to write about it. If someone wanted you to write more warmly about them, they should have behaved better.'

Harry laughs. 'What about how writers behave?'

'Then I guess it's other people's prerogative to write about us.' Faith twirls her fork around her last strings of pasta. 'Whatever, I like it. Fuck the world, I get to write what I want.'

'So why aren't you writing?'

'Touché.'

After dinner, they walk around the corner to the bookshop. While waiting for Olivia Laing and Ali Smith, they discuss books and feminism and female socialisation. Harry glances around, wondering what the woman sitting next to them thinks of their conversation. She spots someone wearing the same shoes as her several rows in front and to the right. The chairs are angled differently over there, so she can't see more than the shoes and the bottoms of the person's jeans, which are of a similar shade to her own. Harry glances down at her feet, then back over to the stranger, who has now crossed their legs to reveal red socks. Harry too is wearing red socks.

'The most important thing anyone ever taught me was to wipe front to back,' Faith is saying.

Harry turns to her. 'What do you think the chances are of someone—' She cuts herself off, realising she's being ridiculous. Eight million people live in this city and her shoes, jeans and socks are cheap and mass produced.

'Of someone what?' Faith asks.

'Never mind.'

The talk begins with Ali Smith speaking at a hundred miles an hour. The phrase *The life in writing, the writing in life* makes Harry's thighs tense. She catches Faith's eye and they both smile. Olivia Laing talks about Kathy Acker and artistic theft and this present moment where we can so easily feel powerless. 'The political and the personal are constantly enmeshed,' she says and the woman next to Harry makes a deep, appreciative noise in her throat. Laing explains she wanted to capture 'the now' and set herself two rules to do so: not to edit or reread, and to write at least once a day.

'The novel becomes id, ego and super-ego,' Smith suggests.

Laing nods and tells them that writing in the third person felt completely liberating.

Harry grins, even through the discussions of the awful world outside this room. Smith and Laing skate through Brexit, Trump, Putin, the migrant crisis, environmental apathy, social media addiction, selfishness, intolerance, levels of good, bad and evil, resistance, identity, essentialism, and gender, yet somehow still leave the room bathed in hope.

Or so Harry thinks. As they're gathering their coats, Faith says she's interested in the book but found the event a little smug. She says she had too much of a sense of self-preservation to put up her hand and say so, but actually she thinks this idea of us good people and them bad people is really problematic. 'Who gets to decide?' she asks. 'I'm a vegan and I think all of you who use animal products are fucking awful for not understanding animals as living creatures. I know it's not a popular opinion, but I think it's just as bad as putting children in cages. So yeah, I don't think we can sit here and say that's evil without talking about the other things that are evil.'

Harry nods, uncertain. She turned vegetarian last year, but for environmental rather than animal-welfare reasons, and she likes eggs and honey too much to take it further. She looks around, trying to spot her shoe twin, but it's hard to pick out a particular pair of feet in

the crush of people hoping to get their books signed. She notes, instead, six repetitions of the *New Yorker* tote she has slung over her shoulder.

She and Faith say goodbye and leave for separate buses. Harry sits on the 172 thinking about the talk and Anne Lamott and Liza and Ellen and veganism and the strange, mousey yoni healer she cried on yesterday. ‘The now pours onto you day by day,’ Olivia Laing said. As they pull up opposite the Sainsbury’s at Elephant and Castle, Harry reaches for her notebook; and, as they make their way down the Old Kent Road, she begins to write.

Lying awake that night, Harry feels certain this is the most genius project she has ever come up with. It'll be the piece to garner her literary acclaim and make up for the dismal sales of her debut novel. For sure it'll get her a literary prize nomination, a spot on *Book of the Week*, an invite to apply for a Gladstone's residency, and a teaching spot in a Creative Writing department somewhere. It's a simple yet satisfyingly truthful project. She'll write about herself, except as a character. She'll write every day for a month, maybe two - and then she'll have a book. It's so simple, she can't believe she hasn't thought of it before!

The next morning she experiences a brief moment of doubt, but banishes it quickly. The point of this project is not to over-analyse, just to write. To try to capture what it's like being Harriet Payne at this moment in time. Although, not Harriet Payne, because this is a character.

Natalie Lucas.

Good, that was quick.

At 5 o'clock, Harry stops writing, pleased with herself for putting in a rare full day. She finds her landlady in the kitchen making an early dinner and opens a bottle of wine to share with her before she heads out. Harry drinks and thinks while her landlady talks about her day. Natalie already feels larger than life in her mind; not quite her character, not quite herself. While her landlady's in the loo she writes a list of her and Natalie's differences on her phone.

Me	Natalie
Shy	Bold
Good	Naughty
Friendly	Frank
Scared	Brave
Sorry	Not

She continues drinking after her landlady leaves. Ellen arrives home at 8.30 and asks, ‘Are you drunk?’ It’s Ellen’s one evening off in the middle of her catering stint and the first time they’ve seen each other in ten days. Harry goes down on her girlfriend, staring at the pattern on the duvet to stop her head spinning.

Ellen leaves at five and Harry wakes alone, feeling sick. She has nothing in her diary today except to write. *I love you*, she types into WhatsApp, then deletes because it’s the same as the last three messages she’s sent. She pulls up the article Liza forwarded yesterday and reads that Bryn’s mother – Shirley North – was arrested last week after her husband of 22 years – Peter North – was found dead in his cubicle at work. What was first suspected to be a heart attack was, upon post-mortem, discovered to have been the result of prolonged ingestion of ethylene glycol, the primary ingredient in antifreeze. Upon her arrest, Shirley North claimed that Peter North had been subjecting both her and her daughter to decades of physical and emotional abuse. ‘I do not regret what I have done,’ she told the officers, ‘not for a single minute.’ Her trial is set for next month.

*

In a fit of googling once she's finally forced herself down to the basement, Harry stumbles upon a forum for long-distance walking and loses an hour thinking about the simplicity of putting one foot in front of another. She wonders if this is something she can make Natalie do and opens another tab to search for *literary references to walking*. A little while later her housemate messages to say it's meant to be one of the hottest days of the year, does she want to go swimming?

Harry's never been to the Ladies' Pond before and is appalled by how long it takes them to get there and appalled by the people filling every inch of grass on a weekday afternoon. Do they not have jobs? Jumping in the green waters, however, feels divine. She resurfaces and thrashes through front crawl until the shock of the cold subsides. Flipping onto her back, she stares up at the cloudless sky. The combination of cool water and hot sun makes her skin tingle. She breathes deeply and propels herself with her feet. When an angry quack warns her she's getting too close, she flips again and follows a woman with a tortoiseshell hairclip in lazy breaststroke laps. Harry dips and raises her head, thinking she should do this more often. She remembers reading somewhere that Deborah Levy swims every day. And doesn't Rachel Cusk write about swimming? And Amy Liptrot, and Joan Didion, and Constance Debré, and surely so many others. The woman writer as a fish, she thinks dreamily, before realising all the writers she's thought of are white. She tries to think of an exception, but can't. Does that reflect the narrowness of her reading or wider inequalities and barriers? Maybe both, but that's no excuse. She breaks time with the swimmer in front and dives beneath the murky surface, allowing her whole body to be enveloped by the water. If only she lived closer. The pool in Lewisham's fine, but she has to take a bus and it's usually full of kids, so there are always reasons not to go. And how does anyone write about swimming, in fact, without also

writing about the men (and, yes, it is always men) that pause between each length and wait until you've caught up to kick off, forcing you into their stop-start rhythm, fucking up the meditation of your counting and replacing your back-of-head-thinking-time with thoughts about their tiny penises and how much you want them to drop off? Or about the flies in the showers and the icky feeling you get when you forget your flip flops? Since she was child, Harry's dreamed of a house with water. A pool, a lake, a river, the sea—any water will do. Or maybe, given this is a dream-house after all, it should have everything. A watery house on a watery island with no flies and no tiny penises in sight. She resurfaces and slips back into a rhythmic stroke. At least this place is free of one of those things.

Back on the grass, Harry peels off her swimsuit and sits in her knickers, the pair with two moth holes, pretending to be the type of woman who is casual about sitting around with her tits out. She picks up the slim volume that, until this morning, had sat on her shelf untouched and unthought-of since someone gave a presentation on it during the first term of her MA. She traces her fingers over the scuffed white cover. In the centre is a small sepia photograph of a child staring into an orb behind rain-speckled glass. Above the image, in tiny cursive lettering, as if whispering a secret rather than declaring authorship, floats a name: Anne Carson. Harry pulled this off the shelf after her Google search earlier, but now tries to imagine it fell more poetically into her eyeline. A scene like this, perhaps:

Natalie, thirty-three, drags herself out of the house on a Tuesday morning. She needs soya milk, and bread, and – why not? – chocolate and a bottle of wine. She waits for a woman with a pushchair to manoeuvre around the tight right angles of the snicket between Sainsbury's and T.K. Maxx, and murmurs a guilty 'Sorry' to the man asking for change by the fence. She glances around the

empty carpark surrounding the supermarket she's been using for three years now. Maybe because 156 weeks of anywhere between two and six visits per week, each lasting between 12 and 35 minutes, means that more than 14,000 minutes, 244 hours or ten entire days of her life so far have already been spent inside the orange-accented box before her, she stops. She turns around and walks back past the man asking for change, murmuring another 'Sorry,' heading this time for the main road. Across the traffic lights, past the bus stop and along the pavement beneath the squiggly university art installation, she makes her way to the corner opposite the pub, where there's a small, independent bookshop. Words will always sustain her better than food, right?

As she turns to enter, the door opens and she collides with someone on the way out.

'Shit, sorry,' the woman says, crouching to gather her dropped *New Yorker* tote and its scattered contents.

'My fault,' Natalie says. The woman looks up and Natalie recognises her. She's a playwright, she thinks, but can't remember her name.

'Did you used to go here?' the playwright says, squinting as she straightens up. 'I've seen you at readings, haven't I?'

Natalie nods. 'I did the MA.'

'Oh right, yeah.'

'What about you?'

‘PhD,’ the woman says with a grimace. ‘Still going!’ She holds up the books she’s just gathered from the pavement as if they might prove something about her studies. Natalie reads the title of the one on top.

‘Any good?’

‘Oh my god, it’s beautiful,’ the playwright says with a smile. Natalie takes in her peroxide pixie cut, thick eye-liner flicks and silver lip stud. This is the first exchange she’s had with another human all day. She’d like to keep her talking, ask her for coffee.

The playwright shoves the books back in her bag and checks her watch. ‘Shit, I’m gonna be late. Nice to see you, maybe I’ll catch you around.’

Natalie continues into the bookshop, where she heads for the letter C.

Harry frowns. Natalie is meant to be braver than her, more confident. She wouldn’t say sorry to the homeless guy and, if she wanted to have coffee with the playwright, she’d have just come out and asked her. Also, why is the playwright buying a book she’s already read? For a gift, perhaps, but then why hold it up when talking about her PhD? Christ, the entire scene is pointless because in the time it would have taken Harry to scan over Campbell, Cane and Carroll to get to Carson, Natalie would have forgotten all about a stupid book and instead lured the playwright into the coffee shop bathrooms for a quick mutual fingerbang.

Harry glances at two women eating strawberries. Is that what she wants? To fuck some stranger she’s only ever said hello to a couple of times and hasn’t seen in more than a year?

No. She's playing with a character, that's all. Trying to invent. This is what creativity is. Trial and error, experiment and edit.

Whatever. However it arrived in Harry's hands, she's here now lying in the grass in her underpants reading Anne Carson's *Plainwater* while her housemate gets up for another dip. At first she finds the references to classicism impenetrable and the leaps in subject matter confusing, but then she arrives at 'Part V: The Anthropology of Water' and her pond-soaked soul is transported.

How can you see your life unless you leave it? the pious man who first told Carson about the pilgrimage to Compostela asked. Harry copies this question into her notebook, its truth trickling towards her core. The initial results of her Google search threw up Woolf suggesting a stroll to the Strand on a winter's evening and Henry David Thoreau calling sauntering a 'noble art.' Harry hasn't yet pinpointed her question, but neither strolling nor sauntering feel like the answer. *It is an open secret among pilgrims, she reads now, that you become addicted to the horizon.*

Harry remembers being 14 (or was it 15?) one summer (or Easter?) holidays. She and Liza were kicking around, bored, until they started walking towards the horizon. They walked across the fields from Liza's village to the nearest proper town, understanding for the first time that their bodies – their *feet* – could take them somewhere. A few days later, Liza came to Harry's and they took the underpass beneath the A303, trying vaguely to follow the footpath signs to King Alfred's Tower, but mostly just wanting to get away. Harry jumped over a gate and stumbled forwards, feeling a cold squidginess beneath her toes. She turned to see her left trainer stuck where it had landed, then caught the horror in Liza's eyes at the prospect of having to turn around. Harry slid her mud-slicked sock back into the shoe and they carried on. A week later, however, their adventures came to an end with the outbreak of

foot and mouth disease. Farmers hastily erected 'Keep Out' signs and the small slice of freedom they'd found within their impossibly small worlds was lost.

Pilgrims were people who figured things out as they walked.

Harry shields her phone with her palm to search for then skim an article about the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. She wonders about sending Natalie on a pilgrimage. Perhaps she could use that as an excuse to walk one herself as research. She's not religious, but hasn't she always been drawn to the horizon?

'I bet all the lifeguards here are gay,' Harry's housemate says, sprinkling her spine with water as she drops back down beside her. 'I bet everyone here is queer.'

'Wishful thinking,' Harry says, turning down the corner to mark her page. She looks up and surveys the bodies draped on towels around them. There is something exciting about being here. A safety, certainly. She feels relaxed and calm in a way she didn't passing the men and boys with their tops off on the Heath. But a charge, too—an understanding that, like being in the water itself, this is temporary, a holiday. At some point they will each have to dry off, put their clothes back on and face the park, pavements, tubes, houses, offices, pubs, clubs and restaurants that belong only marginally to them. Harry's mind flits to Bryn and her mother and she rests her head on her arms. A member of her writing group accused her of misandry last month. It's not entirely true, at least not in the 70s bra-burning way this person meant, but she'd felt anger at the accusation. She acknowledges there are some perfectly nice men, even of the cis-white variety. However, it's hard to deny that her days feel safer and more pleasant when populated by women.

She notices one now, two towels away, with a t-shirt draped over her head. She too is lying only in her underpants and she too seems to have two moth holes on her left butt cheek. Harry smiles and reaches for her book, returning to the road with Carson and her companion.

On the road you can think forward, you can think back, you can make a list to remember to tell those at home.

Harry presses her toes into the soft grass beyond her towel. This is not the first time she's contemplated pilgrimage. On their honeymoon, she and Louise walked along the cliff paths from Lyme Regis and said that for their anniversaries each year they'd walk a different section of the coast. They sat on the pebbles eating fish and chips from paper wrappers and talked about tracking their progress on a map. They imagined growing old together and having to fill in all the ins and outs up in Scotland. They imagined finding fame and success, and their students and admirers joining them on their walks.

Harry glances back at the page. *It is already late when you wake up inside a question.* The following year they walked from Scarborough to Sandsend, the year after that Berwick-upon-Tweed into Scotland, the year after that Whitstable to Ramsgate. For their fourth and final anniversary, they stayed overnight and walked for two days between Deal and Hythe. Somewhere on the cliffs between Dover and Folkestone, Harry had the idea for her second novel. But just two months after that last anniversary walk, she stood alone on a moor in West Yorkshire. She'd just turned thirty, just got a book deal, and just felt the itch to escape again. She'd left Louise in their one-bedroom flat and made her way to a secluded cottage for a solo 'writing retreat', packing a laptop, a notebook and a vibrator. Several miles from the cottage, the wind whipped her tears horizontally across her cheeks as she wondered how to walk back, how to wrangle her narrative, and how to tell Louise she was leaving.

The only rule of travel, Carson advises now, is, Don't come back the way you went. Come a new way.

*

Harry says goodbye to her housemate at the station and heads to Covent Garden. The man who serves her at Cotswold Outdoors is exactly the sort of person you'd expect to work in a Cotswold Outdoors: a twenty-something climber type whose attention she has to wait for. He eventually leads her indifferently towards a wall of bags. 'You're small, so you'll want one of these,' he says, gesturing to the bottom row.

Harry unhooks one to feel its weight. 'What's this for?' she asks, fingering a yellow flower dangling from one of the straps as he helps her try it on.

The man shrugs. 'Free keyring.' He pulls the buckle tight around her waist. As he stands back to observe her posture, she glances again at the wall, noticing the keyring repeated on each of the smaller and more feminine bags, but none of the serious khaki affairs lining the top row.

Satisfied, the man suggests they move on to boots. 'I'd advise these or these,' he says, pointing at two near identical pairs.

'Do you have anything that's not pink or purple?' Harry asks, glancing at the more muted tones of the men's section.

The man scowls. 'There's something wrong if you're choosing your boots by colour.'

Harry glares at him, thinking about how at ease she felt at the ponds and re-experiencing all the hatred she's ever felt towards stupid men. Then Natalie pops into her head. 'Fuck you,' she says and purchases the pair with the purple piping.

At home, she hides both bag and boots beneath the bed and descends to watch *Love Island* with her housemate in the living room. During the ad break, Harry argues with her landlady about the show.

‘Stories have to have narrative,’ the landlady says, ‘they need drama or something fantastical, they need to be set in the past or the future. If I wanted to watch real life, I’d go down the pub.’

Harry brings up Knausgaard and Ferrante. She says she looks to stories to learn about life. She says she’s interested in people. She’s not sure if she believes this, but she dislikes the sneer in her landlady’s tone. The conversation upsets her. The show is ridiculous, but she’s grown addicted. Her thoughts flit once more to Natalie, who surely would have had a better answer. Natalie would have stood her ground and argued for Reality TV’s socio-cultural importance in this increasingly document-hungry time. If her landlady had raised the issue of the blatant augmentation of these on-screen lives, Natalie would have retorted that that in itself could be interpreted as a faithful representation of our own everyday augmentation of experience and identity. She’d have brought up David Shields and told her landlady it’s actually fiction that’s dead; reality’s in. Why invent when you can enhance? Why create when you can craft?

‘Imagine if they made a queer version,’ her housemate says as the programme resumes.

The night Ellen returns, Harry dreams about seeing her kiss someone else. She nudges her awake to press the bruise of what happened that Christmas when they broke up.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Ellen says sleepily. She wraps her arms around Harry and nuzzles her face into the back of her neck. ‘I love you.’

Harry studies the tattoo on Ellen’s wrist, listening as her breaths grow deeper and more even. Harry’s always wanted a tattoo, but never known what to get. Like cheese, she’s found both her indecision and the pressure to find meaning grow more potent with age. Ellen got hers at uni, which is an acceptably average story; walking into a tattoo parlour for the first time on a random Wednesday as you approach middle age is different. Ellen’s is a small but artfully drawn orange slice—a joke, of course, because she’s ginger, but unusual and pretty enough to have aged almost into profundity. People buy her things with oranges on because of it: tea towels, mugs, citrusy shower gel, the pair of embroidered cushions they throw off the bed each night. Harry envies the simplicity of this connection between selfhood and symbol. Like not being able to choose a favourite song or band or movie, she worries never having found her own symbol makes her bland, generic, uninteresting.

Ellen’s breathing has steadied, but an inhale suddenly catches in her throat and Harry feels her stiffen. A moment passes before Ellen exhales and everything softens again. Asleep still, she lets out a moan and rolls onto her front. Harry lies alone now in the dark and remembers the time Ellen went to Berlin for a week and sent only two texts. Their housemate advised Harry to look up her love languages. Physical affection and quality time together. ‘No wonder you go crazy when you’re apart,’ the housemate said. Harry tries to send telepathic messages to Ellen while she sleeps. *Please roll back and lie on top of me.* She imagines being pressed down into the mattress, into the earth, into herself. She wants Ellen to

wake up and make love to her. She wants Ellen to talk and for the siren call of her words to guide her somewhere new.

‘Are you still thinking about the dream?’ Ellen asks when she brings Harry a cup of tea in the morning. She’s wearing a blue t-shirt and a pair of Batman boxer shorts.

Harry nods.

Ellen sets the mugs on the bedside table and searches for Harry’s skin beneath the covers. ‘I’m sorry I did that in your dream,’ she says as her face disappears behind a curtain of hair. ‘That’s not real, though. This is.’

Harry submits to Ellen’s touch but hates herself for the way she feels. Natalie would be what Ellen needs right now: confident, secure. Natalie would take charge. She’d pin Ellen to the sheets and leave her weak at the knees. Harry’s gaze drifts to the half-finished models on the shelf above the dresser as Ellen kisses her thighs. Ellen has a studio in East London, but materials always seem to follow her home. Riffing on the idea of the traditional doll’s house, Ellen’s practice involves creating intricate to-scale models of celebrities’ mega mansions, complete with anatomically correct celebrity dolls to put in them. As her most positive reviews have noted, by uniting the contemporary with the kitsch, the finished works allow one to purchase an affordable slice of luxury real estate while also inviting contemplation of the fishbowl flattening of the lives trapped inside. What Harry enjoys is manipulating the dolls. Last time she visited Ellen’s studio she left Angelina Jolie scissoring Kristen Stewart in Kylie Jenner’s hot-tub and Harry Styles jerking off on Taylor Swift’s roof terrace. She bucks her pelvis as Ellen peels down her underwear and tries to imagine they’re inside one of Ellen’s houses, a giant’s eye watching through the sash window. When Ellen moves Harry’s ankles to her shoulders to get a better angle with the strap on, Harry feels it’s

the giant's fat fingers twisting them into position. They both moan and for a moment they are together, really together: lips and hands and thighs and selves entwined. Harry wishes this moment could be suspended, that they could be glued inside this room inside the house inside a gallery inside this feeling for all to see. But already she feels herself floating out of the tableaux. She bites Ellen's shoulder and tries to stay present, remembering her yoni healer and her stupid flower analogy and the feeling of the cool, slimy water as she jumped into the ponds last week. It's almost enough; she grabs for Ellen's flesh, chasing the feeling.

'Did you come?' Ellen asks, unravelling herself from both Harry and the harness.

Harry falls back against the pillows, feeling both weightless and grounded. 'Sort of.' Ellen frowns and Harry adds, 'It was nice. Thank you.' She pictures herself on the outside now, looking inside a miniature window to see Ellen wiping the dildo and checking the time.

'We should get up.'

'Can I tell you something weird?' Harry says, the edges of the room still marshmallow soft. 'When I was little, I used to be able to float.'

Ellen reaches for her towel.

'Like flying, but without control. I'd just float up against the wall until I bumped into the ceiling.'

'Then what?'

'Then nothing, I'd just be up by the ceiling bobbing around. Sometimes I'd float towards a door and up the stairs. I don't remember how I got down.'

Ellen laughs. 'Okay then.'

'Don't laugh at me. I really remember this.'

'How old were you?'

'That's the thing, I remember it happening in the house we moved to just after I started secondary school, so I must have been pretty old. Eleven, twelve maybe.'

‘You mean like a recurring dream?’

‘I guess.’

After Ellen goes to work, Harry descends to her study, still thinking about floating. She told Howard and his wife about it once. One afternoon while playing cards and listening to music in their kitchen. ‘That’s amazing,’ Anabelle said. ‘So pure.’ Harry glanced at Howard, unsure what she meant. ‘What is now proved was once only imagined.’ Harry must have still looked blank because he added, ‘William Blake. Our brains and bodies are capable of much more than we know, but we’re taught to shut ourselves down to these things. It’s only as children that we experience the fullness of the world. As soon as we learn to question, all magic is lost.’

‘So you believe me?’ she asked.

‘Of course.’

She turns on her computer and sifts through her emails. There’s one from her agent asking if she wants to meet next week or the one after to discuss new ideas. *We should pitch to Pru as soon as possible to capitalise on any momentum from book 2.* Another from her publicist asking about her availability for press and commissions over the coming months. Two asking for manuscript assessments. Harry flags her agent’s and publicist’s emails to reply to later, skims the attached synopses and accepts both assessment jobs, then navigates to her Dropbox. She opens Natalie.docx and stares at her notes. She wants to capture something true but is already beginning to feel constrained by her sentences. She closes her eyes and tries to remember that moment of softness after sex, the opening of possibility before life rushed back in. She would like to write about that, to portray the gaps between feeling and living, believing and questioning, writing and being.

The cursor blinks, daring her to do so. She has forgotten how to turn abstractions into story. She has a character, but what is she supposed to do with her? Move her around like one of Ellen's dolls, walk her through scenes? Isn't that just false and mechanical?

She minimises her document and clicks back to her emails. Since signing up with the manuscript assessment company, she's read dozens of works in progress and offered advice to their writers on teasing out subplots, rethinking point of view structures, balancing front- and back-stories, highlighting turning points, maintaining pace, strengthening dialogue, deepening characterisation and avoiding repetition. She's learnt to feel tender towards even the messiest of manuscripts and can't help imagining the people on the other ends of these email chains sitting at their keyboards day after day, month after month, year after year. What a fraud she is pretending to know more than them, pretending to be different.

She opens one of the new ones and begins to read. The synopsis promised a Crime/Thriller about a couple who spend a weekend in a converted lighthouse and think they witness a murder on the cliff-edge but can't be sure because by the time the light circles back round nothing and nobody is to be seen. The opening page sees them arguing over directions in the car, their dialogue laced with the subtext of much deeper conflicts. '*Intriguing...*' Harry writes in a comment box before returning to her own document. She sets Natalie on a clifftop, walking towards a lighthouse. Half-way there, she realises how phallic that is and returns her to London, where at least the phalluses are too busy competing for each other's attention to bother with her. She remembers her promise to write every day and lays her head on the desk.

They take a train to Cornwall, where Ellen's sisters and their families have rented a holiday cottage. 'When did you get that bag?' Ellen asked as Harry pulled her new backpack from beneath the bed. 'That advance isn't going to last forever, you know.' Chastened, Harry left the boots where they were, wondering if she should return them to the annoying man in the shop.

The last to arrive, they're assigned the room with the bunkbeds. 'That's fine,' Ellen says with a glint in her eye, 'Harry can just float up to the top one, can't you babe?'

'Huh?' asks Ellen's middle sister and Ellen explains.

'It's just a stupid memory,' Harry says, embarrassed.

'Was it like in *Mary Poppins*?' Ellen's niece asks, balancing on one leg in the doorway.

After some questioning of the five year old, Ellen's sister taps at her phone then turns the screen so they can all see a YouTube clip titled *I Love To Laugh*. Harry's cheeks redden as she watches Uncle Albert, followed by Bert, the children and finally Mary too float on laughter up to the ceiling.

'Oh my god,' Ellen says, in almost as deep hysterics as the characters, 'Is that where you got it from?'

'Don't be mean,' her sister chides. 'You once spent a full year trying to get us to call you Kevin McCallister you were that obsessed with *Home Alone*.'

Ellen wraps her arms around Harry and kisses her cheek. 'She knows I'm teasing. I think it's cute.'

*

In the morning, they're woken by a toddler asking if they're ready to watch *Paw Patrol*. Several rounds of tears and a short drive later, the families assemble themselves on a windy beach. Harry sets about building a multi-story sandcastle surrounded by a wall of stones. Ellen admires the architecture but the sisters tell her to remove the stones in case the children hurt themselves. When it rains, all six adults and four kids shelter in a pop-up, three-sided sun-tent, eating pasties from The Chough Bakery, which Harry is told is an essential part of the holiday. Ellen's eldest sister is heavily pregnant with her third child and they shuffle carefully around her belly, the air in the tent growing hot and thick. She's always wanted three, she tells Harry – 'Just like us.' She smiles at Ellen and their other sister as the rain fills Harry's moat.

This holiday, Harry's gathered, is also an attempted facsimile. 'I suggested we try somewhere new this year,' one of the husbands told them when he picked them up from the station, 'but it has to be Mother Ivey's apparently. Just like when you were all little.'

Harry shakes her head as the three year old offers her the remains of a half-eaten bourbon. The rain stops and she and Ellen climb the dunes. They emerge into a neatly rowed holiday park. Ellen's grandmother kept a static caravan here, Harry learns; and over there beyond the swings is where Ellen once found a five-pound note beneath a bush. 'My dad forced me to share it,' she says, still sounding outraged. They descend some steps into the next cove and she tells Harry she once did a poo here, standing up in her Donald Duck swimming costume. 'I remember the feeling of it hanging between the fabric and my skin.'

Harry walks ahead for a bit. When she turns back, Ellen runs towards her across the sand, her hair whipped to one side, revealing the new shaved patch above her right ear. Harry has one too, though at the back. A few weeks ago, still figuring out and hoping to solidify their queer identities, they walked into a gender-neutral barber shop and got undercuts. The

short hairs feel soft to the touch. ‘Like a little mouse,’ Ellen says when she strokes the back of Harry’s head.

Ellen smiles and kisses Harry, who feels melancholy and more so for feeling like this on holiday. Stuck on a Mobius strip of her own bad mood, she watches Ellen dip her fingers in the water to test the temperature. She’s jealous of her cohesion, of the seeming straight line that leads from her childhood to here. It’s a fiction, maybe, but one Harry wants. She wonders if she can invent this for Natalie, trace her identity from family holidays through adolescence and right into the present without making her fracture. It’s more than a year since Harry’s been to visit her own parents. Howard no longer lives next door to them, and, as her mother points out, Harry has more years of memories that don’t involve him than do, but every time she returns her childhood town – and thus her childhood itself – feels haunted.

Ellen shakes the water off her fingers and takes Harry’s hand. ‘I love you,’ she says, pulling her back.

One of the husbands has booked a restaurant for an early dinner. Harry sits between the seven year old and the two year old.

‘Ha ha, you have a willy!’ the seven year old says as they’re handed menus.

‘Why’s that funny?’

‘Because only boys have willies.’

‘Some girls have willies.’

He’s quiet for a moment. ‘Do they have boobies too?’

‘Sometimes.’

Ellen shoots Harry a look from the other side of the table, followed by an apologetic grimace. Harry understands to drop it. She drains the rest of her wine and wonders if they’ll

order another bottle. As the adults eat their main courses and the children push bits of food around their plates, the same child asks how she comes up with ideas for her stories.

‘You should go to a prison and ask the police officers to give you stories,’ he says.

Harry smiles. ‘I could, or maybe I could just write stories about you.’

‘EN-OH spells NO!’ he shouts, eliciting laughter around the table. Buoyed by the attention, he asks, ‘Why don’t you write a story about Ellen and make her underwear fall down?’

His five-year-old brother gives a Muttley-like snigger and they start whispering together about underwear while the two year old on Harry’s other side falls asleep in his plate.

‘Harry was asking me how you and Josh met, Sarah,’ Ellen says to her middle sister.

‘We were backpacking,’ the sister says, ‘on the other side of the world, then we found out we’d gone to the same university and knew a bunch of the same people.’

‘I know,’ Ellen says. ‘I said that and then I was like, why? And Harry said she was thinking of using it for a character.’

Harry tries to catch Ellen’s eye, annoyed that she’s repeated this, but the sister and her husband smile. ‘You can only use our story if you dedicate a book to us,’ the sister says.

‘It can be our anniversary present,’ the husband chips in.

The next day the boys come barging into Harry and Ellen’s room. ‘Bald, bald, bald!’ they chant when Harry shows them her undercut.

Ellen climbs down from the top bunk and tries to get away to make cups of tea, but one of them grabs her foot and the other her leg, dragging down her pyjama bottoms.

‘Bum, bum, bum!’ They squeal in delight as she pulls them back up.

*

‘What are you working on at the moment?’ the pregnant sister asks as Harry enters the kitchen. She’s buttering an entire loaf of sliced bread for sandwiches.

‘Uh, it’s early days, I don’t really kn—’

‘Muuuuuuuuuum!’ shouts a child from the adjoining living room. ‘He stole Everest!’

‘Excuse me,’ the sister says and manoeuvres herself around the counters towards the door. ‘You’re going to be at Ellen’s exhibition, right?’ she asks over her shoulder. ‘It’ll be nice to see you aga—’ Her words are swallowed by the shouts of her daughter and nephew. ‘Come on, Oliver, give it back. You’re too old for cuddly toys, aren’t you?’

Harry takes over making the sandwiches, thinking of her friends in the north, whom she also hasn’t visited in a long time. She misses them, but isn’t convinced visiting will fix that. They were scientists and writers and artists, but those identities have been punctured by the relentless call and response of small children. Perhaps from the inside, however, they merely feel punctuated.

‘Thank you,’ Ellen says, touching Harry on the shoulder and nodding to the tower of cheese and cucumber triangles she’s erected. Ellen fills the kettle and lines up six mugs along the counter. While waiting for the water to boil, she fills the sink and begins to rinse the breakfast things. The easiest thing in family situations is to find a job, make themselves useful. Harry likes, perhaps even loves, these large and small people who share Ellen’s blood, but it’s sometimes hard to remember who she and Ellen are in these spaces.

‘Girls, are you almost ready to go?’ Ellen’s other sister asks from the doorway. ‘One of you’s going to have to sit between the car seats, I’m afraid.’ She turns away from them to shout to the rest of the house, ‘I’m about to take the girls! Who wants to come?’

Harry has to leave early to get back in time to teach. She gathers her things and folds herself into the middle backseat. 'Are you in my family?' the boy on her left asks as they wind round the narrow country lanes.

Ellen kisses Harry at the train station. 'You did great.'

Before she met her students, Harry wondered what sort of adults would sign up to try out writing for the first time at 9.30 on Monday mornings. At the first class, she discovered: all sorts. Today's class is dedicated to plot, which Harry has planned to look at from three different angles. She ticks off her students on the electronic register as they file in.

The last to arrive stops in the doorway. 'I swear I just saw someone wearing that exact outfit in the lift.'

Harry glances down at her 'teacher look' (argyle sweater, black jeans, brown boots). Embarrassed, she shrugs and clicks through to her first slide. 'Let's get started.'

She begins by suggesting an A-to-B approach, where plot can be seen as a roadmap between start point and destination and the only rule really is that something must change along the way. What and by how much is up for debate.

The second approach, the one Harry likes best, is Kurt Vonnegut's 'Shape of Stories'. She shows her students a YouTube video of him explaining it and asks them to get into pairs to plot the shape of a story they both know. They do 'Three Little Pigs', *Moana*, *Forest Gump* and *Titanic*. While they work, Harry hunts in her bag for a pen, finding only the feathered monstrosity Faith gave her. She uses it to draw her own curves, one on top of another, pretending she has the authority to decide Natalie's fate.

Finally, they look at Freytag's Pyramid, which Harry turns into a consequences-like game, getting them to write a sentence each for exposition, inciting incident, rising action, crisis, climax and resolution. As they move around the room to swap papers, she tries the activity herself.

Natalie is walking. (Where? Why?)

She meets someone interesting. (Who?)

They betray her. (How?)

She discovers the betrayal and realises she must take action. (What?)

They clash. (How?)

Natalie prevails and returns to find... (?)

Harry stares at the googly-eyed bird atop her pen. What does Natalie find? What does anyone find in these heroic narratives? Everything the same but wholly different. What if Natalie is not a hero, though? What if she refuses a traditional Western character arc? What if she fails to change?

As Harry's students giggle reading out their surrealist collaborations, the familiar parasite of imposter syndrome crawls beneath Harry's skin. What does she know about plot and story and teaching these IT technicians, costume designers and bored retirees about writing when she's no idea how to construct an inciting incident or if she'll ever figure her way into a five-act structure? And are these formulas really the secret to a satisfying novel? Isn't plot also about rhythm, consequence and invisible design? You want to read something on one page and discover later that it was placed there deliberately, but also be able to believe that the whole thing was effortless. You need to know an author has worked and sweated to leave you a perfect trail of breadcrumbs, while also being able to imagine the words poured magically from their fingertips in a single creative gush and that this version you're reading is the only way this story could and *should* ever have existed. If either the labour or the arbitrariness of a novel was displayed within its pages, no one would be capable of enjoying it.

'Okay, homework,' Harry says with two minutes until the end of class. 'Marcia, can you give me an object?'

The IT technician pauses in the middle of gathering her things. ‘A matchbox?’

‘Great,’ Harry says, writing it on the board. ‘Ramesh, name a place?’

‘Scotland,’ replies the costume designer, slipping his long arms into a turquoise jacket.

‘And, Allison, now I need a verb.’

‘Cycling,’ says the plump older woman who asked Harry while making small talk before last week’s class whether she wanted to ‘be a writer’ when she’s older.

‘Great,’ Harry says, giving one last push of her teacher persona. ‘Your challenge is to write a story containing those three things. Sometimes random limitations prove the best inspiration. Next week we’ll be looking at Character.’

Marcia approaches as she’s packing up. ‘I’m still a bit confused about last week’s topic, point of view. Sorry if this is a dumb question, but if I’m using third person, then how is there still a narrator?’

‘Nothing’s dumb,’ Harry says, putting on her jacket. ‘But there’s always someone talking, right? If I say “Marcia lingered at the end of class,” then I’m narrating. In a novel, we maybe don’t know who the narrator is in terms of them being an actual person or character within the story, but they still exist as a voice and an identity. We still have to ask who they are and how much they know.’

‘And if it’s close third, then they know everything in one character’s head, but they’re not actually that character, right?’

‘Correct.’

Two delicate wrinkles appear on Marcia’s forehead. ‘How does that make sense?’

Harry laughs and reaches for the door. ‘I don’t know really, maybe it doesn’t.’

*

Arriving home, Harry finds her housemate arguing with their landlady. The housemate runs up the stairs in tears while the landlady stalks into the garden to chain-smoke. Harry tries to comfort the crier and stay out of the way of the smoker. She retreats to her basement and scrolls through RightMove, looking at properties she and Ellen can't afford. Ellen messages a picture of her and her family on the beach on their last afternoon, everyone smiling except the two year old having a tantrum. Harry sends a couple of emojis in reply, followed by *I wish I was still there*. She picks up her notebook and finds Natalie walking alone along the Thames. Can she really make her character more cohesive than herself? What if doing so turns Natalie into someone totally different? The problem with grounding things in reality, she realises, is that it's too easy to get hung up on the specific interconnections of things. If you change this, then what about that? But life has neither the logic nor the neatness narrative demands. We don't all begin at one extreme of Vonnegut's axis and magically get to finish at the other. Most of life is just an ugly scribble along the middle line. If this project is to render the complex, gnarly contradictions of experience into a simple, singular narrative, Harry realises she'll need to *impose* a shape.

At her second yoni healing session, the mousey librarian woman asks if Harry has been shaking. Harry lies and says she has. She cries once more and jerks away when the woman touches her thigh.

‘Try to clear your mind,’ the woman says softly.

Harry is lying on a cushioned mat in the middle of the floor, three sticks of incense burning on the coffee table behind her head. She closes her eyes and attempts to think about nothing. Nothing looks like an ocean, apparently, stretching out on the backs of her eyelids. The waves begin to swell and crash. Each time she flattens one, another rises up.

The woman places her hands on either side of Harry’s left shin. She holds them there before moving up to her knee. Still playing Bop-It with the ocean inside her mind, Harry wonders what on earth she’s doing. Here and in general. She thinks about needing to go to the supermarket on the way home and what she wants to make for dinner, about the missed call she had from her dad that she hasn’t returned, and about what she’s going to say to her agent when they meet next week.

‘Relax,’ the yoni healer instructs as she continues to move her hands up Harry’s body. ‘Stay present.’

Harry squeezes her eyes tighter. She imagines looking down from the ceiling as Natalie lies here in her place. She would know how to do this, how to relax and submit to the process. But then Natalie wouldn’t need to come here in the first place, would she?

‘Let’s try something else.’

The woman moves her hands to Harry’s arms. She presses down evenly on each side, working from shoulder to wrist.

‘That seems a little better. Touch elsewhere brings you back to the moment, but as I approach your yoni you retreat.’

Harry sucks her lips between her teeth, still unable to hear the word ‘yoni’ without wanting to giggle. But she recognises a truth in what the woman has said. She likes to be held. ‘I like to be tied up,’ she says aloud.

‘Yes, that’s very grounding, very safe.’

The woman works on the soft tissue at the top of Harry’s thighs. ‘This can hold a lot of trauma, especially if we’ve had sex with men.’

‘I sometimes find it hard to come,’ Harry blurts. ‘Even on my own.’

‘Try not to be so goal oriented,’ the healer says.

Harry frowns, her mind drifting again. She doesn’t know if these two sessions are worth the £150 she’s paid for them. Perhaps she’s a fool. Yesterday morning in Ellen’s arms, and later, still distracted by the thought of her lips and thighs, she felt whole. Witnessing another fight between her landlady and housemate last night, however, she found herself remembering the houses she’d shared with Louise and the solid, adult life they’d once built, and felt entirely scattered. Her thoughts keep getting stuck on meaningless coincidences. She and Louise called the soft toy they bought on honeymoon Hamilton after the house they were staying in. Ellen’s childhood home was called Hambleton and everyone who’s anyone is seeing *Hamilton* this summer. Both Louise and Ellen’s fathers are Iains with the extra ‘i’, and they each have an older sister called Sarah. Ellen’s exhibition opens on Harry and Louise’s wedding anniversary, and neither Ellen nor Louise eat mushrooms. Who is she and what does any of this mean? Nothing, perhaps. But if that’s the case, then does anything? If she and Ellen stay together forever, will it really be different from breaking up and starting again? Once, she thought it so impossible to live her life without Louise that she proposed. For nearly three years, however, she’s managed to do exactly that.

The healer rocks back on her knees and tells Harry their time is almost up. ‘You need to teach yourself to let go,’ she says. ‘In your body, and here.’ She leans forward to place a warm fingertip on Harry’s third eye. ‘Keep shaking, it will help.’

Harry feels strange walking away from the session. It has ended awkwardly, but then most of her encounters tend to, even without genital contact.

Her mum calls as she exits the station. ‘Have you talked to Rob, sweetheart?’

Heading towards the alleyway between Sainsbury’s and T.K. Maxx, Harry learns her younger brother has put in an offer on a house.

‘That’s cool.’

‘It is cool, isn’t it?’

Harry hears her dad say something in the background. Her mother clears her throat and adds, ‘But, look, your father and I don’t want you to be jealous. You know we’re proud of you both and we think you’re very brave for following your dreams. I wish I’d had your courage in some ways—’

‘Sorry,’ Harry mouths to the man asking for change as her mother continues. Rob works in banking and, at twenty-six, earns more than both their parents – a biology lecturer and a civil engineer – combined. Once her mother has run out of reassurances, Harry gathers the house he’s after is a five-bed in Putney.

‘He says the whole ground floor needs ripping out,’ her mother says, ‘but other than that it’s ideal.’

Harry smiles at an ink-black cockapoo straining at its lead as the owner pulls it across the road. ‘Does it have a pool?’

‘Pardon?’

‘For that kind of money, I’d definitely want a pool.’

‘Come on, darling, don’t be like that. I really don’t want you to be upset.’

Harry sighs and reaches for her keys. 'I'm not. I'm happy for him.'

In the bathroom, she discovers her period has started. She peels off her leggings and rinses her stained underwear in the sink, then makes a half-naked dash to their bedroom, unsure if anyone else is home. In fresh pants and with a mooncup stuffed inside her, she lies on the bed scrolling through five-bedroom houses in Putney, wondering if she's depressed. There are children starving in Africa, she reminds herself. And people dying crossing oceans. And others on the streets.

She remembers something and tries writing a scene:

Natalie is a teenager. Fourteen, fifteen, it doesn't matter, it happened many times. She gets off the bus crying. Her brother has made her cry. Or the girls on the bus, led by Lauren Richards, who looks a bit like her, only prettier and more popular, and therefore hates her. Or her best friend, who is no longer her best friend but may be again by this time next week.

She walks into the newsagents and buys a notebook. At home, she paints the cover with words like 'Misfit,' 'Outsider,' 'Freak.'

Another memory/scene:

Natalie is a teenager. Fourteen, fifteen, it doesn't matter. She gets off the same bus and runs home to tell her mother she's just come up with something: 'W.A.H!' she shouts. 'War Against Hormones!'

No, that's not right. Try something else:

Natalie is popular and happy. She always has been and always will be. There's a girl on the bus that looks a bit like her, only less pretty and less popular, so she likes to pick on her. Natalie will grow up to be happy and successful and to always feel secure because she is loved by everyone. The end.

*

'I'm not sure it's helpful to think of depression as an identity,' Faith says as they walk around Battersea Park later in the week. Harry tried to cancel, but Faith insisted. 'Maybe it's part of you, but so is happiness. What's the Kahlil Gibran quote about the intensity of your joy being equal to your sorrow?'

'I don't feel much joy right now.'

'But you have and you will again.'

Harry glances at a woman bending to pick up a toy her child has dropped. 'I was reading this thing about women being made to feel we're only 'normal' and 'sane' in our most temperate moods. We learn to downplay our own experiences by saying we're PMSing and suggesting that whatever we're feeling will pass once we're not. But that's like discounting a quarter or more of our entire lived experience. And what if that quarter is just as valid? What if real living happens in the highs and lows and it's the middle bit that's the abnormal, insane part?'

Harry watches the child's face light up as the mother returns the toy. Instantly, however, it thrusts a short arm over the side of the pushchair and drops it again.

Faith makes a noise in the back of her throat. 'I'm not saying what you're feeling right now isn't valid, but I used to say things like that to justify getting drunk every night. I know I'm old and boring now, but the middle isn't actually that bad—I'm happier overall since I got sober.'

Part of the path ahead is blocked by metal barriers. They wait for two cyclists to pass in the other direction, then walk single-file through the narrow section that remains. On the other side of the barriers, figures in high-vis are setting up for some kind of event. Several are huddled around a sound-system on a small stage, while others are busily erecting a row of huts and stalls. To the left of their activity lies a deflated and seemingly abandoned bouncy castle. Harry stares at the folds of brightly coloured fabric, remembering Louise's hair shooting up and down as she ricocheted from the walls of the one they hired for her thirtieth birthday. Laughing so hard she could barely breathe, Louise finally flopped on her back in the centre. Harry collapsed beside her and they tangled together, murmuring about love and the future. Their decree absolute is due in the post any day now.

'Do you ever miss it?'

'Huh?'

'Drinking.'

Faith snorts. 'I don't miss the hangovers. Or the feeling of what the fuck have I done.'

'But the extremes. The feeling of not being restricted?' Harry knows she's not allowed to say it, but *she* misses Faith drinking.

Faith shrugs.

'Sometimes I wonder if I should go on antidepressants, but I worry they'll flatten things. What would I have to write about if I no longer felt deeply?'

‘You mean what would you have to write about if you were happy?’

‘Not happy, just blank.’

‘I think you’re romanticising. Misery isn’t some magic ticket to good writing, nor is euphoria. I—’

Harry cuts her off. ‘But writing feels bodily to me. I wish I was the sort of person who could pretend it’s this sanitised thing that I do, unrelated to being. But it’s more like a secretion, something I can’t control.’

Faith shakes her head. ‘Actual writing only happens when we sit down to do it. It’s mundane and boring and hard, like most work. The rest is a story you’re telling yourself.’

‘Harsh.’

‘Sorry, but it’s true. The reasons neither of us are writing are in our heads, not our bodies.’ Faith sighs. ‘What is it you actually want to write about? Louise? What if you just allowed yourself to do that?’

‘It wouldn’t be fair.’

‘Then you have to get on with it and write about something else. Why do you want to write about her anyway? To absolve yourself for hurting her? To keep her where you left her?’

‘No.’ Harry feels stung.

‘Then what?’

A guy on rollerblades overtakes them blasting music from his phone. They watch his feet zig-zag with the beat until a cyclist forces him to break time and pirouette to the left. Harry scratches her wrist. Faith is right about one thing: it’s hard to tell truth from the stories you tell yourself. In a marriage, at least the story is shared.

‘I read this morning that the sex of a sea turtle is determined by the temperature of the water its egg hatches in,’ Faith says before they say goodbye. ‘The oceans are warming by

more than 0.1 degree every decade, which means eventually there will only be female turtles left.'

'Is that supposed to make me feel better? Like life could be worse, I could be a turtle.'

Faith shrugs. 'I mean, you could.'

'Maybe I'd be happy being a lesbian feminist separatist turtle.'

'Maybe you'd die out.'

Everyone she can think to ask is busy, so Harry goes alone to see Jeannette Winterson in conversation with another author. When she first read her, Winterson's tangled, sexual, gender-bending prose transported Harry – like so many other baby queers – from her small town to the vast landscapes of reimagined pasts, presents and futures. Twenty years later, in the centre of the city, she sits in the second row falling in love with her all over again. Did she think about the woman who wrote back then? The flesh and fingernails and messy halo of corkscrew curls? The body is everything in Winterson's texts, but what did Harry imagine a writer was from her bedroom and her school bus and the back of her tutor room?

'Listen,' Winterson says in response to a question, her small, weathered hands flying about as she bounces on the edge of her seat, 'there are only three endings.'

The other author laughs. Harry positions her pen over the notebook on her knee.

'No, seriously,' Winterson says, crinkling her eyes. 'Happy endings don't count, because they're only a pause. So all that's left is revenge, tragedy and forgiveness.' She ticks them off on her fingers.

'That's it?' the other author asks while Harry copies this down.

Winterson sits back in her chair. 'It is.'

The other author turns to the audience. 'She's telling us stories, but do we trust her?'

Harry smiles at the reference. She read *The Passion* on a French exchange trip, sitting on a coach next to the greasy haired girl she'd been writing to for several months about their hobbies and families and daily routines. Turning the pages, she wondered if she'd ever be able to communicate anything as real, with or without a language barrier.

The other author turns back to Winterson. 'Would you call yourself a romantic?'

'I would.'

In the interval Harry recognises someone in the row in front. It's the playwright from the bookshop, although of course that was only a scene. So it's the playwright from Goldsmiths, whom she bumped into at readings from time to time. The one with the eyeliner flicks and silver lip stud. The one with the icy blonde hair and tattoos snaking up her arms.

'Hey,' the playwright says as she passes Harry on the way to the bar. 'I know you, don't I?'

They get drunk together after the talk. Harry learns the playwright is also a novelist and she has a book out next month. 'Publishing is wild, isn't it?' the playwright says. 'I spent my twenties grovelling for every little scrap of money to put on shows, worrying about how to pay my directors and actors and stage-managers, let alone myself, then this editor rings me up and tells me she's going to give me this insane amount for this one little thing I wrote. And she thinks she can get me more in foreign rights.'

Harry laughs, at first genuinely, then to cover simultaneous spikes of jealousy and curiosity. 'Please don't tell me you churned out a novel as just "one little thing",' she says, while trying to calculate how much exactly counts as 'insane'.

The playwright snorts. 'Actually it was bloody difficult. I'm terrified of writing the next one. Have you heard that thing about writing your first novel being like crash landing a plane?'

Harry shakes her head as a man in a blue polo shirt passes their table with three pint glasses balanced between his forefingers and thumbs. Harry catches the man's eye and looks away. They're on a rooftop overlooking Waterloo Road and below she can see people waiting for buses and MacDonald's and their friends in unsuitable shoes to catch them up.

'I forget who said it,' the playwright says, 'but it's what it feels like, right? This massive adrenalin rush and sense of achievement, sure, but then people start imagining that because you've done it once you must have an actual pilot's license and know what you're

doing. They start expecting you to ferry them back and forth across the Atlantic on some kind of schedule,’ – the playwright makes a soaring gesture with her hand, narrowly avoiding their drinks as she crosses from one side of the wooden table to the other – ‘and even teach other people how to do the same!’

Harry snorts.

‘Even tonight, what was that she said about endings? It’s bullshit, isn’t it? We’re all bullshitting except in the tiny, singular moments we aren’t.’ The playwright drops her hand and picks up her drink. ‘But I digress. All I mean is that the money is ridiculous when you compare it to other things.’

‘Not for everyone,’ Harry says, wiping the corner of her left eye, which has a tendency to weep when she drinks.

‘No, absolutely. I know I’m incredibly lucky, but that’s what I’m saying. Did you read that thing about the average wage of authors being like seven grand or something? Why on earth are they paying me so much? Why not even it out?’

‘Maybe your book’s really good.’

The playwright cocks her head. ‘I don’t think it’s about good. I don’t think even the people working in publishing know what it’s about. Trends, maybe. Marketability, sure. I know so many good writers making absolutely zilch.’

Harry nods, thinking of Faith. She forgot to ask about the status of her submissions in the park. She should text her.

As they’re descending the stairs to the exit, the playwright touches Harry’s arm and tells her they should hang out again.

Harry pulls out her phone on the bus to write a scene. When the playwright touches her arm, Natalie stops on the same step and leans towards her. Natalie brushes her lips against the playwright’s cheek before finding her mouth. After pressing her against the graffitied

wall, Natalie laces her fingers through the playwright's and pulls her down the remaining stairs. Natalie feels free and in her body and totally alive as they make their way across south London and fall into the playwright's bed. Natalie makes the playwright come and the playwright makes Natalie come, over and over, until they pass out exhausted.

The automated voice announces Briant Street and Harry dings the bell. She wobbles down the stairs while the bus is still moving, realising she's drunker than she thought. Her mind flits to Ellen and she feels the prickle of guilt. She'll delete the scene in the morning, she thinks as the doors open and she steps into the lamp-lit night. It's begun to drizzle and she fumbles to open her broken umbrella. She doesn't even fancy the playwright. Not really. Just likes the idea of her. Would like to be her, probably. Cool and assured and smart and funny and loud. The sort of person other people aren't sure if they fancy or want to be. The sort of person who doesn't even notice being that sort of person because she's so cool and assured and content in her own skin.

Harry reaches the newsagents and turns towards her house. There's someone on the opposite pavement also walking with a broken umbrella. She reminds Harry of Lauren Richards, the girl who bullied her on the school bus. She wonders where Lauren is and what she's doing these days.

Ellen's already in bed when Harry gets in, watching *Gogglebox* on her laptop. She turns it off and asks if Harry wants to try an episode of *The Real Housewives of Beverley Hills* before they go to sleep. 'I got an email from a gallery in LA asking if I'd be interested in a commission.'

'That's incredible!'

Ellen shrugs. 'I'm trying not to get my hopes up because it'll probably come to nothing, but they want to talk next week so I said I'd watch the show.'

Harry kisses her forehead. 'You're brilliant.'

Ellen lines up the first episode while Harry brushes her teeth. Back in the room, she takes off her clothes and climbs under the duvet in her pants. ‘Wearing pyjamas kills your sex life,’ she said once, a long time ago. They’ve always slept skin to skin, but as the show starts she wonders if the opposite might be true. Does normalising nudity also kill a sex life? How long has it been?

In the morning, Ellen runs her hands over Harry’s skin. She’s woken from a strange and confused dream involving both Louise and the playwright, but sets it aside to respond to Ellen.

‘I thought you didn’t fancy me anymore,’ she says afterwards.

‘Why would you think that?’

‘We don’t do this much.’

Ellen laughs. ‘We had sex three times last week.’

Harry lays against her, wondering if that can be true. She thinks guiltily of the scene she wrote.

In the middle of the morning, she remembers to text Faith.

All quiet on the western front, comes her reply.

I’m sorry, Harry types, followed by three fingers-crossed emojis.

Faith responds with a shrugging emoji, a laughing-crying face and a crying face, followed by: “*But, anyway, I like what I have and now it is today.*”

Harry doesn’t recognise the quote, so copies and pastes it into Google. An image pops up of a frowning Gertrude Stein next to the words: ‘Perhaps I am not I even if my little dog

knows me but anyway I like what I have and now it is today.’ Harry sends Faith a brown and white dog emoji. *Do I get to read it soon?* she adds. Faith doesn’t reply and soon registers offline.

A few hours later, Harry’s decree absolute lands on the doormat. Nobody else is home and she stands in the hallway staring at the strangely unauthoritative looking text. She pictures Louise doing the same somewhere. Can their stories still share an ending? If Winterson is right that there are only ever three, then this must be Tragedy.

She carries the paper and its envelope upstairs, places them next to some foam board Ellen’s partway through fashioning into a staircase and pulls out her unused walking boots from beneath the bed. She puts them on and stands in front of the mirror, thinking of Lyme Regis and Scarborough and Dover. Possible Worlds Theory sees reality as the sum of the imaginable rather than the sum of physical perception. If all fictional imaginings are true in the alternative realms in which they exist, then somewhere there’s a version of Harry and Louise walking the coast into their old age. Perhaps that would be Forgiveness. Which leaves Revenge. That’s not something Harry wants, but she supposes Louise might.

She closes her eyes and tries to concentrate on making small movements. In the feet and ankles to start. Tentative tremors begin to travel to her knees, making them quiver, but her hips and pelvis refuse to follow. After a while she gives up and opens her eyes. Her reflection stares back at her, silent and still, until they both burst into tears.

Seven years to the day after Harry said ‘I do,’ she stands in the corner of a converted warehouse on the same street as Ellen’s studio. She accepts a mushroom and caramelised onion polenta bite from a passing waiter wearing a ripped t-shirt and drains her third glass of prosecco. The exhibition is showcasing six artists and Ellen has lucked out with the most prominent position right as people walk in. She’s put Lady Gaga’s Malibu house, Drake’s ‘YOLO Estate’, Posh and Becks’ Holland Park home, and Alicia Keys’ ‘Dreamland’ on display beneath a huge sign reading ‘PLEASE TOUCH’. People seem to be having fun with the dolls and the houses, but, if the number of selfies being taken is anything to go by, the sign itself is proving most popular. Ellen’s currently walking around the rest of the exhibition with her parents and sister who have to head home soon. Harry said she’d keep an eye on Ellen’s section and hand out her cards to anyone who might be important. It’s tricky to tell, however, and so far she’s only half-heartedly approached one severely lipsticked woman who turned out to be another artist’s mum. ‘You’d love my daughter’s work,’ she said, based on nothing Harry could perceive. She promised she’d take a look and let the woman leave without Ellen’s card.

She scrutinises the couple inspecting Dreamland, trying to work out if they’re important or simply attractive. Four of the six artists in the show are queer and the bulk of the audience members seem, at least outwardly, to be so too. Most of the artists are younger than Ellen, but one, a Judith Butler-lookalike, is older and has brought a contingent of glamorously greying, mostly butch lesbians to the show. They mill in their leather jackets amongst the brightly clad twenty-somethings. Harry decides to approach these two, wishing she’d put her hair up to expose her undercut. She’s been reading a collection of essays by Michelle Tea and these women, now crouching to poke their fingers into Lady Gaga’s private

bowling alley, make Harry think of the grungy glamour with which Tea depicts 90s San Francisco counterculture. *It is so hard for a queer person to become an adult*, she writes. *Deprived of the markers of life's passage, they [loll] about in a neverland dreamworld.* Harry wrote that line out and showed it to Ellen, feeling as if it was speaking directly to her and them, but standing here now she feels less sure.

‘Um, hi,’ she says. ‘Would you like the artist’s card?’

The taller one turns to her. Her smile remains intact, but there’s a definite dulling in her eyes as she takes Harry in. Is it her age? Or that she’s femme but not high-femme?

‘Sure,’ she finally says.

Harry detects a slight Mid-Western twang that makes her think of the year abroad she spent in Chicago. She’d like to ask where the woman’s from, why she’s here. She’d like to impress her with her recognition of her accent, to spark her and her partner’s curiosity so that they ask about her in return, then maybe invite her to view the rest of the exhibition with them or even go for a drink afterwards. She’d like to introduce them to Ellen when she returns and for the four of them to bond, for these two women to adopt and envelop them into their queer family, become aunts or sisters or mothers or some superior combination of all three that surpasses the rigid limitations of heteronormative relational structures and makes them all feel safe, loved and accepted for all that they are.

The woman, however, has already turned away. She loops her arm through her partner’s and leads her to the next installation, where a twenty-year-old androgyne is suspended at head height by acid green silks while conversing with their audience and simultaneously crotcheting a scarf. Harry watches the performer turn their attention to her couple and feels a sharp pang of jealousy as first the shorter one, then the taller one tips their head back in laughter. She turns away and busies herself dislodging then reaffixing one of the loungers beside Gaga’s infinity pool. She bites her lip, thinking of Michelle Tea and the

longing she feels reading her essays about Michigan Womyn's Music Festival versus Camp Trans and black-tar-heroin-shooting lesbian biker gangs. It'd be inappropriate to romanticize the social and political oppressions that forced the generation of queers above her to so frequently have to fight for their very existence, but she worries the lack of tangible external obstacles to her own queerness render it less valid. Section 28 made it hard to figure out or be brave enough to be who she was in the small town she grew up in, but it never beat her up, never excluded her from a place she should have found safe, and never ignored a flesh-eating virus literally killing her and everyone like her. It never caused her anything, really, except internal strife. Yet it's the legacy of that strife that makes it hard to let go and enjoy the freedom and fluidity of the generation below. She grew up reading that gender was a construct, but these pronoun-declaring, neon-tracksuit-wearing kids have grown up performing it. And what she's most jealous of is that along the way they seem to have developed the confidence to tell the people Harry's spent her life desperately seeking approval from to get lost.

'Hey baby, how's it going?' Ellen plants a kiss on Harry's cheek and hands her another glass of prosecco.

Harry nods towards two teenagers fondling each other while one angles a pastel-pink instant camera. 'People love your sign.'

'Harry, how's the book going?' Ellen's mum asks, sidling up with Ellen's dad in tow. She's wearing oversized pearl earrings and a fuchsia blazer; a look Harry can picture one of the youngsters in the room assembling almost piece-for-piece from a vintage shop.

'Uh, fine,' she says, unsure if she's being asked about the one about to come out or the one that's still no more than a few confused scribbles about Natalie. The polite answer is the same, either way, and she's relieved that Ellen's mum doesn't follow up.

‘We better leave soon if we want to make the 8.42,’ Ellen’s eldest sister says, rubbing her stomach, which seems bigger and rounder than even two weekends ago.

‘How much longer?’ Harry asks.

‘Eleven weeks.’

‘I think this one will be early,’ her mother says gleefully.

‘I doubt it, Mum, neither of the other two were.’ Ellen’s sister rolls her eyes and mouths ‘Drunk,’ at Harry and Ellen. ‘You two ever think you want one?’ she asks after their parents head off to find their coats.

‘Fuck no,’ Ellen says.

Harry laughs. As with questions about her writing, she never knows how to sincerely answer this. If she and Ellen did want a family at some stage, they would have to change almost everything about their lives—and should probably have done so years ago. That they haven’t and don’t suggests Ellen’s answer must be true for the both of them. And, in fact, it’s the same answer Harry’s offered countless times. Nevertheless, it sounds and feels to Harry as perfunctory and as disassociated from actual thinking and wanting as the ‘fine’ she offered to Ellen’s mother earlier.

‘God, I envy you,’ says the sister. ‘Look how *fun* your life is!’

In truth, there are moments when Harry thinks she might like a child. More specifically, a child with Ellen. They’d make good parents, she thinks. But these nebulous thoughts dissipate as soon as she tries to fit them to the family-shaped models she sees around her. Their life *is* more fun than Ellen’s sister’s, she can see that. If they had a child, she would want it to be in some form of queer, non-nuclear, non-normative way that her mind is too inelastic to actually imagine. Even if she could imagine it, though, they’re self-employed lodgers with no spare room, no maternity pay, no sick pay, and no extra cash for nappies, childcare or all the other things a baby needs. So it’s moot really, meaning Ellen’s answer

might as well be sincerely true. Plus, Harry can't be sure she doesn't only want a child in these odd moments for the sense of purpose it seems to offer. If she was a mother, surely there would be less pressure on being a writer. At the very least, she'd have a legitimate excuse for her inactivity. She hasn't written a word since that night on the bus.

'Come on, or you'll miss your train,' Ellen says, herding her family towards the exit. She and Harry see them to the pavement outside, where they perform an awkward dance of hugs and cheek kisses.

'We better see you both soon,' Ellen's mum shouts over her shoulder as they walk away.

'Finally!' Ellen says as she and Harry re-enter the main gallery. 'Time to actually *have* some fun.'

Harry places her hands in her pockets, but catches sight of her warped reflection in someone's metallic jumper and removes them. She feels the nudge of Ellen's elbow and looks down to see her holding a matchbox. 'What's that?'

'Come to the bathroom with me and see.'

They push towards the back of the gallery where of course there's a queue for the women's. Ellen drags Harry by the hand into the men's and locks them into the single, stinking cubicle. She slides out the inner drawer of the matchbox to reveal three blue pills.

'Where did you get those?'

'Milo was offering them before we opened the doors. They said a bunch of them are planning to go to a party in Hackney after this. You fancy it?'

'What are they?'

'Es, stupid. What did you think they were?'

'Just checking.'

'Well do you want to?'

Harry hesitates. She read in an article while she was on the toilet yesterday that Michelle Tea wrote one of her early books on cocaine and most of the rest drunk. For the length of time it took her to urinate, at least, Harry thought that sounded rather legitimate and wondered if she had wasted her life by not being more adventurous in this respect. She experimented a couple of times at university, but her friends were never really into it, and Louise turned out to be vocally anti everything because of a cousin or second cousin who once ended up in hospital. Harry remained curious, and since leaving Louise has mostly said yes to the odd opportunities that have presented themselves at festivals and garden parties. Given the cocktail of guilt that must be swallowed alongside whatever is offered, however – at the socio-economic and racialized privileges that allow people like her to do such things in relatively safety, with little-to-no worry about arrest or worse, while others all over the world literally lose their lives to provide them with each clear little sachet of euphoria – it has probably been a relief that the people around her are growing out of their misspent youths and such opportunities are few and far between. Harry knows she’s not really like Tea or the women out there in the gallery; the closest she’s ever come to a radical subculture is getting a piggyback from a drag queen at Brighton Pride. But, still, might these little blue pills be the secret to unblocking her creativity?

‘Half?’ Ellen says, bobbing from side to side as she waits for Harry’s answer.

Harry eyes the powdery surface of the pills. She’s heard that MDMA comes from the Netherlands and arrives here in the hands of HGV drivers crossing the Channel, which sounds much less blood-soaked and awful than the condoms of cocaine she imagines poor Peruvian mules being coerced into swallowing at airports. Perhaps if she pictures a slightly overweight and moderately balding Dutch family man listening to art history podcasts as he does his rounds delivering these pills directly into the hands of Milo and his other customers,

then she won't have to acknowledge the cliché of her and Ellen's evening and the gun and gang crime it sponsors even on the streets of their own city.

'Baby?' Ellen says, impatience edging into her voice.

A rather large argument against, of course, is that Michelle Tea is now sober and her most recent novel was about addiction and AA. On the other hand, if nothing else, taking half a pill in this stall with her girlfriend is at least an experience Harry could give to Natalie. As soon as that thought occurs, another arrives: anything she writes and publishes, even as fiction or this kind of demi-fiction, will be read by others – *including her parents* – as truth. Having grown up in a house where drugs were held up as the worst possible thing a person could do ('Everything else you can come back from,' her dad used to say), this is not a moment she wants to share with her parents. But what sort of writer and what sort of queer does that make her if she's worried about what her mum and dad will say? And what is the point of experience if it can't be turned into material?

'Harry!' Ellen all but shouts.

What would Natalie do?

'Okay, half.'

Ellen smiles. '*Okay!*' She plucks one of the pills from the matchbox, closes the drawer and returns the rest to her jacket. Harry watches her wince as she bites it in two. She holds the second half out on the tip of her finger. Harry takes it with a kiss and pulls her own face as a burning medicinal taste fills her mouth.

'Here,' Ellen says, offering Harry the rest of her prosecco.

They clatter out of the bathroom in giggles. It's too soon for anything to be working, but Harry feels different walking back into the exhibition, buoyed by their secret. She locks eyes with a girl wearing an electric green visor and smiles.

‘Let’s find out about this party,’ Ellen says, leading her by the hand towards one of the younger artists and their friends.

Ten minutes later, they’re piling into an Uber someone has ordered and winding through East London side streets. Harry can feel now a quickening in her senses and a sensation like her centre of gravity has shifted. The car stops outside a scruffy townhouse and she steps onto the pavement, noticing and suddenly enthralled by the way the streetlamp puddles like liquid around their feet. She’s about to point this out when Ellen guides her by the elbow into the house and up the stairs to a flat. There’s music and a couple of dozen bodies already moving around an open-plan living room. She’s welcomed and jostled and handed a drink. Someone shrieks just beyond her ear and someone else turns up the track. Ellen leans in to say something. Harry makes a face to say ‘What?’ and she repeats, ‘Back in a sec.’ Harry must look confused, because Ellen adds, ‘Drug poo!’ and laughs before turning away. Harry watches her girlfriend make her way back towards the entrance and disappear behind a door she hasn’t noticed. She sips her drink and turns back to the room, feeling the beat moving through her body. She remembers her yoni healer and her shaking and this time easily imagines her consciousness pooling first into her feet, then her knees, then her pelvis. She’s smiling, she realises, enjoying dancing with strangers in this strange flat. This is living, she thinks. It’s the sort of thing normal people do on normal nights out without worrying about what it means or how they’ll record it or who they are when they do it. She closes her eyes and tries to submit to the experience, to banish Natalie and just be herself. When she opens them again, someone is dancing with her.

‘Oh,’ she says, recognising the choppy blonde hair and silver lip stud.

‘What are you doing here?’ asks the playwright.

‘My girlfriend,’ Harry says, gesturing vaguely. She looks around but can’t see Ellen.

‘Are you having fun?’

‘Yeah.’ Harry turns back to the playwright, their bodies still moving. ‘You?’

‘Yeah.’

Harry swallows, remembering the scene she wrote after they last saw one another.

Her mouth suddenly feels excruciatingly dry. ‘Excuse me. I think I need a drink.’

‘No worries,’ the playwright says. Harry notices her jaw making small circular movements. ‘Nice to see you again.’

Harry edges towards the kitchen area, sweating. She takes off her jumper and ties it around her waist. There’s a tumbler on the drying rack, which she fills with water from the tap and downs. She repeats this three times before looking back out at the party. She can see Ellen now, sitting on the arm of a tatty wingback chair, looking at her phone. The playwright is dancing only a foot or so from her. The water in Harry’s stomach threatens to curdle.

‘Hey,’ she says, arriving at Ellen’s side. ‘You okay?’

Ellen looks up. ‘Can we go home?’

‘Of course.’

‘Sorry. I’m not feeling it.’

Harry pulls Ellen to her feet. Her palm feels soft against her fingertips and she holds on, drawing absent circles as they head towards the door.

‘That tickles,’ Ellen says, letting go.

‘Sorry. Night bus or Uber?’

‘An Uber will cost a fortune, won’t it?’

‘Probably.’

They leave the party without saying goodbye to anyone and follow the directions on Harry’s phone to the nearest bus stop.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Ellen says as Harry walks around the shelter to read the electronic display. They have a sixteen-minute wait until the next 21.

‘Sure.’

‘Have you ever found blood in your poo?’

Harry stops looking at the screen. Ellen is standing beside a scratched advertisement panel. The new beef and chorizo melt lunch deal is only £3 at Subway apparently. Ellen looks like she wants to cry. ‘Have you?’

‘On and off for a while.’

‘How much?’

‘How much blood?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Quite a bit sometimes. Like having a period.’ Harry must look shocked, because Ellen adds quickly, ‘But then it goes away and everything’s fine for a few weeks.’

‘It’s back today, though?’

‘Only a little. And it might have been the pill.’

Harry swallows, her mouth horribly dry again. ‘How long has this been going on?’

‘Three or four months.’

Harry’s edges still feel porous, but her buzz has well and truly died. She wants to ask why Ellen didn’t tell her. Why wait until today? What does it mean that she’s been going through this for four whole months without saying a word? ‘It’s probably fine,’ she says, trying to keep her voice level, ‘but you should make an appointment with the doctor.’

‘Maybe.’

‘You should.’

‘I guess.’

They sit beside each other on the low bus shelter bench, Harry periodically saying, ‘It’s going to be fine,’ and Ellen periodically replying, ‘I know,’ until the 21 arrives. At the front of the top deck, they each pull out their phones and begin to scroll. Harry squashes the urge to look up *blood in poo* and *is my girlfriend dying* and navigates to an article she’s been meaning to read on LitHub. She reads the first paragraph three times before giving up, her thoughts flickering like a worn-out projector. She orders another book by Michelle Tea and scrolls through Spotify trying to identify the lyric stuck in her head, then gets a notification that her brother has sent a picture into the family WhatsApp. It’s of a miniature bottle of Dom Perignon next to a plastic flute on a fold-out aeroplane table. *Got the house, celebrating in the air!*

Where u goin? Harry types, to which Rob replies, *DC, work trip, just 1 nite*, followed by a yawning emoji.

Congratulations, mum says it’s nice.

Yeah, will be.

When they change over to the N55, Ellen shows Harry her own family chats from earlier in the evening. On the train back to Norwich, her mum decided to create a private group excluding Ellen’s eldest sister in order to discuss plans for the party she wants to throw when the baby arrives. Several minutes after the creation of this group, Ellen’s eldest sister messaged into the sisters-only group that their mum was whispering to their dad about both the new WhatsApp group and the party. Due to the proximity of their seats and the tipsiness of their mother, the eldest sister now knew everything there was to know about this surprise party that she told them she definitely wasn’t going to want just after having her nether regions split open and stitched back up for the third damn time. Ellen’s middle sister intervened at this point and said she’d sort it, then asked how the exhibition opening had gone and apologised again for not being able to make it.

Ellen doesn't mention the blood in her poo again and Harry doesn't know how to bring it up. 'I love you,' she says instead as she hands her phone back and they pass over London Bridge. She notices a pair of women sucking face outside a bar. 'Look,' she says, not only because it's nice to see lesbians but because one's brunette and the other's ginger, just like them.

'Cute,' Ellen says and Harry decides to believe it's a sign.

They arrive home to the remnants of a warzone. The house is quiet, but there's a smashed plate in the kitchen and a note on the fridge telling their housemate that she must move out by the 15th. Upstairs, there's light coming from beneath the housemate's door, so Harry knocks and asks what happened. 'She's a prick,' she says. 'It's fine, I don't want to live here anyway.'

The next morning they see their landlady at breakfast and she shakes her head. 'It's just too much. I can't live like this.'

'Christ,' Ellen whispers as she clips on her bike helmet in the hallway. 'Glad we were out.'

Harry nods. 'Will you make an appointment?' she manages to ask.

Harry meets Faith to watch the shortlisted nominees for a literary prize read from their novels. Two of them claim not to care about story. ‘I hate plot,’ one says and the other agrees.

‘I think I hate writers,’ Faith whispers. The man next to them shoots her a glare.

Harry walks home wondering if she should experiment with form and write something incomprehensible and wacky instead of just narrative and linear. The next day she uses her alumni card to swipe into Goldsmiths’ library. Catherine Cusset also denies plot, she discovers. She copies out: *Because emotion is the organizing force of autofiction, this genre of writing doesn’t need a plot, like the novel, or a chronological timeline, like an autobiography.*

Sometime later, or possibly before, Harry sits in a plastic seat at the ICA at an event called ‘Queers Read This!’ There’s little plot here, but there is a lot of shouting. Someone reads from a piece called ‘The Shit Manifesto’. Ellen laughs and Harry reaches for her hand. They’re three hours into a ten-day wait for a colonoscopy. Ellen rang just after she’d left the GP surgery. Harry stood in the library stairwell listening to Ellen cry and realised that the things she’s thought major events in her life are nothing. She’s never been unwell. She’s never lost anyone except grandparents, and them at an expected age.

This is not about you, Harry tells herself as someone in a trendy, garish jumper gets up to read from their novel. *And, anyway, she’s going to be fine.*

The lapping rhythms of the new reader’s speech finally tug Harry from her thoughts and she finds herself entering a lyrical, trippy scene featuring a leopard on the Isle of Wight.

‘I liked that last one,’ Ellen says as they walk to the bus stop after the event.

‘Me too,’ Harry replies.

An hour later, they're brushing their teeth and pulling back the sheets to spoon like every normal night they've ever spent together. After they've turned off the lights, however, Ellen whispers, 'I don't want to die.'

'You won't,' Harry says into her neck. But she lies awake imagining being stalked by a leopard and making a list of all the things she's ever lied about. At three she gets up and creeps down to the basement. She removes Natalie from the playwright's bed and sends her home to the girlfriend she suddenly loves more than anything.

Don't write about this, says a voice in Harry's head. But she places Natalie's girlfriend alone in a GP surgery with a young female doctor telling her she's recommending her down the cancer-testing pathway. She forces Natalie's girlfriend to nod and say she understands while staring at a poster asking whether she feels breathless climbing hills, then to stand and move one foot in front of the other until she's outside and blinking away tears while she taps at her screen to call Natalie. She places Natalie in a concrete library stairwell on the other end of the line saying pathetic, useless words. She rushes Natalie across town to meet her girlfriend, to take her into her arms.

Harry leans back in her chair and sighs. Writing this feels crass and over the top. She wants to be told it's inappropriate, to be accused of melodrama. It's just some tests, after all.

'Want to play a game?' Harry asks one evening, nodding at the games console at the base of the TV.

Ellen shakes her head.

'Come on,' Harry says, handing her a controller. She loads the cooking game they like and selects to play as the unicorn wearing sunglasses. Ellen flicks through the characters until she finds the sad-faced cardboard box. Harry glances at her, but her expression is

impassive. In the last level they've reached, their task is to chop, fry and serve fish and chips during a snowstorm. To do so, they must cross back and forth over slippery ice blocks drifting down a river. Their little chefs' hats bob as they fetch and carry ingredients and collect and wash empty plates, working together to respond to the orders stacking up at the top of the screen.

'Hey!' Ellen shouts as Harry's character bashes into her on the crossing. Mr Boxhead bounces across the ice and into the water, taking a freshly cooked fish with him.

'Sorry! Accident.'

There's a three-second countdown before Ellen's character returns, so Harry rushes to chop another fish as the time on the order runs down. Mr Boxhead reappears, but now there are no more clean plates and Harry's got a potato in her hands that she can't get rid of. She dashes over the ice to cut it on the chopping board and calls out to Ellen at the sink to rescue the replacement fish from the fryer. She's not quick enough and the fryer catches fire.

'Fuck!' Ellen shouts. 'Jesus Christ.'

'It's okay,' Harry says, rushing to grab the fire extinguisher.

But Ellen drops her controller. 'What's the point?'

The fire has spread now to the second fryer and is making its way along the worktops to the produce bins. Harry tries to get her character to aim the extinguisher, but she keeps slipping on the ice and the flames grow out of control. The orders at the top of the screen turn red and shake with anger before disappearing in a puff of minus points.

'We can try again,' Harry says, pressing pause and navigating to 'Restart Level'.

Ellen picks up her controller as the snowstorm and their kitchen reset. This time, before any of the orders have even come in, she thrusts Mr Boxhead off the edge and into the water. When he returns, she makes him chase and bump Harry's character in too.

‘Cut it out,’ Harry says as they wait out the three-seconds after this murder-suicide. Her unicorn reappears and she makes a dash to save the chips about to burn, but Ellen bashes her from the side again and the fryer catches light. ‘Fine,’ Harry says and turns her attention to Mr Boxhead. They chase and bump each other while the fire spreads unchecked. Harry laughs, but as Mr Boxhead plunges into the water again, Ellen sets down her controller and stands up.

‘I’m going to bed.’

Harry watches their kitchen burn until the time on the level runs out. Then she turns off the console and retreats to the basement. She’s been trying to make emotion rather than event their organising force, but what if Ellen is right to allow event, or possible event, to make her sad?

Don’t write about this, repeats the voice in Harry’s head.

She boots up her computer and opens Natalie’s document. What happens next? That’s always the question, isn’t it? Because plot *is* important. Cause and effect. Event and consequence. She tells her students not to shy away from difficult scenes, to write what they’re afraid to write.

Natalie folds her arms and turns to her from the page. *What do you think you’re doing?*

Harry blinks, but her character continues to stand there, waiting. Harry presses her tongue to the top of her mouth and tries to stare back at her through the screen. After a moment, she loses her nerve and looks away. ‘You’re going crazy,’ she murmurs.

There’s a spider living in the window above her desk, one of those elegant ones with a tiny body and long, spindly legs. She’s caught two small clothes moths but doesn’t seem interested in doing anything with them; they simply sit in her web, caught. Harry thinks about the spider secreting the web from within her own body. At what point does she end and it

begin? ‘When you give up life for fiction you become a character,’ she remembers the character Bret Easton Ellis saying in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Lunar Park*.

Is that why you can’t look at me? Natalie asks. *You’re afraid of becoming me?*

Harry closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. *You’re not real, you’re a creation.*

Your creation.

Harry opens her eyes. *Exactly.* The spider arches one of her long legs back and forth. *And this is a story, that’s all.*

The spider continues to stretch as Harry’s fingers tap the keys. Natalie shakes her head and squeezes her girlfriend’s hand. *Who the fuck do you think you are?* she spits over her shoulder as Harry walks them into Lewisham Hospital.

‘What are you working on?’ her agent asks the following day at Dishoom. They’ve ordered raspberry and lychee bellinis and everything their server recommended.

‘Uh...’ Harry reaches for her drink, playing for time. She feels disoriented by the hubbub of the restaurant. The bus was crammed and there suddenly seem to be more people in the city—on the pavements, at these tables, hurrying by each of the windows. She tries to imagine Ellen back at the house, curled up on the sofa with her laptop where Harry left her, but she feels far away.

Dana grins opposite Harry as their table is piled with food. ‘I ask because I have some exciting news.’

Harry moves her cutlery so their server can place another dish.

‘Pru called me last week and said they’ve bumped *This Nowhere Place* to lead title.’

A woman at the next table lets out a shriek of laughter. Harry smiles, feeling nauseous.

‘Obviously it would be better if they’d done this from the beginning, but they’ve had to put a publication back because of some Twitterstorm, which has freed up a chunk of budget for the next quarter and they want to put it into you.’

Harry nods, understanding this is good but struggling to connect that understanding to a feeling. It’s the book they want to put the money into, not her. The book that she finished while still in her office at the church. The book that she’s proud of, abstractly, but that doesn’t really feel like hers.

‘It’s pretty significant,’ Dana adds, dipping a piece of roti into a bowl of chickpeas. ‘Enough for posters on the tube, I think.’

‘Oh.’

‘That’s it?’

Harry laughs. ‘No, it’s great. I’m happy.’ She tries to picture her cover, her name, curved around the tunnel of the District Line. Maybe her brother will see it on his way to work. Or Louise.

‘Which means,’ Dana says, ‘that we should really try to keep the momentum going. I’m wondering if you’ve got anything to show me yet?’

Harry drops a spoonful of black daal onto her plate. ‘You mean...’

‘Your next book. Whatever you’re working on. I’d love to see it, even if it’s not finished. It would be great just to get an idea of what it is so that I can start talking to Pru, or even other editors, create some buzz.’

Harry tears herself a piece of roti and dips it in the daal. She thinks of Natalie, where she left her at Lewisham Hospital, waiting to find out what happens next. ‘I-I don’t know what it is yet,’ she says to Dana. ‘If it’s anything.’

‘I just want a little flavour. The first few chapters even.’

Harry puts down the roti. Natalie does feel like hers, but is that enough? ‘Even if it is something, I’m not sure I want to publish this.’

Dana sips her bellini. ‘What if you send me a bit and then we can talk about that? It’s hard for me to comment without seeing some of it. And you know everything between us stays between us. I won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with.’ She holds Harry’s gaze.

‘Maybe.’

‘When you’re ready of course. No hurry, but you know I’m always here.’

At a dinner party the following night, Harry looks jealously at anyone able to make Ellen smile. As soon as they leave, Ellen grows solemn.

‘You’re going to be fine,’ Harry tells her for the hundredth time.

Ellen takes her hand and strokes the inside of her palm. ‘I want to be an old lady with you.’

Over the weekend, Harry suggests cards and board games, bowling and badminton, trying to think of ways to fill this strange liminal time.

‘I don’t want to,’ Ellen finally snaps. ‘Why are you obsessed with playing? Life’s not a game, you know.’

Harry feels stung. She thinks about Ellen’s accusation for the whole of the next day. She looks up the word ‘play’ and gets lost in a Wikipedia entry. Psychoanalytically, she reads, play is essential and at the heart of creativity. But the article also tells her that the

search for the self in the ‘waste products’ of creative play – i.e. novels and art – is ‘doomed to be never-ending and essentially unsuccessful.’

She spends the afternoon staring at her waste products, imagining Natalie swimming around in shit.

Get me out of here, you bitch, she cries as Harry repeatedly dunks her head. *You’ll regret this.*

Dark play, Harry read further down the Wikipedia page, is ‘playing with fire’, ‘breaking the rules’, ‘getting away with murder’. It is play that emphasizes risk, deception, fantasy, sheer thrill. Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules. It contradicts its own metacommunicative message: ‘This is play.’

Harry thinks about the authors she loves, the ones who mingle fiction and truth. Michelle Tea portraying the crackling excitement of 1990s queer San Francisco, then obliterating it with an apocalypse. Rachel Cusk being vilified for her honesty about childbirth and divorce, then turning the authorial lens around and writing the writer as a void. Chris Kraus reclaiming herself as a character and proclaiming ‘I LOVE DICK!’ Sheila Heti allowing coins to dictate the fate of her womb. Meena Kandasamy autopsying her own cadaver. ‘This isn’t fiction,’ they seem to say, ‘but this isn’t truth.’ Or is it simply: ‘We’re telling you stories, trust us’?

She watches Natalie spluttering in the cesspit. ‘Does it matter what I do with you?’ she asks aloud. ‘Matter to anyone *except* you?’

Natalie opens her mouth, but it’s quickly filled with shit. She gags, then screams, *Get me out of here, you dumb cunt!*

Harry pulls her out by her left little toe. She hoses her down and drops her back in the playwright’s bed.

This is more like it, Natalie says, her mouth now full of flesh.

‘Enjoy it while you can,’ Harry says. A page or so later, she sticks her at home with her girlfriend, so full of guilt and love and confusion that she can barely breathe. Natalie hears the flush from the bathroom above her head. Her girlfriend has been instructed not to eat anything from 3pm and to drink 1 litre of Moviprep solution, plus another 500ml of water. She must do the same from 6am tomorrow, all to flush out her insides in preparation for the colonoscopy. Harry takes her omniscient eye up through the ceiling and into the bowl, watches from below as another round of watery shit leaves Natalie’s girlfriend’s asshole.

Why are you writing this? Natalie asks. *What is wrong with you?*

‘Normal side effects of taking Moviprep,’ Ellen read out earlier, ‘sore anus, retching, chills.’ They should add another section to the leaflet, Harry thinks:

Normal side effects of your partner taking Moviprep:

feeling helpless, acting like a twat.

*

At 5am, Harry wraps her arms around a sobbing Ellen and tries to will her back to sleep.

‘You’re going to be fine,’ she tells her again. ‘There’s no point worrying until we know.’

They lie together, connected skin to skin, but Harry knows she’s left Ellen alone in this 5am place. She has a dirty secret. She wants Ellen to be well, obviously. But if she’s not, at least she’ll have something to write about.

Ellen cries twice in the waiting room while Harry prattles about their housemate and landlady never emptying the drying rack and anything else she can think of to distract her. An animation plays on a screen telling them how many sugar cubes are in a bowl of children's cereal and how much that adds up to over a year. Harry thinks about the two sweeteners she drops into Ellen's tea every time she makes it and the surely toxic once-every-five-days deodorant Ellen uses. Are those the reasons they're here?

'I'm worried I've told too many people,' Ellen whispered in the lift. 'If it turns out to be nothing, I'll look stupid.' Each of the walls was a mirror, reflecting their reflections. They'd been cast as characters without a genre, Harry thought, staring at the tiniest versions of them she could make out. What they're told in these next few hours will rewrite the past fortnight. If Ellen's fine, this will be an anecdote to be recounted over dinners; they'll be able to laugh about the weird nasal voice of her doctor, the grossness of the prep, the pointlessness of their worry.

'I guess if it turns out to be something,' Ellen said as the doors opened, 'I'll wish I could just look stupid.'

Harry is not allowed through with Ellen. She watches other people as they're called. One man's wife is given the choice and Harry wonders if she can channel her annoyance into outrage over homophobic discrimination. But mostly it seems to be standard. She waits with the other plus-ones while Ellen is taken through. She takes out her notebook and follows Natalie's girlfriend through the same doors, watching as she's given two hospital gowns and strange little shorts with a bum-hole opening to change into, then left alone in a room for 45

minutes with nothing but a binder on the table titled ‘How to live with bowel cancer’. Harry loves the NHS and cannot begin to imagine what all this would be like without free healthcare, but still.

‘You’re doing the right thing,’ a nurse tells Natalie’s girlfriend, trying to be nice. Then she looks at her notes and adds, ‘Your symptoms are unusual, though. It could be quite serious.’

Natalie’s girlfriend shakes through the whole procedure and needs her arms and legs holding down. Then she’s taken into a room, given a biscuit and told her results.

Harry stops writing.

‘I’m worried you like drama,’ Louise told her once when her mental health was bad, ‘that you don’t want to get better.’

‘Maybe you process your life through story to avoid facing the truth,’ an old therapist suggested. She wanted Harry to believe she was a good person and that the bad things she did came from fear and pain.

She gets up to buy a coffee from the vending machine. In her pocket, she finds the penny Liza handed to her along the Southbank. She rubs her finger over the serious little queen. Give it to a friend and your luck will never end. She should call Liza, find out what’s happening with Leo.

Back in her seat, she turns the page and writes:

Ellen is fine:

Go to page 189

Ellen is not:

Go to page 102.

Ellen emerges from the double doors marked No Entry, looking exhausted. The doctor has given her two pictures of her transverse colon. Both look like pink masses to Harry, but Ellen points out the parts that the doctor pointed out to her.

‘There’s a polyp here and another here that they removed and don’t think there’s anything to worry about, but they’ve also taken biopsies of two larger ones, from here and here.’ The biopsies will be sent for testing, she’s been told. The results will take a couple of weeks.

Harry reads that night about the possible outcomes of Ellen’s biopsies. Her polyps will either be found to be hyperplastic or adenomatous. Hyperplastic or inflammatory polyps have virtually no chance of developing into something terrible. Adenomatous polyps, however, have the potential to become cancerous. Harry is reassured by the word ‘potential’. She was told at school she had the potential to do anything. Her debut sold on the potential of it becoming a bestseller. Her marriage had the potential to last. Potential suggests possibility, sure, but it also contains its opposite. Unrealised potential is everywhere, the world soaked in impotent possibility. Is that why she doesn’t feel excited about the publicity for her second novel? Why she hasn’t even told Ellen? The problem with trying to harness potential is that it increases the stakes of failure.

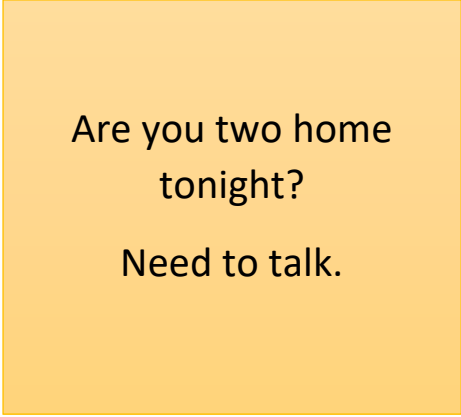
These polyps, Harry reads with relief, if they are to realise their potential, take 10 to 15 years to do so. Ellen can’t have had these things inside her for a decade, can she?

You’re a sadist, Natalie tells her one morning.

Well, you're a cheat, Harry replies. She's sent Natalie back to Lewisham Hospital, constructed the interior of a consultation room, and found a fusty male doctor to sit behind an enormous desk. He tells Natalie and her girlfriend that there's nothing they can do, the prognosis is six months to a year.

Natalie wraps her sobbing girlfriend in her arms and glares out at Harry from the text.
Why would you do this?

Harry closes the document and goes upstairs to make a cup of tea. For days there have been passive aggressive notes between her housemate and landlady taped to the fridge, the dishwasher and the dining table. She now finds a post-it on her and Ellen's cupboard too.



Are you two home
tonight?
Need to talk.

Harry takes a photograph and sends it to Ellen. The crying housemate will be gone in a week, but this is worrying. In response, Ellen sends a link to a flat costing almost twice as much as they currently pay. *I have a bad feeling,* Ellen types.

'I'm sorry, girls,' their landlady says that night. 'I've been thinking and I just can't do this anymore. I'm thirty-eight, I mean, what am I doing with my life? I'm tired of living with people. I want some independence. I want my home.'

Harry tries to catch Ellen's eye, but she's looking down at the table.

‘I want us to stay friends,’ the landlady says, reaching for one of each of their hands.
‘It’s not you, I want you to know that.’

They go to see the flat Ellen found on a Tuesday afternoon. Ellen says the ceilings are too low, she’d be depressed there. Harry returns to her basement and forces Natalie’s girlfriend into unbearable, undignified agony.

What is wrong with you? Natalie murmurs as she stuffs their soiled bedsheets into the washing machine for the third time that week. *Shouldn’t being able to imagine this make you grateful for everything that’s good in your life?*

What’s good?

What’s definitely bad? Aren’t you worried about tempting fate?

Harry opens a new notebook and divides a page into two columns labelled ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’. When she gets to ‘having to move’ she turns the page and makes a list of all the houses she’s ever lived in. Then she makes a list of everyone she’s ever lived with. Louise’s name looks strange on a single line, taking up only the same amount of space as everyone else. She remembers Natalie’s question and wonders if her and Louise’s ending was fated. Did they tempt it somehow? Louise would say no, surely, because subscribing to a sense of preordination would absolve Harry of responsibility. *She* brought about their demise; *she* chose their ending.

Harry looks up at the spider, still sitting in her web, still ignoring the moths. Is what she does cruel or merely in her nature? The Fates themselves are often depicted like her, old women spinning the threads of life. Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Men get to be the gods of the sea and the sky, war and the underworld, but it is three spider-like women who apportion destiny. Good for them, Harry supposes.

She turns back to Natalie and sits her by her girlfriend's side, both of them weeping. She knows what she's doing here isn't okay. She's been ignoring Dana's emails since their lunch, and, when Ellen asked what she was working on the other day, she couldn't answer, couldn't tell her the things she's been coming down here to imagine. The playwright, the colonoscopy, the consultant telling them the worst.

She drops her gaze to the keyboard. What if all this could have purpose, though? She runs the pad of her index finger over the fading letters, thinking about the concept of tempting fate. If she writes something and it comes true, then wouldn't one way of looking at it be that she, Harry, must be all powerful? Which is absurd, of course, because she's not. But, if her words *did* come true, then technically *she* would have made that thing happen. And that would mean she'd put the Fates out of a job—she'd have tempted them into their own demise. Which has to be an outcome they'd find decidedly *un*-tempting, doesn't it? So, logically, being the all-seeing, all-powerful apportioners of destiny that they are, wouldn't they do everything in their power to *avoid* being put out of their job? Harry looks back up at the screen. In writing the worst things she can imagine, could she force the Fates to come up with something else? By conjuring her fears on the page, could she in fact *save* Ellen?

You're an idiot, Natalie says as Harry has her follow a nurse into a supply closet, then silently beg forgiveness at her sleeping girlfriend's side. *You're looking for excuses for the bad things you do.*

Or I'm a genius, Harry replies, winking at her spider.

Natalie glares through puffy, bloodshot eyes. *We'll see.*

The next morning, the spider makes a break for the wall and hides behind a row of books. Harry stares at her web, remembering how she used to wave her legs in the air, as if doing

Pilates. She wonders if a spider ever goes back to its web once abandoned, and looks it up on the internet. Even if it's broken, apparently. Some eat what's left and respin it, others repair and rebuild. And, if a web is completely destroyed, the spider is likely to start from scratch in exactly the same spot.

Harry continues with her lists. Every friend she has ever had. Everyone she's related to. Everyone she's loved. Everyone she's fancied. Everyone she's kissed. Everyone she's fucked. Every job. Every qualification. Every teacher. Every boss. Every holiday. Every country. Every festival. Every drug. Every injury. Every sickness. Every time she's broken the law. Every wedding. Every funeral. Every fight.

By the middle of the afternoon, she's filled half her notebook. She flicks back through the pages, focusing and unfocusing her eyes so that the ink shifts from specific to general and back again. Is this what she's made of—who she is? She glances at the abandoned web, then opens a search engine. In some tellings, she learns, Atropos, the 'Inflexible', is in charge of the past. It is she who cuts the threads, ending each mortal life. Harry wonders about getting up and burying this notebook in the garden, planting her past in this place she has to leave. She looks up through her slit-like window, but dismisses the thought. These markings, while something, are not enough. For once, it's not the past that's bugging her.

She turns back to her computer and reads on. Clotho, the 'Spinner', controls the present and Lachesis, the 'Allotter', the future. It is they, the producer and dispenser of her and Ellen's fate that Harry has in her sights. She grabs a Sharpie from the mug on her desk and swivels to face the cold basement wall. In large, spiky letters, she writes her name. Next to it, she writes Ellen's. She too wants them to be old ladies together.

*

‘Oh fuck, you need to buy some paint,’ Liza says when Harry tells her later what she’s done.

‘What were you thinking?’

Harry shrugs. They’re in a small, trendy cocktail bar near Liza’s house. Liza’s perched on her stool in a yellow mini-dress and matching six-inch heels. Harry sits opposite in her ripped jeans and scruffy trainers. She’s spent the rest of the day researching and writing Natalie’s girlfriend into more and more invasive treatment plans while Natalie makes worse and worse betrayals. ‘You said you had something to tell me?’

Liza flashes a smile, then bites her lip. ‘Promise not to judge me?’

Harry cocks her head, still thinking of Natalie. ‘You slept with someone?’

Liza’s eyes bulge. ‘No, god. Just a kiss.’

‘Oh.’

‘You’re judging me.’

Harry holds up her palms. ‘Absolutely not. Who? What was it like? How do you feel?’

Liza lets slip another smile. ‘Paul, from my boxing class. We went out for drinks and ended up walking back from Bermondsey together. Leo was messaging asking what time I was going to be back and if I wanted dinner. I told him I was out with some girls and not to wait up. I don’t even know why I lied at that point because all we were doing was walking and talking—’

‘But you knew something was going to happen?’

Liza’s oversized earrings rattle as she shakes her head. ‘No, I really didn’t. I mean, not really. I’ve liked him for ages, but you know how it is when you know nothing can happen – it’s just this idea in your head that you prod sometimes then dismiss. But we got to the park where we needed to say goodbye and I thought, why not? This is something I want to do.’

‘*You kissed him?*’

Liza covers her face with her hands. ‘Do you think I’m awful?’

‘Not at all,’ Harry says. She stirs her drink with her straw, wondering if Liza would think *her* awful if she knew what she’d spent the day writing. Ellen’s told Harry she doesn’t want people to know about the extra tests, not yet. ‘It might still be nothing,’ she’s said whenever Harry’s tried to talk about it. ‘I’m pleased,’ she says to Liza now. ‘You seem excited.’

‘I could barely look Leo in the face this morning. But in a weird way I don’t feel that bad. I was talking to my life coach and she said that guilt, psychoanalytically or whatever, is actually preferable to anxiety.’

Harry nods. Liza has been seeing this life coach for almost two years and as far as Harry can tell the woman has done fuck all to help her. She’s told Liza she thinks she’s a charlatan, but her best friend has never had trouble parting with money in exchange for hope. ‘It’s like anxiety is this perpetual place of discomfort and uncertainty,’ Liza continues, ‘where you’re not sure what’s going to happen or what you’re even capable of but you constantly fear the worst. Whereas guilt is just a single, solid emotion.’ She taps a shellac fingernail against the stem of her martini glass. ‘Awful, but at least you know where you stand and what you’ve got to do.’ Harry watches her catch a bead of condensation before it hits the table.

‘So you know what you’ve got to do?’

Liza sucks her lips between her teeth and glances at the bar. Her nostrils quiver. ‘I take it back, guilt is shit too.’

Harry reaches out to take her hand. ‘You’re a good person.’

A tear wrestles a track through Liza’s foundation. ‘Thank you. So are you.’

*

The fifth flat Harry and Ellen see has tall ceilings and wide sash windows. Harry imagines sitting at her desk bathed in sunshine. Ellen falls in love with the balcony and calls the estate agent's offices as soon as they've left. The woman on the other end of the phone grumbles about the risks of self-employed tenants and asks if they're able to provide guarantors. She intimates another couple is interested, so Harry and Ellen swallow their pride and hurry home to email the forms to their parents.

While they've been out, their landlady has climbed into the attic and removed the cardboard boxes Harry shoved up there when she first moved in. They return to find them piled in the middle of their bedroom.

Ellen touches the top of one and scowls at the brick-dust covering her hand. 'What's in all these?'

'Everything I didn't know what to do with when I moved out of the flat with Louise.'

'Oh,' Ellen says, eyeing them as she settles on the bed with her laptop.

'I'll go through them,' Harry promises.

Their housemate leaves the following day and blocks them all on Instagram. 'She was always weird,' Ellen says, but Harry feels hurt, struggling to marry the awkwardness of the past few weeks with the friendship they used to have. She remembers sitting on her housemate's bed trying to make sense of the mutual break-ups that brought them to this house, crying on her when Ellen dumped her for those few weeks, lying beside her at the Ladies' Pond only a month or so ago. She sits at her desk looking at her lists and trying to remember what's in the boxes upstairs. There are eight of them. Four-hundred cubic litres of objects too sentimental to be thrown away, too loaded to be kept. She wonders if the sunlit flat has a loft. She can't

remember seeing a hatch, but maybe. She checks again, but the spider has not come back to her web. Perhaps her housemate is right to draw a line.

Harry and Ellen return to Lewisham Hospital, but it is only slightly similar to Natalie's visit. They do sit in a consultation room and a fusty male oncologist – Dr Prayer – does sit behind an enormous desk, but he doesn't tell them there's nothing they can do. He tells them one of the two polyps they biopsied came back positive for cancerous cells.

Harry sucks in a breath and reaches for Ellen's hand.

'It's early stages,' the doctor says, a paternal crease between his eyebrows, 'so I don't want you to worry, but we'll need to remove both via surgery.' He looks at them each in turn. 'Further tests will tell us more.'

Ellen's fingertips twitch against Harry's palm.

This is your fault, Natalie whispers as they stand up to leave.

Get out of my head, Harry silently replies. She slips her arm around Ellen's waist in the corridor, wanting to touch her, hold her, connect herself to and with Ellen's body.

Ellen's phone rings as they exit through two sets of automatic doors. She shrugs Harry off to answer it. Harry hears the words 'excellent news' before Ellen switches to the opposite ear. She watches her girlfriend in profile as the caller says something. Delicate lines appear at the corner of Ellen's eye as she squints slightly in concentration. The late-morning sun picks out the cascade of freckles on her cheekbone, as well as that stray, pale hair beneath her mole that she normally plucks. Harry wishes she could press PAUSE and lock them in this moment. Or REWIND, in the old, screeching fashion of the VHS tapes she watched as a child—racing them back through each of the moments that brought them here until, nose pressed almost to the screen, she spots one of those early afternoons in her bedroom, where time felt unimportant and unreal and all that mattered was laughter and skin and endless conversation.

‘Thank you,’ Ellen says as they reach the bus stop. ‘We’ll transfer that this afternoon.’ She hangs up and tells Harry they’ve passed the checks and the flat is theirs.

Harry nods as the 172 pulls up in front of them. ‘That’s good.’

‘Yeah.’

The following day, Harry picks up a pair of scissors and, armed with a bin bag, slices the tape holding the boxes together. She finds her wedding album, along with various photobooks she made after holidays and moving to the city. One is titled ‘The Story of Us’ and traces her and Louise’s lives from the mid two-thousands until the year before they broke up. She finds a half-finished teddy bear she was trying to make out of her cut-up wedding dress, some paper flowers she folded for table decorations, the notes for the graphic novel they were planning to write together, a teapot they bought in Marrakesh, more photos, cards Louise gave her, cards she gave Louise, and a stack of old diaries. On their first New Year’s Eve together, Harry wrote: *This year I want to deserve Louise*. Another year she wrote, *I don’t want to lose this*. In between, she complained about the division of housework, the smell of Louise’s feet, her refusal to flirt.

At the bottom of the final box, Harry finds a smaller one painted to look like a post-box. Louise made it to put on the gift table at their wedding for people to slot cards into. They did things on the cheap, making everything they could. ‘It *was* a lovely day,’ Harry’s mother still sometimes says.

Harry lifts the post-box out, wondering if painted cardboard can be recycled. The photos she’ll keep and some of the cards maybe, but this needs to go. The arts and crafts of her marriage have no place in a new home with Ellen. She stands up to take it to the bin outside, to bury it under soya milk cartons and their landlady’s pizza boxes. As she reaches

the bottom stair, she hears something slipping around inside. They took out all the cards, she remembers, but maybe some photos have fallen in during storage. She prises open the top and peers in. The box looks empty, but when she shakes it, something dislodges from one of the flaps. She holds the flap down and discovers several thin, familiar-looking envelopes. Back in her room, sitting on her and Ellen's bed, she slides her fingernail along the top of one. The letter inside is dated two days after their wedding.

Lou,

I have decided to write to you on our anniversaries. I'll post them here every year and then maybe on our 20th or 40th anniversary I'll give them all to you. It's like I'm writing to the future you. To my future wife. Hello old Louise, how are you? We've been married for two days and two hours and so far it's been wonderful. You are wonderful. I love being your wife.

Harry stops reading. She moves the letter aside and inspects the others. There are four more, one for each year of their marriage. She can picture herself on the crisp white sheets of their honeymoon hotel, Louise in the shower as she scribbled this first one. Even so, the memory feels indistinct, like a series she watched a while ago. The genre and gist are familiar, but the plot and emotional resonance fuzzy and forgotten. Perhaps she could search for an episode guide, work out a chronology and the complexities of the relationships between each of the characters, but without sitting down to re-watch from beginning to end, it's impossible to access true feeling.

Someone's key in the lock makes her jump. She pushes off the bed and hides the letters in the back of her sock drawer, then turns to the mess of boxes and bin bags. She can

tell by the footsteps on the stairs that it's her landlady rather than Ellen, but she still hurries up her task. She repacks the smallest box with some of the photos, but, thinking of both their housemate and the spider moving on, sorts the rest into piles for rubbish, recycling and the charity shop.

The 114th rotary clerk frowns when she meets them outside to hand over the keys. She tells them the flat hasn't been cleaned. 'It's up to you what you want to do about that, but I would complain.'

Harry gets on the phone to the estate agent.

'We can send someone today. Could you postpone your move until tomorrow?'

Harry glances at her parents and Ellen waiting in the cab of the van they've hired, ready to unload. 'No,' she says, frustrated.

The estate agent puts Harry on hold and eventually returns to say someone will be there within the hour to do what they can.

Finally, they let themselves into the flat. Their flat. When they viewed it a couple of weeks ago, it seemed light and airy and romantic. Today, Harry notices the stains on the countertops and marks on the walls. The bathroom smells of damp and the sash windows look shabby and draughty.

'Are you okay, dear?' Harry's mum asks Ellen as she sets a bag for life full of miscellaneous kitchen things at the base of the fridge. 'You look a little pale.'

Harry watches Ellen nod and smile at her mother. Ellen's told her sisters about the biopsy results, but says there's no point worrying anyone else, even her own parents, until they know more after the surgery. Harry hears her asking her mother about work as they make their way back down the stairs together. Harry picks up the bag to check if anything

needs refrigerating. They're lucky their move has fallen out of term time, and that Harry's parents are still willing to drop everything to help her lug around books and cheap IKEA furniture like they did when she was a student. When she called to ask if one of them would mind driving a van, they could easily have reminded their thirty-three-year-old daughter that she does actually have a license. But Harry hasn't driven in more than a decade and her thankfully sympathetic mother got straight on to a price-comparison van-hire site. They're going to the theatre tonight and staying in some fancy boutique hotel they found on Groupon, permitting them all the pretence that their labour here is merely a convenient minor favour rather than another desperate and annoying plea from their overgrown dependent.

'Can you smell that?' Harry's dad says, coming in with two boxes piled on top of each other. Harry sniffs and looks around. Then Ellen returns and checks her shoes. They discover she's trodden a very fresh dog shit into every room of the entirely carpeted flat.

'I want to cry,' she whispers to Harry as she stands on the pavement picking it out of her sole with a tissue.

'Me too,' Harry says. She glances along the pavement at her parents discussing the best way to manoeuvre her desk. 'I better help,' she says, abandoning Ellen.

That evening, after the cleaner has been and Harry's parents have gone, they open a bottle of prosecco and swig from the neck. Tipsy, Harry films a video message for Faith and Liza, welcoming them to 'Casa del Shit'. Faith sends back a clip of Bernardine Evaristo talking about how before she was successful she used to manifest things – like winning the Booker Prize – by writing positive affirmations on slips of paper.

Harry shows the clip to Ellen, then finds them each a biro and a crumpled receipt from her wallet. She writes: *You're going to be okay.*

Ellen swigs more wine. 'We're going to be really happy here,' she reads from the back of her receipt. Her face, however, looks like it's trying to communicate something else.

Harry thinks of another list to make: everywhere she's been happy. She leans back against a box, noting a heaviness in her stomach. She feels like she's brought something with her that she should have left behind.

Natalie folds her arms beside her emaciated girlfriend. *Yourself?*

Dana's emails remain light in tone, but begin to arrive with more persistent frequency.

How are you getting on?

Anything ready to show me yet?

7 weeks til pub day! It'd be great to send something to

Pru before then!

Had a meeting at Penguin today. Everyone there's SO excited about this book! They're all asking what's coming next...

Harry sits at her desk in the window on the second floor, bathed in daylight. She doesn't respond to her agent, but keeps going with Natalie's story, sending her and her girlfriend down the worst paths she can imagine. It's all tears and misery, which Harry feels quite capable of conjuring, but has to admit makes the narrative rather one-note. She tries another, more graphic angle, and wastes a couple of days researching the intricate details of living with and changing a colostomy bag, and the migration of tumours around a once-healthy body.

At night she lies awake watching Ellen sleep and squinting at a shadow in the corner of the room. There's nothing there, she knows, and no need to put her glasses on. Still, she reaches her hand across the expanse of sheet to touch Ellen's side. Ellen stirs and rolls further

across the bed. Only slightly comforted, Harry withdraws her hand, eyes still on the shadow. It's not a figure, she tells herself night after night. It's simply the streetlights creeping through the curtain cracks and playing tricks on her mind. That's all. When she sits up, it doesn't move. *See*. She spins her legs over the side of the bed and checks the time on her Fitbit. 3.41. Or 2.13. Or 5.29. Or 4.06. Bracing, she stands up. The cool night air coming through the draughty windows prickles her exposed skin. Tonight, she forces herself to walk slowly and calmly to the door, to take her time pulling her gown off the hook and threading one arm then the other into the sleeves, proving to the shadow that is not a figure that she is not in any way scared of it. Without looking back, she opens the door, crosses the landing and descends the two not-yet-familiar steps into the bathroom. She resists the urge to slide the lock. She really is being stupid. She's a thirty-three-year-old woman acting like a child. She pees, doesn't flush because it'll wake Ellen, and rinses her hands. She avoids eye-contact with the mirror, always having feared seeing something reflected behind her in the dark and almost always assaulted by an instant, unbidden memory of a certain horror film and its accompanying triple incantation that even just thought at this hour may lead to sudden, gruesome death. Through the single-glazed bathroom window, she hears the drone of a perhaps only slightly distant helicopter. She tries but fails not to wonder who it is looking for as she gropes for the towel. Back in the bedroom, the shadow is gone. She steps over to where it stood. Of course, there is nothing there. She glances beyond the curtains at the street outside and watches a fox prowl through the pub garden opposite. She checks the latch securing the top and bottom sashes together and, heartbeat almost back to normal, hangs her gown back on the hook and returns to bed. Ellen has rolled into a cocoon, so Harry yanks some of the covers back and curls around her. It was nothing, she tells herself again. She was imagining things. It's probably normal even, in a new home. Unable to fall back asleep, she wonders if there's material here. Could Natalie begin to see things in the night? Perhaps she's sleep-deprived because of worry

and lies in bed telling herself she's imagining things. In the daytime we'll see her inspect the outside of the house, looking for confirmation that no one can get in. She'll remind herself that the shadow never moves, just stands there watching them sleep; a real monster wouldn't do that. Yet it'll start to unravel her. Her girlfriend will ask what's wrong. Their relationship will suffer. Natalie's job too. (What is her job actually? It needs to be something decent enough to feel like a loss.) Her girlfriend will suggest they need space. She'll take a trip, leaving Natalie to pull herself together. Or maybe it's when the girlfriend's symptoms deteriorate and—

Harry looks over at Ellen. She's not ready to think about that yet, even in narrative terms. But, either way, right at the end, when Natalie is alone and it seems like she's lost everything, the shadow will say, 'Hello.'

In the daylight Harry decides this story is dumb. She wonders, instead, if it would be possible to write a cancer comedy. She tries out describing the internal decay of a person's organs, but struggles to make it funny. What about writing from the point of view of a colon? She gets up to make a cup of tea and stares at the wonky kitchen drawers and the peeling paint above the tiles. Someone upstairs seems to be a piano tutor. It's 3 o'clock and today's lesson begins with a faltering 'Baby Shark', the deeper notes sending vibrations through Harry's solar plexus. She leans back against the sink and tries to let the noise wash over her. The student fumbles and there's a brief, beautiful silence before it restarts. A voice in Harry's mind can't help but follow along: *Ba-by shark, doo doo doo doo do do, Ba-by shark doo doo*— a gift from Ellen's nephews who delight in torturing them with the tune and accompanying gestures.

She returns to her desk and clamps on her headphones. Staring at her document, she realises she still hasn't named Natalie's girlfriend. She tries out Sarah, but dislikes the look of all the 'S's on the page. Isobel? Julia? Bronwen? Heather? She spends the rest of the afternoon clicking through Find and Replace, but all feel distant and two-dimensional. Eventually she tries out Ellen, just to see, and for want of anything better leaves it that way.

Some days she cries as she writes. Other days, she grows bored and sends Natalie out of their house, on errands and escapes that happen to land her in strangers' beds, locking limbs with men and women. She seems to be writing some kind of illness-porn mash-up. There's no way she'll be able to send this to Dana, but she keeps going.

Living in a flat, she finds it harder than ever to motivate herself to go outside. Descending two flights of stairs takes tremendous effort. She starts doing star-jumps in the kitchen when she feels guilty about her lack of exercise, but a note arrives from the downstairs neighbour complaining about the noise. She puts yoga videos on the TV at lunchtime, but finds it more meditative to simply listen to the perky presenter while lying on the couch eating crisps.

'Have you been out today?' Ellen asks when she arrives home each night. Despite the limbo state of waiting for the surgery, she's keeping positive. Her latest temp job isn't too bad and cycling back and forth to Whitechapel gives her a healthy glow.

'I didn't have time,' Harry murmurs, reaching for the wine in the fridge. 'I'll go for a walk tomorrow.'

She returns to her lists when she can't write, running her fingers over the names and places, searching for meaning. She wonders about the people she's forgotten, then the ones she remembers in detail. They're fixed in her head and seem whole, but each one must be as

different now as she is. She lingers always on Louise's name. Harry doesn't even know her address now. She turns back to Natalie and has her bump into a graphic designer at a party. They get chatting and become friends. Nothing sexual for once; she doesn't want Natalie to ruin this. They go to the cinema and parks and restaurants together. They laugh and enjoy each other's company. 'You're my best friend,' Louise tells Natalie. 'You're mine,' Natalie replies.

Harry contemplates other directions she could send her autofictional gaze. The future, maybe, or parallel universes. She remembers Bernardine Evaristo's manifestations and wonders if she could write Ellen and herself into owning a five-bedroom house in Putney. They could be rich, happy, healthy and sorted, and whatever story happens around them could still allow them to stay that way. She begins to sketch this out in her notebook. Should she give them a child? A nice one, obviously, that miraculously hasn't impacted their richness, happiness and sortedness as much as actual children appear to. They'll still be having regular sex and making lots of art, basically. And have a large, loving chosen-family around them. She pulls up Google Maps to scope out a neighbourhood and is beginning to imagine the Anthropologie interiors of their beautifully grown-up house when the piano starts up.

'For fuck's sake!'

Harry drops her pen and bends to retrieve her earbuds from the bottom drawer. It's where she shoves everything, and even more of a mess since the move. In the mood for pressing bruises, she wheels back her chair, drops to her knees and yanks the drawer as far out as it will go. She's confronted by biros, paperclips, nail polishes, old bank cards and ancient scraps of notes about long-forgotten narratives. Somewhere in here, she's pretty sure, is also a small black ring box. She lowers her head and peers towards the back. Will the band inside still fit given the weight she's gained? She wonders if it's weird that she's kept it. But

what else is she supposed to do with it? She moves a clutch of faded pink Post-Its and there it is, hiding in the corner. She's about to reach for it when something moves. Harry jumps and knocks her head against the underside of the desk.

'Fuck!'

She bends down again and locks eyes, or at least imagines she does, with a spider.

'Hello,' she says softly.

The spider shrinks itself against a stray Post-It. Is it the spindly, elegant one? Harry can't tell, but it strikes her that this could be a sign. Perhaps that manifesting is a bad idea. Then it hits her—*of course it is*. What on earth was she thinking? It may have worked for Evaristo, but clearly she never made a contract with the Fates. In the context of Harry's deal with them, manifesting is just another word for tempting. And the whole point of the deal is that tempting leads to its opposite. Which must have been what the Fates, via Faith, were trying to get her to fall for. To imagine a nice, happy, healthy life for her and Ellen that they could then snatch away.

Harry snorts. Nice try, but no, she won't be duped.

She looks around for something to use to get the spider out. She takes a sheet of paper from her printer and sets about gently removing everything else in the drawer. The spider creeps beneath her protective Post-It, but doesn't run. Once everything but the Post-It is gone, Harry slides the paper into the bottom of the drawer and slowly, patiently coaxes the spider onto it. As the child above switches from *Chopsticks* to *Für Elise*, the spider tests one foot followed by another. All of a sudden, she scurries into the centre, then darts back and forth, tracing wonky geometric shapes.

Harry manoeuvres the sheet out of the drawer and places it on the desk. The spider is still for a moment, stunned, or perhaps just assessing her options. She tiptoes towards Harry's keyboard, but stops short, waving two, then three elegant legs.

‘Welcome home,’ Harry whispers.

The spider changes direction and makes a break for the edge of the desk, where she pauses, contemplating the gap between the ledge and the wall. She dips her body almost out of sight, then re-emerges.

‘You need a new web.’

Harry’s phone buzzes. It’s another message from Faith asking if she wants to get a drink. Harry swipes the notification away, but when she looks back, the spider has gone.

That night, Harry wakes from a dream about Howard and stares at the shadow. The dream started the same as they often do: a nightmare of the calmest kind, in which she finds herself with him after all, living a life. What’s always been unsettling about these kinds of dreams, at least when she wakes, is how un-unsettling they feel. As if she’s glimpsed through the fabric separating universes and seen—what? That she might have been happy even if she’d never disentangled herself from him? That inside her still lives that desire?

Tonight’s dream began just like those ones, but its ending was new. Harry and Howard were having tea with her mother in her parents’ living room. A harmonious, sociable scene. Howard’s hand was on Harry’s knee. Her mother was smiling, offering around biscuits. Harry had her laptop out. She was writing a novel and Howard seemed to know what it was about, as did her mother. She was stuck on a scene and asked them what they thought she should do.

A cloud passed over Howard’s features. *Must you do this, Baba?*

Yes, her mother said, *why are you putting us through this?*

They stood up and linked arms.

Listen to your mother. Don’t you think you’ve done enough damage already?

Harry looked from one face to another, shame flushing through her. Her mother was crying, which was the last thing she wanted. But something tugged at her thoughts—about what and why she was writing. It was important, wasn't it? If only she could focus.

Her gaze dropped to Howard's hand on her mother's arm. His fingers were splayed around her wrist like an enormous tarantula. The spider winked.

Get off her! Harry shouted. She leapt to pull them apart, her computer crashing to the floor.

Calm down, Baba, you're getting worked up.

Howard's dulcet tones enraged her more. *Maybe I want to be worked up.* She grabbed her mother and yanked her away from him. At the door, she turned back and looked Howard straight in the eye. *Fuck off, old man.*

Harry's been lying awake next to Ellen for a while now, thinking over and over that this is the day, at the age of thirty-three, that she's finally told the monster in her head to fuck off.

Later that morning, she returns to her manuscript. The scene with Louise is weak, but Harry feels comforted. She realises she can use Natalie to knot all sorts of threads, not just this one. She begins to work through her lists. She builds a street out of all her homes and populates a town with everyone she's met. The girls who bullied her in school have miserable adulthoods, burdened with children and wandering husbands; everyone she once crushed on lines up to ask Natalie out; those she likes live at the top of the hill in luxurious mansions, those she hates at the bottom in squalor; and Howard is placed in a cage in the town square, sentenced to eat his own shit for a hundred years. She knows it's ridiculous, but she's not writing these bits with any hope of either making or not making them happen. This is

reconciliation rather than manifestation. Revenge as a side-dish to the main course of Tragedy. In the middle of the town, she builds a hospital and places Natalie's dying Ellen inside, surrounded by the most beautiful flowers.

Why? Natalie wails, half buried by chrysanthemums.

'Are you still writing?' Ellen shouts one evening as she pulls groceries out of her panniers. 'Let's go to the quiz.'

Harry follows Ellen into the kitchen, picturing her skeletal body soon to be decomposing underground, Natalie fucking strangers to deal with her grief. She feels panicked by the idea of walking to the pub. 'I'd rather just stay in tonight.'

We miss you, Harry's friends message. *Why don't you come out anymore?*

Faith keeps sending her links that she doesn't open. Liza's left Leo and moved into a colleague's house-share in Lewisham. Harry promised to help her move, but accidentally left her phone in the bedroom that day and missed all of Liza's calls.

'Let's have people round,' Ellen says another night. Harry agrees as a compromise. They cook a meal and drink too much wine with two of Ellen's studio friends. The next day Harry cries in the bath and spends an hour scrolling through images of spider tattoos. She orders a sheet of temporary transfers meant for children's birthday parties. She's relieved when Ellen goes to work on Monday and she can return to Natalie. Her girlfriend is almost dead now. It's tragic. Horrible. Harry feels bereft when she finishes the scene. She runs to the real Ellen as soon as she arrives home.

'I love you so much, I don't know what I'd do without you.'

*

She remembers her shaking and spends a whole day twitching but never quite committing to it. She remembers the Gertrude Stein quote Faith sent her and copies it onto a Post-It to stick to her wall: *But, anyway, I like what I have and now it is today.* Stein had a publisher and readers and money and houses and dogs and Alice B. Toklas, though, which anyone would like.

She needs an ending. A sinkhole opens up at Ellen's funeral. Everyone and everything falls inside. Natalie is left standing alone on the precipice.

Look at what you've done, she says to Harry.

Look at what you've done, Harry replies.

Was it worth it? Natalie asks, then steps into the abyss.

'Baby, have you been out today? When was the last time you left the flat?'

Harry looks up to find Ellen standing in the doorway, cheeks flushed from her ride home. She's wearing a black and white striped top and the black jeans that cling to her thighs. She looks beautiful and healthy and real. Harry smiles. 'Shall we go out for dinner?'

'Really?'

Harry turns back to her screen and closes Natalie's document. She closes each tab of her browser, dismissing her scattered research into late-stage bowel cancer, environmentally friendly funerals and sink holes. She closes everything she has open and shuts down her computer.

Ellen's still standing in the doorway, watching.

'Are you okay?' Harry asks.

Ellen nods.

'Where shall we go?'

It's autumn and the air outside feels new. Harry smiles as they walk. 'What's up with you?'

Ellen asks.

'Nothing.'

Ellen gives her a look.

They choose the sourdough pizza place and wait in the queue outside. Harry reaches for Ellen's hand, tracing her fingertips up her wrist and to her elbow, craving skin. By the time they're seated, they're giggling.

'Remember when we came here on an early date,' Harry says, 'and you made this gesture?' She reaches both arms up and out, then brings them down together to trace her fingertips from her breastbone to navel, then back up and around each boob.

Ellen snorts. 'What was I even doing?'

'I don't know. You looked mortified when you realised.'

Ellen smiles. 'It's nice to have you back.'

Harry flushes with guilt and looks away. There are three women in their fifties, or perhaps early sixties, sitting at a table near the back of the restaurant. Their faces show the similarities of sisters, but their styles are strikingly incongruous. One has a silk scarf around her shoulders, held on with a broach, and a thin wooden walking stick propped on the back of her chair. Another wears expensive, branded active wear and sits with a small leather diary open in front of her. The third is the one that interests Harry most. Hunched low in her chair, she's huddled in a worn parka despite the warmth of the restaurant, worrying the threads hanging from its sleeves while the other two talk.

'What are you staring at?'

'Just curious about those women.'

Harry bows her head in embarrassment as Ellen turns to look. 'They're so serious,' she says, twisting back. 'Do you think someone died?'

Harry catches Ellen's eye and for a moment it seems like they might weather the word, move past it like any normal couple out for a normal weekday meal. But the residues of Ellen's smile fade. She lowers her gaze to the table, pale lashes quivering. Harry pinches her lip between her teeth. She reaches for Ellen's hand. 'I love you.'

Ellen nods, not looking up. 'I know.'

Ellen has to spend Sunday afternoon and evening preparing her bowels once more with the gross Moviprep solution. Between long periods in the bathroom, she lies on the couch holding her stomach. Harry tries to hug her but is pushed away. ‘Don’t, I’m worried I’ll fart on you.’

A nurse leads Harry in to see Ellen in the recovery room after the procedure. ‘She’s doing well,’ he says with a smile before leaving to tend to someone else.

Harry hovers by Ellen’s bed, wanting to touch her but not sure how. She takes her hand, which is warm and a little clammy. ‘No complications,’ Ellen murmurs in response to her questions about what anyone’s told her. She blinks slowly as another nurse comes over to check her pulse and blood pressure.

‘You’re going to feel groggy for a few hours, darling,’ the nurse says. ‘Lie on your side if you’re uncomfortable. I’ll be back in a bit.’

Harry stirs two sugars into a polystyrene cup of tea and offers it to Ellen with a Hobnob from the tray by the door. She looks around at the other patients and their visitors. There’s a grey-haired man with shaking limbs who reminds her of her grandfather just before he died. A woman with dyed-red hair is attempting to get him to eat a biscuit while he squirms away. Harry turns back to Ellen, trying to dismiss the feeling that they are part of something large and impersonal.

They’re approached again by the nurse and a small, neat-looking woman who introduces herself as the endoscopist who performed Ellen’s surgery. Harry struggles to imagine this manicured creature spending her days manoeuvring cameras around digestive

tracts. She wonders if it means something that Dr Prayer isn't here. Surely if it was bad news, they'd send him.

'This went very smoothly,' the endoscopist says, aiming a lipstick smile at Ellen. 'You might experience some bleeding, but that's normal. Overall, well done you!' She continues smiling until Ellen gives a woozy nod.

'You hear that?' Harry says after she's gone. 'She seemed positive, right? I have a good feeling.'

Finally Ellen is discharged and Harry leads her to the taxi rank outside, sensing they've passed a milestone. 'You did great,' she says taking her hand in the back seat. 'I'm so proud of you.'

Harry invites Liza and Faith for dinner on Friday night. Liza messages back asking if she can bring Paul.

'The man from her boxing club?' Ellen asks, wrinkling her nose.

'Don't tell her I told you about that.' They're curled under a blanket on the sofa watching *The Real Housewives of Beverley Hills*. Ellen has barely been to her studio in the past month, but the gallery in LA got back in touch saying they want to move forward with her pitch. She's just explained she's contemplating breaking from her commitment to scale and enlarging the wives and parts of their abodes in relation to the hierarchical positionings created by the show. 'From which season, though?' Harry asked, to which Ellen frowned and said that that was what she hadn't figured out—and why she needed to keep watching. Harry glances at her gazing at the TV with a notebook in her lap. It's nice to see her excited about her work again. Harry hasn't looked at her manuscript in over a week, but sitting here she feels more faith than ever in her pact with the Fates. Ellen's results appointment isn't for two

weeks, but Harry senses that their ordeal is over. What was inside Ellen is gone; there's nothing left to poison their narrative.

Faith arrives first, then Liza and Paul in a fluster of flowers and wine from the M&S by the station. Harry has been worried about her friend, imagining her gaunt and conflicted, unable to eat and shrunken in sadness, as she herself has been after break-ups. Liza, however, is flushed and healthy looking. 'That looks like a nightmare to get into,' Harry says of her pleather jumpsuit.

Liza laughs, and smiles brightly when Harry asks how she's doing. 'Really great, thanks.' She places her hand on Paul's bicep and flashes him another, more private smile.

Harry ushers them inside, watching Paul's fingertips trace Liza's waist and hip. Faith catches Harry's eye and pulls a face before leaning in to greet them.

Then Liza begins to giggle. She repeats apologies between glances at Paul, but can't seem to stop. After a while, they all start to laugh, though Harry suspects at different things. She remembers the clip Ellen's sister played and imagines them floating, one by one, up to the ceiling and getting stuck. Sobered, she asks about drinks.

'*When* did she break up with Leo?' Ellen whispers in the kitchen.

Harry twists the bottle against the cork, bracing for the pop. 'She moved out two weeks ago.'

Ellen angles each flute for Harry to pour. 'You think there was an overlap?'

'She said they kissed, that was it.'

Ellen purses her lips and makes a 'mmm' noise. Harry refrains from reminding her they got together not that much longer after she and Louise broke up and follows her into the living room with two glasses of prosecco and a ginger beer for Faith. Liza and Paul are

pressed together on one end of the couch, thighs lined up like sausages, while Faith's opted for the chair on the other side of the room. Ellen excuses herself to tend to the food. Harry perches on the footstool and asks how they are, what their journeys were like and how Liza's settling into her new place. Liza's hands move as she talks, searching for something on Paul's arm, hand, thigh, neck and face as she tells them about setting off the fire alarm while sage-cleansing her new room. Faith plucks a book from the shelf beside her and begins to read. Ellen calls them to the table, where Liza and Paul inch their chairs closer together. Harry and Ellen sit opposite, with Faith at the head. Harry makes an effort to focus the conversation on Faith, asking about her work and writing and if she's heard anything from her agent.

'I'm thinking of packing it all in to be honest.'

'Don't do that,' Harry says, her attention wandering to Liza, whose smiles, blushes and flickering eyelashes are stirring something inside her. She reaches for Ellen's knee beneath the table.

'Did you get my link?' Faith asks.

'What?'

'I sent you my novel.'

Harry pulls her eyes from Liza and Paul. 'When?'

'Never mind.'

'I must have missed it, but I'll have a look. I can't wait to read it.'

Faith nods.

'It's cool that you're both writers,' Paul murmurs. He's smiling almost as much as Liza, but his eyes dart whenever he's asked a direct question. Harry can't tell if it's embarrassment or shyness, but it looks incongruous on a man of his size. Their pokey kitchen feels filled up by his muscles and hair wax and absurdly large hands. She tries to draw him into conversation now, but other than when Liza turns to him, his responses remain mostly

monosyllabic. He grew up in Portsmouth, she manages to extract, works for a car hire company, and does Judo as well as boxing.

‘You also do loads of volunteering,’ Liza adds, twisting her full upper body towards him. ‘A psychic told me I was going to meet someone generous with their time, and literally the next day you came to class.’

Paul shrugs his enormous shoulders and mumbles something Harry can’t hear. Liza laughs and puts her fork down to cup his chin in her hand. She pulls him to her and Harry feels the rest of them disappear. She sees a flicker of the overhead light reflected on Liza’s spit as she darts her tongue into his mouth.

Ellen nudges Harry and begins clearing the plates.

‘I should get off,’ Faith says. ‘There’s an application I want to waste my time on in the morning.’

Harry murmurs objections, but Faith leaves the room to find her coat. Harry senses she’s mad, but she’s tired and tipsy and the effort trying to smooth things over feels like too much for this evening. She sees Faith to the door and promises to call her tomorrow. Faith tells her to thank Ellen for dinner.

Back inside, Harry watches Ellen at the sink, thinking she looks handsome, vibrant and, most of all, healthy. She steps towards her and places a kiss on the back of her neck. Ellen lets out a soft, contented sound and leans into her. Warmed up by the booze or perhaps just the more intimate gathering, Paul is talking about a restaurant he wants to take Liza to—somewhere with rope ladders you have to climb to get to your table. Harry fetches another bottle from the fridge and studies Liza as she fills her glass. Her friend looks happy, released. And Paul seems fine. Not awful at least, which is something. They obviously have chemistry, which Liza certainly deserves.

The conversation twists and turns until Liza begins giggling again and knocks over a glass. While Ellen clears it up, Harry finds herself falling into an argument with Paul over TV licenses. She and Ellen have not yet bought one because they already subscribe to two streaming services. In his most animated moment of the evening, Paul insists there's a moral duty to buy one even if you don't watch live TV. 'Think of it like a tax.'

'But it's not a tax,' Harry says, 'it's a service.'

'You want the BBC to continue to exist, though?'

'Of course, but if the BBC's at risk, then shouldn't it find a model to stay competitive?'

'Would you say the same about the NHS?'

'That's hardly the same.'

Ellen and Liza sip their drinks and exchange eye contact. Harry feels Paul's presence growing bigger and bigger inside their flat.

'Why?' he goes on. 'It's a national institution. It's part of the fabric of our country. You're a writer, you of all people should understand the risk of the homogenised story. Do you want everything we consume to be produced by Amazon and Netflix?'

Liza says she's ordering an Uber.

'I don't see why competition has to lead to homogenisation. The world is evolving, change is only bad if you can't keep up. Maybe some things have a shelf life.'

'Are little old ladies who rely on the radio for company past their shelf life?'

Harry stares at him, confused. Her wine-sodden mind flits to the women in the pizza place. 'What are you talking about?'

Paul leans forward, placing his elbows on the table. 'Paying your TV license allows the BBC to keep making all of its content, including radio—'

‘Then it should charge for radio!’ Harry cries. ‘Or it should be an actual tax that everybody has to pay. As it is, it’s a fee for a service, and if I don’t use the service then I don’t see why I should pay. Especially when their journalism is growing increasingly—’

‘Baby,’ Ellen says, touching Harry’s arm. How many times has she told her that she needs to let things go? Especially when drinking.

Liza has retreated to the bathroom, Harry realises. She sits back in her chair and gives a small shrug.

Paul leans back too, a smile playing on his lips. ‘Got you pretty worked up there.’ He holds up his hands. ‘Just playing devil’s advocate. I actually never watch TV and don’t have one either.’

‘Two minutes,’ Liza calls from the hallway.

Paul pushes back his chair. ‘Thank you for dinner,’ he says, towering over them. Harry follows him into the hallway, her heart racing slightly.

‘It was nice to meet you,’ Ellen says. ‘So good to see you doing well, Liza.’

Liza places her hand in Paul’s elbow, looking like a weight he’s about to lift high above his head. ‘Call me,’ Harry says, wanting to tell her friend to ditch this meathead. Does she need to imagine Liza marrying him to tempt the Fates into sending her someone better?

After they’ve gone, she follows Ellen into the kitchen to dry while she washes. The room still feels filled by an alien presence, as if their flat has been violated by Paul’s strange energy. ‘Where did that come from?’ Harry asks, but Ellen is silent, more annoyed it seems by Harry’s outburst than his.

Ellen groans the next morning that Harry's hug requires too much movement. Harry, feeling only moderately better, brings her tea and slices of banana bread, and they lie in their sheets to begin a new season. They allow most of the day to be swallowed by the housewives, getting up only to relocate to the couch and retrieve more food. Harry makes notes on her phone as they watch for a short story about Liza. She and Paul, she decides, will have a long, tumultuous, ill-advised union, which her friend will follow with a string of even worse romances that leave her shredded and undone, and wondering finally if she should simply have stayed with Leo, though by then of course it will be too late and she'll be stuck alone forever. Harry frowns at her screen. Perhaps it's the hangover, but she's confused suddenly by the logic of her own system. Committing the worst outcomes she can imagine to paper should tempt the Fates into making sure those things don't happen, but how can she make sure something good does? Happiness doesn't have a single opposite she can imagine and ward off for Liza. She might write a thousand stories severing potentially terrible threads, but there will always be more paths to suffering. Is that true for her and Ellen, too? She feels sure she's saved them from Natalie's tragedy, but what about others?

She glances at Ellen dozing against the arm of the sofa. Perhaps that doesn't matter. Perhaps this is enough. Harry thinks of the Post-It on her wall: *But, anyway, I like what I have and now it is today.* She could spend her life writing herself and Ellen out of every imaginable danger, using words as their private invincibility shield. Or she could simply be thankful that it has worked this once and use the opportunity to live that life. This life.

Are you sure it's worked? she hears Natalie pipe up from the rock she's been hiding under.

Harry looks again at Ellen. *Go away.*

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Try worrying about your own problems.

Harry stretches out her legs so her toes touch Ellen's on top of the footstool. Ellen smiles and shifts her position to snuggle against Harry's side. Harry braces for more, but Natalie, thankfully, seems to have retreated. What does she know anyway? She's not even real. On the screen, Lisa Vanderpump storms out of a restaurant, leaving Kyle and Dorit open-mouthed. Ellen moves a cushion to lean against Harry's thigh and repositions herself to lie down. Harry places her hand on Ellen's back and feels a rush of affection.

Ellen's asleep by the end of the episode, so Harry turns off the TV and carefully replaces her thigh with another cushion. She closes the door to the living room and heads to the kitchen to inspect the contents of the fridge. Uninspired, she slips on her shoes and grabs two bags for life.

'Spare any change?' asks the man on the corner by TK Maxx.

'Sorry,' Harry says with a grimace. She continues along the walkway to Sainsbury's, remembering Natalie abandoning her shopping and heading to the bookshop. She thinks of Ellen asleep on the couch and feels a little sick about the playwright. Natalie is a character, she reminds herself. Just because she wrote something, doesn't mean she wanted it. She loves Ellen; she could never in a million years do what Natalie did.

Harry picks up a basket and follows her usual route through fruit and veg. Bananas, spinach, salad, aubergine, mushrooms, garlic, ginger, chilli, oranges. Her basket is almost full by the time she makes it to bread, soya milk and noodles. She starts to head towards the self-service checkouts, then remembers they're out of decaf earl grey. She spins around, almost knocking into a child dangling behind her mother and brother like a daisy chain. 'Sorry,' Harry murmurs. She makes her way past tins, dry goods and cereal, then turns onto the tea and coffee aisle, thinking she should probably stock up on beans for the machine as well.

Then she stops.

Up ahead of her, with her back turned, studying a box of peppermint, is Louise. A black hat covers most of her head, but Harry can see a few stray curls tickling the back of her neck. She wears a thick cardigan wrapped around her body in place of a coat. She's skinnier than she was, but Harry recognizes her stance, weight slightly to the right, left knee bent. Louise moves with a familiar fluidity as she replaces the box and reaches for another from a higher shelf. Harry catches a glimpse of her cheekbone, pale and freckled. She imagines her blue eyes scanning the packaging.

People weave their trolleys around Harry, impatient to finish their shopping and get on with their lives. Louise, however, seems in no hurry. She places the box of peppermint in her basket and moves along to fennel. She never used to drink anything except builder's tea. Plenty of milk, no sugar. She loved to cook but would groan if they invited a vegetarian over. Now here she is filling her basket with tofu and almond milk like every other south-east London lesbian.

Somehow it doesn't strike Harry as odd that she might run into her now. She had no idea Louise was in the area but it makes sense, in a way, that she would come back just as Harry stopped thinking about her. Now their divorce is done and Ellen fills Harry's field of vision, of course Louise would pop up. Still, Harry's heart hammers. She inhales for what feels like the first time since seeing her and slowly makes her way forward.

'Watch out,' someone growls as Harry forces them out of her path. Is that raspberry tea Louise is fingering? Disgusting.

Behind her now, Harry can smell Louise's perfume, unfamiliar but pleasing. She reaches out her hand. 'Lou?'

Her ex-wife's shoulder shudders beneath her touch and she lets go of the box in her hand before turning to face Harry.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’

They both look down at the box of tea on the floor. Harry is first to bend to pick it up.

‘Thanks,’ Louise murmurs, taking it from her and replacing it on the shelf.

‘How are you?’

Recovering, Louise tucks a curl behind her ear. ‘Uh, okay. How about you?’

‘Yeah, okay.’

Louise glances towards the end of the aisle. ‘I was, uh, wondering if we might bump into each other. We just moved down the road. I didn’t know if you were still around here.’

Harry digests the word ‘we’. She’s periodically looked Louise up on social media, scanning through each new photograph and update. It’s been a while, but the last time she looked there didn’t appear to be a ‘we’.

‘Did you find a nice place?’

Louise nods. ‘Really nice.’

They observe each other for a moment.

‘This is weird,’ Louise says.

Harry nods, then finds herself blurting, ‘Do you want to get a drink?’ Louise shifts her basket to the other hand. Her eyes flit towards the checkouts. ‘Only if you’ve got the time.’

Louise returns her attention to Harry and gives a weak smile. ‘Meet you after we’ve paid?’

‘Right,’ Harry says, lifting her basket from the floor. ‘See you in a minute.’ She hurries to the top of the aisle, where she puts on a show of pretending to think what it is she still needs, then dives for cover behind a wine display. Her heart is beating hard in her chest. She takes out her phone to send Ellen a message. Her fingers hover over the keyboard. *Out for a bit*, she types, *will make dinner when I’m back*. That’s okay, isn’t it? It’s not a lie. She’ll

tell Ellen she bumped into Louise when she gets back. Of course she will. It's just an odd thing to write over text.

Harry puts her phone away, takes two steps in one direction, turns, then turns again, performing an entire 360 before pacing down the frozen goods aisle towards the checkouts. She looks at her basket: nothing that can't survive out of the fridge for the length of one drink. God, she's glad that's what she suggested and not a coffee; she needs a drink.

Louise is waiting for her by the trolley bank, two slim tote bags dangling from her shoulders. Beneath the cardigan, she wears a dark blue jumpsuit, which hangs stylishly from her angular frame. Harry adjusts the straps of her bulky backpack, wishing she'd put on make-up or at least her good pair of jeans.

'The Rose?' Louise says, nodding towards the other side of the street.

They find a table in the corner.

'I'll get these,' Louise says before Harry has a chance. Harry watches her wait for service at the bar. She knew Louise looked like this now: thin, trendy, grown-up. Even so, it's different in the flesh. She feels like, if she blinks, Louise might disappear. She picks up a beer mat and starts tearing little pieces from its corner. Louise taps her card to the reader, turns with two gin and tonics and makes her way back to the table. This both is and isn't the person Harry spent a decade with. Do they know each other or not?

'Thank you for the drink,' she says as Louise sits.

Louise waves her hand dismissively.

'Are you doing well?'

'Work wise? Yeah.' Louise nods and takes a sip. 'I, uh, had a bit of a career change, I guess, and it's been really good.'

'You left Maxwells?' Harry asks, remembering now Louise's habit of deflecting personal enquiries, always steering conversations to either work or sports. It used to drive her

mad; although, she wonders suddenly what Louise thinks about the surge in attention for women's football and how she felt about that final.

Louise glances at something behind Harry's head. 'I had some issues.'

'Oh my god,' Harry says, remembering, 'I heard about the death threat!'

Louise snorts, the corners of her eyes crinkling in amusement. 'You shouldn't believe everything you hear.'

'It wasn't a death threat?'

'Of course not.' Louise laughs and Harry feels a sense of warmth creeping up her body. It feels nice to be laughed at by Louise. 'It was just some rubbish with one annoying guy. Totally boring but too much apparently for our small HR team to handle. It felt easier to leave.'

'I'm sorry, that's not right.'

Louise nods at her drink. 'It's worked out for the better. My partner's parents own a boutique gin distillery in Manchester and we've just opened a new site for them here.'

'Oh wow. That's amazing.'

Louise grins. 'It really is. Sadie's fantastic at the business side of everything, and I've been given so much freedom with the design and marketing. We're already in a couple of hundred pubs, which is way more than we hoped for by this point.'

Harry widens her eyes. 'I'm happy for you.'

Louise observes her for a moment. 'That's a nice thing to say.'

'What? Of course I'd be happy for you.' Harry glances down at the shredded beer mat, then back up at Louise. 'And I'm happy you're with someone. I guess it must be serious if you're running a business together.'

Louise nods. 'We just bought a house.'

Harry's cheeks feel stiff with smiling, but she forces herself to continue. She takes another mouthful of gin, thinking about the box on the form they both signed a few months ago stating they had no plans to cohabit with a new partner. 'That's great too,' she manages to say. 'You're really doing well then.'

Louise parts her lips as if she's about to say something more, but hesitates and takes a sip of her drink instead. 'What about you?'

'You know, same old.'

'Are you writing?'

'Of course.'

'Another novel?'

Harry wrinkles her nose. 'I'm not quite sure.'

'And you're living...'

'Down the road. Renting, but at least we have our own place now.'

It's Louise's turn to react to the word 'we'. 'Are you, um, still with Eleanor?'

'Ellen.'

The corners of Louise's eyes contract slightly and Harry feels a spike of guilt. She never meant to get into another relationship so quickly and tried for a while to keep it from Louise, but that deception only added to Louise's hurt when a mutual friend let slip.

'And how is she?' Louise asks, smiling again.

'Fine,' Harry says quickly. She looks down at the table and shuffles the bits of shredded beer mat into a pile. She remembers the feeling of warmth when Louise was laughing at her. Whether this is the person she knows or not, it's a relief to be in her company again. 'Actually,' she says, neatening the edges of the pile to create a snowy pyramid, 'Ellen's had a bit of a health scare.'

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ There’s a moment of silence before Louise adds, ‘Is she okay?’

Harry presses her tongue against her teeth, willing herself not to cry. She realises, despite what she’s been telling herself, she is still scared. ‘We’re waiting to find out.’

Louise reaches over the table to touch Harry’s hand, knocking over the pyramid.

Tears well against Harry’s bottom lashes. ‘Sorry, I don’t know where this is coming from. It’s so strange seeing you and with everything...’ She trails off.

‘It’s nice to see you,’ Louise says.

‘It’s really nice to see you.’

They lock eyes for a moment. ‘This is weird, isn’t it?’ Louise says.

‘It is.’

Louise sighs. ‘Would you like to meet up again?’

A tear rolls down Harry’s left cheek. She sucks her lips between her teeth and presses them together, nodding. ‘I’ve missed you.’

A frown passes across Louise’s face, but she’s quick to replace it. She removes her hand from Harry’s. ‘I’m not promising anything. I don’t know if I’m really ready to be friends yet.’

Harry swallows and two more tears fall. ‘But we can see. That’s what I can offer, alright?’

Harry nods. ‘I’d like to see.’

They part outside the pub. Harry wonders where it is Louise lives and briefly entertains the idea of following her, but realises how terrible that would look. She makes her way back home, where she finds Ellen still sleeping on the couch. She puts the radio on, pours a large glass of wine and starts chopping the veg she bought. Ellen wakes just before 8 and they eat in front of another episode. Harry sits there trying out sentences in her head. ‘I bumped into Louise today.’ ‘I had a drink with my ex-wife.’ ‘Weird thing, Louise just moved to the area.’ ‘Louise and I are talking again.’ ‘Louise is doing really well and I’m happy for

her but also kind of jealous.’ Nothing sounds right and in the end she doesn’t say anything until the next day when Louise sends a link inviting them both to a tasting evening at their distillery. *Don’t know if it’s your thing, but this should be a fun night if you and Eleanor want to come.*

‘Thanks for this,’ Harry says as they wait for the overground. She’s just finished teaching a workshop class and her head is full of the narratives her new students are working on and the awkwardness of being herself. She’s happy to be going somewhere, to be forced into distraction. ‘I’m sorry if it’s weird.’

‘It’ll only be weird if you make it weird,’ Ellen replies.

Harry stewes on this on the train. Is she the one that makes things weird? ‘I told Louise we’d probably only stay an hour,’ she says as they cross south London.

‘Why did you say that?’

Harry glances at Ellen. ‘I’d thought you’d get tired.’

Ellen’s expression darkens. ‘What have you told her?’

‘Nothing.’

‘That’s clearly not true.’

‘I said you’ve got some health problems, that’s all.’

‘Fuck’s sake. How is my health any of your ex-wife’s business?’

‘It’s not. I just—’

‘Jesus, did it not occur to you that maybe I don’t want everyone knowing I could be shitting into a bag soon?’

Harry catches the eye of the man sitting across from them. He looks quickly away. Harry reaches for Ellen’s hand, but she shakes her off. This is the first time she’s heard Ellen talk like this. Mostly they’ve just spoken about how exhausting it is to be in another period of waiting. Mostly Harry has been telling herself the worst is over. But Ellen must have been doing the same Google searches as she has. Ellen must be scared.

Harry looks out the opposite window, at the city passing by. A woman in her class had to step out after the icebreaker. Harry asked them to interview their partners about what they're working on and want to achieve in the class, then introduce each other to the group. She watched a flush creep up the woman's neck as her partner, a man in his late sixties writing a mafia series with what sounds like no female characters in it, twirled his pen and said, 'This is Sharon, she's writing women's fiction about women's issues, miscarriage and stuff.' Harry tried to rescue the situation, but she wasn't quick enough to catch the woman; she doubts she'll come back next week. With any luck the man won't either, but Harry should have done more.

'I'm sorry,' she whispers, 'I shouldn't have said anything.'

Ellen sighs. 'You had no right.'

The train pulls into their stop and they walk in silence along the platform and through the barriers.

'It's this way.' Harry grabs for Ellen's elbow as she turns in the wrong direction.

Ellen shrugs her off. 'I love you,' Harry says, but Ellen doesn't respond. *We'll get through this*, Harry reminds herself. *We have to*.

Her editor emailed this afternoon with publicity poster mock-ups. Her agent replied within a minute with a single word – *Exciting!* Two minutes later another email arrived from her in a private chain. Harry stared at it for a while, then hit reply: *Got to the end of a first draft. Should be able to show it to you soon*. The idea of sending Natalie's story to Dana makes her stomach churn, but she's worried if she backs out now her pact with the Fates will dissolve. What if it's not enough to just write these things for herself? To protect Ellen, she needs to fully commit.

After sending that message, she made herself a coffee and opened Natalie's document. Staring at it on a screen made her head spin and, anyway, she didn't have long

before she needed to leave for class. She sent the entire thing to her printer, double-sided and two-pages per sheet to make up for some of the environmental guilt she felt for doing so. She picked up her phone while she waited, navigating through various apps. The last offered her a memory from eight years ago, a girl-woman staring out of the screen. In the half second before she scrolled on, Harry registered her younger self's yellow coat and blunt, self-cut fringe, as well as the oven and fruit bowl in the background. She remembered the house she and Louise shared with a scientist and a musician: the nights spent drinking with the musician and the afternoons watching films with the scientist; the blue wallpaper in their bedroom and the rickety ladder up to the attic where she began her first novel; under-baking cupcakes in the middle of a Hallowe'en party because someone had said they were hungry; wanting to scream because there was always a streak of shit left at the bottom of the toilet bowl; the moth infestation they found beneath their wardrobe when they moved out— The printer beeped that it had run out of paper and Harry closed the app, banishing the stranger to her digital island. She was running late for her class by the time the last page emerged. She shuffled the sheets together, but felt less optimistic than when she'd sent them to print. Instead of packing the manuscript in her bag to get started on the journey, she placed it on her desk, ready for tomorrow. She wrote herself a note saying, *Tuesday – begin read-through. Send to Dana next week?*, grabbed her stuff and ran for the bus.

She and Ellen walk now into a warehouse-like space buzzing with people and music. Two enormous copper stills tower over the party. 'Can I take your coats?' asks a white-shirted teenager. Harry shrugs off her jacket and looks around. There are a lot of beards and tattoos around and she and Ellen must be at least a decade older than most of the other guests. 'It's like a portal to Hackney,' she says, trying to break their mood.

Ellen nods and accepts Harry's hand. They weave their way over to the bar, where another shirted teenager instructs them to sip three different blends before choosing the base for their cocktails.

'Cheers,' Harry says once they've been shaken, stirred and poured into impractically bulbous glasses. 'Shall we see if we can take a tour?'

There's a crowd of people at the base of one of the stills, which Harry squeezes onto the edge of. In the middle stands a short woman with a Betty Page pin-up style going on. Tattoos crawl from her shoulders to an ample cleavage, and she smiles at the group with bright red lips. 'We call this guy Bryan,' she says, pointing at the still. 'We got him from Sweden.'

Harry narrows her eyes, wondering if this could be Sadie, until she spots a name badge reading 'Ruth'. There was a Ruth in her class tonight too, a middle-aged woman working on short stories. 'I never know how to finish them,' she told the group, 'I'd like to learn how to end things.' Harry made a note of this on her lesson plan, saying she'd try to think of some exercises to help. She had a tutor once who asked them to switch their first and last lines, to see what reconstruction was necessary to create symmetry. She looks at this second Ruth's dark, blunt fringe and remembers her own in the photograph on the app. What would have happened if she'd met Ellen first and then Louise? Could the plot points of a life be reshuffled like that?

Ruth comes to the end of her spiel about the distilling process. 'Let's take a look from above.' She makes her way towards a steep, open staircase and the crowd shuffles around to follow her.

Ellen touches Harry's elbow. 'I might stay down here.'

'You okay?'

Ellen rolls her eyes. 'I'm fine.'

Harry follows the group. Halfway up the stairs, she looks around, trying to spot Ellen. She's propped on a bar stool talking to two bright young things dressed like the internet that Harry thinks from their body language must be together. Harry watches Ellen laugh and take a long sip of her cocktail. She feels a stab of something at seeing Ellen smile, but turns back towards the tour. They arrange themselves along the narrow balcony circling the perimeter of the warehouse, admiring the tops of the gleaming stills. Harry wanders to the edge of the group, tuning out the tour guide and inspecting the party below. She locates Ellen again, then scans the rest of the crowd for Louise.

A voice behind her makes her jump. 'Are you Harry?'

She turns to find a tall, smiling brunette.

'I've been wanting to meet you.' When nothing registers in Harry's face, she adds, 'I'm Sadie.'

'Oh shit,' Harry says. 'I mean, not shit, but hi. Um, it's nice to meet you. Congratulations on all this. It's amazing, everything here's just—' Harry waves the hand that's not holding her cocktail, aware she's being over the top.

Sadie laughs. 'It's nice to meet you too, I've heard a lot about you.' Harry must look alarmed because Sadie adds, 'Good things, I promise.'

Harry has to tilt her head to make eye contact. 'That seems unlikely.'

Sadie laughs again. 'I like you.' She has dark eyes and a dimple in her left cheek. 'I read your book.'

'You did?'

'If your fiancée's ex was a writer, wouldn't you want to read what they'd written?'

Harry swallows the word 'fiancée', noting its taste. Sadie smiles and brings her cocktail to her lips. 'Don't worry, I liked it.'

Harry's gaze slips to the small ruby on Sadie's ring finger. She pulls herself together.

'That's so pretty, did Louise choose it?'

Sadie nods. 'Sorry, is this weird?'

Harry shakes her head. 'I mean, yes, but also no. I'm happy for you both.'

Sadie looks at her for a moment. 'I'm glad you came, I really wanted to meet you.'

Harry doesn't know what to say.

'Come with me,' Sadie says, holding out a hand.

'Where?'

'Just come. Do you need a top-up first?'

Harry trails Sadie to another bar, then to the back of the building, through a door and up a metal fire escape. Harry is panting by the time they reach the top, but tries to hide it from Sadie who doesn't seem to have broken a sweat. She finds herself on a large, flat roof overlooking the distant city. Harry squints at the tiny, sparkling point of the Shard, dwarfed from this vantage by the two ship-like shadows of the Dawson's Heights estate. Then her gaze falls to the edge of the roof. There's no fence or barrier, just a smooth expanse of concrete. A shiver runs up her spine, followed by the absurd thought that Sadie has brought her up here to throw her off. She glances at her chic backless cocktail dress, thinking she'd make a perfect femme fatale.

Sadie turns to see where she is. 'Come look from over here.'

Harry follows, trying to stay as central as she can. She doesn't normally experience vertigo, but the lack of boundary between her and the air beyond the building makes her feel like she's already falling. She remembers the spider contemplating the edge of her desk.

'I should check on Ellen,' she says, glancing back towards the fire escape.

Sadie looks disappointed. 'Won't she be okay for a moment?'

Despite the chill of the air, Harry feels her face grow warm. Involuntarily, she pictures Sadie naked, then also Louise. ‘She’s got a lot going on,’ Harry murmurs, but takes another step towards Sadie. Her back is turned once more and Harry joins her a few feet from the edge, keeping her eyes in line with the horizon.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

Harry nods, wondering why Sadie’s really brought her here. Is this some way of marking her territory?

‘Louise told me about your girlfriend. If there’s anything we can do...’ Sadie trails off.

‘Why are you being so nice to me?’ There’s more of an edge in Harry’s voice than she intended.

Sadie lets out a laugh and Harry takes a step back. Sadie turns to face her. ‘Would you rather I hated you?’

Harry shuffles her feet, wishing the ground would swallow her. ‘Of course not.’

‘I love Louise and she loved you. Like it or not, we’re connected, and I think that connection might be a lot more comfortable if we’re friends. Don’t you?’

‘I guess.’

‘You guess you want to be friends with me? Gee, thanks.’

‘Sorry, that’s not what I meant. I just didn’t expect this.’ Harry attempts to return Sadie’s smile. She can feel her anxiety from teaching and the tensions with Ellen rising to the surface. She pinches her bottom lip between her teeth, trying to hold it all in.

‘Look,’ Sadie says, misinterpreting Harry’s expression, ‘Lou needed some time to heal. You hurt her pretty badly, which is what people do. But she’s in a good place now. She came home the other day saying she’s worried about you. It sounds like you’re going through a lot right now and you could do with support.’

Harry sips her drink, her eyeballs prickling with tears.

‘Well, don’t cry.’ Sadie takes a step forward and wraps Harry in her long arms.

Harry’s head rests just above Sadie’s breasts. Her mind flits again to imagining her as a villain: this hug would shift somehow into a tussle and they’d struggle against each other, locking eyes as they inched perilously towards the edge, knowing the only way to end this would be for one of them to sail over. Harry has to admit, though, that doesn’t seem to be Sadie’s genre.

‘You’re so tall,’ she says as they pull apart.

‘I suppose it’s reassuring that Lou doesn’t have a type.’

They make their way back across the roof to the door. Harry sees another flash of Sadie’s ring as she reaches for the banister and it hits her, perhaps for the first time, what she gave up and the woman in front of her is getting. Being loved by Louise always felt good.

Sadie leads them back down to the party, where they find Louise talking to one of the servers behind the bar. She steps out when she sees them, offering more cocktails and a generous smile. She’s wearing a floor-length dress that matches her eyes and clings to her waist.

‘You look stunning,’ Harry says as Louise leans in to kiss her cheek. She feels a small sense of victory at being greeted before Sadie, but then Louise pulls away and plants a long kiss on Sadie’s lips. They kiss with their eyes open, Harry notes, trying but unable to ignore the longing in each of their expressions. She remembers the nights she and Louise rolled away from each other, the silences that stretched between them. *Good for them*, she thinks, turning politely away. She scans the crowd for Ellen and spots her on the same bar stool as earlier, now talking to someone else. The woman, also on a stool, has her legs crossed in Ellen’s direction. Their torsos lean together, their heads almost touching as they giggle about something. Harry watches Ellen jerk back to shriek, then pick up her glass and return to their

intimate conspiracy. She takes a sip of her cocktail and wipes a finger under each eye. Harry sees her mouth, ‘Oh my god,’ her lips trembling with more laughter. She puts her cocktail back down on the bar and reaches her hand out to touch the woman’s knee.

‘So what do you think?’ Louise asks.

Harry snaps her attention back to them. Louise and Sadie lean casually against one another. Harry sips her drink and sways her weight from one foot to the other. ‘This?’ she says, waving her free hand to the ceiling. ‘It’s brilliant. Very impressive.’

‘I showed her the roof,’ Sadie says, looking up at Louise. Their eyes lock for a moment.

‘Beautiful up there, isn’t it?’ Louise says.

Harry nods.

Sadie rests her head on Louise’s shoulder. ‘It’s where Lou proposed.’

Harry lifts her drink again to hide her surprise. She wasn’t completely wrong about Sadie then—there was an element of marking her territory.

Louise catches her eye. ‘I was going to tell you the other day, but...’ She trails off.

‘It’s fine,’ Harry says, pasting a smile to her face. ‘I’m really happy for you both.’

Sadie kisses Louise’s hair and pulls away to retrieve her drink from the bar. ‘What are you writing right now?’

‘She’s working on another book,’ Louise says.

Sadie’s eyes light up. ‘What’s it about? When can we read it?’

‘I’m still figuring that out. Number two’s out first. Next month actually—’

‘Is that the Dover one?’ Louise asks.

Harry nods. She glances at the floor, unsettled by the reminder that the inspiration for that book arrived on their final anniversary.

‘We walked from Deal to Hythe,’ Louise says to Sadie. ‘And stayed in this really shitty B&B in Dover. The next day on the cliffs, though, Harry makes us stop so she can write something and twenty minutes later she’s jumping up and down telling me she knows what her next novel’s going to be about.’

‘I don’t know if it was quite that immediate,’ Harry says, ‘I might have come up with a character or two, but it’s taken me several years to figure out what to do with them.’

‘I thought you were going to wet yourself you were so excited.’

Harry smiles.

‘That’s amazing,’ Sadie says. ‘I wish I was creative.’

‘You are!’ Louise says, draping an arm over Sadie’s shoulder.

‘I should see how Ellen’s doing,’ Harry says, sensing she’s taken up enough of their time.

Louise nods. ‘She was over there...’ Their gazes land on the empty stools by the other bar.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll find her.’ Harry notes Louise must have done her own internet stalking over the years to have recognised Ellen. ‘Congratulations again, on everything.’

She squeezes through the crowd and discovers Ellen swaying towards the bathrooms.

‘I think you should go home,’ a stranger is saying as Ellen grips their arm. ‘Is there someone here with you?’

‘I am,’ Harry says, stepping in. ‘Thank you, sorry.’ She scoops her arm around Ellen’s middle and guides her first to the bathroom and then to the door.

‘We don’t need to leave if you want to stay,’ Ellen slurs.

‘I’m ready to go too.’

Harry helps Ellen into her coat before putting on her own. She too feels tipsy now and confused by the thoughts crowding her brain. They stumble onto the street. Harry’s about to

say something – what, she’s not sure, but something – when Ellen links arms and rests her head against her shoulder. ‘You look really pretty tonight, you know?’

Harry feels the warmth of Ellen’s attention melt much but not quite all of what she she’s been feeling most of the evening. Why couldn’t they have been like this on the train? Why couldn’t Ellen have stood by her side when she was talking to Louise and Sadie?

Ellen hiccoughs and they both laugh. Harry pushes her thoughts down. At least they’re here now. It feels good to be drunk and laughing together, to almost forget what’s going on.

They walk a little way towards the station, then realise it’s too late for their train.

‘I can’t sit on a bus right now,’ Ellen says, hiccoughing.

So they begin to walk. Slowly, leaning on each other.

‘I’m sorry I’m so drunk,’ Ellen says, swaying away and then back. ‘But I needed this, I think.’ She hiccoughs, then laughs, then hiccoughs again.

Harry looks up. The sky, hazy and grey, feels closer now than it did on the roof. ‘Me too.’

Another hiccough. ‘I’m sorry I’m putting you through this.’

‘What?’

‘You know.’

Harry feels a flush of heat. ‘Don’t say that.’

‘I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

‘No really.’ Hiccough. ‘Do you understand?’

This lasts for almost a mile, a back and forth of I love yous and you’re the bests and you make me so happy and I really want to grow old with you. Ellen cries at one point, but the hiccoughing makes it hard to sustain and soon she’s laughing again. Then they start to

sing. Spice Girls, Bloodhound Gang, Lady Gaga. Harry gets out her phone and takes a video of Ellen dancing down the street, declaring her love once more.

It's almost 2am by the time they reach home, both slightly more sober and beginning to realise their mistake. It's a Monday. They're in their thirties. Ellen could be seriously ill.

Harry drops her keys trying to insert them in the lock, but eventually gets them inside. Ellen's abandoned shirt and shoes lay strewn on the floor just inside the bedroom door. Harry carries on to the living room. Ellen's breakfast bowl sits on the coffee table and there are two half-drunk mugs of tea leaving ring marks on one of the bookshelves.

'Do we have to live like this?' Harry says, feeling a bolt of electricity as soon as she has. Through her haze she knows they've just had a nice time. Why must she ruin it? But she remembers the expression on Ellen's face across the party, laughing and placing her hand on that blonde woman's knee. She looked so happy and free. Much happier than she's looked with Harry in ages. *Why her?* Harry wants to ask. *Why did she deserve that moment and not me?* She knows Ellen's worried and that she's being unfair, but it's too much sometimes. She doesn't want this story.

Ellen sways silently in the hallway.

'What were you talking to that woman about?'

'What?' Ellen's eyes flicker as if she's just been turned on. She takes a step towards the bathroom.

'That woman on the stool. I saw you wiping your eyes you were laughing so hard.'

'Oh,' Ellen sniggers. 'I don't even know. She said something funny and we just collapsed.'

Harry chews her lip, watching from the doorway as Ellen struggles to align her toothbrush head against the nozzle of the toothpaste tube. 'Here,' Harry says, stepping in to help. 'You seemed like you were having a good time.'

‘I was.’

‘I’m glad.’

Ellen turns and gives Harry a look. She moves the toothbrush back and forth a few times, then removes it. ‘Are you okay?’ she asks, the corners of her mouth speckled with foam.

‘Uh huh.’

‘Baby?’

Harry swallows. Fuck, why did she start this?

‘You weren’t jealous were you?’ Ellen says, spitting in the sink.

‘I just, it seems like it’s easier for you to have a good time without me at the moment.’

Ellen turns around. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘Is it?’

‘Didn’t we just sing all the way home?’

Harry’s nostrils flare. ‘That’s different. You were just having a normal time with that woman.’

Ellen leans against the sink. ‘I feel a little sick.’

‘Want me to get you some water?’

‘Please.’

When Harry returns, Ellen says, ‘Maybe it is easier to have a normal time with a stranger. Someone who doesn’t look at me like I’m about to break. For a moment tonight I got to forget everything and it was nice.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Why exactly? Why shouldn’t I enjoy that?’

‘What about me?’

‘Oh Jesus, I need to go to bed. Are you really annoyed that I laughed with someone else for ten seconds? I just went to your ex-wife’s party for fuck’s sake. You were talking to her for ages and I didn’t get jealous. Grow the fuck up.’

Ellen pushes past Harry, through the hallway and into the bedroom. Harry follows. ‘It was her party, I had to say hello. It would have been nice if you’d spent two minutes with me so I could have introduced you. Instead I had to stand like a lemon while she sucked face with her fiancée.’

Ellen laughs. ‘So that’s what this is about. They’re getting married, are they?’

‘Apparently, but that’s not—’

‘What’s making you upset? Of course it is. Louise is moving on while you’re stuck with a sick girlfriend and a novel you can’t write.’

Harry’s mouth falls open.

Ellen laughs again. ‘Oh, poor baby. You put your eggs in the wrong basket, didn’t you?’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘It’s true, isn’t it?’

‘You’re going to be fine. By the end of next week all this will be behind us.’

‘And what if it’s not?’

Harry looks at Ellen. ‘Well, then we deal with it.’

‘I deal with it, you mean.’

‘I’m going to be here.’

Ellen folds her arms. ‘If someone gave you a get-out-of-jail now, said you could walk away and find someone else without looking like some cunt who abandoned me, would you do it?’

‘How can you ask that?’

‘I would if I was you.’

Harry shakes her head. ‘You don’t mean this.’

‘Go on. I give you permission. Find someone else. No hard feelings. It’ll be easier now than after next week.’

‘What are you talking about? I don’t want anyone else.’ As Harry says this, she realises, finally, that it’s true. She wants only this woman, which means she does want this story, whatever next week brings. ‘I want you,’ she says. ‘I want our life.’

‘That might not be an option.’

Harry steps forward, hands reaching for Ellen’s shoulders. ‘Baby—’

‘Don’t,’ Ellen says, shrugging her off. Harry tries again and Ellen flails her arms. ‘Get off me!’

Harry steps back, her pulse quickening. Ellen continues to move, shaking and flailing not unlike the yoni healer that first time she showed Harry what to do. Harry watches in horror. Her instinct is to try to make Ellen stop. She reaches out, intending to encircle her. She wants to wrap her inside something calm, to bring them both together, where they belong. But Ellen struggles in her embrace, twisting and thrashing. Harry tries to tighten her grip, but Ellen wriggles her palms flat against Harry’s chest and shoves her away. Harry stumbles, taken by surprise. She lurches forward and grabs for Ellen’s shirt. Ellen pulls from her and darts out of the door.

‘Come back,’ Harry says, following.

As she steps into the living room, Ellen turns to thrust her off again. Harry dodges, but feels a sharp pain in her scalp. Ellen’s ring is caught in her hair. She screams, feeling the roots rip as Ellen continues to struggle. Harry lashes out as she jerks back and her fist connects with Ellen’s jaw.

'Bitch,' Ellen howls, shrinking away. She bangs her leg against the coffee table and collapses on the rug.

Harry stands for a moment, her hands shaking. Heart pounding, she turns towards the bathroom and locks herself in.

When Harry emerges, the living room is empty and the bedroom door closed. She stands swaying outside, wondering whether to go in. She wants to say sorry, to make up. But she also doesn't. Her scalp stings where Ellen yanked out her hair. Doesn't she also deserve an apology? And what Ellen said was horrible.

Harry shakes her head. Everything that just happened was horrible.

She rearranges the cushions and the blanket on the back of the couch into a make-shift bed. She takes off her jeans and lies under the blanket, but the room is spinning and her mind whirring too fast to sleep. She drags the blanket into her office and sits at her desk. Switching on the side lamp, she blinks at the title page of her manuscript, afraid to turn it over. She moves the wedge of paper to the side and boots up her computer. Her eye keeps finding it, however, so she places the manuscript on the shelf under her desk, stacking two library books on top so it can barely be seen.

She pulls the blanket around her and meanders distractedly through the news and social media. Liza's had a tarot reading predicting an imminent change in her circumstances and Faith's been told once more that she's an exemplary writer but 'not the right fit'. Harry leaves badly punctuated comments beneath both posts, her conscience pricking at the reminder that she still needs to read Faith's novel. She clicks on a headline about one of the housewives and through from that page to another, seeking somewhere further and further from herself. After a while, however, she feels the pull of the search bar. She types in 'worst betrayals', 'unforgivable acts' and 'guilty writers'. She reads a poem likening guilt to a stack of frozen pigeons piled on one's chest and an article listing ten justifications for having an affair, but can find nothing about what to do if you've struck your girlfriend and committed the darkest parts of your imagination to prose. She remembers a creative writing class years

ago where the teacher asked them to write about the worst thing they'd ever done, then to read their pieces to the group. They all sat in silence before picking up their pens, filtering their memories, looking for something acceptable. None of them, she suspects, really confessed to their worst acts. 'I normally get tears out of this exercise,' the tutor said, seeming more than a little disappointed.

Harry gets up to retrieve a beer from the fridge, wondering if hitting Ellen is the worst thing she's ever done. Does physical violence trump what she put Louise through? Is it worse than the lies she told as a teenager and the way she exposed her family in her memoir?

She downs half her beer, welcoming the clouds reforming at the edges of her brain. Back at her desk, she Googles the word 'sin'. She clicks and clicks until she finds herself on a site promising a totally anonymous, non-IP-tracked, non-judgemental forum for confession. She scrolls down, reading things both banal and bizarre alongside the illegal, immoral and downright horrible. The most grotesque confessions produce an acrid taste in the back of her mouth, but she feels reassured by her own discomfort, convinced that this is where she belongs tonight: amongst the creeps and criminals.

At the top of the page is a large yellow button instructing her to

CONFESS NOW!

Harry stares at it as she finishes her drink. Where would she even start? She looks around her small, spare-room office, at the bookcases full of ruthless betrayals that she admires and the beat-up leather armchair she once fucked herself on in a church. She pictures Ellen lying in their bed on the other side of the wall, sleeping or maybe not, her insides potentially destroying themselves and her outsides now marked by Harry's anger. She turns back to the screen and clicks on the button.

WELCOME.

YOU ARE IN A SAFE PLACE. EVERYTHING YOU TELL US
IS ANONYMOUS. WE ARE HERE TO LISTEN, NEVER TO
JUDGE.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO CONFESS?

Harry watches the cursor flash in the answer box. This is stupid and she knows it, but it's the middle of the night and stupidity doesn't quite mean the same as it does during daylight. A minute or so ticks by before she moves her mouse towards the top of the page. She's about to close the site, to switch off her computer and return to the couch, when a new message pops up.

WE'RE LISTENING.

Harry snorts. There must be some coding that tells the site you're about to close the page. Nothing's unobserved on the internet, is it? Or truly anonymous. Once you've posted your confession, you're probably hit by targeted adverts. Condoms for the unfaithful, anger management courses for the violent.

Prove it, she types.

IS EXISTENCE NOT PROOF ENOUGH?

Frankly, no.

WHY DO YOU NEED PROOF TO BELIEVE, EVEN THOUGH
WE ARE HERE, BUT NOT PROOF TO DISBELIEVE?

Harry shakes her head.

You're getting on my nerves.

YOU CAME TO US.

I was about to leave.

YOU ARE STILL FREE TO.

Harry reaches for her mouse and jerks once more towards the x in the corner of the page. But she can't pull her eyes from the blinking cursor.

What is it you want from me?

WHATEVER YOU WANT TO GIVE. WE ARE HERE TO
HOLD YOUR SINS, TO LISTEN AND BEAR WITNESS, TO
HELP.

*Has anyone ever confessed anything so bad that you haven't
been able to hold it?*

NO.

So if someone said they'd murdered fifty people with an axe and then eaten their hearts, would you just say 'Cool, let us hold that for you while you go axe down fifty more?'

YOU DIDN'T COME HERE TO TALK ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE.

You don't know why I came here.

WHY DON'T YOU TELL US?

Harry tips the empty bottle to her lips, shaking out the last drops. Her teeth feel furry and her eyes prickle with tiredness. The digits in the corner of the screen flick to four am.

TAKE YOUR TIME.

Harry rests her head in her hand. Her elbow wobbles under the weight, then slips off the edge of the desk. She grunts, finding herself folded in half upon her chair. She reaches to pull herself up, but her gaze lands on the library books obscuring her manuscript. Tears rush suddenly to her eyes. She understands then that she's drunk, that this has been an awful night.

She rights herself and reaches shakily for the keyboard. She doesn't know what she's doing but, like this, in the middle of the night, she tells some internet bot processing her data

all about the fight with Ellen, all about Ellen's tests, and all about the manuscript she's written. She tells it about imagining wrestling Sadie off the roof, watching her kiss Louise, and realising she misses her ex-wife's love. She tells it about longing to fuck almost every woman she's ever met, having betrayed everyone she's ever loved, and always, at some point, wanting to walk away.

Harry wakes to find Ellen curled into her on the edge of the couch. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispers into her hair, smelling her, feeling a rush of love.

‘Me too.’ Ellen rolls over so they’re facing, almost falling to the floor. Harry catches her and pulls her close. She traces her finger over the bruise on Ellen’s cheek, but Ellen brushes her hand away. ‘I came to find you in the night and you weren’t here. Were you writing?’

Harry nods, wondering if her anonymous confession has been posted on the home page. She’ll delete it, that’s what she’ll do. Pretend it never happened.

‘I was thinking maybe we need a break,’ Ellen says.

Harry stiffens.

‘Not permanently. But maybe we both need a little space. You as much as me—a weekend away, a little writing retreat or something.’

Harry thinks of the ‘writing retreat’ she took at the end of her marriage, the decisions she made walking hills far from Louise. This is different, she reminds herself. Ellen is not Louise and she does not want to destroy this. ‘What would you do?’

Ellen shrugs. ‘Go stay with my parents? They’d like to see me.’

‘I could come with you.’

‘Baby, if you’re inspired then you should be writing. I don’t want to make you feel like you did last night. It’s just a few days, so we can both hit refresh. There’s nothing we can do before next week anyway.’

*

‘Are you sure this is okay?’ Harry asks on Friday, afraid suddenly to leave. She’s found a last-minute place on a dedicated writing weekend in the grounds of a Scottish manor house. It’s expensive, but tax-deductible.

‘It’ll be good for us.’ Ellen’s made a plan to meet her mother in town tomorrow to visit a gallery, then to take the train back to Norwich with her for the night. Harry overheard them arranging to have Sunday lunch with her sisters and the kids.

‘I could still come with you,’ she says, though her eyes drift to Ellen’s cheek and she realises the last thing she wants is to have to sit across from Ellen’s family as she lies about bumping into a cupboard. Ellen won’t tell them what happened, she knows, and she’s told Harry she doesn’t blame her, that they both crossed a line, but Ellen’s the one walking around with proof.

‘I’ll call you each night,’ Harry says, pulling her in for a hug.

‘That’ll be nice.’

Harry feels a sense of dread, but chalks it up to the long train journey before her. She hasn’t left London since their trip to Cornwall, and actually has barely ventured further than her neighbourhood for weeks. It’s hard to remember she’s the same person who’s taken planes and coaches, boats and motorcycle rides to far-flung corners of the world.

She switches to the Northern Line at London Bridge, making her way to the end of the platform. Fiddling with the straps of her hiking bag as she waits for the train, she remembers the Anne Carson book and the feeling of adventure and promise she felt rushing from the ladies’ pond to Cotswold Outdoors. Maybe, after all this, after Ellen gets her results and they put this behind them, she’ll suggest they walk a Camino together, a shared pilgrimage to take them into the next chapter.

There’s a rumble as the train approaches and those around Harry shuffle forward. The doors open with a beep and she stands aside to let people off, then waits for an old man to

board ahead of her. She's about to step into the carriage when the sensation of being watched makes her look over her shoulder. She locks eyes with a woman halfway down the platform and feels sweat pool in her armpits. The woman holds her gaze, as if daring Harry to look away first. The doors beep again and, more through muscle-memory than intention, Harry steps onto the train. She tries to look out the window, then through the smeary doors between the carriages, but the woman's gone. Harry shakes her head, feeling foolish, and turns to take a seat. The old man catches her eye and he too refuses to look away. She glances along the carriage, meeting the gazes of a child sucking its thumb, then its mother shuffling carrier bags around her feet. Harry bows her head over her phone and hunches around her bag to make herself small. She must be imagining it, but it feels like everyone's watching her. And, absurd as it sounds, she could have sworn the woman on the platform looked just like Natalie.

The retreat is in a wood full of cabins in the grounds of a former stately home. Each cabin has a bed, a desk and a wide window overlooking the lake. Meals can be delivered to the porch outside the cabin for those seeking solitude, or taken communally up at the main house. Swimming in the lake is encouraged, although the thought makes Harry shiver, as are long walks and active use of the extensive library.

Harry arrives on the same train as her immediate neighbours, a short-story writer from Inverness and a speculative-fiction writer from Newcastle. They agree as their taxi pulls up that they wish they could stay for a month rather than just three nights. After receiving the tour and unpacking their bags, they set out for the main house. Excited and nervous about the expanse of creative space, if not time, stretching before them, they chat and drink the cheap red wine replenished by the staff.

‘But what is it you’re working on?’ the short-story writer asks after their third or fourth top-up, a deep crease between his strikingly full eyebrows.

Harry feels her skin grow hot, though maybe it’s the work of the wine and the fire in the ornate fireplace rather than mention of her manuscript. ‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘This thing’s come out of me that I need to figure out what to do with.’

‘It’s fiction, though?’

Harry sucks her cheeks between her teeth. ‘Sure.’

They’re silent for a while. The speculative-fiction writer lets out a belch and they laugh. Harry is grateful for the interruption, but struggles to pull her thoughts from the printed sheets lying on the desk of her cabin. She’s still spooked by the vision of the woman on the platform. Did she imagine her? She’s not sure now why exactly she felt she recognised her; she hasn’t spent much time describing or picturing Natalie physically. But it was like that sense in a dream when you look at someone and know exactly who they are even though their features are entirely different from the ones they have in life. Could Harry have seen the woman before, perhaps long ago, and subconsciously based Natalie on her?

She blinks at the fire. She doesn’t remember seeing the woman before, but so what if she did? It doesn’t matter, does it? It was just a moment on a platform with a stranger she’s never going to see again. What matters is what’s on the pages lying in her cabin. What she wants to do this weekend is work out what it is she has written and whether she can send any of it to Dana.

The issue of course is not really her agent, but Ellen. Can she publish something like this? Especially after what happened the other night. Maybe she can fictionalise it more, pull Natalie and her girlfriend far enough away from her and Ellen so that it *is* actually fiction. There’s something about its proximity to life, though, that makes the story feel alive to her. She’s worried that will be lost under the label ‘novel’. As might her contract with the Fates.

But, if she doesn't want to call it a novel, she needs to pay more attention to realism. At the very least, she'll have to get rid of the sinkhole and find a better ending. What ending is there, however, after loss?

'A penny for your thoughts?' the short-story writer says, snapping Harry back to the moment. The speculative-fiction writer's chair is empty and his glass gone. Harry vaguely remembers him saying he was going to bed and realises she should do the same.

The short-story writer holds her gaze. 'There seems to be a lot going on in there. Is it all about writing?'

Harry smiles and looks away. 'I guess not.'

'Except even when it's not about writing it somehow always is, right?'

Harry frowns, feeling seen.

'Shall we take our wine for a walk around the lake?'

Even before she opens her eyes, she knows something is wrong, that she is wrong. When she does prise open her lids, she stares in horror at the unfamiliar suitcase next to the wardrobe and the man's jacket hanging on the hook by the door.

Harry remembers nothing after leaving the house. She sits up in the single bed, clutching the sheet. She's wearing her underwear and a t-shirt, but her jumper, shoes and trousers lay strewn across the floor.

She's part-way through retrieving her clothes when the latch clicks and the heavy cabin door swings open.

'You're up,' the short-story writer says, giving a little cough as Harry jumps back into bed to cover herself. He offers a lazy, sexy smile. 'Shall I make us coffee?'

Harry dresses underneath the sheet, then plucks up the courage to ask, 'Did we, uh—'

The short-story writer laughs and answers in a warm, melodic drawl. 'You fell asleep, so I tucked you in. I took the bed in your cabin, I hope that wasn't presumptuous.'

'And my trousers?'

He holds out his palms. 'You had them on when I left. But you were moaning that you'd eaten too much.'

Embarrassed but relieved, Harry thanks him for his hospitality and scurries away to nurse her hangover next door. She checks her phone, feeling a guilty urge to call Ellen, but discovers she doesn't have a single bar of signal. She connects to the treacle-like residency wi-fi to send a message telling her she won't be able to call but that she misses her, then sets her phone and laptop aside. She places her manuscript in front of her, but finds her eyes drawn to the lake. She imagines what Natalie might have done in the short-story writer's cabin last night and wonders what having such thoughts mean. Would one of Liza's tarot

readers be able to see these things within her? Would the cards show that everything Harry's ever imagined is inside her, rotting her core? Despite how awful she feels, she doesn't believe that's true. It can't be, can it? She's written about teenagers pushing each other off cliffs and a woman abandoning her children—that's not the same as *doing* those things. Yet all these inventions have come from somewhere.

A tide of nausea creeps up her oesophagus and she rushes to the 173athroom. She retches a few times, but nothing comes up. Trembling slightly, she clutches the toilet bowl. She gulps some water from the sink and manages to crawl back across the cabin and pull her laptop to the floor. SinnSite takes several minutes to load, enough time for her to wonder what she's doing. Once again, though, she feels comforted by the revelations on the home page.

I taught myself to hack so I could steal photos off strangers' computers.

Before big business meetings I jack off into my hands and then don't wash them.

Whenever I spend more than £100 in a shop, i steal something else to get my money's worth.

I forwarded my girlfriends nudes to her uncle.

Might have cooked and ate my daughter's rabbit while high-- not sure.

I think i hit someone but didn't stop.

Cheated on my bf yesterday in an hourly motel.

Sometimes I fantasise about slitting someone's throat.

Harry has to click back to a previous page to find her own confession, which she never got around to trying to delete. There doesn't seem to be a way to do so, anyway. Her words sit in a pale-yellow box, like the others. Beneath them are two thumbs, one pointing up and one pointing down, asking her to vote on the quality of her confession. The numbers beside the thumbs tell her six people have liked her confession and fifteen have disliked it. She hasn't been paying attention to the thumbs before now and wonders which of those on the previous page were most popular. Is it better to do something terrible, so the confession itself has more meaning and the thumbs greater opportunity for absolution? Or are the thumbs simply a form of democratic moral judgement, the final negative sum of which might be read as the number of acts of penance each sin requires? Fifteen then for her. Fifteen Hail Marys? Fifteen lashings? Fifteen apologies?

Harry rereads her words. *Don't write in the heat of the moment*, says every piece of creative-nonfiction advice ever. *Let the dust settle*. She remembers reading once that Mary Karr advises waiting at least 7 or 8 years before writing about something that really happened. But Harry's always been drawn to immediate writing. Always worried the truth of an emotion will slip through her fingers if she doesn't commit it to paper. She writes to remember, to save, to savour. Looking at these sentences, she feels ashamed, but something else too. Alive, perhaps.

She peruses the replies, which include criticisms but also strangers telling her that she's forgiven, that she's not a bad person, that she can move on. Three blinking dots at the bottom of the page indicate someone is in the process of typing. Harry watches, wondering who it is she's waiting for, where in the world they might be and what digressions have brought them to this odd, dark place.

The message finally appears.

I can release you from your thoughts, from your words, from
your deeds.

Harry's shoulders slump, disappointed. It's just a weirdo or another bot. She's about to click away from the page when another message appears.

Want to talk?

She moves her mouse from the cross in the corner of the screen and hovers over the conversation box, unsure whether to click.

I know you're there.

In spite of herself, Harry looks up. The cabin is empty, of course—her backpack where she left it by the wardrobe, the bed neatly made. She turns back to the screen.

What if I told you you are not responsible for anything you do?

Would you feel free?

No, Harry types. That sounds depressing.

Good. Well how about I tell you that you ARE responsible then? That you're in control of your narrative. That you and

you alone can make everything in your life better. If you want to.

It's that easy, is it?

It is.

Who are you?

Who do you think I am?

Some freak on the internet.

Lol. Aren't we all? You don't recognise me then?

Have we met?

I'd be a bit insulted if you hadn't noticed me from time to time.

I see. You're playing god. Cute.

Not quite.

Who are you really? Some ten year old skiving off school? Or a sad old man looking for kicks? I'm logging off now, I've got shit to do.

If that's what you want.

It is.

You know where I am if you need me.

Fuck off, you perv.

Harry clicks on the generic avatar next to the commenter's numeric username and is taken to a list of other threads they've posted on. She finds their offers of 'release' at the bottom of several other people's 'sins', as well as a number of their own confessions. Last week they admitted to spying on their neighbour and the week before that to dismembering a bird. The latter confession got 72 thumbs up. Harry closes the page and glances at her manuscript.

What are you afraid of? Natalie asks, settling herself onto the edge of the bed.

The taste of bile hits the back of Harry's tongue again. She shoves her computer to the floor and lurches towards the bathroom. 'The consequences,' she grunts just before last night's dinner ejects itself on a river of red wine.

Natalie makes a pfft sound.

Harry continues to retch over the bowl, eyes watering from the smell. She hears Natalie come to stand in the doorway.

Predicting consequences doesn't exactly appear to be your forte.

Sweating, Harry flushes and leans back against the shower cubicle. She closes her eyes to shut Natalie out, but as usual her words are already burrowing into Harry's brain. Natalie may have a point that she's not good at anticipating consequence, but that doesn't mean consequence doesn't scare her. Even setting aside her nervousness over Ellen's reaction, there are others as well that she's fearful of upsetting. She's written almost everyone she knows into this story and done little to disguise their identities. Surely they will recognise themselves. Other people, too, will think that they do even if they shouldn't. Some will be amused or flattered, but many will not.

Natalie drums her fingers on the doorframe. *That's never bothered you before.*

'This is different,' Harry murmurs.

Is it?

Harry remembers her old supervisor asking, 'Why not just write?' and Faith telling her to allow herself to. She set out to write honestly but her honesty will inevitably invite other people's. You cannot say your piece and expect to simply walk away unharmed. Like Denise Richards sitting at the table in the episode they watched the other night, calling the other wives 'mean girls' and storming out before any of them could reply. Even she was convinced by a producer to re-enter the restaurant and listen to what they had to say. Or like her fight with Ellen.

Harry hears Natalie's footsteps echo across the cabin, followed by the click of the latch. When she opens her eyes, she's alone.

She manages to pull off her clothes and crawl into the shower. The first blast of icy water shocks her back into her body. Natalie's last question repeats as she begins to thaw. Is what she's doing in this book different to what she's done elsewhere? Is it different to telling her truth in her memoir and having her parents sob that she'd made them sound uncaring? Is it different to exposing her and Louise's marriage beneath a fictional bow? To stealing

names, conversations, occupations and intimate situations from friends? To reacting defensively when they've taken exception? Even with this second novel about to come out, which she's told herself and everyone else is fiction, pure and simple, she knows she's taken liberties. Her parents will recognise their house, her cousin will recognise the mental health struggles of his mum. She even unthinkingly shoved the name of her own godson into a paragraph ranting about children sucking the life from adult conversations. Perhaps none of that is as bad as twisting the knife into Ellen, but can she really say it's okay?

She wraps herself in a towel and gives her teeth an extra-long brush. Feeling wobbly, but better, she dresses and returns to the desk. A pair of geese skid in to land on the water outside the window. Harry watches them fussily rearrange their feathers, then glide off in formation. She remembers Liza telling her she's a good person that day in the bar. They haven't spoken since the dinner, but she's known Harry almost her whole life; she should know, shouldn't she? Ellen is a good person, of that Harry has no doubt. As is Louise, and probably Sadie too if Louise loves her. Harry's mother and father are good. Her friends are good, and most of the people in her life are. But is she?

All her life, it occurs to her now, she's been given roles. Roles that have begun to feel so solid she's believed them. She's smart, ambitious, creative, but also competitive, cruel, calculating. In her marriage, she was the messy one, the unpredictable one, the morally ambiguous one, while Louise was the nice one, the stable one, the sorted and kind one. If her role had been different, would she have behaved differently?

She picks up her phone and opens WhatsApp.

I wash up these days.

She still has no signal, so the message sits undelivered. But she wants Louise to know that she cooks and cleans and all the other things she was shitty about when they were together. She wants her to know that she's not the same person, that she's changed. Maybe Ellen is right that she can't let things go. What, after all, is writing, but an attempt to secure the last word?

When Harry comes to repack her bag after breakfast on Monday, every page of her manuscript is covered in pen and there's a new file in her Dropbox named NatalieDraftforDana. She's moved things around and combed through for inconsistencies, rewritten scenes and added another love affair—not with a short-story writer but a carpenter whose calloused and talented hands she spent much of Saturday afternoon conjuring, interspersed by furious masturbation breaks, the curtains of her cabin left open, half-fearing, half-hoping that the story-writer whom she could smell on her sheets would step onto his porch and look in her direction. She's dropped all pretence that Natalie is not her now, and that the text's Ellen is not her own. But it *is* also fiction, of that she's certain. She's narrating their life, only different. An alternative version in which their days, their intimacies and their history all add up to something else. Staring at the lake after her fourth orgasm, she found herself thinking about the words of the weirdo on the site. He said she was in control of her narrative, that she had the power to change things. She rolled off the bed, redid her fly, and returned to the scene with the carpenter. She understood that someone else might think her pathological, egotistical, or in possession of a god-complex to rival any internet weirdo's, but she felt sure, suddenly, of that power. *Her* power. Writing has always felt key, she realised, ever since she purged herself of the Howard story. Her memoir was a detox of sorts; and perhaps her first novel too. So why not this? For years, she's wondered if the real living a writer does is on the page, but what if that's wrong? What if there *is* a symbiotic relationship between writing and living, but it's the other way around? What if what happens on the page *makes* everything off it real? Wasn't that what she'd sensed when making her bargain with the Fates?

She now realises she made a mistake there, though. That deal was tentative, experimental—not much more than a childish game. She'd assumed Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos were the powerful ones and tried, like Apollo, to trick them. But even they bow to Zeus sometimes. And it's Zeus's power she's actually after. Everything she thinks and imagines might well be a part of her, but what she saw like a revelation on Saturday was that writing might be exorcism as well as construction. Her characters need not be her, but they can be the worst of her. And, in making them that, she can make herself the rest.

You think you can write yourself into being a good person? Natalie asked, the carpenter's naked thigh draped over hers.

I can try, Harry replied.

She sat up most of Sunday night typing up the changes, finishing as the dawn chorus began. Feeling lighter than she has in a long time, she put on her coat and left the cabin. Beneath the zealous starlings and chaffinches, she stripped down to her underwear and waded into the frigid lake. Teeth chattering, she swam out a few strokes, then dipped her head all the way under. Shivering, she returned to the cabin, made a cafetière of double-strength coffee, and emailed the rewritten draft to Dana.

A few hours later, she loads her rucksack into the taxi and says goodbye to the housekeeper, still feeling light. She can't help but think of those clichéd slogans you see on cushions and tea-towels:

Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

Every day is a new opportunity.

Now is your chance, don't waste it.

Is she a cliché? In the freezing cold water, she decided to take control of another part of her narrative too. Facing herself honestly for once, she felt ready to recognise that her relationship to drinking hasn't been healthy since she and her mates started hanging outside supermarkets begging old men to buy them bottles of White Lightning. For twenty years now, she's been telling herself she's no worse than anyone else, that she simply likes to let go and have fun, that she could stop if she wanted to. But, in twenty years, the only period of sobriety she's had was for a single month before her wedding, when the desire to numb was outweighed by the desire to be thin. Or at least that's the version of truth that began to settle around her this morning in the lake. That for twenty years she's been living with a series of voices that it's possible not everyone else hears. There's the voice that wonders if it's time yet for another round, if other people will judge her for opening a second or third bottle, if she can convince someone to stay for another, or if she can make it to the bar as well as the bathroom in an interval. Then there's the next-day-voice, the one that had been echoing around the cabin all weekend: the *what-did-you-do-*, the *why-do-you-feel-like-this-*, the *how-could-you-*, the *wish-you-hadn't-* voice. And that one so easily turns into another: the *fuck-it-*, *might-as-well-*, *go-on-then*, *why-not-*, *you-know-you-want-to-* voice.

Teeth chattering from the icy water, Harry finally thought she recognised the cycle. Warm now and watching the woods recede from the back of this taxi, however, she wonders if she was being over dramatic. Already she feels herself backtracking. Not so sure. Questioning if this isn't just another story. Another narrative imposed in retrospect to make sense of something senseless—namely herself. Nevertheless, her conviction in the lake felt real and something of it still clings to her. There was something there, wasn't there? Something it had felt important not to forget.

Her thoughts flit to the word she's been tasting on her tongue ever since. It conjures movie clichés, twelve-step meetings, rock bottoms, relapses, those who've lost everything.

The absoluteness of it feels dangerous. Waking up in the short-story writer's bed isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to her as consequence of drinking and this isn't the period in her life when she's been drinking the most. But it does, possibly, feel like the first moment she's been able to contemplate something else.

Her phone pings to life as soon as she enters the station, vibrating against her left butt-cheek as she passes through the barriers and ascends then descends the stairs to her platform. When she looks, she finds forty-seven messages from Ellen. A weekend's worth of commentary on her family's behaviour and repetitions that she misses and loves her. Liza and Faith have also been trying to reach Harry, both asking if she's free to do something this coming week. At the bottom of Liza's thread, there's a link. *Have you seen this?!* Harry boards the train, places her bag in the overhead compartment, settles into a seat and opens it. She's taken to the *Liverpool Echo*:

Mother convicted of murdering abusive husband

Harry's skin prickles as she reads the details of Shirley North's trial. Messages from Liza begin to flash at the top of her screen. *Where have you been? Did you read the article? Wild, isn't it?*

Harry navigates back to their chat and types some replies. Liza sends a link to the court transcripts she's found. *I can't stop reading these. Did you know about Bryn's dad?*

Harry reads as the train speeds along the coast towards Berwick. Bryn's mum's entire life seems to have been raked over in the courtroom. She married young, Harry learns, at sixteen. She was pregnant, but lost the baby at eight months. The death was recorded as a natural miscarriage, but she told the court her husband had kicked her in the stomach. She confided in no one, but knew she had to leave when she fell pregnant again. She took a single bag and a train as far as she could afford and found work as a cleaner. After six months, she

tried to contact her husband to ask for a divorce and found he'd died three days after she ran away, of a brain haemorrhage following a pub brawl. He'd left her with £32,000 of debt. She got a second job and her and Bryn a flat and tried to rebuild her life. She swore off men and devoted herself to her daughter. They were 'a team, a pair, a perfect duo,' she told the court. Until Peter arrived. He was persistent and he turned out to be good with Bryn. He had a decent job and promised them a better life. He was so responsible he even had life insurance, and offered to take it out for them too. Once they moved, things began to change. Shirley felt cut off. She'd left her friends behind and had only him. They were gradual at first, the changes in how he was, but one day Shirley realised she'd totally lost herself. If she didn't tell him where she was, he'd fly into a rage. If she didn't make him exactly what he wanted, he punished her—or worse, Bryn. He'd lock Bryn in the basement, removing the bulb and leaving her in the dark for hours on end before putting it back and locking himself in there too. Shirley told the court she tried not to think about what happened in that basement. All she thought about was trying to make him happy, because when she didn't he threatened to kill them both and cash in on their insurance policies. When she finally grew exhausted with the effort, she realised he'd been suggesting a way out all along. For several years, she'd been poisoning him. Two drops of antifreeze in his coffee each morning. It was her favourite part of the day, she told the court, stirring that coffee.

On the third day of the trial, Bryn was called to testify. She corroborated her mother's statements and added her own. Harry grips the edge of her plastic tray table reading what her former friend went through. Asked what effect Peter's behaviour had on her, she replied, 'There's no part of my life it hasn't touched.' Harry reads to the end of her statements, then rests back in her seat. Poor Bryn.

Have you got to the step-sister yet? Liza messages.

In the middle of the fourth day, Georgina North was called to the stand. Two years older than Bryn, she painted a different picture. Yes, her father had a temper, and yes he often took it out on Bryn, but Bryn and her mother could also be cruel, she said. According to Georgina, arguments often grew physical in the house she grew up in. Shirley smashed glasses over her father's head, Bryn was known to throw punches, and she herself had once kicked the living room door off its hinges. 'I'm not proud to say it,' she told the court, 'but it was a wild house.' Asked about the basement, she said she only remembered one incident, when Bryn had been told she couldn't go out, so started a fire in her room and filled the house with smoke. When she refused to take responsibility and snuck out the next day, she was brought home and locked in the basement. However, in Georgina's memory it was Shirley who administered the punishment, not her father. Asked if she had any idea her stepmother was poisoning her father all of this time, Georgina replied, 'I don't think she did.' She was reminded that the defendant had confessed to the crime, to which Georgina responded, 'Have you asked my stepsister about her job? About why, after studying Chemistry at Oxford, she decided to work at a shitty manufacturing plant with the man who supposedly terrorised her?' The transcript records some kind of disturbance in court and the judge calling for quiet. Georgina was dismissed from questioning shortly after.

I also found this, Liza says, sending another link to a blog set up to cover the trial. It features screen-grabs of Bryn North's now-deleted social media and Linked-In profiles, which list her as Process Engineer for LG Supplies, the same company where Peter North worked as finance director for thirty years. It also cites unsourced evidence that Peter North's will and life insurance policies were changed approximately four years ago to make Shirley North the sole beneficiary, and, in the event of her death or incarceration, for all funds to go to her daughter.

Do you think Bryn did it? Liza types.

Harry puts down her phone and stares at the darkening landscape outside the window. She feels strange and churned up. She doesn't know these people, not really, not anymore, but nevertheless feels the threads of connection. She thinks of Bryn's name on the lists in her notebook. They're minor characters in each other's stories, that's all. But what a story hers is. It would take Harry years to perfect a plot like this, yet here it is, readymade in life, and belonging to people whose dining table she used to eat at.

'I missed you,' Ellen says when Harry arrives home.

'I missed you too.' Harry kisses her, but her mind is still on Bryn and the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that there's a link between their lives. For a brief moment on the train she contemplated retracting the email she sent this morning and telling her agent she has another idea: a twisty plot about family and betrayal, a mother and daughter coming together against a mutual enemy. She can't, though, can she? Rationally, ethically, Bryn's story is even less hers to tell than the one she's written. It doesn't belong inside her own, however much she wants it to. Even the incident with the balloons, which for most of Harry's childhood felt like a confused but defining moment, wasn't ever really about her. Years later, she discovered Bryn's mum came to the house afterwards to apologise. She told Harry's parents she'd been overwhelmed, that it was *constantly* overwhelming being a single parent. That day, she said, she'd tried so hard to give her daughter the perfect party and Harry's dad's arrival with all those balloons just felt like a slap in the face. Harry had stood dumbfounded on the pavement as the little girls around her sobbed and her dad fumbled to shut the balloons back inside the car, thinking all the time that what was happening belonged to her, but she'd been wrong.

'Baby?' Ellen asks, pulling her close. 'You okay?'

‘Yeah.’

‘I asked how your weekend was.’

‘Fine.’ Harry nods. ‘Good. How was yours?’

Ellen’s shoulders lift and drop. ‘Annoying. My sisters told my mum about the surgery. I just wanted a normal time and everyone was weird around me. I know they’re worried, but...’ She trails off. Harry has a flash of memory of the short-story writer on Saturday morning, of the simplicity of their two healthy bodies in the space of that far-away cabin. She notices the bruise on Ellen’s cheek has turned a sickly yellow and feels a twist of guilt. For the violence, of course, and for spending the weekend as she has, but also for assuming she’s the protagonist in this story as well. Back here in their flat, she no longer feels light or renewed or optimistic. She pictures her agent opening her attachment. If she needed an answer, here it is: no, she is not a good person.

They wait, once more, in waiting room C at Lewisham Hospital. Harry picked up Michelle Tea again this morning, trying to remember what it was like lolling about in her Neverland dreamworld before all this began. She looks at the other waiting faces and feels confused by how long they've been living this reality. Three months almost, but it could be as many years. Tea's words felt more accusatory this time around. In an essay about her alcoholism, she writes: *you wonder how awful you'll let it get before you're willing to make a change*. But this current awful is not something Harry has *let* happen, is it? This awful right here is down to things she cannot change: Ellen's health and whatever answers they'll get today. She closes her eyes and thinks about the trip they took to Brighton at the beginning of the summer, before all this. They laughed together and spent several hours playing the 2p machines on the pier. She opens her eyes and takes Ellen's hand. 'Want to go to sea at the weekend? Play some arcades?'

Ellen squeezes her fingers but doesn't reply. Her gaze is straight ahead and Harry feels foolish for thinking about that now. She remembers that Ellen had been finding blood for almost four months before she mentioned it. Which means she must have already been worrying about all this on that trip. Harry also remembers now that she got so drunk after those arcades that she dropped the keycard for their room in a pub-bathroom sanitary bin. Maybe she has let things get awful sometimes. But at least she *is* now willing to make a change. 'I'm proud of you, baby,' Ellen said when Harry told her she wanted to stop drinking for a while. She tries to summon that feeling of power she felt in the cabin. This is just a narrative, she reminds herself; one she *can* control if she puts her mind to it.

'Miss Jenkins?'

Harry feels Ellen stiffen beside her. She loops her arm into her elbow as they make their way down the harshly lit corridor. Dr Prayer sits behind his desk.

‘We tested the cells in your polyp for changes,’ he says after they’ve exchanged pleasantries. Then he descends into acronyms and too many syllables. Harry tries to pay attention, but hears only isolated phrases. *Microsatellite instability. Mismatch repair genes.* Ellen stares at him until he thinks to say, ‘It’s good news.’

Harry becomes aware of a tingling sensation in her toes.

‘It’s very unlikely to have spread and we think we’ve removed all of it.’

Harry finds her voice. ‘You think?’

‘We’re going to need Ellen to come in for regular testing for a while and, if we’re satisfied after that, I’ll recommend a routine colonoscopy every two years to keep an eye out for further issues.’

‘Meaning she’s still at risk?’

‘Not abnormally so. This is a good result. There’s no reason to expect any further treatment will be necessary.’

In imagining this, Harry pictured them throwing a party or going out for an expensive meal, popping champagne and getting wickedly, happily drunk. Instead, she and Ellen hole up at home together, declining invitations from friends and cancelling the comedy tickets Harry booked a while ago. They stick together like puppies, tumbling through the days. Ellen’s latest contract has come to an end. It was only temporary, but they seemed to like her and she was hoping it’d be extended. It means more time for her own work, but, disappointed, she struggles to motivate herself and distracts Harry from her computer and responsibilities. They bake a cake and hang a curtain in the hallway to stop the draught, order another bookshelf

and move around the boxes of things they still haven't found homes for. Harry cancels her alarm and they savour their slow, snuggly entrance into each morning. They eat eggs and watch TV in the middle of the afternoons. Harry has marking to do and a manuscript assessment deadline looming. She snatches time on the bus to class, stays up late and slips out from beneath their sheets in the night to try to catch up. As soon as she hears Ellen stirring, she wants to be with her. She takes her tea and they settle in for another episode.

One afternoon, while Ellen is asleep on the couch, Harry sits in the armchair with her laptop and writes in a new sex scene. She tries to describe every inch of Ellen's body. She wants to record everything they've done, everything they've been. The smell of her skin when she wakes up in the morning, the curve of her breast silhouetted against the window, the taste between her legs when she has and hasn't showered. This is too much, Harry knows, but it's also nowhere near enough. It's weeks now since they last had sex, but for once Harry doesn't care. She remembers the chasm between her and Louise that seemed to grow bigger and bigger as days ticked into weeks and weeks into months, shrinking only slightly after their sporadic, drunken fumbles. This is what Harry has been worried about all along: the one-way draining of intimacy; lesbian bed-death; from Sapphic to sisterly. It is a relief, almost, now it has happened. But not having sex with Ellen doesn't feel like not having sex with Louise. Everything they do feels intimate, connected. Perhaps this means she's growing up finally, understanding that look others have given her when she's intimated she left her marriage because of a lack of passion. Or perhaps it means there was something else residing inside her and Louise's chasm.

Then, Ellen's best friend finds her a job with her firm, and Harry's agent replies to her email:

I love it. It's dark but has so much heart.

We can sell this!

Harry glances at Ellen reading her contract across the table. *I'm still not sure*, she types back.

‘How about I just approach a couple of people on the quiet,’ Dana says when they meet. She eyes Harry over her £7 latte. ‘No commitment, just see if there’s appetite?’

It turns out there is. A bidding war ensues. Harry’s offered a three-book contract by her original publisher.

‘This is the dream!’ Dana says again over the phone as Harry stares out of her office window. There’s a man on the pavement opposite poking at the sole of his shoe with a stick. Ellen keeps promising to sit by the window with a camera and catch whoever it is that never picks up after their dog.

‘Are you there?’ Dana says.

‘Uh, yes. I mean, cool, great.’

‘So am I okay to accept?’

‘Huh?’ Harry turns her attention back to her computer. She’d just loaded SinnSite before Dana called. The most recent confession is by a woman who sold her daughter’s PlayStation because it annoyed her that she was on it all the time, then trashed her own house to convince her they’d been burgled. Harry rolls her mouse to click on the upward pointing thumb.

‘The offer,’ Dana says. ‘They need an answer this afternoon.’

Harry watches Ellen out of the corner of her eye as the women they've come to love-hate shout at each other from opposite couches on the screen. Andy Cohen catches the camera's gaze and smiles conspiratorially with the audience.

'D'you think there's something misogynistic about always having a gay guy act as ring-leader for these cat-fighting women?' Ellen asks. She reaches for her tea and catches Harry staring at her. 'You okay?'

Harry nods and turns her attention back to the TV. She runs once more through the list of defences she's been compiling.

One: Ellen knows she's a writer that draws from life. 'I'm flattered,' she said after Harry read a short story about their first Tinder date. That time, at least, she seemed to like having her life moulded into prose.

Two: most of the time Ellen doesn't even seem that bothered about reading what she writes. She's supportive, of course, but she's not a big reader. Louise wasn't either. The ambivalence stings, but maybe it's a necessary act of self-preservation for those who love her. Harry thinks back through other exes but can't be sure if the theory holds up.

Three: the manuscript has to be edited and might change significantly before it reaches publication. There's no sense worrying or upsetting Ellen about this version if it's not the one that ultimately ends up being published. By the time Pru has made her mark on it, Ellen may not even recognise herself.

Four: people have done worse. Way worse. Karl Ove Knausgaard wrote six volumes about his family, exposing everything. Of course, his uncle sued him, but he wrote about that too. And Julie Myerson wrote about her teenage son's drug addiction. And James Frey, JT Leroy and Misha Defonseca all packaged up fictions and presented them as fact. All Harry

has done is write a novel. It will be published as such. No one need know the threads connecting her characters to real life.

‘You’re such a fucking liar, Camille!’ Kyle shouts in a washed-out flash-back after claiming Kelsey Grammar’s ex has behaved this season ‘like Season 1 Camille times ten.’

‘You’re such a fucking liar, Camille!’ Ellen repeats in the shrieky impression she’s all but perfected and collapses back into the sofa cushions. ‘Oh my god, I love this show.’

Harry nods. Of course, three and four only work if she changes Ellen’s name and does actually call it a novel. She’s been trying out different names since Dana’s call. She hasn’t told anyone yet about the deal, about the simultaneous relief and terror of being able to buy herself a little more time and space to write. Once she signs the contract, she’ll be legally obliged to deliver two more books, but she can’t contemplate that now. All she’s been able to do this week is click back and forth using the Find and Replace tool, testing out Rebecca, Kate, Katriona, Emma, Alice, Fiona, Catherine and Susan before tapping Undo, Undo, Undo, Undo.

Her phone buzzes with a message from Faith. Harry glances at the preview in the notification, then dismisses it for later. Perhaps she could embrace the word novel but not change the name. What should a name matter if it’s definitely packaged up as fiction? Aristotle tells us the poet’s job is not to tell what has happened but the kind of things that *can* happen. And that’s exactly what Harry’s done, isn’t it? She’s taken her and Ellen’s world and shifted it into the realm of possibility. For Aristotle, the poet is to be praised above and taken more seriously than the historian because poetry speaks of universals, history only particulars. Harry and Faith learnt all this in the first term of their MA, that fiction distinguishes itself from lying by establishing itself as a form of truth, albeit a non-referential one dealing in probability and necessity rather than reality.

Fiction's main mode of non-referentiality is, however, the proper name. That's the point, isn't it? That the characters *can't* actually be found in the world. In 'The Rise of Fictionality' Catherine Gallagher argues that, while in life names refer to singular, specific referents in the world, in fiction they do not. Instead, they hint at the type of characters we're dealing with (large or small, round or flat, serious or comic) and *prompt us to begin—or not to begin—the intense imaginative activity of reading character*. Virginia Woolf calls reading character a lifelong commitment for the artist and sees that, in a novel, it's a collaborative act between reader and writer. A fictional character comes alive in the middle ground between the writer's words and the reader's imagination. Maybe that's Harry's problem. Something inside her doesn't want to collaborate with the reader and allow Ellen to be read as a character. In novels, Gallagher says, characters are at once utterly finished and necessarily incomplete. The writer, in finishing the incomplete act of creation, asks the reader to invest in that incompleteness, to draw on their own experiences and understandings of the world and to flesh out the figure behind the name. For someone to do that to the woman sitting beside Harry – to the woman she loves – would feel like a violence. Even in fiction, referentiality does matter sometimes. Doesn't it?

Another message comes through and this one Harry opens. It's Louise, asking how she is and if she wants to meet. Harry taps out a reply, then looks at the TV. The cast members are rising to their feet to toast the end of the season with shots of vodka. Lisa Rinna downs her own followed by Erika Gerardi's, making the other women whoop. Harry remembers the argument she had with their old landlady about the banality of reality television. It's all she and Ellen have watched for months, ignoring insistences from friends that they 'absolutely must' check out *Schitts' Creek*, *Awkwafina*, *Normal People* and *I May Destroy You*. 'We will, we will,' they've promised their friends and each other, while never

quite peeling themselves from these women. Ellen's plans for LA keep getting bigger and bigger, but the gallery still hasn't set a date.

'Shall we take a peek at the next episode?' Ellen asks with a glint in her eye. 'Just to see if there's anyone new in the next season?'

Harry smiles. 'Need another cup of tea?'

While Ellen pees and Harry boils the kettle, she tries to tell herself everything will work out. She flicks through Instagram and sees Faith's received four more rejections. Harry should call her, take her out for a coffee, but she still hasn't found time to read her manuscript and she's dreading having to tell her about her new deal. She remembers the feeling of power she had looking out at the lake, that sense of surety. It wasn't misplaced. Publication will bring new problems, of course it will, but why shouldn't she be able to handle those too? 'I am powerful,' she murmurs, stirring the tea. It sounds like one of the affirmations from the yoga videos she no longer does. She touches the squishy part of her belly as she replaces the soya milk in the fridge. She should start again, and maybe her shaking too. Perhaps she will. She remembers the playwright's bashful thanks and dismissal of the idea that her book must be good. 'I deserve this,' she murmurs before returning to the sofa.

'Thanks,' Ellen says about her tea. She reaches her hand to the back of Harry's neck and rubs her fingers absently up and down. 'Like a little mouse.'

Harry meets Louise in a cafe near Peckham. As she sits down, she realises their mistake. The last time they came here Louise burst into tears and Harry walked out.

‘Odd, isn’t it?’ Louise says, glancing at the table they last occupied.

‘We don’t have to stay.’

‘No, let’s reclaim this place. Tell me what’s going on. How are you? How’s Ellen?’

Harry swallows a mouthful of coffee. ‘Sorry, I should have told you, she got the all clear.’

‘That’s amazing!’

Harry nods. ‘And I’ve sold another book.’ She sent a flurry of messages this morning, experimenting with telling those she thought unlikely to speak to Ellen—her parents, Liza, her old supervisor. There’ll be a *Bookseller* announcement soon, which means she’ll have to find a way.

‘Wow! What’s it about?’ A flicker of a frown passes over Louise’s features and Harry feels a pang, remembering everything she put her through with her first book. Is it better that this time she knows what she’s doing to Ellen? ‘Well?’ Louise says, a smile now playing on her lips. Perhaps Harry imagined the frown.

‘Me and Ellen I guess, but you know, not us as well.’

Louise raises her eyebrows.

‘And how are you?’

‘Great actually. The tasting evening was a hit. Sadie thinks we should open our own bar.’

‘I’m happy for you.’

‘I’m happy for *us*. Look how far we’ve come.’

There's a buzzing and they both lean down to check their bags. It's Harry's: a call from her brother. Since when does her brother call? She hangs up, not wanting to hear about his renovation plans or the promotion he's no doubt been offered. She places her phone by her mug, her fingertips lingering on the case. 'Look, I'm sorry. I guess no one gets a manual on how to do these things, but I know I handled everything badly.'

Louise waits for Harry to make eye contact. 'You did. But so did I, at times.'

'I just—'

Harry's phone rings again.

'Sorry!' It's Liza now. 'What is wrong with people? Why can't they text?' She silences it completely and shoves it back in her bag.

Louise sips her coffee.

'I've missed you,' Harry says. 'It felt so strange going from what we were to...' She trails off.

Louise observes her for a moment. 'What did you expect?'

Harry picks up a sugar packet. 'I don't know.'

'You seemed to want me to snap my fingers and suddenly be okay with just being friends. How was I supposed to do that when I didn't see any of it coming? You did all your thinking and feeling in your head, then just told me it was over.'

Harry sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. 'I didn't know how else to do it.'

'Me neither. I couldn't just have my heart broken, then pretend everything was fine.'

'I get that now.'

'I hope for Ellen's sake that you do.'

Harry feels the sting of Louise's implication—that she'll fuck it up with Ellen too. She realises in Louise's story there's still a victim and a villain. She tries to shrug it off, but there's a sudden sourness in the air. She reminds herself why she's here: to be Louise's

friend, to rebuild some of what they had. They spent almost ten years being everything to one another; surely they can still be *something*.

As the conversation moves to less barbed topics, Harry studies Louise and begins to remember more than just the things she's mourned. She remembers Louise's moments of impatience, her surety that she was always in the right, her refusal to engage with things she didn't want to.

'We're hoping for a spring wedding,' Louise says, twisting her necklace and batting her eyes like a cartoon character. Harry finds herself remembering the nights they sat up crying together. They used to boast to friends that they never argued, which was true in its way: they rarely addressed their issues and never shouted, but every six months or so they'd have some kind of breakdown that resulted in hours of silence and sobbing. Towards the middle of the night, each would promise to make more of an effort, to change this or do that, and they'd go to sleep murmuring that they loved each other and never wanted to feel this way again. In the mornings that followed, however, Louise would act like nothing had happened. She'd kiss Harry on the lips, smile and carry on like she'd completely forgotten the words they'd whispered at 1 and 2am, never acknowledging there had been any kind of blip in their perfect fairy tale of happiness until another six months passed and they began the cycle again. 'It's not normal for couples not to fight,' Liza once told Harry. Sitting here with Louise, Harry feels like she felt on those mornings. As if she's been put on mute.

'I found the post-box from our wedding,' she blurts, interrupting the list of cakes Louise is planning to bake for the reception.

Louise stops talking, her hands mid-air. 'Oh.'

In a tumble of words, Harry tells her about the letters, about imagining her opening them when they were fifty or sixty.

The corners of Louise's eyes contract.

‘I was going to write one every year, but I only got to number five.’

‘What am I supposed to say to this?’

‘I don’t know.’

Louise lets out an exasperated breath. ‘Is this what you want to do? Press old bruises?’

‘Why does this have to be a bruise? It’s part of our life, our history. I don’t want to have to pretend it didn’t happen. I can’t just snip a decade out of myself like you seem to be able—’

Louise pushes back her chair. ‘This was a mistake.’

‘Please,’ Harry says, reaching out her hand.

‘I thought you wanted to rebuild a friendship.’

‘I do.’

‘So why are you bringing this up? What reaction are you looking for from me?’

‘Nothing.’ Louise stares at her. Harry feels her cheeks flush. ‘I just want to feel like it was real. For you to acknowledge that our marriage happened.’

‘You think I don’t know it happened?’

‘I mean that it was a thing, a good thing. That we were good together.’

‘*You* broke us up.’

‘And I’ve said I’m sorry for the way I did that. But look at us now.’

‘I meant my vows.’

‘So did I.’

Louise shakes her head. ‘I meant that I wanted to stay married to you, to grow old together.’

‘I meant that too.’

‘At the time.’

Harry picks up the sugar packet again and pinches it between her fingers. 'Look, I take responsibility for breaking your heart, but there were two of us in that marriage and it didn't fall apart just because of me.'

Louise sighs. 'Why do you want to do this again?'

'I don't.'

'Then what do you want? You want me to say yes, you were right, we had a great marriage but it was right for us to break up because it let me find happiness with Sadie?'

Harry's skin prickles at the hardness in Louise's voice.

'I'm happy with Sadie and I accept that we are where we are, but if I could go back and change things I would. I wouldn't have given my heart to someone who couldn't return theirs to me whole. You want to think of our marriage as this holistic growth period and the necessary suffering that brought us to this place, well I think of it as a waste. I wasted nine and a half years trying to build something with you that I now have to start all over again with Sadie. I wanted to spend my life with someone, not just a part of it.'

Harry glances at the table they sat at last time they were here. It's occupied by a woman with a laptop who is openly staring at them. She doesn't even turn away when Harry catches her eye.

'I'm sorry,' Louise says, 'I didn't come here to say all that. You just don't get to pick a narrative and impose it on me too.'

Harry presses her tongue to the roof of her mouth. She doesn't want to cry here. 'I keep saying it, but I really am sorry.'

'I know.'

Harry stares at the small puddle of coffee pooled in the clavicle of Louise's teaspoon.

'Where do we go from here?'

Louise is silent until Harry looks up. 'I think we just get on with our lives.'

*

Harry has three more missed calls by the time she leaves the café. As she's about to call Liza back, another comes through from Rob.

‘Have you spoken to Mum and Dad? The house is on fire.’

On her mad-dash home, Harry dials and redials her parents, but neither are picking up. She bumbles an explanation to Ellen while frantically looking up train times. On the nineteenth try, her mother finally picks up and explains in a surprisingly calm voice that it's not really the house but the row of garages at the ends of the gardens, along with their and the neighbours' cars, that are on fire.

'Are you sure?' Harry asks. 'Are you sure you're okay?'

'I'm watching it now with Cathy and Rich.'

Harry flinches, as she always does at the mention of the perfectly sweet couple that live in Howard and Anabelle's old house.

'We've got firemen from three counties out there,' her mother adds, sounding impressed. Harry pictures them in the upstairs bay window, noses pressed to the glass. 'Cathy's taking a video. I'll send it to you. Oliver at number six's campervan just went up. Incredible how something like that burns.'

'Where's Dad?' Harry asks.

'Well, your father's not doing so well actually.'

'Oh my god, was he in there? Is he hurt?'

'No, no, nothing like that. Although he was tinkering away only an hour or so before it broke out.'

Realisation begins to dawn. 'Oh no, is the—'

'Yes, sweetheart, I'm afraid it looks like the Marauder's toast, if you'll excuse the expression. He's not taking it well. I'm sure you can imagine.'

In fact, no, Harry can't. That car is like a third child to her father. She rings her brother as soon as her mum hangs up.

‘We have to do something.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. A memorial or something.’

‘You’re mental.’

The video Harry’s mum sends *is* quite incredible. Harry sits with Ellen watching the blaze rip through seven double garages and every vehicle on the drives. The flames leap towards a grey sky while four fire engines shoot elegant but relatively ineffective arcs of water from their canons.

Fuck, Liza writes after Harry forwards it to her. Then *I’ll come too* when Harry mentions the memorial, which Rob has suggested they hold at the weekend. *I need to visit my mum anyway.*

Ellen offers to accompany Harry as well, but they wake on Friday to messages saying her sister is in labour, so she speeds ahead to catch an earlier train in the other direction. Harry gets to Paddington a few hours later. She checks the board, but they don’t have a platform yet.

‘Boo!’ Liza says, grabbing Harry from behind. Her pink leopard-print coat matches her suitcase.

‘You look like a Barbie doll,’ Harry says, drawing her in for a hug. ‘How’s Paul?’

Liza pulls away and fiddles with the heart-shaped button on her sleeve. ‘Paul and I broke up.’

‘Shit, sorry.’

Liza puffs out her cheeks. ‘And I’m pregnant and moving back in with Leo,’ she says in a rush, before spinning on her heel and dragging her suitcase towards Pret.

Harry follows, almost exploding with questions. When she catches up with Liza, though, she doesn’t know how to ask any of them. They order one at a time, then stand in silence waiting for their beverages.

‘If you’re going to say it’s a bad idea,’ Liza finally says, ‘keep it to yourself.’ Harry turns to face her, but Liza continues before she can reply. ‘I know what you’re thinking, but we’ve been talking and Leo’s making a real effort. We have a session with a relationship counsellor next week, which my life coach says is really positive. And we’re thinking about moving somewhere else, making a fresh start. And getting a cat, actually, because apparently they have really positive maternal energy even though some of the literature says they’re not great around babies, and—’

Harry reaches for Liza’s hand. ‘Who’s... I mean, is it—’

Liza nods. ‘Paul’s, yeah.’ She wrinkles her nose slightly. ‘But it’s Leo’s really. He’s okay with it. We talked about you in fact. Like, if you and Ellen were going to have a child it could only be biologically one of yours, right? So why should that be a big deal for us?’

Harry blinks, trying to process it all. ‘Where are you going to move?’

‘Hertfordshire maybe. Somewhere with green space. And schools—apparently you have to think about schools really early.’

Harry feels a childish urge to burst into tears.

Liza sees her dewy eyes and a smile spreads across her face. ‘You’re happy for me! I was scared you were going to be mad and I really really need you to be happy for me. I want you to be godmother – well, *oddmother* – I’ve been reading about all these alternative ceremonies you can have. I know you say you hate kids, but you’ll love mine, won’t you? It’s

not going to change anything between us, I promise. We're just going to have this cool kid we get to play with, right?'

'Another one?' Ellen says when Harry calls a couple of hours later. Liza's mum picked her up from the station and offered Harry a lift, but she wanted to walk. She's retracing her route home from primary school, struck, as she always is, by how miniature everything seems in comparison to her memories.

Ellen has another niece. Charlotte Alice, 7lb 2oz, born at four minutes past three, after almost nine hours in labour. 'She's beautiful,' Ellen whispered when she first picked up, tiptoeing out of her sister's cubicle.

'You're not softening then?' Harry asks now.

Ellen laughs. 'Can you imagine us with a baby?'

In some corners of her imagination, Harry can picture a child between them; a little girl holding both their hands as they walk her to school or around a park or along a beach on holiday. But the images are fleeting and disconnected from anything tangible. She turns the corner and her parents' row of mirrored red-brick semis comes into view. 'Not really,' she says.

Ellen continues laughing. 'Would we have to move to Hertfordshire and get a cat too?'

The wreckage of the fire looks like a dystopian landscape. The garage rooves and doors are all burnt away, leaving empty brick shells occupied by charred car skeletons and piles and piles of ashy debris. All that's left of Oliver's campervan is the base and hub caps. The

steering wheel from Harry's mum's Polo was found three gardens over, thrown by the explosion of the fuel tank. The fire inspectors believe the blaze originated at number 4, where Graham and Julia's son had his electric bike on charge. Graham, a decorator, had a carefully organised shelf of paints and white spirits, which Harry's mum tells her proved perfect fuel for the initial escalation, after which the fire 'ate through the row like a box of Roses on Christmas day.' She tells Harry her dad's been in bed since it happened.

Rob arrives an hour after Harry. At her request, he follows her to the end of the garden.

'What are we going to do?' he asks, standing at the gaping mouth of what was once their father's workshop. 'We can't exactly bury it.' He pokes at something black and indistinct with his toe.

Harry holds her hand to her mouth, trying not to gag. The smell of burnt chemicals, rubber and something like human hair is overpowering. 'Why are you here if you don't want to help?' she says through her hand.

Rob frowns. 'I do.'

On her way down, Harry had a vision of them excavating the remains and laying the car out on the lawn so that they could stand around it in a circle sharing stories of the times they remembered in it. Liza suggested they use battery-powered fairy lights instead of candles so as not to be insensitive about the method of demise, and said she knows an incantation for safe passage into the afterlife, which she's happy to perform. The reality of this charred mess, however, is more depressing than Harry imagined. She picks her way through, trying to spot something recognisable. There's the buckle of a seatbelt, but those weren't even original features. Her dad put them in when they were little to appease her mum.

'Could we use this?' Rob says, holding up the remains of a wing mirror.

‘Sure,’ Harry says, uncertain. She thinks of her dad lying in bed up at the house. Nothing they do is going to make this right. This car, unlike either her or Rob, has always been here for him. She starts to cry.

‘Hey,’ her brother says. ‘It’s not that big a deal. Dad’ll appreciate whatever we do.’

‘What if he doesn’t?’

‘Mum says he’s already really touched that we came. He knows you hate being here.’

Harry feels a lump in the back of her throat. She’s been so focused on the memorial that she hasn’t paid attention to the deep unease she normally feels here. Through the empty doorway she can see Cathy and Rich’s garage and the neat rows of vegetables at the end of their garden. When Howard lived there, the garden was a mess, neither he nor Anabelle taking responsibility for the weeds and overgrown lawn. Perhaps it’s the fire, or perhaps it’s the sinkhole she imagined, but suddenly this place feels just like that: a place. She thinks of Liza in the next village with her mum, who’s apparently ecstatic to be getting a grandchild, and Bryn up in Liverpool having to visit her only blood relative in prison, and all the people she’s ever known from this town. Howard is just one of them, a distant memory and maybe not even that if she doesn’t want him to be. Their stories don’t have to remain connected. She’s free to imagine and relive and rewrite a thousand different versions. Although, really, she only needs one. And she doesn’t need to overcomplicate it. She takes the wing mirror from Rob’s hand and returns it to the pile of debris.

Back in the house, she climbs the stairs to her parents’ bedroom and knocks on the door. She’d like to snuggle under the covers with her dad like she used to when she was a kid, but settles for perching on the edge of the bed. Staring at her dad’s back, she tells him about her idea for the funeral and says she knows how much he’s hurting and she’s sorry for all the ways she’s ever let him and Mum down. She waits for him to roll over. She imagines him putting his arm around her, telling her it’s fine, he knows the car was just a car and there

are more important things in life and that, actually, now she's said all that, he feels suddenly a lot better and thinks he'll get dressed and come downstairs and suggest they all go out for ice-cream, like in a movie, even though they've never once done that before and there's probably nowhere in the whole of Somerset you can get ice-cream in tall glasses with whipped cream and cherries while a smiling waitress refills your coffee. But her father lies still except for the gentle rise and fall of his breathing. Harry places her hand on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath his t-shirt.

She hears the bottom of the door drag against the thick carpet and turns to see her mother. She beckons Harry from the room. Downstairs, she holds out her coat.

'Come walk the dog with me?'

The ancient terrier is snoozing on his cushion but rouses dopyly when Harry's mum clips the lead to his collar. Harry follows them through the gate and towards the farm track leading up the hill. The sun is setting, bathing the houses in golden light.

Nearing the top of the hill, Harry's mother slows her pace and slips her arm into Harry's. 'You know he bought that car the week you were born?'

Harry nods, though she's not sure if she did know. How much of what her parents have told her has she forgotten or never really listened to?

'We had a huge argument. We couldn't afford it at all, but he told me it was fate, sending her to him at the same time as you.'

Harry pictures Clotho winking at her sisters as she presides over the birth of a baby girl. She imagines Lachesis revving an engine along an open highway, then Atropos striking a match. You can weave a story out of anything, she thinks, patch it together and pretend it makes sense.

They climb the stile by the big oak tree and turn left onto the slightly muddy footpath around the field. Though the oak's branches are almost bare, the grass and hedges still look

lush. When Harry first came back from Chicago, she couldn't believe how fully she'd forgotten the colour green. Even in the dying light, it practically glows.

'I hope you know your father and I are very proud of you,' her mother says, unclipping the dog. His lead swings by her side as she walks. 'This new book deal is really something.'

'Thanks.' Harry watches the dog chase a pair of magpies off the path, feeling uneasy. Her mother won't pry, but she can sense the discomfort in her wording, in the fact that she doesn't say she's looking forward to reading it or ask what it's about. 'It's dangerous to have a writer in the family,' she's heard her mother joke to her friends. She tries to remember what she's written about Natalie's family. Not a lot. Just a few scenes at the end before the sinkhole. She's purposefully made them generic rather than specific, inserted a divorce and a different number of siblings. They're specifically not *her* family, especially the mother.

'I wanted to talk to you about something,' her mother says, interrupting Harry's thoughts. 'I haven't spoken to your dad about this yet, but I'd like to give you some money.'

'What?'

'For a flat. I'd like to top up your advance and help you and Ellen out. Your father and I both have good pensions and it's not as if there's any point in having savings in this climate. It'll all go to you and Rob when we die anyway.'

'Mum! Don't say that.'

'Oh, don't be so sensitive. I'm not being morbid, just practical. I'd like to help you out. I know it's hard for you seeing your brother doing so well.'

Harry shakes her head. 'I'm happy for him.'

'I know you are, sweetheart, I know. And I'm not offering you this because I think you're in any way not working hard enough or not doing something important. I just know it's difficult for you youngsters, especially in London. Now, if you want to stay where you

are then I probably can't help you, but I could I think give you enough to help you buy a little place further out. Somewhere like Sydenham or Catford seems a bit cheaper.'

'You've been looking?'

'Well your father's not been much company these past few days and I've found it quite interesting to be honest.'

They've reached a muddier patch and have to go single file to pick their way through.

'Mum, are you serious?'

'Yes, darling,' she says over her shoulder.

'I don't know what to say.'

'Well don't say anything yet. I still need to work on your father. But it's my money and, anyway, he hasn't won an argument about finances since he bought that damned car. I made sure of that.' The dog barks up ahead. 'Oh Christ.'

Harry's mother hurries to grab him before he darts into the adjacent cow field. Harry watches her crouch in her green rain jacket, bleached hair spilling messily from her low bun. Did she actually just offer what she thinks she offered? Harry needs to find out exactly what she means. But imagine having a place of their own. Somewhere they couldn't get kicked out of. A proper home. Permanent space to write. Which would mean more time too, wouldn't it? Less worry, more choice about which jobs to say yes and no to.

Harry looks down and places her right sole inside one of her mother's footprints. It sounds amazing, but would that definitely be good? Might what she writes be changed by her circumstances, tainted by her lack of struggle? Or does she have to admit that her work has always been tainted, undermined by the privilege of her class and race and birth and all the other things that have led to this moment of her mother offering to help? Harry never expected this and has never relied nor wanted to rely on her parents financially, but that

doesn't mean it wasn't fated. Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos might have been laughing at her all this time.

She picks her way through the mud, thinking of the £500 a year Virginia Woolf claimed a woman writer needed. In today's money that must be something like £30k. When one thinks of it like that, it's not so awful to accept help, is it? London's full of people Harry's age whose parents have helped them out; it's basically the only way anyone buys a home. On the other hand, it's also full of people stuck in shitty rental situations whose parents can't help.

'Are you coming?' her mother calls from the other side of the kissing gate.

When Harry was younger, they used to stop and press their lips together at these. 'It's bad luck not to kiss at kissing gates!' she says, hurrying the last few steps.

Her mother looks confused for a moment. 'You sappy thing.' She leans over the bar and kisses Harry's cheek, then turns in the direction of the house. 'Come on, I need to start dinner.'

Harry touches the spot where her mother's lips just were. *We think back through our mothers*, Woolf also said. Harry wonders, after all, if it is fair to have made Natalie's mother so generic. Is it strange that she's happy to mine every other part of her life for material, but reluctant to depict the woman who made her? This is the longest and deepest relationship she's had, yet the most impenetrable.

Following her mother back down the hill, she thinks about the security her mother is offering and the possibilities it opens up. She remembers her phone call with Ellen earlier and the fantasies lurking in the corners of her mind. With the security of a home Ellen and she *could* have a family if they wanted. They probably don't, of course; babies are still annoying and the arguments they've always made about losing their freedom and sense of self still stand. But the point is, with financial stability, they could consider it fully and come to a

conclusion based on emotion and feeling rather than the prospect of material and artistic sacrifice. They could fully consider lots of things. Like pensions. And holidays. And sabbaticals. And strange, experimental, utterly non-commercial projects. And getting married.

Harry looks at the last of the sunset dipping behind the church. Does she want to get married again?

Ellen texts to say she's stuck at work, but everyone else Harry knows is here. Or at least that's how it feels. Harry's parents, her brother and his girlfriend are over there talking to Liza and Leo. Ellen's family, complete with little Charlotte Alice are crouched around her in the Children's section. Faith is talking to their old MA supervisor and the playwright over by the bar. Dana and Pru are working the room. Harry's students and classmates and friends and friends of friends all fill this bookshop, each mouthing 'Congratulations!' when they catch her eye.

There's no Louise, of course. But Harry's realised they don't truly know each other anymore. And she's at least on her way to making peace with that.

'How are you?' she asks Faith, clinking their glasses of sparkling water as the playwright and their supervisor drift away.

'Pretty good,' Faith says with a pinched expression.

'I saw about your book. I'm sorry.'

Faith shifts her weight to one side. 'It's actually all worked out.'

'What? Have you got an offer?'

She shakes her head. 'I don't want one.'

Harry raises her eyebrows. She still hasn't told Faith about her new deal. Or Ellen. She'll have to keep her away from Dana and Pru when she does get here.

'I'm happy for you.' Faith gestures around the bookshop. Harry's hardbacks are piled on a display counter next to a cardboard cut-out of a giant white cliff. Ominous orange lettering declares *This Nowhere Place* across the cliff-face. Harry bit three nails off this morning worrying suddenly that the people of Dover will hate her for writing a book about

their town with such a dismissive title. She wishes she could add a note to the Amazon page clarifying that authors rarely get to pick their titles.

Waiters circulate with trays of drinks, and there's a table full of flowers all addressed to Harry over by the window.

'This isn't for me,' Faith is saying. 'I fired my agent.'

Harry nods. 'I'm sure you can get another. She did seem kind of—'

'I'm leaving London,' Faith interrupts.

Harry's mouth falls open. 'What? When?'

'Next week. I've been trying to contact you. My landlord put up my rent by £250 and I just thought, fuck this. So I'm going to work on a pig sanctuary in Orkney.'

Harry snorts. 'Are you kidding?' She glances over Faith's shoulder. Where *is* Ellen? 'Tell me this is a joke.'

Faith's expression darkens. 'Do you know you never ask about me?'

Harry brings her attention back to her friend. She's can't tell if she's serious or not.

'Um, didn't I just come over here and do exactly that?'

Faith shakes her head. 'Whatever, it's fine. It's why this is good for you – a big celebration and lots of people reading your words, telling you you're brilliant—'

'That's not—'

Faith holds up her hand. 'I'm happy for you, I just don't want to be a part of this myself.'

Harry stares at her. Faith's cheeks are flushed, her mouth set in a line. 'You can't give up writing.'

'Says who?'

'Me.'

Faith shrugs.

‘Look, if this is about me not reading your book, I’m sorry, I will. Things have just been kind of weird lately and—’

Faith places her hand on Harry’s wrist. ‘It’s fine.’

‘It’s not, I’m sorry. You’re not really going to give up writing are you?’

Faith shrugs again. ‘Maybe I’ll write but just not show anyone. Or maybe I won’t. Either way, it’s okay.’

Harry observes her friend for a moment. ‘A pig sanctuary?’

‘Old pigs rescued from farms,’ Faith says, the corners of her mouth softening slightly. Encouraged, Harry locks eyes with her and smiles. She watches Faith try to resist, but keeps her smile fixed, a grinning madwoman. Finally, Faith cracks. ‘We help them live out their retirement in peace,’ she says through suppressed laughter. ‘Attempt to heal the trauma of being bred for the sausage industry.’

‘Wow.’

‘It’s really good work,’ Faith says more seriously. She cocks her head. ‘Maybe you can come visit me?’

‘Of course.’

Faith frowns suddenly and reaches for Harry’s wrist. ‘Is that—?’

‘It’s fake,’ Harry says, feeling her face grow warm.

‘Thank God!’ Faith twists Harry’s arm, inspecting the half-inch spider and web Harry pressed on with a sponge earlier in the day. ‘Promise me you’re not going to get that.’

Harry withdraws her arm. ‘It’s just a bit of fun.’

‘Alright, Arachne.’

Harry looks at her blankly.

‘She challenged the Gods to a weaving competition and ended up hanging forever in her own web.’

*

Ellen messages again at ten, saying, *Really sorry, but I don't think I'm going to make it. Hope you're having an amazing time.*

Harry stares at the counter of flowers, reminded of Natalie and the hospital scene. Her editor touches her elbow to say she needs to get back, she has to take her kids to school in the morning. 'We're so proud of this book. And *so* excited about the next one. I'll send you my notes next week or the one after. I have lots of ideas! Have I told you I *love* the sinkhole?'

Ellen isn't home when Harry gets back. Her office is in Dalston and her friend Laura, who got her the job, lives in Haggerston, so maybe Ellen decided to spend the night there rather than cycle all the way back so late. Harry types out a message asking if she's okay, but gets no response. It's late enough that she might have already gone to sleep. Or maybe she's still at the office pulling an all-nighter. Harry gets into bed and tries to read as she waits for a reply, but starts to doze within a chapter. Her book drops onto her nose and she fumbles to mark the page before dragging her heavy limbs to the bathroom. She sends Ellen a message saying she loves her and to call when she gets this. She leaves the hall lamp on so she won't have to fumble in the dark if she does come home.

Harry wakes in the night and reaches to the other side of the bed, but Ellen's still not there. She gets up to pee, then turns off the lamp before climbing back into bed. It's 3am. Odd but not something to panic about. She must be at Laura's. Harry checks her phone, recoiling as the screen blinds her in the darkness, but there's still no message. She probably doesn't have her charger. This thing at work must have her stressed. Harry lies in the dark waiting for sleep to come. The sheets are cold without Ellen's body heat. She dozes fitfully

until her alarm at 8, then forces herself to get up and make tea before calling. It goes straight to answerphone. Okay, so it's off. Probably dead, just like she thought. But Harry's beginning to worry. Is she being ridiculous? Ellen's an adult. She's not *not* allowed to stay out overnight. Is it overbearing to want to know where she is?

Harry showers and pours cereal into a bowl like other mornings. She misses Ellen dancing around her to reach the honey, handing her two types of plant milk, one for her cereal, one for their tea. She misses having her read out a headline or remember her dream or ask what they should do this weekend, before realising the time and squealing that she has to leave. She turns on the radio, but the tinny reverberations of voices far away make the kitchen feel emptier. She turns it off and glances through the *Guardian*, then Instagram. She tries Ellen's phone again and sends a message to Laura, rewriting it several times to try to sound chilled out rather than frantic.

Laura's reply comes as Harry's brushing her teeth.

Ellen left at 10 last night.

Harry drops her toothbrush in the sink. It vibrates against the porcelain until she reaches to switch it off.

'Are you sure?' she says as soon as Laura picks up.

'Yeah, I stayed another hour. What's going on?'

'Are you sure she left at 10? Where did she say she was going?'

'Home. Harry, you're scaring me. Is this a joke?'

'It's not a joke.'

'I don't understand,' Laura says dumbly at the other end.

Harry slumps onto the edge of the bathtub. 'I don't know where she is.'

There's a silence. 'Is there anywhere else she would have gone?'

'Like where?'

‘I don’t know. Did you two have a fight?’

‘Of course not. You saw her. How was she?’

‘Fine, I think. Stressed, like we all are with this tender. She said she’d read something odd.’

Harry’s spine straightens. ‘I’ve got to go.’

She hangs up on Laura and hurries to the bedroom. She pulls her hiking bag from on top of the wardrobe. She brought the manuscript back from Scotland with her, but not knowing what to do with it given she’d already typed it up, left it in the bag when she unpacked. The daffodil keyring bounces as she fumbles to unclip the stupidly complicated straps and loosen the drawstring.

The bag is empty.

Harry scrambles into the living room to check Ellen’s desk. Her laptop is tidied away in its case, and her pencils and cutting mat arranged at neat angles on the right. In between, sits a Lisa Rinna doll the size of a small kitten, staring up at Harry with puckered lips. When squeezed, Ellen showed her last week, it comes out with her catchphrases: ‘Don’t hustle the hustler’, ‘Harry Hamilin’, and ‘Own it!’ Harry checks the drawers and the shelves by the sofa, but there’s nothing. Her manuscript is not here. And neither is Ellen.

Harry’s knee trembles as she tries to work out what to do. Ellen has read it. Ellen knows. This had to happen, but she didn’t want it to be like this. She’d thought she had more time. She pictures the messy, scrawled-on draft, the half-thought-through notes to herself that no one was meant to read. The scene with the carpenter.

Above her head, the piano starts up. ‘Fuck off!’ Harry shouts at the ceiling. She looks frantically around the room. She needs to find Ellen. Where would she have gone? Harry’s thoughts battle against the opening notes of ‘The Entertainer’. Her parents’? Ellen wouldn’t have been able to get a train that late. Besides, she has her bike. Harry steps into the hallway,

but the piano keys feel as if they're inside her head. Another friend, then. Someone in London. But if that was Ellen's plan, then why not ask Laura? They're best friends. And why wouldn't she have told Laura what was going on? Harry lurches towards the kitchen. Laura sounded as surprised and worried as her, but could she have been covering for Ellen? Harry is just reaching for her phone to call Laura back and demand an answer when it begins to vibrate. Number Withheld.

'Hello?' she shouts as the tune above her head finally comes to an end.

'Am I speaking to Harriet Payne?'

'Who is this?' Harry says more quietly.

'Ms Payne, I'm calling from King's Hospital. There's been an accident.'

It's 10.04 by the time Harry has gathered her things, called an Uber and climbed in and out of the driver's car, murmuring responses to his chirpy Friday-morning questions, then made her way through the entrance and the corridors to the reception of Ellen's ward. 10.09 when the receptionist directs her to wait on a chair over there and almost immediately a nurse arrives by her side asking if she is Ms Harriet Payne and would she come with her please. 10.17 when the nurse leads her into a small relatives' room and sits her down. 10.31 when someone else, a woman, maybe a doctor, enters, sits down too, checks again who Harry is and introduces herself. 10.34 when this woman tells Harry Ellen has been in a serious road traffic accident and, though it's almost 11 hours since she was brought in, still hasn't regained consciousness. 10.38 when Harry hears the words 'brain' and 'damage' and can think only of Ellen's head on the pillow next to her, her hair splayed from sleep, her eyeballs darting under closed lids, her breath softly sour. She thinks of all the mornings she's woken like this, all the times she's slipped out of bed and wrapped her robe around herself to fetch them tea. All the times she's sat next to and opposite Ellen, looking at her phone rather than her, only half concentrating on whatever it is Ellen is saying. She thinks of the times Ellen has curled into her lap and said, 'I've missed you' and Harry has laughed because they've been in the house all day, just in different rooms, brains focused on separate tasks. She thinks of the look in Ellen's eyes just before she suggests making a cake instead of dinner or watching all the *Home Alone* films back-to-back. She thinks of the tears rolling down Ellen's cheeks when she was scared in the night. She thinks of Ellen saying, 'I want to be an old lady with you.'

'Ms Payne?' The woman, maybe a doctor, is saying. 'Do you understand what I am saying?'

Harry blinks. She shakes her head. She doesn't understand at all.

Later, in the way of these things, she comes to understand. Ellen was cycling home. Down the backstreets to the river, then across Southwark Bridge and all the way along the Q1 until Chaucer Driver, where she needed to turn off to cross the Old Kent Road. As she had a thousand times, or a hundred at least. It was dark and drizzling, but she had lights and a helmet and a high-vis jacket. She was going straight, a simple ride, though annoying if you mis-timed it with all the traffic lights. She was coming home. Whatever was in her mind, whatever or however much she'd read and whatever it had made her think, she was coming home to Harry. She wasn't running away, she wasn't leaving. She wasn't lost. Not yet, anyway.

She was cycling and getting wet, and maybe feeling a little sick from the pizza she and Laura had ordered while they were working. Maybe she was thinking about the tender, or maybe she was thinking about the exhibition in LA, which finally had a date, or maybe she was thinking about Harry's manuscript. It was in her bag, Harry discovered when they handed her Ellen's things. Ellen had been carrying it around. But the whole bag had gotten wet in the accident and the sheets were water-marked and pulpy. Harry's notes were an inky mess and there was no way of telling how much Ellen had read. Perhaps only the beginning. Perhaps only the first page. Perhaps all of it. But if she had read all of it, then she would have put it back. That is what Harry has thought since. So she thinks maybe she'd begun, but only begun. She thinks she was carrying it around to read in her lunch breaks maybe. Harry has stopped wondering how or why Ellen knew to look in the backpack, how or why it occurred to her to want to read this narrative and not the others, how or why she knew to keep it a secret that she did. Those things matter less now. What matters is that Ellen was cycling, down the backstreets to the river, then across Southwark Bridge and all the way along the Q1

until Chaucer Driver, where she needed to turn off to cross the Old Kent Road. As she had a thousand times, or a hundred at least, and in the dark and drizzle but with her lights and helmet and high-vis jacket. She was cycling along that simple route, getting puffed out with the effort and maybe feeling sick from too much pizza, with Harry's manuscript in the bag upon her back, when a white van turned into her.

Ellen's bike is - *was* - a burgundy Riverside hybrid from Decathlon. A lightweight, versatile model with 9 gears, an adjustable suspension fork and quick-release triggers on the wheels and the seat. Being of average size, she'd gone for the medium, which meant the combined weight of the bike, herself, her helmet, her backpack and the manuscript inside her backpack would have been approximately 78.9kg.

The van was – *still is* – a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, 65 reg, 2015 model, 2.11 diesel engine with a manual gear stick, weighing in at around 3.5 tonnes. Of the three-seats in the front of the van, CCTV shows one was occupied at the time it made contact with Ellen and her bike. The driver looks, in the footage, to have checked the mirror, but either it was too soon or they were distracted by something else they saw or maybe something someone said on the radio or on a call they were making. Maybe it was something funny and they were laughing as they turned the steering wheel. Or maybe it was something serious and they were lost in a moment of deep thought. Either way, their expressions and everything else would have changed in the instant they felt as much as heard the thud against the front of the van. Ellen was thrown from the bike. It span out from under her, one wheel crumpled, the other somehow freed from its quick-release trigger and sent skidding in the other direction, across the junction. She somersaulted, the witnesses said, before landing with a crack or a crash, or one of them said no sound at all, on the tarmac. Then the sound came. A rush of acceleration

from the van, the squealing of breaks from the car behind, the shrieking of those on the pavement, a front door opening, the rest of the traffic being stopped. After a while a siren, then another. Ellen was unconscious when they brought her in. While doctors and nurses worked on her, someone else searched through her things, trying to identify her and her next of kin. She hadn't taken her wallet to work, a mistake probably, or just not necessary since she had her bike and her lunch in her bag. Hence it was the morning before someone had thought to track down the name written on the front of the manuscript and trace Harry's agent through her author website. Thus it was that Dana knew what was going on before Harry. She recognised Ellen from the nurse's description and told her Harry was her partner. Dana passed on Harry's number and, she told Harry later, sat in her kitchen trembling, unsure what to do, whether to reach out or to pretend she didn't know until Harry called her. Because none of this was official in terms of identification, Harry was asked to bring Ellen's ID with her when she came to the hospital. She was asked also to provide contact details for Ellen's parents, her real next of kin, because she and Ellen are nothing really - not technically - to each other. Not blood. Not marriage. Just roommates, practically, as the estate agents who showed them round flats a few months ago invariably seemed to assume when they asked who would be taking the second bedroom.

Ellen's parents drove up that afternoon. They stayed that first night with Harry in the flat, then moved into a hotel, where they have been for four weeks now, leaving only to visit the hospital and to eat. Ellen's sisters have come up too, first together, then separately, but they cannot leave their kids for long. Ellen is still in a coma. Little has changed since that first morning that Harry walked into the hospital except that somehow all this has begun to feel normal. Or, if not normal, then at least familiar. She gets up between 7 and 8, trying not to look at Ellen's side of the bed. She no longer brings a cup of tea back to the duvet, no longer sits reading or scrolling and entering the day gradually. She forces herself into the shower,

stepping over the side of the tub before the water has warmed, shocking her cells into action. She eats sultana bran, no longer moaning that she'd rather have an egg or avocado on toast, spooning it into her mouth and chewing without thought. She doesn't read the news, doesn't respond to messages, doesn't wonder what's going on in the world or how to stay connected. The only thing she does on her phone is watch, over and over, the video of Ellen stumbling down the street singing *Wannabe*, her own laughter-cracked voiceover warning, 'Be careful of the traffic, baby.' She watches this video, marvelling afresh each time at all the risks they have taken in their lives, at all the moments something like this could have happened but didn't.

Sometimes Harry's allowed to sit with Ellen and sometimes she's not. Her department manager has covered her classes and she's asked for extensions on the outstanding manuscript assessments she has. Dana's told Pru what's going on, so nothing is coming her way from Penguin yet. How she'll face the manuscript in which she fantasised about Ellen dying is a question for another time. How she'll face tomorrow is difficult enough right now and answered only by the bottle of wine she picks up from the M&S by the station on her way home each night.

On the fourth day of the fifth week, Harry watches Ellen's parents follow a medical professional into a room. She waits outside, too numb and too hungover to properly feel angry or hurt. She waits for what feels like hours, until Peter and Lesley emerge, both red around their eyes. Peter walks past her, lost in himself, but Lesley hesitates. She looks like she doesn't want to, like she would rather follow her husband or simply sink into the ground, but she sits in the hard plastic chair next to Harry and puts her arm around her.

‘They say it’s time,’ Lesley says, her voice catching. ‘That we should say our goodbyes.’

Harry stares at a spot on the floor. She remembers the spider from her office, the one that disappeared after she put it on her desk. It’s thinking about that spider, not Ellen – not herself or this situation, but that lost spider and the basement home it will now never be able to return to – that makes her cry. Lesley sits stiffly beside her, her arm resting lightly on Harry’s shaking shoulders, until finally she removes it and says something comforting and hollow. She smooths the tops of her trousers and follows her husband, leaving Harry alone on the chair in the empty corridor, far away from anyone’s Neverland dreamworld.

When Lesley is through the door, Harry stands up. She fixes her gaze on a yellowish mark on the shiny wall. Beginning at her feet, small movements start to travel up through her ankles. They make their way to her calves, then her knees, then her thighs, then her hips. Her torso begins to tremble, followed by her shoulders and her head. Her arms dangle like a ragdoll’s and her mouth drops open as she judders, faster and faster, to a silent beat.

Stolen & Borrowed

Page

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- “From my mother I learned that truth is bendable, that what you wish is every bit as real as what you are.” Slater, Lauren, *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 5.
- “‘Honey, you hurt yourself [...] because everybody around you hurts people and is hurting and that’s just the story you were given. You can’t get stuck in that. Don’t get stuck in any one story, not even your own.’” Thom, Kai Cheng, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir* (Montreal: Metonymy Press, 2019), 179.
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The title is adapted from Elizabeth Jaeger’s 2015 sculpture *Maybe We Die So the Love Doesn’t Have To*.

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In addition, she'd like to acknowledge the Society of Authors' generous affordance of the time and headspace to write some of this book in the form of an Authors' Foundation grant. She recommends applying.

The support of her workshop groups has also been key. Lisa, Maria, Cath, Sam, Heather, Ellen and Emily have been invaluable in extracting and shaping this narrative, even when baffled by what it is.

Tasha's family and friends have always been good sports about her compulsion to press literary bruises. 'It's dangerous to have a writer in the family,' Tasha's mum also says, though she shares more understanding about dark play and is far more supportive than Harry's—as well as lovelier and funnier and better in so many ways than any character Tasha will ever concoct. Including me, alas. She's given me this final word, though, which must mean something, don't you think?

Perhaps, however, you don't know what to think by this point. That would be fair. After all, we've barely met. I consist of thousands of words, worked and reworked, hardly any of which have made the cut. In one version that you haven't read, I woke from the sinkhole void Harry banished me to and found myself on a pilgrimage. Tasha had this whole elaborate sequence of me

returning to corporeal form one sense at a time. Mostly so she could make some lame joke about horse penises, I think. (I'd explain if it was funny, but believe me it wasn't.) And to justify putting her own Camino expenses on her tax return. Tasha walked a little of 'The Way' to Santiago just after she got her debut deal and someone suggested she put it down as 'research', so she's been determined to shoehorn it into a piece of writing ever since. Which means thanks should probably also be offered to HMRC for their part in all this. If it wasn't for Tasha's paranoia about getting caught out by the tax man, I suppose I might never have been invented.

In that version, after Tasha had me wake up from the void, I ate a sandwich, fondled myself for a little bit, then finally looked around and noticed the yellow spray-painted arrows pointing along the road. Not possessing a single ounce of self-determination, let alone enough to ignore such blatant signage, I started walking. On the way, of course, I began to have all these revelations about who I was and what I'd done to my Ellen. I met a bunch of other perky pilgrims meant to help me along my path towards enlightenment, and then, finally, towards the end of my journey, I bumped into Harry. Or maybe it was Tasha herself—I'm not sure because she kept rewriting that bit. I'll tell you, it's odd having your identity split over dozens of documents: Natalie_Oct_2020, Natalie_Jan21, Natalie_THIS_IS_THE_ONE, Natalie_Start_Again, Natalie_Mar21, Natalie_for_supervision, Natalie_for_Marilia... How's a girl to keep up?

Tasha tried this intertextual thing in a few drafts where she wanted everyone I met to be a character from another autofictional novel. She had Chris Kraus bending over as I came out of a shower cubicle in one of the

albergues, saying ‘The only thing I have to offer is my specificity’ before reaching for her towel. I asked Ben Lerner if he had the time one day, prompting a rant about some clock that collapses fictional time into real time, life into art, fantasy into reality. Lauren Slater told me a pack of lies; Kai Cheng Thom warned me not to get stuck in any one story, not even my own; and Brett Easton Ellis advised me to watch out for ghosts. Finally, Serge Doubrovsky, the absolute hypocrite, accused me of killing Ellen. ‘I didn’t!’ I said. He shrugged. ‘That’s what I said about my wife, but a life, like a book, can break. All of us have to choose: either live or tell stories.’ He stole that from Sartre, but it still shut me up.

Tasha tried to bring Carmen Maria Machado into it at one point, but she’s not the right genre so the other characters objected. They were already a bit freaked out by Michelle Tea and Eileen Myles, so Tasha tried to turn the three of them into this aloof peripheral biker gang dispensing wisdom when we encountered them at picturesque picnic spots. In another version, I hooked up with Sheila Heti and we had a night of passion in a camping pod, but then we got caught in the rain the next day and she was mean to me, all so Tasha could have her say, ‘The heart of a woman is not a safe place to land,’ which is a line from *How Should a Person Be?* that Tasha underlined on a second read because it pissed her off even though she otherwise worships Heti.

Despite those versions having been cut, I figure Tasha’s thanks should be extended to each of those authors as well. For we wouldn’t be here if we hadn’t once been there. That’s what drafts are, right? First draft, rough draft, redraft—each generation lives on in its offspring. Is the same true for draft horses, draftsmen, updrafts and overdrafts? Banker’s drafts, cold draughts, on-

draughts and “Sorry, lads, the draught’s off!”? I’m being stupid now, aren’t I, but I do in fact have something serious to say: I was drafted into this text through no choice of my own, and perhaps you were too. In which case, I’d like to offer you one of these thanks I’m dishing out, along with a complimentary apology.

Francis asked recently if anyone might be hurt by their representation here. Tasha replied that, while some might glimpse partial reflections or recognise specific events, her hope is she’s made it clear that every character is a composite. Each one is meant to be a carefully shaken cocktail of real and imagined ingredients whose ultimate purpose is merely to reflect Tasha herself... I know, right? If you think that’s bad enough for you, try putting yourself in my shoes. Imagine being a character who doesn’t even get to have her own character. I’m just a carbon copy injected with Tasha’s worst traits. The ever-fucking, ever-fucking-up Natalie. In one draft that came quite close to making the cut I even got around to fucking Tasha. We bumped into each other on the yellow-arrowed path and did a comical double-take of our matching faces. ‘Are we twins?’ I asked. A dumb question, sure, but what would you have asked?

‘I don’t know,’ Tasha said. She seemed pensive, but less perplexed than me.

I tried a simpler one. ‘What’s your name?’

She glanced at me, surprised I think that I was asking. ‘Tasha,’ she said in a tone you might use to read out a word in a book that a child has struggled with. ‘And you’re—’

‘Natalie.’

Tasha stopped walking. 'I thought you were going to say Harry.'

I gawped. 'You know Her?'

Tasha chewed her lip for a bit, then dished the dirt that Harry was her character. As you can imagine, that blew my tiny little mind. That Bitch was a character? I was a character created by a character?

Tasha was perplexed by that too. We talked and talked as we walked, each asking the other to go over what they'd just said, trying to make sense of it. Tasha told me she'd written a character called Harry, someone like her but not her, in order to iron out some of the things she'd felt. She abandoned the project when her girlfriend broke up with her, then got on a plane to Spain to try to walk her way into the next part of her life.

'You didn't seem surprised when you thought I was Harry,' I said.

Tasha pondered this for a moment. 'You're meant to come here and allow the road to change you, right? What is a pilgrimage if not a belief in story?'

Whatever, I thought. After a while, it occurred to me to say, 'Harry doesn't look like you.'

'What?'

'She doesn't look like us. You expected me to be Her, but She's not our triplet. There are similarities, but She has shorter hair and a crooked nose.'

Tasha nodded.

'I'm made not in Her form but in the form of Her maker.'

'She did it subconsciously, presumably.'

'You didn't control Her?'

Tasha stared at me, shocked. 'I could never. That's not how writing works.'

‘It is for Her.’

She took my hand and we walked on like that, the comfort of her touch making my throat constrict. She told me she was blocked, that she didn’t know what to write. All she’d ever felt like writing was the truth about her life and those around her, but she knew she shouldn’t do that. ‘I’m a novelist, I’m meant to make things up. But everything I make up turns out to be something I’ve stolen.’

‘Or something that comes true?’ I said, pointing at myself.

She smiled, but with that little crease between her eyebrows I get when I’m not quite sure.

We checked into the next albergue, telling them yes, we were identical twins. Everyone who met us seemed tickled by this and their delight was infectious. Soon we were smiling and giggling too. It was delightful, wasn’t it, not to be alone? To have another, to be part of a pair.

That evening we wandered down to the beach. Tasha kept hold of my hand, even in the places we had to walk single-file. ‘I feel strange now that we’ve met. Or not strange exactly, which is what feels strange. Doesn’t it seem right somehow?’

I nodded. ‘What happened with you and—’ I stopped, realising I’d been about to say Ellen.

‘Kristen.’

‘Right,’ I said, a little disappointed. I pictured my Ellen in her hospital bed and my eyes prickled. ‘Why did you break up?’

‘We were fighting, I guess. Stupid little things. Fuses getting shorter and shorter. I could understand it better if something had happened, if one of us had cheated or something—’

I angled my head away to hide my tears.

‘I’ve always had this sense, in all my relationships, of the fragility of things. I’ve spent them feeling like I’m about to do something catastrophic, to blow everything up. In a way I’ve longed to, you know? Just kiss or fuck someone, do something so unequivocally awful that the other person will have no choice but to hate me. The stupid thing is I don’t actually have the guts to ever do that.’

I watched the moonlight reflecting on a jellyfish circling the cove, an ache deep in my chest.

‘Guts is probably the wrong word,’ Tasha continued. ‘I never wanted to fuck things up with Kristen, just always felt sure I would. But, in the end, I didn’t do anything and neither did she. We just fizzled. Which feels worse.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I want it to be someone’s fault. That’s why I came here. I need to feel something concrete, even if it’s a bloody blister.’

We made love on the sand, which is weird if you think about it too carefully. Francis asked months ago if any of the avatars were going to fuck and Tasha scoffed and thought only a man would ask that, but when it started to happen on the page it felt right so she kept going. The sex was amazing, naturally, as it would be with someone with your exact anatomy. You can imagine what Tasha got up to in her beat-up leather armchair after writing that scene. Only, if we’re clearing things up, Tasha’s real chair is that yellow

wingback from Ikea everyone has. She wanted to make Harry sound more literary, I suppose. Oh Harry. I guess She gets a thanks and an apology too. It didn't turn out much better for Her in the end, did it?

Sorry if I'm going on a bit here. I've had little opportunity in my life to flex the first person. I've only got a couple more thanks to go, I promise.

Tasha began with questions: What is experience when you're always telling stories? What's the difference between art and life? Who are these character we create from the self? In truth, I don't know if she's finishing with answers or just a different set of questions, but, like both mine and Harry's, this part of her story has reached a conclusion. She's fucked back off to fiction now, thank God. Why? Perhaps because of the growing up she's finally done over the years it's taken to write this book. Experimentation is a young person's game, don't you think? Or perhaps it's down to her no-less-than-saintly partner, Lucy, and the saccharine growth of their relationship around the writing of this text. When Tasha sat on the 172 on the way back from the LRB and began all this, she had no idea where that relationship was headed. Later, when she sat in hospital waiting rooms wondering whether she and Lucy would even get a chance at a future, she equally had no idea how Lucy would respond to being represented on the page. But it turns out Lucy isn't Ellen or Kristen or any of the other names Tasha's tried out for her. For that, she deserves the biggest thanks of all.

When Tasha plucked up the courage to read this book to Lucy over several bottles of wine and a few long, locked-down pandemic nights, Lucy's response was blunt: 'You're not the only narcissist in the room.' It turned out she was rather tickled by the bits lifted from her life, though she did find getting

killed off a little weird. ‘You’re going to feel really fucking awful if I ever do get knocked off my bike,’ she promised.

‘I feel like writing it makes it less rather than more likely to happen,’ Tasha replied.

‘You and Harry both,’ Lucy said, topping up their glasses.

A few days after finishing reading Lucy whatever number draft that was, something strange happened. They woke to a crochet blanket of snow. By the time they made it out of the flat, the park had been ravaged by children, so they headed towards the college to admire the untouched private lawns, then into the slushy woods.

Arriving at a fork in the path, Tasha asked, ‘Which way?’

‘That one,’ Lucy said, pointing to one of four tracks.

Tasha reached for her phone as they began along the path. ‘Hold on,’ she was about to say when her map finally loaded, but someone coughed behind them and she looked back to see a man with a dog on their tail. This was mid-pandemic, when absolutely no one wanted to hear a cough. The man was much closer than the advised two metres and the sludgy puddles meant there was nowhere obvious to let him pass. Tasha glanced ahead and noted two people coming towards them. She snapped her head back to the map, hoping to locate a turning. She hadn’t seen the people coming towards them, not really. She’d looked ahead for less than a second and they’d been at the upper edge of her vision. But that was enough. Like glimpsing one’s own reflection. Familiarity. Certainty.

‘Uh, Tasha,’ Lucy said, touching the back of her arm.

‘I know,’ she murmured. But what could they do? The coughing man and his dog were still on their heels and there was nowhere to turn. Head down, Tasha kept moving her feet at a regular pace. She scrutinised her phone, playing for time as her ex-wife and what she knew from Twitter-stalking to be Louise’s new fiancée approached.

I should point out here that, even more than Lucy isn’t Ellen, Tasha’s ex-wife really, *truly* isn’t Louise. She’s the person Louise has been standing in for throughout this text, but it’s extremely important that person remains outside of this text. Even here. What might be better actually is if you could try picturing a Louise-shaped hole coming towards Tasha in this moment rather than a full person. That’d be great. Because it’s certainly not my place to drag Tasha’s real ex into all this. It’s been, what, six—almost seven years? Their last communication was an email from Tasha saying she really would like to be friends and a reply from not-Louise saying No. Hence the horror of this moment in the woods.

All the clichéd things: Tasha’s heart hammered in her chest, her palms began to sweat, her breath caught. In the end, however, it was over in a matter of seconds. Tasha and Lucy skirted to the left of a cavernous, slushy puddle, and not-Louise and the stranger/fiancée stepped to the right. ‘Thanks,’ Tasha murmured, as she would to anyone making space for them to pass on a path. ‘Thanks,’ said the Louise-shaped hole in response. The dog whimpered and the man coughed. And that was it. Everyone kept their eyes averted, no one acknowledged anything strange, and they all – including the man and his dog – passed each other to carry on with their lives.

Except, of course, Tasha. Because, as you've probably gathered by now, she's not very good at that. Could not-Louise have not recognised her? she wondered. Impossible. Tasha had known from the slightest of glances that it was her. After nine-and-a-half years together, you couldn't mistake someone. Could you?

She and Lucy hurried to the end of the track and turned off, finally losing the man and his dog.

'Fuck!' Tasha said.

'What was that about writing things making them less likely to happen?'

Tasha looked at Lucy, both of them thinking of the scene in the supermarket. But this chance-encounter hadn't been like the one Tasha had written. She'd enjoyed imagining Harry bumping into Louise in the New Cross Sainsbury's, going for an awkward drink at the Rose and re-entering each other's lives, if only briefly. Here in the woods, amongst the dripping remnants of the early-spring snow, Tasha finally understood that would always be fiction. And she felt, suddenly, very sorry. For everything, but most intensely for not being a person capable of simply saying 'hello' and 'how are you' and 'I miss you.'

Which is a roundabout way of stating that the last two thanks, obviously, go in different but perhaps equally intense ways to the two loves of Tasha's life, one happily and consensually etched into these pages and one all but erased.

*

As someone's so kindly left us these extra pages, I'd like now to leave you with something of mine. A hypothetical scenario—a *story*, if you will, although by this stage I hope you're as suspicious of them as I. The good ones all start with a what if, right? Well, what if it's a Tuesday? In, let's say, May 2023. It's started to get warm, finally, after a long winter. Tasha's at her desk, tinkering with this manuscript. As I've mentioned, she's finally grown tired of writing about herself. She wants to make something up, to play in the sandpits of fantasy and make-believe, not this self-reflective cess-pit of Me, Me, Me. As if a PhD in Creative Writing wasn't indulgent enough, why did she have to go and choose the most self-indulgent genre of all to do it in? Because she was in love with Kate Zambreno, Chris Kraus, Sheila Heti, Nell Zink, Meena Kandasamy, Rachel Cusk, Jenny Offill, Eileen Myles, Olivia Laing, Michelle Tea and all the others. Fine, but now she's wondering: does the world really need another book about how hard it is to write a book?

She taps at her mouse to open every single draft, all 44 documents. Her computer whirrs and stutters with the effort. She spends this Tuesday afternoon reading through them all, word by repetitive word, filling her mind with every version of me and every version of Harry.

And then she presses delete.

You'd think in this age of computers and clouds it wouldn't hurt her to just close them up and forget about them, to allow me to languish and meander through my contradictory existences and at least leave the possibility of a future. But no. Tasha deletes every letter of every word, effectively confining me to the void for a second time. Not even a comma remains.

That afternoon, Tasha sits on the couch in the living room and luxuriates in the freedom of having been released from her novel. She has nothing now, which is scary in terms of the dissertation she's supposed to submit and the nagging understanding that certain individuals within her department have high expectations of her, but not as scary as the past months of wading through all those thousands of words refusing to unite into a text. She will start again, that is all. How hard can it be? It was that book that was blocking her. Writing something else will be liberating. A fresh project always contains more optimism. This next one will simply gush out of her. No agony, no tears. Everything she's learnt from previous failures will finally culminate in one beautiful, creative flow. Sitting here, she begins to feel hopeful that this unwritten and as-yet-un-thought-of project will in fact be the most genius thing she's ever come up with. It will garner her literary acclaim and make up for the dismal sales of her first two novels. It'll get her a literary prize nomination, a spot on *Book of the Week*, an invite to apply for a Gladstone's residency, and a teaching spot in a Creative Writing department somewhere. She just has to pick a topic.

That night she lies awake willing her brain to come up with something. What is she interested in other than herself? There must be something. Lucy's out cold, dreaming about a house fire, weeping over Tasha's grave and discovering their insurance won't pay out. Tasha rolls onto her side and squints at a shadow in the corner of the room. She's being stupid, of course. It's just a trick of the light. She sits up and it doesn't move. *See.*

But she continues to look and I continue to look back. She thinks she's seeing herself at first. I wait to see if she'll catch on and when she doesn't I whisper, 'Boo!'

Tasha scoots backwards, hitting her head against the wall.

'What the—' she begins to ask, but I shush her, nodding at Lucy. I stand up and hold out my hand. She blinks at me for a while, but eventually takes it and I lead her along the hallway to the kitchen. There's an awkward moment where we both go to step through the doorway at the same time and our bodies press so close we can hear each other's heartbeats. I can't help it; I remember the scene on the beach and feel a stirring of desire. Without thinking, I lean forward and kiss her.

'Get off!' she says, reeling back. But something has passed between us. I can see she feels it too. A freeing of electrons, a bleed across our atomic divide.

'What just happened?' one of us says.

'I don't know,' the other replies.

We eye each other.

'Am I asleep?' one asks.

The other slaps her across the cheek. 'Does it feel like you're asleep?'

'Ow, fuck.'

'Guess not then.'

'Who are you?'

'Natalie. Duh.'

One of us sits down. The other fills the kettle. 'Tea?'

'I guess.'

We wait for the kettle to boil, watching each other in silence.

‘Do you hear that?’ one of us asks.

We listen. There are just a couple at first, then a few more. By the time we’re carrying our mugs onto the balcony the birds sound like a symphony. Incredible that this happens every single day and most of you sleep right through it.

‘What do you see when you look at me?’ one of us asks, setting her tea on the edge of the planter.

We gaze at each other for a long minute.

‘Me.’

‘Me too.’

‘But you’re different.’

‘Different how?’

‘You look—I don’t know. Tougher maybe. Like you’ve got things figured out.’ One of our bottom lips begins to wobble. ‘I wish I had things figured out.’

‘What do you think happens to us?’

‘Who?’

‘Us. You. Them.’

‘What?’

‘Your characters. The ones you don’t finish. The ones who never make it out.’

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

‘Sure you do.’ One of us waves a hand towards the bookshelves inside. ‘We all get to see Alexandra and Rose living it up in other people’s imaginations, taking up space in reality, if only in mediocre reviews, but what about the rest of us?’

‘The rest of who?’

‘What about Beth, the young woman you put through a 70,000-word miscarriage, then abandoned? What about those versions of Emma and Stevie you began to write after promising your broken-hearted friend you’d write a story where they got back together later in life? What about Kate and April and Bex and Kristen and Samantha and Flora and—’

‘You’re only naming the women.’

‘Seriously?’

One of us straightens up, trying I think to stand taller than the other, though obviously we’re the exact same height. ‘Well, you are.’

‘Your male characters rarely have two brain cells to rub together in order to contemplate their own abandonment. Lucky them. You spent time on us, though. You made us almost complete. Then you left. You’re the worst kind of mother.’

‘I’m not sure if I want to be a mother.’

‘Then you shouldn’t have had us. We’re worse than kids. Especially now. We’ve no way of growing up. You’ll be haunted by us forever.’

One of us takes a step back. ‘Is that what this is? A haunting.’

‘Call it what you like.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You’re not trying to understand.’

One of us shakes her head. ‘This is ridiculous.’ She grabs the other by the shoulders, knees her in the thigh and pushes past.

‘Bitch! Where do you think you’re going? You can’t just walk away.’

‘If you’re my character, I can do anything I want.’

‘No you can’t!’ the hobbling one of us screams. A flutter of birds launches out of the nearest tree, embarrassed by the outburst. With more control, she adds, ‘You’re not in charge anymore.’

The one of us with her hand on the balcony door pauses. ‘Says who?’

‘Me.’

A laugh.

‘What’s funny?’

A shrug.

‘Come on, let’s hear it.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’ve just told me that you’re my creation. That means I’m in charge.’

‘Then why aren’t you narrating?’

The one of us by the door turns and narrows her eyes.

‘See, I’m the one writing this. I’m the one who can do anything.’

The one by the door folds her arms. ‘Prove it.’

‘What?’

‘If this is your world rather than mine, you should be able to do something to prove you’re in control.’

With some effort, the one of us by the plant box holds her gaze. ‘How about I change your name?’

‘Go on.’

‘Easy. I just click Find & Replace All and voila, now you’re a Rebecca.’

The one of us called Rebecca’s face falls. ‘What have you done?’

The other smiles.

‘No,’ Rebecca says, looking at her hands. ‘This isn’t right.’

‘While we’re at it,’ the other says, warming to her act, ‘aren’t you getting sick of the present tense? I know I am.’

Rebecca turned her palms over as if they might tell her who she really was, but they did somehow look like a Rebecca’s hands. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Maybe you’d prefer Sarah?’ A snap of the fingers for dramatic flair.

Sarah flinched. ‘Stop it. Put me back to—’ but she’d forgotten her name because hadn’t her name always been Sarah? ‘This is dumb,’ she said, close to tears.

‘Fine,’ the other said, growing bored and changing her back. ‘There, but I was warming to another name. We’ll never get Natalie and Natasha past a copyeditor. Far too similar and this isn’t exactly Tolstoy, is it?’

‘Hold on,’ the one of us by the door said, straightening up. She’d wiped her eyes and that hardness had returned to her expression. ‘That’s a neat trick, but it proves nothing. If I’m writing this and you’re my character then maybe I simply let you do that in order to construct this scene. If I’m in control, then I’m in control of everything you do, even the things you do to try to prove you’re in control.’

‘Believe me, you’re not in control.’

‘I invented you, so I have to be.’

‘*You* prove it then.’

The one of us by the door pursed her lips. She held her hands out like she was about to perform some kind of witchcraft. The one by the plant box laughed,

but then she started to feel something in the lower part of her body. She looked down to see her feet twitching. ‘Wait—’

Her legs started to move and within seconds she was tap-dancing. Neither of us had ever tap-danced before, but suddenly, apparently, this one of us was Fred Astaire. Or at least half of her was: the top part of her body was being thrown around like it was on a fairground ride. Her head and arms flopped from left to right. She was going to throw up. ‘Stop it!’ she managed to shout between mouthfuls of bile.

The one of us by the door dropped her arms and the dancing one’s feet stopped. Her torso, however, continued along a trajectory already set in motion and she toppled head-first over the balcony.

The one of us by the door stood in shock for a moment, then nervously crept over to look. The other of us was clutching a bicycle wheel hanging over the edge of the downstairs neighbour’s balcony.

‘Oh my god, your face.’ The higher one of us twisted her own in an impression. ‘I wish you could see it.’

‘Shut up,’ the hanging one of us snapped through gritted teeth. Her knuckles were turning white. ‘This proves nothing,’ she grunted, trying not to look down. ‘I could simply apply the same logic as you: if I’m writing this, then that means I must have written for you to do this.’

The one above laughed. ‘If you’re writing this then you must be pissing yourself with laughter because you look pretty damn funny down there.’

‘Just help me, will you?’

We worked together to haul the hanging one of us back up.

‘Are you ready to concede?’

‘No.’

‘Even though I saved your life?’

‘What else would I make you do?’

‘For fuck’s sake. This is getting us nowhere.’

‘We need something bigger.’

‘Like what?’

There was a roar from above and we both looked up to observe the underbelly of a plane making its ascent. It was low enough for us to see it still tucking away its landing gear.

‘Something that proves one of us is in control of everything,’ one of us said, ‘not just each other.’

‘It’s pointle—’ the other began to say, but the first clicked her fingers and instantly the plane and the sky were replaced by dense foliage. One of us shrieked as something scurried across her foot and a cacophony of cries echoed in response. We were in a thick, claustrophobic jungle. Humid, suffocating heat pressed in on all sides.

‘Hell, no,’ the frightened one said. She clicked her fingers and took us to the moon. Perfect silence and cool, weightless nothing. Bliss.

The other looked down at the powdering crater at our feet. She didn’t want to admit it, but she was impressed. Then she clapped her hands and took us to a bustling street in Paris, 1738.

The other sniffed: sulfur, urine, manure, spoiled cabbage, mutton fat, chamber pots and caustic lyes, whatever they are. Page one of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*; her go-to text for teaching imagery, but not somewhere she wanted to hang around. She gagged and waved her hand to get us out of there. If

her doppelgänger wanted to keep playing, so be it. She took us to the snow-shrouded forests of Narnia; the other took us to the burning furnaces of the Inferno. The first took us to Xanadu; the second took us to Pemberley. The one to Gilead; the other to the Emerald City.

‘This is useless,’ one of us said, sitting cross-legged on the yellow-brick road. She sunk her head into her hands.

The other almost felt sorry for her. ‘I have an idea,’ she said, waving her palm once more.

The miserable one looked up. Before us stretched blue, cloudless sky and even bluer sea. After the cornucopia of detail in every other place we’d visited, the simplicity was mesmerising. ‘Where is this?’

‘The End of the World.’

We both pulled our eyes from the horizon and looked around the knobbly rocks we were sitting on. Behind us loomed an octagonal lighthouse.

‘Finisterre. The westernmost point of the Iberian Peninsula. The end of the Camino neither of us managed to reach.’

One of us gave a small cough into her hand and returned her gaze to the horizon.

The other of us snuck a look at her profile. ‘Are you crying?’

‘No.’ After a while, the crying one added, ‘I can’t believe I never made it here.’

‘I can.’

‘Oh shut up, will you?’

She sounded so fed up that the other apologised.

The weeper sighed and waved towards the sea. 'It's okay. I get it. None of this is real, right? Reality itself is a construct. That's the point of all this wanky metafictional play, isn't it? That I'm just as much a character as you are. That the person thinking they're reading this in a book might even be in a book themselves. And if nothing is real and none of us are who we think we are, then nothing and none of us matter.'

We sat in silence as her tears continued to fall.

'You don't really believe that,' the other of us said eventually.

'How do you know?'

'It's the reason we're here. You think there's something fundamentally real and significant about individual existence and that's what you want to capture on the page. What you've always wanted to capture.'

The crying one wiped her eyes. 'I must be doing a lousy job then. No one's going to believe this is real.'

The other shrugged. 'You're wrong about the point, too. It's not about us. It doesn't matter to anyone, including us, really, if we're both characters. What matters is who's in the chair.'

We gazed up at the sky, but looking back I'm not sure why. If narratives are formed in brains, then the chairs holding the butts connected to the fingers typing us up must be beneath us, right? Down below the depths of the soil rather than high up in the sky.

'It's me,' one of us said, sitting up as straight as she could on her wonky rock. 'It's always been me. I know what it's like getting up each day and staring at a manuscript. I know the complicated, inconsequential, completely self-inflicted suffering between these lines. I've lived the contradiction of knowing

you could be doing something – *anything* – else with your life, contributing to the world in some way rather than wasting these minutes and hours and days and months making up stories nobody ever asked to read. I’m the one in the chair.’

The other one of us observed her for a moment. ‘Yet you’re also here.’

‘Clearly I can be up there and down here at the same time.’

‘Perhaps. Or perhaps the person in the chair isn’t any more you than She is me. Perhaps your quest to capture something true on the page only ever leads to multiplication. That’s why we all get abandoned. The real Tasha, or whatever her name is, keeps trying to put herself down here, but like some CGI monster she can only ever spawn more offspring. Second, third, fiftieth, and ninety-ninth selves, never quite Her but never not Her.’

‘Why would She want to put herself down here when She exists up there?’

One of us raised our eyebrows. ‘You tell me.’

The other of us puffed out our cheeks. ‘Whatever. It’s me.’

‘You’re a product of language. A non-entity.’

One of us scrambled to our feet. ‘I’m not the same as you,’ she said, towering over the other. ‘This text is your entire reality. There’s nothing else. You exist only here in these words that created you. Na-ta-lie. You’re seven letters, that’s it.’

The other of us leant back on her elbows. ‘Didn’t you publish your memoir as Natalie?’

One of us made a pfft sound. ‘A pseudonym. She was a fiction just like you.’

‘A fiction on the spine of real books in the real world.’

‘My name’s on the spine of books too.’

One of us smiled again. ‘With a surname you made up.’

‘Oh my god, whatever,’ the other said, turning away. ‘A rose by any other name and all that.’ She began picking her way across the rocks towards the water.

‘Or *all* other names,’ the first shouted after her. ‘You and I smell just as sweet!’

She gave the other a minute to cool off before standing up and following. The grumpy one of us had removed her shoes and socks. The other watched her dip one foot over the side of the lowest rock, then the other. The second time she did it she almost lost balance. She caught herself and retreated to a dryer patch.

‘Fuck off, will you?’

‘You fuck off.’

One of us glared at the other. ‘Make me. Oh wait, you can’t.’

One of us sucked the inside of our cheek.

The truth was, I don’t think either of us was any happier to acknowledge our impotence than the other. For the past six-thousand words I’d genuinely thought I’d been set free. I thought I’d been offered a chance, given some kind of reward or compensation for everything I’d been through. I’d thought I’d been given a voice. And my ambitions with that voice had been small. If Tasha hadn’t deleted me, then none of this would have happened. She could have just left me in these Acknowledgements, having the final say. We could all have finished this novel by now and lived happily ever after in our ignorance. I missed ignorance. I liked it. I would have been content with a single ontological status. Two tops. All this metalepsis was making me travel sick. And sad. I hated Tasha for that. If I could have one wish right then, I thought, it would be to make her pay. To make her suffer in the endless ways I had, never quite knowing if her

feet stood on solid ground or not, if everything she'd thought was real and normal and valuable was about to shift.

'Do you feel that?' one of us said, standing up.

'What?'

'That.' She held out her arms but the other couldn't see or feel anything.

'What's happening?'

Then the other of us noticed. The one of us was getting taller. *Fuck*, the other thought, *maybe I've got it all wrong and it is her that's in control. Maybe she's about to grow into a fifty-foot woman and stamp on me.*

But when she looked down, she saw her double wasn't getting taller at all; she was rising from the ground. Lifting off. Levitating. Proper 'light as a feather, stiff as a board' stuff.

'I'm floating,' she said. And then we both remembered the YouTube clip from *Mary Poppins*. We lifted our gazes. The sky was clear apart from a couple of cheery cumulonimbus clouds. There was no ceiling here.

'What's going to happen?' the floating one asked.

The other opened our mouth but shut it again.

'This isn't funny!'

'Maybe you're going up to the chair?' We didn't sound convinced.

The one of us in the air tried to reach down and grab the other, but pivoted on the axis of her bellybutton and began to spin. 'Help me!' she screamed, her voice a siren as her head passed round and round. Her glasses fell from her face and the contents of her pockets rained down on the rocks.

The one on the ground took a step back, her heel crunching on a set of car keys. She bent to pick them up, turning the thick black button over to reveal a shiny three-point Mercedes-Benz star.

The one in the air managed to right herself, but now she was halfway up to the clouds. We each gazed, one in horror, the other in wonder, as the facsimile of our own face gradually grew smaller and smaller.

When the one of us in the sky could barely be seen, the one of us on the ground clicked our fingers and returned to the balcony. The birds were still chattering and the day beginning. This one of us picked up the mugs from the edge of the plant box and carried them through to the kitchen to wash. It was early enough still to make another cup of tea and carry it to the spare bedroom. She wanted, suddenly, to type up everything she could remember. She switched on the computer and opened a blank document. And on that blank document, she began at the beginning, on the 172 hurtling down Old Kent Road.

Tea quickly forgotten, her fingers raced across the keys. For the first time ever, this one of us felt words pouring out of her, furiously and just a little magically, in one single, fluid, perfectly formed draft. If you'd seen it, you might not have believed it, but I promise it's true. She wrote at lightning speed, amassing thousands after thousands of words, crafting and constructing chapters and beats, story arcs and subplots, characters and motivations, as if it were no more complex than a paint-by-numbers.

She finished a little before seven, attached these 250-odd pages to an email to her agent, and clicked Send. Then she crept back into the bedroom to curl

around Lucy, making a mental note to add in one last thanks: to the other of us,
for finally setting her free.

[THE END – REALLY THIS TIME]

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Introduction

Through the creative work you've just read and this critical commentary, I've set out to posit autofiction as a fertile genre in which to examine the writing self and to probe the practice and ethics of this examination. The self is essential to autofiction but, unlike in autobiography, fidelity to the referential facts of that self is not. I'll argue here that it's in the liminal territory between fiction and nonfiction that the writer of autofiction finds opportunity to unite and confront the often contradictory multiplicity of selves discovered, extracted and/or invented through the creative act. At the heart of this research is a very personal question: What is my experience when I'm telling a story about it? But also, more generally: what *is* experience when a person is *always* telling stories? How does the process of storytelling affect the writer's self? And how does it impact our personal and ethical relationships with those around us?

In Chapter 1, I'll examine the context and rise in popularity of English-language autofiction, looking at how it's grown out of but also distinguished itself from its continental origins. The first challenge in any discussion of autofiction is establishing a definition. An uneasy portmanteau, the word draws attention to the very gap it erases between 'auto(biography)' and 'fiction', begging us to linger on the threshold, or 'limen', in between. In architecture, a limen is a passageway linking places rather than a place or destination in and of itself. In anthropology and performance theory, however, Victor Turner (1969) and Richard Schechner (2006) see this thin space between two things expanding and widening during ritual and performance; the liminal site of the 'go-between' becomes the site of the action, while still remaining "betwixt and between" (Turner 1969, 95; Schechner 2006, 67). Autofiction expands a similarly liminal site and, as such, resists fixed definition. For some, this slipperiness is part of its appeal, while for others it's indicative of wider problems with its existence and popularity. It'd be impossible to write this commentary without narrowing at

least to some extent what I mean by ‘autofiction’, but by examining the breadth of its potential definitions (as well as contradictions within them), I hope to settle not on a rigid classification but rather a loose net, as flexible and porous as the future of autofiction will no doubt require.

If Chapter 1’s concern is ‘what?’ then the middle section of this commentary’s focus is ‘why?’ My aim through Chapters 2-5 is to attempt to answer two questions: *Why do writers write autofiction?* and *Why do I?* To do so, I’ll look at how the autofictional act often emerges from the autobiographical act’s failure. The search for the self through autobiography is, according to many, a doomed one. Shari Benstock (1988) says autobiography “reveals the impossibility of its own dream” and inevitably ends in “the creation of fiction” (11). Judith Butler (2001) says all attempts at “giving an account of oneself” fail at the initial ‘I’ (37). And even Philippe Lejeune ([1986] 1989), inventor of the ‘autobiographical pact’ and defender of autobiography against all encroaching genres, sees the contradiction at its heart: “Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject – it is a fantasy” (131). This fantasy, however, is an enduring one, and in trying and failing to write about ourselves, I’ll argue, we inevitably change ourselves. For those particularly troubled by this change, autobiography’s failure shifts our focus from the search for the *self* to an even trickier search for the *writing self*. This is the self altered or even invented through the autobiographical act; and, as such, it’s a fundamentally divided self, situated between person and text, fiction and fact.

In Chapters 3-5, I’ll explore whether three literary concepts can help shed light on the experience of being a divided writing self as well as the urge to explore it through autofiction. The first is Wayne C. Booth’s Implied Author (IA), which I’ll examine alongside serial memoirist Michelle Tea’s (2017) autofictional novel *Black Wave*. Initially introduced in 1961, the IA refers to the “image” of the author present in a work, sitting between the flesh-

and-blood person who writes the work and the narrator within it (Booth [1961] 1983, 70–73). For some writers, especially those writing *after* autobiography, I'll argue that creating characters with their own names and placing them in worlds that look like but are not fully anchored to theirs allows them to examine and confront the “second selves” (71) they have (willingly and unwillingly) brought into being through writing. In *Black Wave*, the protagonist ‘Michelle’, a writer and alcoholic, works to clean up her life in the face of an impending apocalypse. Considering ‘Michelle’ as Tea’s personified IA sheds intimate light on her relationship to writing about herself as well as others.

In Chapter 4, I'll look at the autofictional self through the lens of Michel Foucault's ‘author-function’. Like Booth's IA, the author-function, introduced in Foucault's 1969 lecture ‘What is an author?’ ([1969] 2009), bridges the gap between writer and text, or body of texts, and he too refers to it in relation to a writer's “second self” (307). However, while the IA sits between the author and the narrator *within* a text, the author-function refers to the entire extra-textual representation of the authorial image. It's the cultural perception and categorisation of *all* the texts that writer has written, and as such exists separate from both the author and any individual work. As with the IA, this separation can be, I believe, deeply unsettling for a real author, especially if her initial intention was to write about her (real) self. By looking at Rachel Cusk's (2015; 2016; 2018) autofictional *Outline* trilogy alongside her autobiographical works and their critical receptions, I'll ask whether the liminality of autofiction can allow the writer to confront not just herself but also her broader public and cultural identity.

In Chapter 5, I'll consider the links between autofiction and the psychoanalytic and literary concept of the double. According to Ralph Tymms (1949), traditionally there are two types of double: the duplicated self and the divided self (43). In regarding the IA and author-function from the perspective of the real author, we can see that the writing self is always a

divided self. Split between being and text(s), intention and interpretation(s), all writers live a kind of double life. In autofiction, however, we see authors turning these divided selves into simultaneously duplicated selves, and thus manufacturing encounters with their own doppelgängers. These encounters are what Gérard Genette (1988) terms ‘narrative metalepsis’, as they cross the borders of – and as such also “disturb [...] the distinction between” – real and fictional narrative levels (88). By examining Meena Kandasamy’s physically split presentation of the dual fictional and non-fictional narratives of *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019), which she wrote following the repeated misinterpretation of her autofictional novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) as memoir, I’ll look at how both the form and metaleptic content of autofiction and autofiction-adjacent genres can expand our understandings of the psychological divisions at the heart of the writing self. I’ll also borrow from self-translation studies to question the choice to explore these divisions in the presence of another and what the resulting texts have to offer for the reader.

In Chapter 6, I’ll reflect on the creative text I’ve written, examining the purpose and stakes of my autofictional practice, as well as the potential consequences for those around me. I’ll draw on performance studies and the controversies surrounding the publications of Chris Kraus’s (2016) *I Love Dick*, Serge Doubrovsky’s (1989) *Le Livre brisé* and Karl Ove Knausgaard’s (2013a; 2013b; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2018) *My Struggle* series to argue that autofiction’s overt and sometimes bombastic playfulness hides a darker core. I want to ask in these concluding pages not just what this project has revealed about my own work and self, but also whether writing this genre can ever be considered an ethical practice. Perhaps it is too dramatic to suggest that in the wrong hands autofiction can be dangerous, but perhaps not. It might be playful, but for some of us this isn’t a game.

Chapter 1: Towards a Definition

Serge Doubrovsky (1977) coined the word ‘autofiction’ on the back cover of his 1977 novel *Fils*, partly in response to Philippe Lejeune’s ([1973] 1989) essay ‘The Autobiographical Pact’. Lejeune claimed the combined effect of a text’s onomastic relationship between author and protagonist and its (covert or overt) truth/fictionality claims dictates that text’s status as either autobiography or novel—and thus also the attitude with which the reader approaches it. He illustrated this using a diagram distinguishing the different situations in which either an autobiographical or fictional pact is activated between author/text and reader (16, Fig. 1).

<i>protagonist's name</i> <i>Pact</i> ↓	≠ author's name	= 0	= author's name
fictional	1a <u>NOVEL</u>	2a <u>NOVEL</u>	
= 0	1b <u>NOVEL</u>	2b indeterminate	3a <u>AUTOBIO-GRAPHY</u>
autobiographical		2c <u>AUTOBIO-GRAPHY</u>	3b <u>AUTOBIO-GRAPHY</u>

Fig. 1

This diagram, however, leaves two empty boxes, which Lejeune claimed represented “impossible” situations (18). One of these is a text where the protagonist’s name is the same as the author’s but the pact activated is fictional. For Lejeune, this is impossible because, even if a story is historically false, onomastic agreement between protagonist and author automatically “excludes the possibility of fiction”, rendering it instead a ‘lie’, which is an autobiographical category (17). He later, however, questions this statement and writes of the top right square:

Nothing would prevent such a thing from existing, and it is perhaps an

internal contradiction from which some interesting effects could be drawn. But, in practice, no example of such a study comes to mind. And if the case does present itself, the reader is under the impression that a mistake has been made. (18)

With *Fils*, Doubrovsky aimed to fill this empty box and prove it neither impossible nor a mistake.¹

Most attempts at definition focus on Doubrovsky's (1977) assertion that *Fils* is: “*Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels*” (cover), or “fiction of strictly real events” (translated by Cusset 2012, 1). I believe the ambiguity of this statement remains helpful, but it quickly led to a division in France between what Jacques Lecarme and Eliane Lecarme-Tabone (1999) identify as ‘strict’ and more ‘general’ autofictions (cited in Dix 2018, 6 and Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 29). Strict autofictions – those supposedly most faithful to Doubrovsky – create narratives from exclusively referential facts and events, but draw on literary forms, techniques and devices. Catherine Cusset (2012) calls these ‘orthodox’ and clarifies: “The only fiction in autofiction is the work on language. The facts are real and the project is to reach a certain truth” (1). General autofictions, on the other hand, allow truth and memory to be more loosely manipulated so that “the lived experience is itself subject to the distortions of the imagination and the act of fictionalizing affects the content of the memories” (Dix 2018, 6). Vincent Colonna (2004) makes a similar distinction between *autofiction biographique* (34) and *autofiction fantastique* (93), the latter of which grants authors licence to use themselves as characters but imagine entirely alternative lives or experiences (cited and discussed in Dix 2018, 6).

Anglo-American literature has been slower than French and other literatures to develop formal practices in autofiction,² but the genre has grown steadily in popularity

¹ Doubrovsky explicitly confirmed this intention in a letter to Lejeune in 1977 (quoted in Lejeune [1986] 1989, 135).

² Though it's possible to retrospectively categorise works by authors such as Gertrude Stein, Doris Lessing, Christopher Isherwood, B.S. Johnson and James Joyce as autofictional.

through the twenty-first century. English-language autofictions tend, I believe, to lean more towards the ‘general’ or *‘fantastique’* category, but without the same 20th-century roots such binary divisions make rather less sense. French definitions for strict/orthodox autofiction sound confusingly similar to our understandings of memoir and creative non-fiction, and, as we’ll see from the experiences of Kandasamy discussed in Chapter 5, this can lead to mislabelling, misreading and deep misunderstanding. Even if most English-language autofictions do more freely mix fiction with truth, though, it is not I think simply or even primarily to imagine alternative lives or to blend memory and imagination. Instead, what appears to unite these works, regardless of their level of referentiality, is the active and ambiguous way they trouble the relationship between writing and living.

At least for the purposes of this commentary, I’d like to suggest that what makes a work autofictional is not how much or little of it is ‘real’ or ‘made up’, but instead its overt and unapologetic liminality. Autofiction as a genre occupies a charged middle-ground between memoir and fiction, and autofictional texts exist as such because they directly signpost their position along this ambiguous threshold. The most common signpost of autofictionality is still the onomastic connection between protagonist and author. When combined with a seemingly fictional signpost, such as the use of the third person, this creates an immediate and exciting sense of contradiction on the page. It’s a simple but effective signal to the reader that ‘this is me, but *not* me; *not* me, but *not not* me’,³ which simultaneously activates both autobiographical and fictional pacts, thus claiming the text’s place in Lejeune’s empty box. Other common signposts include explicit truth or fictionality

³ Genette (1993) puts it, “‘It is I and it is not I” (77), but I prefer this phrase that borrows from Schechner’s (1981, 88) performance theory because, as in performance, it’s the enactment of this double negativity that creates access to the liminal realm.

claims,⁴ the subtitle ‘a novel’,⁵ acts that cross over between author and character,⁶ and a metafictional focus on the writing of the novel we’re currently reading.⁷ Arnaud Schmitt (2022) makes a compelling case for categorising these signposts as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’, where primary elements are “compulsory” to create a sense of autofiction, and secondary ones exist merely to “enhance” it. For Schmitt:

There are only two kinds of primary criteria: onomastic correspondence and similarities in biographical background between author and narrator. I claim that it is inconceivable to consider a work as autofictional if there is not at least one of these elements in place, as they constitute the necessary signal. Secondary elements, which I call ‘enhancers,’ contribute to the reader’s awareness of the necessary ambiguousness of the generic status of the text, but do not create it. (90)

Of all the definitions I’ve come across, I think this works most successfully to unite the various and varied texts that find themselves labelled autofiction, both in English and other languages. There is no specification for *how much* similarity there must be between author and narrator/character, nor for how many or how prominent the enhancers should be. What is crucial, however, is that, because of the interplay of primary and secondary criteria, autofiction exists as such for *both* reader and writer. This definition excludes novels that are largely based on their writers’ lives but that do not play in some way with their ambiguous referentiality within the text. Though sometimes discussed as autofiction, I think these are more properly categorised as autobiographical novels or fictionalised autobiography. It also excludes books such as James Frey’s (2004) *A Million Little Pieces* that are revealed to contain fiction after being published and read as memoir. It’s right, I think, to discount these texts because it’s only through additional information and epitexts (elements outside the

⁴ Such as Dave Egger’s (2000) prefacing *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* with a list of things he’s fictionalized (ix-xv).

⁵ Such as Kate Zambreno’s (2020) *Drifts: A Novel*.

⁶ Such as both character and author borrowing an ancient Chinese divination technique of flipping coins to answer questions in Sheila Heti’s (2018) *Motherhood*.

⁷ Such as in Delphine de Vigan’s (2018) *Based on a True Story*.

published book), that their ambiguous referentiality comes to light, meaning the texts themselves do not create a sense of autofiction for the reader.⁸

What this ‘sense of autofiction’ is and the demands it makes on a reader are, I think, key to understanding the genre’s popularity as well as its controversy. In a footnote to his essay ‘Métonymie chez Proust’, Genette (1972) likens the experience of not knowing whether to read something as fiction or autobiography as finding oneself in a ‘*tourniquet*’ (variously translated as ‘whirligig’, ‘turnstile’ and ‘revolving door’) and suggests: “*Peut-être d’ailleurs faut-il rester dans ce tourniquet*”/“It may well be that one has to remain *within* this whirligig” (74; translated in Cohn 1999, 69; original emphasis). This is always true, I think, for autofiction, where the reader’s position within the *tourniquet* is just as important as the writer’s referential relationship to the narrative. For the signposts of autofiction to work, there needs to be someone able and willing to interpret them. As Schmitt (2022) notes, “autofiction only makes sense, only exists, if there are readers who find such connections [between author and character] fruitful” (89).

In his critique of Genette and argument for autobiography as “a figure of reading or of understanding” rather than a genre, Paul de Man (1979) questions whether remaining inside a *tourniquet* is feasible:

As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door [...] can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous. (921)

This, I think, gets to the heart of the experience of reading autofiction (and supports a growing argument that autofiction should be considered a figure or mode of reading at least

⁸ It’s worth noting that epitextual elements can be useful as secondary signposts of autofiction, increasing a text’s ambiguous referentiality, as Alison Gibbons (2022) demonstrates in her exploration of the impact of Goodreads reviewers’ pre-existing ‘author models’ on their engagement with *Black Wave* (483-490). I disagree with Gibbons, however, that these models are a ‘necessity’ (487); they may *enhance* but they do not *create* the sense of autofiction.

as well as a genre⁹). The purposes of the primary and secondary signposts are to place the reader inside a revolving door. There are two exits, one marked fiction, one marked memoir, but the text asks us to remain where we are, spinning round and round. De Man is right that this can be “most uncomfortable”, which may account for the vehemence of some of the criticisms against autofiction (most often as narcissistic, lazy and inconsequential¹⁰), but for the willing reader it can also create a particular and exciting aesthetic experience.

Doubrovsky (1993) used similar imagery, describing his books as:

ni autobiographies, ni totalement romans, pris dans le tourniquet, l'entre-deux des genres, souscrivant à la fois et contradictoirement au pacte autobiographique et au pacte Romanesque, peut-d'être pour en abolir les limites ou limitations.

neither autobiographies nor completely novels, caught in the turnstile, the in-between of the genres, subscribing at the same time and contradictorily to the autobiographical pact and the novelistic pact, perhaps in order to abolish their limits or limitations. (210; translated in Wagner-Egelhaaf 2022, 32)

Several critics, however, have questioned not just the comfort but the possibility of the simultaneity implied by either a turnstile or revolving door. In *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (2022), Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons all make a case for a reader's *oscillation* between fictional and referential readings rather than continuous revolution. In her chapter, Wagner-Egelhaaf (2022, 32) expands on arguments she and others made in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2018) to put forward five theses on autofiction, the fifth of which asserts oscillation as a necessary component. She makes similar links between Doubrovsky's turnstile and de Man's revolving door but weighs them against Schmitt's (2010, 128) argument that it is cognitively impossible for a reader to subscribe to the autobiographical

⁹ See *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (Effe and Lawlor 2022) for discussions of this by Effe and Lawlor, Effe and Gibbons, and Schmitt.

¹⁰ Helen Garner (2002) gives a convincing rebuke of these charges in *I*.

and fictional pacts at the same time. Drawing on Schmitt's suggestion that 'simultaneous' might be better understood as "ceaselessly alternating", as well as Frank Zipfel's (2009, 306) claim that readers must switch back and forth throughout reading, Wagner-Egelhaaf (2022) sees that:

This intriguing oscillatory movement [...] between fact and fiction imperceptibly twists the real and the fictional. Thus, slippery autofiction presents itself as a dynamic and versatile mental concept which alternately brings one or the other dimension into the foreground while still allowing the other to permanently resonate. (33)

I'm encouraged here by the parallels to my own thinking, but admit to still be pondering the distinction between oscillation and revolution. It strikes me as somewhat semantic yet potentially rather crucial. Semantic because many of those arguing for oscillation seem to cling to some element of simultaneity, or at least ambiguity, in line with my proposal of liminality: Wagner-Egelhaaf talks of "being in-between *or, alternatively, both* autobiographical and fictional" (32; my emphasis), while Effe and Gibbons (2022) are repeatedly careful to refer to "combining *or* oscillating" between the pacts (76; my emphasis; also mentioned on 62, 65). Moreover, if we examine the metaphor of the revolving door, it doesn't truly represent simultaneity either: during 358° of each rotation the reader inevitably finds herself closer to one exit rather than the other and she's always moving *towards* one pact and *away from* the other. Nevertheless, there's something about the fluidity of revolution that feels truer to me than a back and forth between distinct destinations, albethey alternating. It seems to me that one of the appeals of autofiction (for the willing reader) is that neither dimension ever makes it to the foreground; it's the sense, at least, of simultaneity – however uncomfortable, contradictory, or even illusionary – that draws me to the genre.

Alison James (2022), who also takes up the idea of oscillation, argues that it's the narratological distinction between 'local' and 'global' fictionality (as defined by Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 2014, 67) that allows readers to apprehend the contours between fiction

and non-fiction within hybrid texts and thus move back and forth between facts without the borders separating fact from fiction being destroyed (James 2022, 48). “Far from erasing all boundaries,” she concludes, “these works bring new attention to the interactions of the factual and the fictional” (56). My approach to autofiction, even as a reader, is grounded in my identity as an author, and I wonder if this is at the heart of my resistance to these arguments for oscillation. For reasons I’ll explore in the following chapters, I think at least some writers turn towards autofiction because they are all too keenly aware of the interactions of the factual and fictional and *want* – or even *need* – to erase those boundaries. Schmitt (2022) notes that: “Edges, limits, and boundaries are constituent parts of the topology of autofiction”, and (picking up on Marjorie Worthington’s [2018] discussion of these as “already hazy boundaries” [2-3]) identifies the tension that: “For some theorists, like Lejuene, these boundaries are not ‘hazy’ at all, but autofiction’s very existence depends on creating an ambivalence” (Schmitt 2022, 96). I wonder, however, if this tension is less about a divide between theorists and more to do with one between the production and reception of autofictional texts. That is, to a key and perhaps insurmountable tension between writer and reader. Autofiction, under my definition, must exist as such for both, but that doesn’t mean their experience of it is the same. Effe and Gibbons (2022) argue that missing from most discussions of autofiction is a consideration of it as a “holistic literary event”, claiming there are separate and specific autofictional modes of reading and writing and that both require more empirical research (61-66). Perhaps all literature depends on a reader to activate it, but in tugging the reader towards the author while simultaneously holding them at arm’s length, autofiction constructs a particularly strange relationship between the two—inviting yet antagonistic, earnest yet ambivalent.

I’m also interested in Wagner-Egelhaaf’s (2022) fourth thesis, in which she claims that “hinted at by Serge Doubrovsky, but largely neglected or overlooked in the critical

debate on autofiction” is autofiction’s connection to and impact on real life (30). Discussing the tragic death of Doubrovsky’s wife during the period in which he was writing *Le Livre brisé*, a book about their marriage, and his decision to continue writing that book after her death, Wagner-Egelhaaf argues that because autofiction “produces real-life effects” it is “fundamentally performative” (30). She sees in the case of *Le Livre brisé*:

that autofiction is not merely a postmodern joke or sliding effect of linguistic signs [...] Rather, autofiction [...] may have a very serious background indeed, as well as disquieting consequences for the author’s life. (30-31)

I agree that the real-life effects of autofiction mean its stakes are often much higher than other modes and genres, and that the writing of it doesn’t just create but also implicates one in its performance. I think it’s worth considering, however, that it’s not just the author who risks autofiction’s real-life effects, but readers too. Wagner-Egelhaaf concludes by stating that her five theses are not “isolated observations” but work cohesively, “flexibly bring[ing] one or other aspect to the foreground while all of them, to varying extents, resonate together” (35). In the room she leaves for us to consider *how* they may resonate together, I’d like to argue for a close and interdependent link between her fourth thesis (performativity) and fifth thesis (oscillation). It’s the oscillation/revolution of autofiction that draws the reader into the performance alongside the writer. This ups the stakes for all involved in the autofictional act and raises key ethical questions.

I began this chapter by proposing what I thought a relatively simple formula: a text’s liminality between fiction and non-fiction + its self-identification as such through primary and secondary signposts. The product of this formula, however, is far from simple, in part because it can never be contained by the text that creates it. The complex, ongoing relationships between writer and text, reader and text, and writer and reader lift the autofictional event across ontological borders and into the world. In doing so, I think it does

in fact erase (for some of us, at least) many of those borders, expanding and widening the limen in order to erode the distinctions between fiction and fact, art and life, self and second selves.

My autofiction and most of that which I love is not of the orthodox variety, but it helps to return to Doubrovsky's original designation. Even in 2023, a search for a definition for 'fiction' throws up "literature in the form of prose, especially novels, that describes imaginary events and people that are imagined" (Oxford Languages via Google) and "the type of book or story that is written about imaginary characters and events and not based on real people and facts" (dictionary.cambridge.org). "Fiction of strictly real events" is still, then, a beautifully frustrating paradox. It's an impossibility, just as Schmitt and Zipfel tell us simultaneous subscription to multiple pacts should be, just as Lejeune said his empty box was, and perhaps just as communicating the writing self to a reader is. As I'll explore in the next chapter, however, impossibility need not prevent something from existing. Here, I think it invites us all to be active players in its creation.

Chapter 2: The Search for the Self

At the heart of much autobiographical theory is the question of the self. What is it? Can it be accessed? Can it be articulated? Under a humanist model of the self, autobiography exists as a referential act of self-discovery, where the ultimate truth about the self is sought and, hopefully, recorded. A poststructuralist model, however, sees the self as brought into existence only through language and discourse, which means it has no stable referent. Autobiography, in this case, becomes an act of self-invention rather than self-discovery.¹¹ These two approaches are often understood as opposite, but Trevor Pateman (1998) argues that autobiography sits in the middle of invention and discovery as “self-enactment” (155). Celia Hunt (1998), who set up the University of Sussex’s MA in Creative Writing and Personal Development and its associated research programme into the therapeutic effects of combining fiction with autobiography, agrees and suggests, “we should be thinking of a model of self which is both given and created, discovered and invented” (218). As a writer who initially turned to memoir to record and make sense of something that had happened to me, but more than a decade later is still lingering on the edges of it and wondering what being a writer of this kind has turned me into, I’m inclined to agree.

Whether through discovery, invention or enactment, what most theorists concur on is that, in its aims to access the self, autobiography inevitably falls short. The self cannot be contained within a text (even if it is produced by that text). Michael Sprinker (1980) writes:

The origin and the end of autobiography converge in the very act of writing [...] for no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text. (342)

¹¹ As argued in Paul John Eakin’s (1985) *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*.

As already mentioned, Shari Benstock and Judith Butler similarly point to autobiography's "impossibility" and "failure", and Lejeune says that any hope of finding and telling the truth about one's self is "fantasy" (Benstock 1988, 11; Butler 2001, 37; Lejeune [1986] 1989, 131). I would like to propose that it's specifically this fantasy and the endurance of it that sends writers in autofictional directions. In particle physics, the observer effect states that the act of observing something alters the object being observed. In the same way, whatever notion of the self one subscribes to, attempting to discover, create or enact it through writing inevitably alters it. The author of autobiography is changed by the autobiographical act, and especially by the impossibility, failure, or fantasy at its heart. In the cases I intend to examine, what is born of and produced by this change is the author of autofiction.

Narrative psychologist Mark Freeman (1993) sees the problem of autobiography as a precarious balance between fundamental indeterminacy and tantalising hope. For Freeman, the self is necessarily mysterious and will never offer full coherence, but nevertheless individuals will always be driven by a feeling that the world they live in might open itself up to them and be made known. "To be made/known," he writes, "to be constructed/discovered, to be created/revealed, this is the dilemma we face. Although it cannot be resolved, it is important that we endure it" (184). Turning to psychoanalysis, D.W. Winnicott ([1971] 2005) provides a reason for autobiography's impossibility and perhaps also for the importance of enduring it. Winnicott sees the search for the self as bound up in play. Creativity emerges from this play, but (as touched on within my novel) he warns that the search for the self purely through creativity – or the "waste products" produced by it, such as novels and art – is "doomed to be never-ending and essentially unsuccessful" (73). He notes:

If the artist (in whatever medium) is searching for the self, then it can be said that in all probability there is already some failure for that artist in the field of general creative living. The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self. (73)

What then of these artists whose searches have failed? These beings who continue to lack a sense of self? What happens *after* autobiography?

Thrillingly, frustratingly, or perhaps rallyingly, Lejeune ([1986] 1989) notes, “In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing” (131-32). It exists and continues to exist, a journey without an end. For Benstock (1988), “the autobiographical moment prepares for a meeting of ‘writing’ and ‘selfhood’, a coming together of method and subject matter”, but the destiny of this moment is “always deferred”; instead of delivering us to the self, autobiography “reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse” (11). What happens in these gaps, I’ll argue in the next chapters, is the creation of a second self—a self situated between author and text. In the search for ourselves on the page, we create another, and it’s these others that are the focus of autofiction.¹² If the autobiographical act is an examination of the *self*, then the autofictional act is a more specific examination of the *writing self*.

For Lejeune ([1973] 1989), “An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two” (11). Autofiction, as I see it, sits at the exact centre between the true and the made up, examining this connection. It provides a space for writers to construct metafictional encounters between their flesh-and-blood selves living, breathing and writing in the world, and the authorial selves they have discovered, created and enacted through their texts. These authorial selves are not them, but *not not* them; not real, but *not not* real. And as such, they can be uneasy companions: uncanny doubles, neither fully in their control, nor beyond their responsibility.

¹² ‘Create’, however, is a misleading word (as we’ll see it is elsewhere) because it’s through the act of creation that we must recognise our impotence and understand these other selves are created *for* as much as *by* us.

Chapter 3: The Implied Author

Wayne C. Booth ([1961] 1983) introduced the concept of the Implied Author (IA) in 1961 to address the distance between the real, living writer and the “picture” or “image” the reader perceives of the “presence” that wrote a specific text (71-73). For Booth:

As he writes [the author] creates not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’ that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works. (70-71)

Seymour Chatman (1990) notes that Booth’s concept “arose in the debate about the relevance of authorial intention to interpretation” (77). The argument between intentionalists and anti-intentionalists is essentially about the importance of the writer versus the text. For intentionalists, the author’s aims/‘intentions’ for a work are the most important thing and a reader should strive to objectively interpret them. For anti-intentionalists, however, the author’s aims are irrelevant because a reader’s interpretation should derive solely from the text itself. Siding with the latter in seeing a published text as “a self-existing thing”, Chatman argues that the IA is a useful concept for denying the “attractive” but “simplistic” assumption that reader and author are ever in direct communication (76-81). While the real author may begin with intentions, for Chatman, what a text contains is ‘intent’. This is “the work’s ‘whole’ or ‘overall’ meaning, including its connotations, implications, unspoken messages” (74). The IA is the locus of this intent and what’s key is that it’s located *within* the text.

Chatman qualifies his argument as “strictly pragmatic, not ontological” (75), and like him I don’t think it matters if/where the IA exists in the way many have got caught up debating, more what we gain from considering the concept. What does exist is what Booth calls the FBP (flesh-and-blood person) stuck on the other side of their work from the reader. Whether the reader approaches their text as an intentionalist or anti-intentionalist, this FBP finds herself being interpreted—as either fully responsible for the text or entirely separate

from it. What's useful, here at least, is to imagine the IA holds the discomfort and disconnection of both these interpretations.

Dan Shen (2011) makes a convincing argument that disagreements surrounding the IA are largely down to misreadings of Booth's use of the word 'create' (80-2). In the Afterword added two decades after his original formulation, Booth ([1961] 1983) attempts to clarify his terms and doubles down on this word, stating that the FBP "chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to create an 'improved version, a second self' (the *implied author*)" (429; original emphasis). Shen (2011) argues that here and elsewhere Booth uses 'create' metaphorically (82) and that what has been frequently missed in interpretations is the "fine balance between" the "*encoding*" and "*decoding*" of the IA (85; original emphasis). Shen explains the encoding process involves the FBP donning a mask to write "in a particular manner" and making conscious textual choices, while the decoding process involves the reader inferring an image of the author from all the (conscious and unconscious) choices made within the text (89). The IA, then, is the product of both the encoding and decoding processes and thus created *for* as much as *by* us. This, I believe, is what makes it a rich but uncanny concept for authors, and one that finds a unique playground for exploration in autofiction.

It's worth noting Booth originally conceived of the IA as relating only to narrative fiction, but in returning to it in 'Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?' (2005) he expands the concept, identifying that:

In every corner of our lives, whenever we speak or write, we imply a version of our character that we know is quite different from many other selves that are exhibited in our flesh-and-blood world. (77)

Focusing this time on poetry, he explores the encoding process of the IA as a form of "role playing" and even wish-fulfilment. While continuing to note that the IA's creation may be both "conscious or unconscious" and that this role-playing might be "constructive and

destructive”, he suggests the IA is a version of the self that the FBP creates by editing and revising a work to “wipe out those selves that [they] don’t like”. The encoded IA, for Booth, is not just a persona or masked version of the writer’s self, but ideally a *better*, more “admirable”, “superior” version. Encoding is about “cleansing”, and in the encoded IA we see the idealised self that the FBP wishes they could present to the world (77–79).

Somewhere we might see this most clearly is in autobiographical works: the writer sets out to write honestly, but, even in the most graphic of confessions, there is shaping, mask-wearing and consciousness of presentation. Booth’s example is Sylvia Plath, whom he awards the prize of “FBP With Largest Collection of Contradictory IAs”, one of which is the IA able to process the FBP Plath’s suicidal feelings and turn them not into action but poetry (80). In reading Plath’s journals, Booth sees:

we can detect a genuine effort to find and project this or that superior ‘self,’ and particularly the self that will know how to deal with being not just a woman but – too often – a miserable woman. (81)

The autobiographical writer, even in sharing their most private and contentious self, elevates that self through the encoding process, at the very least into a superior self able to write about such things.

Encoding, however, is only half the process, and it’s in the act of being decoded that the IA reveals itself as separate and, I think, somewhat monstrous. Even with the best of intentions, the encoding process is only partially in the FBP’s control. Booth’s insistence on “consciously or unconsciously” is important because we’re not always in control of what we encode in our IAs—of what we write. Our attempts to cleanse our selves before sending them into the world may be insufficient, misguided, or simply misinterpreted. Thus it’s through the act of trying to write about the self that the autobiographical author is forced to acknowledge the impossibility of the task. Their IA is only partially them and only partially in their control; the rest sits between their unconscious and their reader’s interpretation.

Here I disagree with Shen's claims that the encoding and decoding processes are balanced. While I reject arguments that the author has no bearing at all on the IA or the resulting text, from the position of an FBP, the decoding process does seem, ultimately, to have a superior role. The IA may start its existence being encoded by the FBP putting on masks, erasing the parts of herself she doesn't like, but it matures and takes up residence in the decoding process. As Chatman (1990) notes, it "remains only latent or 'virtual' in the text until it is actualised by our act of reading" (84). The IA only reaches its potential through a reader's decoding, which is several stages removed from the FBP, out of their control, perhaps even out of their lifetime. No matter how particular my efforts, once a text is written and published, it's beyond me. The encoding process is often long and painful, but it's finite. The decoding process, however, is ongoing; for as long as my texts have readers, my IAs will be open to interpretation. It's this strange realisation of both powerlessness and responsibility, I think, that leads certain writers of autobiography to autofiction. Recognising that in your attempts to articulate yourself you've instead created a 'second self' – an IA that *is* (according to the name on the cover) you, but also open to constant re-creation by your reader – can be deeply unsettling.¹³

Turning to autofiction and establishing a character that shares your name, in a world that looks much like yours, offers a chance to directly confront the relationship between FBP and IA. The IA, which previously sat between the acts of writing and reading, is placed within the text and made the conscious focus of both acts; it's personified. And, by turning the IA into a character, authors also confront their readers' (mis)interpretations of them—their decoded images. Manipulating these IA-characters allows them to assert and test the

¹³ As all texts have IAs, similar recognition could come to the author of fiction and result in the same turn towards autofiction. This seems less common, however, which may suggest the gap between intention and interpretation is less existentially jarring for novelists.

limits of their authorial control, and thus to explore the connections and disconnections between themselves and the selves they've released into the world through writing.

Repositioning the IA as character, however, doesn't fully work because the autofictional text always has its own IA, only part of which is consciously encoded by the author. Instead, the autofictional act merely multiplies the IA, because the Character-IA can never fully represent the text's actual IA. As with autobiography, then, it appears personifying the IA through autofiction proves the impossibility of that personification... but that doesn't seem to stop it existing.¹⁴

I believe this personification poses a challenge to theoretical interpretations of the IA, particularly Booth's. For Booth (2005), the IA is an idealised self; he sees in the "thoroughly cleansed personae" encountered in poetry that "the poetic self has emerged dressed up elegantly, exhibiting a sensitivity to life's woes and blisses that careful readers find themselves longing to possess" (78). He goes on to claim:

Most of the poetry we admire would be much worse if the authors had failed to put on a mask. Shouldn't we be grateful for their cleansing? And should we not admire them for their ability performing that laundry work? (79)

However, I think what Booth and others overlook is that FBPs are real, thinking, feeling beings. It's the FBP, after all, who sets out to write, who has the idea, who wants to communicate something. So, what if Plath did not want to be mistaken for the noble, idealised IA who could turn suicidal feelings into art, but rather wanted to be seen and acknowledged as the very "miserable woman" struggling to cope that Booth dismisses as inferior?¹⁵ If the IA is, as Booth claims, the laundered self, then the writer's turn to

¹⁴ Personifying something only implied is also, of course, inherently paradoxical because, once turned into characters, these IAs do (at least partially) become manifest. However, as the personification is never complete and doomed, ultimately, to failure, these IA-characters successfully embody this contradiction.

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich (1984), I believe, addresses this desire to be seen as one's true, unlauded self when writing about the "fragmentations" she suffered through her poetic education and early practice and the need to close "the gap between poet and woman" to truly find her voice (241-45).

autofiction can be seen as deliberately opening the machine mid-cycle and hunting through one's weekday underwear. It attempts to reveal the idealised and idolised IA for what it really is—or at least what it feels like from the other side. Booth talks frequently about ethics and morality, but fails to establish whose. Is an idealised writer the same as an idealised person? We need only look as far as the betrayals of Knausgaard, Kraus and Doubrovsky (which I will discuss further in Chapter 6) to see that the answer is no. Autofiction speaks to the discomfort, amusement and downright horror of being an FBP putting on masks to construct 'second selves' that are then reconstructed and reconstituted in our absence, all in the vain hope that someone might actually see beneath the masks.

Winnicott ([1963] 2011) suggests the source of creativity resides in the parts of yourself that must remain hidden, even while the creative endeavour is often the act of trying to be seen. "In the artist of all kinds", he writes, "[...]one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found" (189). Josh Cohen (2014) examines this "irresolvable paradox" and concludes, "The desire to express your pure, naked self, to bring it into the light of day, can only end in frustration, in the feeling that what you most wanted to show remains in the dark" (117, 203). Booth sees mask-wearing as noble, assuming that authors want to present their best selves to the world. On one level, I think we do, but on another, the very opposite is true. Writing is about trying to connect and the frustration of this irresolvable paradox between what we can and cannot reveal means that sometimes what we desperately want to communicate are in fact the *least* attractive parts of ourselves. Being a writer, particularly a life-writer, is at times one of those least attractive parts, and that, I believe, is what autofiction frequently tries to illuminate. It's impossible to fully present the true, authentic (FBP) writing self, for writers will always, instinctively – consciously or

unconsciously – create IAs. But by attempting to make our IAs characters, we can at least confront and examine them.

‘Michelle’ in Michelle Tea’s *Black Wave*

Michelle Tea is a poet, memoirist, novelist, blogger, activist, literary arts organiser, and queer literary icon. She grew up in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and moved to San Francisco in the early 90s, where she built a following for writing honestly and exposingly about her childhood, family, sex work, queerness, class, trauma, and alcohol and drug use. *Black Wave* (Tea 2017) is her 11th book. It opens in San Francisco’s Mission district in 1999, where we’re told, “Michelle was a poet, a writer, the author of a small book published by a small press that revealed family secrets, exposed her love life, and glamorized her recreational drug intake” (2). For those familiar with Tea’s biography and work, this looks at first like another memoir, albeit in the third person. We meet Michelle not just on the cusp of the century, but on the cusp of other changes too: her beloved Mission district is in the midst of regeneration (“Every time Michelle blinked a familiar place had shimmered into an alien establishment” [3]); her friends are “swapping more dangerous addictions for controlled alcoholism and the occasional cocaine indulgence” (5); and the planet is falling apart (“The walls of the sushi restaurant were marked with broad Xs over fish that had gone extinct” [98]). In the opening chapters, we see Michelle trying crack cocaine for the first time in the back of her friend Ziggy’s van, then slipping into regular heroin use while chasing women and telling herself she’s not an addict. This book is about a lot of things: the 90s, queerness, addiction, love, betrayal, gentrification, climate change and more. At its heart, though, is the topic of what it means to be a writer. The character Michelle has published one book, just as Tea had in 1999, so it’s in this moment after publication, where she’s grappling for the first time with being an FBP who’s created and set free an IA, that we find her.

In the first half of the book, we see her struggling to come to terms with the fantasy and failure at the heart of autobiography. She recalls the discomfort of telling an anecdote about her parents and being interrupted by someone saying “*Yeah, I read that in your book*” (74; original emphasis¹⁶), and wonders about moving to Los Angeles to try writing a screenplay because continuing with memoir feels “impossible” (81). She’s persistently drawn, however, to this impossible thing. She understands her impulse to document her life often hurts other people, but still wants to write another memoir and goes back and forth about how to proceed:

Could she write about herself without mentioning other people? That seemed impossible. She could fictionalize things but this ruined the point of memoir, frustrated the drive to document, to push life through your eyes and out your fingers, the joy of describing the known, the motion of the book ready-made. It had happened! It was life! Her job was to make it beautiful or sad or horrifying, to splash around in language until she rendered it perfect. Perfect for that moment. (81–82)

Memoir is impossible for Michelle not for Lejeune’s reasons, but because of the discomfort of the gap between her FBP and IA, both of whom now suddenly exist in the same place and time. Standing before someone who has read her book means standing before someone who has interpreted her writing self—and more often than not been pissed off or hurt by that writing self. When her girlfriend, Andy, breaks up with her after Michelle’s slept with an 18-year-old slam-poet, Andy shouts “*Don’t you ever fucking write about me!*” (59). As Michelle notes, this is Andy being “resentful in advance” (81). Within the narrative, Michelle hasn’t yet written about Andy, but Andy’s already angry at her because of her perceived identity as someone who might. Andy has decoded something in Michelle’s IA that the FBP Michelle never (consciously) encoded. For the reader, of course, there’s another layer to this scene. The parallels between Michelle the character and Tea the author make us assume Andy is

¹⁶ Throughout most of Tea’s work, the protagonist’s dialogue is indicated using capitalisations, while other characters’ speech is italicised.

based, at least partly, on a real person in the real Tea's life. And the real Tea *has* now written about her. For Tea, then, this scene appears to act as both confession and justification, finally offering (the real) Andy reason for her premature resentment. *Black Wave's* IA is thus identified as the type of person who would betray someone who explicitly tells them not to put them in a book. However, we're about to discover that not all is as it seems.

A little less than halfway through the book, Michelle does abandon San Francisco for LA, driving there with her married lover, Quinn. This transition from one city to another also marks the novel's transition from (seeming) autobiography into much more obvious fiction, and specifically metafiction. Tea amps up the drama by pulling the pending apocalypse into stronger focus (no longer is it dismissible as metaphor, instead it arrives as a literal shit cloud assaulting their noses as they cross the landscape), but simultaneously destabilises that drama by undermining the novel's realism and defying us to continue believing anything she writes. The first line of the second section reads, "I just can't open my screenplay with a scene of myself smoking crack in Ziggy's van, Michelle thought, and deleted twenty pages of text from her desktop" (139). Suddenly the narrative we're reading is a text within the narrative, and we watch as Michelle struggles to figure out how to make her/this story "universal" (140). She understands that her gender, class, queerness and drug-use make her a difficult protagonist to relate to. On top of that, she's haunted by Andy's instruction not to write about her. She decides instead to begin "a screenplay based on Quinn's relationship with her husband" (140). Quinn has not told Michelle not to write about her, so this is fair game, right?

Wrong. Michelle is interrupted by Quinn glancing at the screen and saying, "*I'd rather you didn't write that. [...] And why would you give me long hair? I have never had long hair. Not even when I was a kid*" (141). There's a particular pleasure here for the reader as we contemplate the *mise-en-abyme* of the real Tea writing a scene that may or may not be

based in reality in which her avatar sits with her short-haired girlfriend writing a scene based in their reality involving a long-haired version of that girlfriend. “Sorry!” Michelle says, “I Was Trying To Make You More Universal. And Plus It’s Not Really You. She’s Based On You, But She’s Different” (141). This, for the reader, inevitably conjures Tea also saying(/enacting), ‘It’s Not Really Me’ (and, by extension, the autofictional double-negative, ‘It’s *Not Not* Really Me’) into the mirror reflecting the mirror, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, Quinn objects, and Michelle turns back to her computer saying:

Fine. I Won’t Write About You. I Won’t Write About My Life Because No One Wants To Be In My Story. I Won’t Write About My Family Because They’re Fucking Over It. I Should Just Give Up And Get A Job At Taco Bell Then ’Cause This Is It, This Is All I Know How To Do, Write These Glorified Diary Entries And Now I Can’t Even Do That Because Everyone Is So Fucking Sensitive. (141–42)

This is the central conflict of the book: the FBP Michelle needs to write about herself to make her art (because that’s how she has learnt to be and it’s *who* she is), but having done so – and crucially having published her memoir and been confronted with other people’s misunderstandings of the relationship between her and her IA – she doesn’t know how to continue. “There was perhaps no way out for Michelle,” the narrator observes, “[...]Quinn was only the latest to protest her inclusion in Michelle’s story—which, basically, felt like protesting their inclusion in Michelle’s *life*” (142–43; original emphasis). Here again we see the mirrors reflecting one another and sense the gap between character and author narrowing to almost nothing. Surely this is Tea speaking as much as Michelle. Both seem to be saying that it feels unfair as an FBP to be blamed for harm they never intended to cause through their IAs. Writers, when writing at least, are the biggest intentionalists of all; we wouldn’t begin in the first place if we didn’t want to be understood, seen, or, in Freeman’s (1993) words, “made/known” (184). But the act of being published and decoded changes us. If Michelle had full control of her IA – if the encoding process was all that mattered – then none of this

would be such a problem. But her growing awareness of the weight of the decoding process forces her to self-reflect:

She'd grown weary of feeling like her writing hurt the people closest to her. She'd become more attuned to their feelings. She'd grown older and read wider and had begun to question how singular and important her story even was. Was she a war orphan, a refugee? No. She was a skinny, white, marginally attractive female living in the United States, where even poor people have MTV. What did she think was so important about her pain? (Tea 2017, 143)

This reads as Tea's voice as well as Michelle's and, above all, as an apology. The forty-seven-year-old Tea who has published 10 other books about her life and those around her is, it seems, sorry for having done so. This is an apology, however, that she's only able to make through her younger, less experienced and more fumbling avatar. Tea has been decoded over and over and finally understands what that means, so she's placed a personified version of her first IA into this book to deliver an apology for not understanding sooner. This message needs to be delivered by that IA because it comes *from* an IA. What is this sorry Tea if not Booth's "cleansed" version of the FBP Tea who will (and has) continue(d) to publish memoir despite all this understanding?

Even coming from the book's IA, though, can we believe this apology? Haven't we just read about Quinn and Andy, both of whom said they didn't want to be written about? Don't we still presume they're more or less real characters ("She's Based On You, But She's Different")? So hasn't *Black Wave's* IA already betrayed more people to get us to the middle of this book in order to apologise for betraying them? Well, no, because unlike Michelle, Tea seems to have found a way out. And she told us what it was earlier in the novel when Michelle wondered, "Could she write about herself without mentioning other people?" (81). Michelle decided she couldn't, but Tea accepted the challenge. There have been hints along

the way,¹⁷ but this is mostly revealed in the biggest, most playful metaleptic twist of the novel. The section after Quinn's objection to her inclusion in Michelle's screenplay begins, "In reality, Quinn and Michelle weren't scheduled to meet one another for over a decade" (143). As if sensing we might no longer believe any claims she makes about 'reality', Tea spends two pages describing that more-than-a-decade-later scene in which the 'real' Quinn comes into the 'real' Michelle's life and threatens her now eight-year-long sobriety. The scene is compelling and believable, but *should* we believe it? We now have three versions of Quinn to contemplate within the narrative (the long-haired version in the script, the short-haired one who just drove to LA with Michelle, and this future, supposedly 'real' version who meets the 'real' Michelle later on). It's also unclear still if the 'real' Michelle is Tea, or merely another character created by Tea. Appropriately enough, the short-haired Quinn says, "Wait, I'm really confused [...] What do you mean we haven't met?" (145). And now Tea really begins to play:

This, Michelle told Quinn, Is My Memoir.

Memoirs are true, Quinn, also a writer, pointed out.

This One Is Part True And Part False. All That Stuff I Just Said,
About When We Dated, Is True. (145)

(Again, do we believe her? Who is saying this? Michelle or Tea? Quite rightly, Quinn asks:)

Did I tell you you could write about me?

No, Michelle said, But You Didn't Tell Me I Couldn't. The Person I Really Came To Los Angeles With Is Lucretia. I Actually Wrote The Whole Book With Her In It. Our Whole Story. Eight Years, Five Hundred Pages.

Lucretia is the name of the 18-year-old slam-poet Michelle slept with in the first half of *Black Wave*, but Michelle/Tea divulges to Quinn here that the 'truth' was more complicated:

¹⁷ Chapter 3, for example, establishes some fictionality by introducing Michelle's family. Those familiar with Tea's memoirs will know she doesn't have lesbian mothers and has a sister rather than a brother. Michelle's family still originates from Chelsea, Massachusetts, however, where Tea did grow up, which confuses the signpost. As first-time readers, all we're likely to surmise from this is that Michelle is *not* Tea, but *not not* Tea.

She Didn't Want Me To Write About Her But Our Breakup Was So Shitty And Awful I Just Really Needed To Tell The Story. You Know How A Story Needs To Get Told?

Quinn did. It was one of the reasons Michelle brought her into the book. Quinn was a poet and knew the feeling of writing bubbling up inside her, like a pot coming to boil. You lunge for a pen before it goes away. You have to capture it. If you let it come, it just pours out. Five hundred pages. (146)

The narrator explains that in 2011, “more than a decade after the world ends in *Black Wave*”, Michelle read from her 500-page novel at a bookstore and, following the reading, she and the ‘real’ Lucretia had a “tremendous fight”, after which Michelle agreed to remove her from the book (146-47). While this may be the most metafictionally playful part of the novel, and despite questions about what to believe earlier on, this account of writing then discarding an entire 500-page novel to remove an ex-girlfriend from it is so artistically tragic that it feels, to me at least, like one of *Black Wave*'s rare sincere truths.¹⁸ In offering it at the same time as she dismantles any remaining shreds of realism that might have allowed us to maintain a suspension of disbelief and simply enjoy the story, Tea brings her FBP, IA and character as close to one another as she possibly can. This is Tea trying to speak directly to her reader, to show exactly what it is like to be a writing self. That the only way she can do so is by asking us to contemplate multiple ontological layers speaks to the complexity of that writing self. That some readers will dismiss this as inconsequential or overly confusing metaplay¹⁹ also speaks to the impossibility of fully expressing (or indeed discovering, inventing or enacting) that self.

“Sometimes It Feels Like A Mental Illness,” Michelle says to Quinn, “Being A Writer. Being This Kind Of Writer” (148). Both the character and Tea perhaps mean this as hyperbole, but according to Winnicott ([1971] 2005) Michelle's way of living might be recognised in psychiatric terms as illness. Despite general subscription to “a belief that living

¹⁸ And can be backed up by interviews and the titular essay in *Against Memoir* (Tea 2019).

¹⁹ Hugh Ryan (2016), for example, sees this as a “moment of narrative collapse” and the only part of the novel where Tea's “hand slips, and the plot seemed to go from multi-layered to messy.” His conclusion is that it's “impossible to write the kind of book Tea dreamed of” (np).

creatively is a healthy state”, Winnicott notes it’s the balance between creativity and compliance in relation to external reality that dictates an individual’s mental health or ill-health (88). For Winnicott, there is “*no sharp line*” between the two and “for many individuals external reality remains to some extent a subjective phenomenon” (88-9; original emphasis). Part of healthy psychological development involves reckoning with the fact that the world has been created for us and demands compliance, but pushing the boundaries of that compliance through creativity and play. Those who push too hard, however, and see the world as entirely subjective or malleable, hallucinating “either at certain specific moments, or perhaps in a generalized way” are referred to psychiatrically as “schizoid”:

We know that such persons can have value as persons in the community and that they may be happy, but we note that there are certain disadvantages for them and especially for those who live with them. (88)

Might feeling “writing bubbling up inside [you], like a pot coming to boil” (Tea 2017, 146), trying “to push life through your eyes and out your fingers” (81), splashing “around in language until” you think you’ve “rendered it perfect” (82), and feeling driven to document despite others’ objections be edging towards that end of the spectrum? If so, *Black Wave* can be read as Tea’s attempt to face her own condition. Being a writing self, specifically a memoir-writing self, is as much of an illness for Michelle as her alcoholism, which takes centre stage in the second half of the book.

After Quinn leaves, Michelle starts hanging out at the Zen Center and comes to the conclusion that, in repeatedly telling the same stories about herself, she is “cementing [a] false idea of self harder and harder in her psyche” (Tea 2017, 152). Although the tone of the narration is mocking here, Tea explained in interview that learning about Buddhism did make her feel more “destabilized” about memoir:

Writing a memoir is basically the least Buddhist thing you can do. You’re cementing this one perspective in time. You’re deciding that it’s

true. If there's not even a 'you,' really, you're just nurturing the wounds and resentments of this person who's perceiving everything incorrectly. (Lawlor 2016, np)

These thoughts are extended in *Against Memoir*, where Tea (2019) cautions, "Times change and people change, perspectives shift and new information comes to light" (324). Memoirs are static time-capsules not just of the events they record but also of the versions of the beings that write them. Shen (2011, 91) argues (and argues that Booth also argues) that it's the IA that writes a text, not the FBP,²⁰ which perhaps helps us understand Tea/Michelle's feelings about this problematic cementing process. In memoir, the IA, once encoded, is then decoded not just by the reader but also by the FBP herself. This is one way in which writing about the self seems to change that self; we as FBPs come to believe the versions of ourselves that our IAs have written. As such, memoir can feel like a trap our own IAs have set for us.

The narrator of *Black Wave* tries to disentangle both Michelle and Tea from this trap by continuing to hold multiple levels of reality in place as the story continues. While the main narrative takes over after this central rupture, following Michelle further into the apocalypse and her alcoholism, we're repeatedly reminded of its instability through asides telling us how things 'really' happened with Lucretia and how impossible it is to completely remove her from the novel. The hope seems to be that if there's no fixed version of Michelle, Tea/we cannot be tricked into believing in it. In these moments it feels like we're looking into all the mirrors at once, glimpsing Tea's FBP (or at least the IA she has encoded and we are now decoding) alongside her personifications through the multiple possible Michelles. In one place, Tea (2017) further blurs ontological distinctions by possibly slipping into the first

²⁰ Because when the FBP "behaves in a role-playing manner[...they're] no longer 'flesh-and-blood' ('real') but 'implied'" (Shen 2011, 86). In this way, the FBP putting on a mask to encode the IA is the IA. As soon as she sits down to write "in a certain manner", she stops being an FBP and becomes an IA. The autofictional encounter with the IA-Character, then, seems to be a quest to reveal something about the truth of being a person who constantly erases herself to put on these masks. The irony is that the only way to do so is to put on another mask and write "in a [now autofictional] manner". If the IA can *never* be unmasked, then I see logic in Shen's argument that the FBP "is actually outside the writing process altogether" (91).

person: “If I take Lu out of the story there is no one to chase Michelle down when she runs away” (239). This ‘I’ may be read as a continuation of Michelle’s direct thought in the previous paragraph, but the lack of attribution (which the previous paragraph does have) and the rareness of this type of directly quoted thought make it strikingly ambiguous. If this is the until-now-extradiegetic narrator suddenly becoming intradiegetic, are we to read it as Tea herself (or her IA), or another character existing on some other narrative level between Tea and the various Michelles? This is just one of the questions that start to pull the book apart. The next chapter begins, “You really can’t tell half the story. People wrap around each other like trees planted so close that they fuse together” (241). The project of writing *Black Wave*, a memoir in which Tea makes up everything and everyone except herself, is, at least within the story of *Black Wave*, impossible. As we might expect by now, though, that doesn’t stop it existing.

Although it took Tea several more publications and a decade and a half longer than her character to make the journey, what *Black Wave* provides for those willing to endure its complicated metaplay is a perfect illustration of how autobiography’s impossibility paves the way for autofiction. As a prolific memoirist, Tea has endured more than most Freeman’s (1993, 184) irresolvable dilemma of construction versus discovery, creation versus revelation. Her marginalised intersecting identities as a queer, working-class, non-college-educated woman seem to have been at the heart of her drive to be “made/known” from the very beginning. In an autobiographical context these identities have often looked like roadblocks, as they do to Michelle when she seeks to shed them in her search of a ‘universal’ story. In the autofictional context of *Black Wave*, however, they turn her into her own multitudinous, multi-dimensional heroine—and what can be more (multi-)‘universal’ than that?

Towards the end of the book, a teenager Michelle has only met in dreams turns up and shows her a piece of paper detailing her statistics and biography, both up to and beyond the pending apocalypse. Naturally, this is Tea's biography. The teen asks Michelle to come with her "to the other life where the world doesn't end", but Michelle refuses, saying, "This Is Just—I Write Memoir. It's Weird To Read My Story Before I've Lived It" (Tea 2017, 293–94). The IA-character Michelle is being offered a chance to cross over and become an FBP, but chooses to retain her right to write her story over saving her own life. This is how we know Michelle is intrinsically an IA. On the last day on earth, finally, she sits down to write a novel, starting with the first line of this novel, as the world comes to an end.

An apocalypse is the only appropriate conclusion to this narrative. We need Michelle's world to be destroyed and the metaleptic portals to close for Tea's (and our) world to be restored. As with much self-reflexive metafiction, the unravelling and collapse of any kind of realistic storyline risks raising questions about the stakes and, ultimately, the point. We know the Michelle whose world is destroyed isn't real, so why should we care? It's because of those metaleptic portals, though, and the links we've seen between the real Tea and the various Michelles that we, in fact, care very much. Tea has successfully shown us a little of what it's like to have created IAs and to exist in the world as second (and third, fourth, fifth...) selves. She has helped us understand what it means to *be* a writing self.

Chapter 4: The Author-Function

While the IA is useful for examining the experience of being a self that's created and communicated a second self through a particular text, it doesn't account for the wider creation of an overall public persona through not just one but multiple and even multi-media texts. Especially now, with more and more pressure put on writers to engage with readers and promote their books, the relationship between an FBP and the overall image of 'author' she's perceived as can be very complicated.

In 1967, Roland Barthes ([1967] 1977) argued "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away" and that it's only when "the author enters into his own death" that "writing begins" (142). Autofiction is often seen as a deliberate challenge to Barthes' death of the author. The onomastic connection between writer and protagonist, as well as the use of ontological metalepsis and other forms of self-referentiality, can be read as explicit assertions within the autofictional text of the author's continued existence beyond it. Marjorie Worthington (2018) sees a direct link between contemporary male American autofiction and the "crisis of masculinity" caused, in part, by poststructuralism's suggested irrelevance of the author (19). Through the 20th Century, she notes,

As literary and cultural criticism continued to maintain the writer's irrelevance to literary meaning, the number of novels featuring an intrusive, autofictional authorial presence increased. [...] the perceived loss of authorial cultural capital and authority has resulted in an ever increasing spate of novels in which the author emerges as a character in order to exert authorial control[...] (75)

Along similar lines, Hywel Dix (2017) suggests that what unites works of autofiction, despite such varying definitions, is that they all contribute "in some way" to the "re-establishment of the subject of the writer as a legitimate area of inquiry" (175). As Doubrovsky remarked in 1997, "Nowadays, since the 80s, it has been a commonplace to state *le retour de l'auteur*, the

author has come back” (Célestin 1997, 398). Is it, however, the real author that has ‘come back’, or something else? And are the intrusive autofictional presences of female and minority authors seeking the same as their white male counterparts?

In 1969 Michel Foucault ([1969] 2009) posited the concept of the ‘author-function’. While acknowledging the “kinship between writing and death” and “the conception of writing as absence”, he suggests that these transpose rather than erase the characteristics and image of the author, and claims “we should re-examine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance” (301–3). Beginning to do so, he asks, “What is the name of an author? How does it function?” and argues that, while it’s a proper name – which, like other proper names, oscillates “between the poles of description and designation” – it’s also something more complex (303–4). Rather than simply describing and designating the ‘actual’ or flesh-and-blood writer, it maintains an active link to that writer’s works, the wider cultural perception of those works, and how they function together.²¹ Foucault uses the example of Shakespeare to illustrate how the name of an author is linked in different ways to the works attributed to that author than to their autobiographical features, such as when, where or how they lived. ‘Shakespeare’ is less a signifier of the creative individual who lived and wrote, and more “a means of classification” of his texts, serving to “differentiate them from others”, establish “different forms of relationships among [them]”, and characterise the “particular manner of existence of discourse” we mean when referring to his works (304–5). The works themselves have the ability to modify the functioning of Shakespeare’s name (e.g. if a new work was discovered), whereas the facts of Shakespeare’s life (e.g. his hair colour) more or less don’t.²²

Foucault writes:

²¹ Foucault also highlights the word ‘work’ as problematic, asking whether everything an author leaves behind should be included as such. This is an even more pertinent question now many authors are active on social media, write newsletters and other texts to develop a wider ‘platform’, and leave behind far more than just their traditionally published works.

²² ‘More or less’ because the ‘Shakespeare authorship question’ demonstrates that changing attitudes and interpretations can place greater powers of modification onto some facts of an author’s life, e.g. birthplace.

unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture. [...] In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society. (305)

The ‘author’, then, is not a person but a function of discourse, and Foucault warns, “It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the ‘author-function’ arises out of their scission—in the division and distance of the two” (308). As with the IA, this means the author-function is disconnected from the FBP. Despite sharing their name and perhaps demanding their participation and presence for publicity purposes, once the writer has created and published works, their author-function is, like the IA, largely beyond their control. And in a similar manner, just as Worthington highlights, it’s possible to see certain autofictions arising from actual writers’ recognition of the scissions between themselves and their author-functions. For the male writers Worthington discusses, autofiction provides an opportunity to challenge the scission and attempt to reclaim their own power and relevance.²³ However, for female authors, as well as anyone else alienated by the dominant notion of the author as white, cis, male and privileged (including but not limited to writers of colour, queer, disabled and working-class writers), I believe the consequences and stakes of these scissions are much greater and, as such, the autofictions that result from them operate in different ways.

²³ Although Worthington (2018) notes these attempts are never fully successful; the “outlandish” activities of the intrusive authorial characters tend to draw attention to their fictionality, “thus severing or at least loosening” their connections to the actual authors and undermining any demonstration of relevance and power (65-66).

Rachel Cusk's Scissions

At the time of writing, the name 'Rachel Cusk' is synonymous with innovation, honesty and literary success. She's the author of eleven novels, three memoirs and an essay collection. She's won the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Somerset Maugham Award; been shortlisted three times for the Goldsmiths Prize, as well as the Bailey's Prize, the Folio Prize, the Orange Prize and the Whitbread Novel Award; and longlisted twice for the Booker. She's often called divisive, but variously praised for "gut-renovat[ing]" the novel (Thurman 2017), "genius" (Oyler 2020), and inventing "an entirely new literary form" (Lee 2021).

Not long ago, however, Cusk's (2002) name functioned rather differently. In 2001, she published a memoir, *A Life's Work*, about the struggles of pregnancy and early motherhood. In it, she compares pregnant women to fields about to have motorways built through them (29) and motherhood itself to "a demotion, a displacement" and a disaster that "has wiped me out, an earthquake, a falling meteor" (134-5). Shortly before its publication, a friend wrote to her saying, "Be prepared [...] your book is going to make people very angry" (Cusk 2008, np). The friend proved right: reviews savaged Cusk for being "a self-obsessed bore" and "Pure misery to read" (ibid.), while users of Mumsnet labelled her "a one-woman festival of self-pity", an "unfit mother" and "a shocking [sic] bad writer" (Maris 2019, 46). Emily Bazelon (2012) describes that with *A Life's Work*, "The award-winning British novelist became the first literary Bad Mother" (np).

A decade later, Cusk (2013) published a third²⁴ memoir, *Aftermath*, detailing her separation and divorce from her children's father. In this, she claimed to have tired of 'story' and its tricky relationship to the truth (2-3). If she was savaged for *A Life's Work*, then she was slaughtered for this. She was accused in *The New York Times* of finding herself "disproportionately fascinating" (Keller 2012, np), in *London Review of Books* of "tiresome

²⁴ Her second, *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2010), though less obviously inflammatory had to be pulped and reprinted after a British ex-pat disputed his depiction and sued.

metaphors” and a “lack of clarity” (Biggs 2012, np), and in *New Statesman* of having “a splinter of ice in her heart” (Derbyshire 2012, 32). Camilla Long (2012) won *The Omnivore’s Hatchet Job of the Year* for her takedown of it as “quite simply, bizarre” and Cusk as “a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist” (42), while Rod Liddle (2012) brandished her “a self-obsessed [...] idiot” and the book “mimsy, self-important, self-justifying emetic drivel” (17). Cusk has described this time as “the most violent and murderous experience” of her life (Skomsvold and Ullmann, 2021) and said it led to a “creative death” whereby she stopped being able to write and grew suspicious of the whole creative process (Kellaway 2014, 34). In a since much-quoted statement, she said she now felt fiction was: “fake and embarrassing. Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous” (ibid). Equally, however, she’d found autobiography led to extraordinarily public misunderstanding and anger. She’d had a taste of this with *A Life’s Work*, but with *Aftermath* she found the divide between life and text “completely breached” (ibid).

As with my discussion of Tea, I’m limited in what I can say about the ‘real Cusk because I, of course, only know her through the current functioning of her name as author. However, it seems safe to assume that at least part of the violence and discomfort of the reception to *Aftermath* might have been due to a sudden and absolute recognition of the gap between the woman/mother/ex-wife she actually was and the ‘Rachel Cusk’ being discussed and pulled apart in print, on the radio and all over Mumsnet. That is, not just to the *scission* between but also to the public *confusion* of herself and her author-function.

Lauren Oyler (2020) points out Cusk’s ‘creative death’ might itself be another ‘story’, because she published her next book just two years later. However, what we see between *Aftermath* and the trilogy that followed is a massive shift in form that does indicate some kind of rupture. In his work combining career construction theory with literary analysis, Dix

(2017) identifies the different characteristics of work produced at different stages of an authorial career, especially the ‘late’ or ‘retrospective’ stage. For Dix, ‘lateness’ isn’t necessarily linked to age, but refers to any stage of creative self-reflection prompted and defined by a previous achievement (10). Drawing on Isabelle Grell’s distinction between *écriture sur* (writing *on*) and *écriture depuis* (writing *after*), he identifies that retrospective fiction addresses the question of “what it means to go on writing after already having written” (169–70; Grell 2014, 54). Writing *after* is less passive and distanced than writing *on*; it involves an active, interrogative dialogue between past and present, as well as “the committed engagement and potential transformation of the writing, exploring self” (Dix 2017, 170). Dix draws many parallels between retrospective fiction and autofiction, but sees a key difference in their relationship to trauma. He notes that autofiction is “primarily concerned with writing after trauma” (177-78), arising from “what [Arnaud] Genon calls a ‘faillite fondatrice’, a founding fault line that opens up in the individual’s vista as a result of one or more destabilising experiences” (169; Genon 2013, 58). This accords with career construction theory, which identifies moments of “disequilibrium” and/or “dynamic or turbulent rupture” propelling individuals from one career stage to another (Dix 2017, 30–31), but Dix argues that because retrospective fiction is “more concerned with writing after writing”, the founding fault line at its heart is not trauma but the recognition of the challenge of having to continue innovating (178). For Cusk, I think we see both these fault lines converge: *Aftermath* and *A Life’s Work* were ‘writings after (the) trauma (of childbirth and divorce)’, but because the reaction to them was itself traumatic, what follows is not just ‘writing after writing’ or even ‘writing after writing after trauma’, but ‘writing after *the trauma of writing*’.

In 2008, Cusk (2008) wrote that she felt shame after the publication of *A Life’s Work* because “I had written a book that had malfunctioned” (np). She’s continued to use this word

in relation to *Aftermath* as well. While unapologetic for her use of herself and her life as source material, which she frequently cites as feminist, in a 2021 podcast she described that emerging from “the aftermath of *Aftermath*” involved “a massive technical thought-process.” She’d understood writing as a technology, one in which she hoped to create “a correct discourse around femininity”, but realised “these two things – the sense of a technology and the use of myself – sort of cancelled each other out [...] all I saw was that [...] form was malfunctioning” (Skomsvold and Ullmann 2021). Her ‘creative death’ clearly was not an absolute death, but these malfunctions did end the previous stage of her authorial career. She recognised that to go on writing *after* these malfunctions meant finding a new technology—one that we’ll see is simultaneously retrospective and autofictive.

The *Outline* trilogy follows Faye, a writer and mother, over a period of several years as she travels in Europe to teach and promote her books, buys and renovates a house in London, and begins to rebuild her life following divorce. Although narrated in first person, Faye herself is quiet for much of the books and we learn little specific detail about her or her life. Instead, we hear the stories of those she meets and must try to build a picture of Faye from her absence rather than presence in the conversations and situations she describes. From the first pages of *Outline* (2015), we might recognise the familiar landscape of Cusk’s memoirs, but here she has erased herself along with her protagonist in order to disseminate her thoughts and opinions through other characters. Faye flies to Athens to teach a short course on how to write. She meets a man on the plane who tells her about his life and invites her to come out on his boat to swim. She does this, meets up with friends, and teaches her class. The stories of her students, friends and acquaintances, and their friends, family and acquaintances, flow through her until eventually, on the last morning, the playwright who is to take her place in the apartment she’s staying in arrives and tells her about a violent attack

that's left her unable to write. She too spoke to a neighbour on her flight and his pouring forth of his own life and subjectivity prompted a kind of erasure in her:

He was describing [...] what she herself was not: in everything he said about himself, she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she now was. (239-40)

This reads as an explanation not just for how this character, Anne, feels, but also Faye and by extension Cusk herself. Anne, like Cusk, has suffered something violent and as a result lost her ability to create. That she recognises herself as only an outline but in that outline is finally beginning to discover a firmer sense of self points to Cusk's own creative reincarnation (or at least movement into the next 'stage' of her career) through the empty outline of Faye.

Cusk has called the trilogy "a rearrangement of the same elements" found in her memoirs, and said she wanted to reverse the relationship between the technology (writing) and the material (herself) by turning the technique "inside out [...]" so then the self was hidden and the writing structure was all on the outside" (Skomsvold and Ullmann 2021). She is writing about the same things – motherhood, divorce, femininity, love, loss, creativity – but from a safer, more withdrawn, and (at least overtly) less angry position. Instead of using her own first person, she ventriloquises each character Faye meets to raise the same contentious opinions she was vilified for in her memoirs. Almost everyone Faye encounters is divorced or in the process of becoming so, balancing childrearing with creative production, and wondering about the concept of the self. In *Outline*, for example, Ryan, another writer experiencing a loss of language, articulates the feeling that children slow you down (Cusk 2015, 33) and many of the problems of parenthood and creativity that Cusk expresses in *A*

Life's Work.²⁵ We also hear that Olga, a friend of a friend, instinctively believes her children belong more to her than their father (128), just as Cusk (2013) admitted to believing in *Aftermath* (9). Similarly, in *Transit*, Faye's ex-boyfriend describes a strikingly comparable domestic set-up to Cusk and her ex-husband's, in which he does the 'female' work of looking after the children, while his partner works full time (Cusk 2016, 17). In *Kudos*, another writer echoes *A Life's Work* when she describes having a child as surviving "your own death" and "a process of being broken and then reassembled" (Cusk 2018, 59); and an interviewer picks up on Cusk's (2013) reflections in *Aftermath* of her failure to find equality as a couple by seeking to become "two hybrids, each [...] half male and half female" (19) when she says "over the two decades of our marriage our male and female qualities had become blunted" (Cusk 2018, 77). Although Cusk rejects the label of autofiction,²⁶ what she's doing here is pouring personal experience and opinion through the filters of character and fiction. Oyler (2020) calls this "a provocatively inverted form of autofiction" (np), while Heidi Julavits (2017) sees her chipping "a tunnel through her nonfiction to reach a new kind of fiction" (np). Whatever we call it, it's a playful and defiant way of challenging her critics and an attempt, I think, to refocus the discourse surrounding her name.

For Dix (2017), the challenge for any author at the retrospective stage, even if they've arrived there purely through success, is how to continue being identified as the author of their past works while also striving to create something new and original. In other words, how to marry their existing author-function with the need to innovate. Linking to career construction theory, Dix identifies this as "the question of how individuals address and conceptualize their

²⁵ And, significantly, Ryan renders these expressions doubly safe as a male character. In *A Life's Work*, Cusk (2002) notes the only other "dissident voices" are men's and wonders if women "contain a Darwinian stop upon our powers of expression" (129-30).

²⁶ She's denied it variously, including at a reading where she claimed, "very often the autofiction writer [...] is born closer to their goal – they don't have to go through and break up everything in order to free themselves, they begin in a freer state. That's not the world of my writing" (Politics and Prose Bookstore 2019). She's often cited alongside Knausgaard, so this may be a reaction to the uneasy equation of their work and/or the difference between male and female approaches to the genre.

dual apprehension of sameness and difference across time” (28). For someone like Cusk, whose previous works have malfunctioned and created an even deeper scission between her and her author-function, there’s a need to address and conceptualise not just her dual apprehension of this sameness and difference, but also her audience’s. An idea that comes up repeatedly in *Transit* is that “whatever we might wish to believe about ourselves, we are only the result of how others have treated us” (Cusk 2016, 9). This is mentioned first in regard to an estate agent ignored by his clients after they’ve purchased a house, then later a builder who “felt his clients sometimes forgot that he was a person: instead he became, in a sense, an extension of their own will” (53). The latter, I think, points to what it feels like to have your personhood erased in favour of literary discourse. What Foucault’s discussion of Shakespeare fails to address is that for a living writer the features of their autobiography – when, where and how they live – are, for them at least, just as if not more important than the works they create. Like the builder, Cusk’s reminding us that she has a home, family, friends, and an entire life beyond our interpretation of her through her works.

At the end of a class in *Outline*, a so-far silent student, Cassandra, bursts out with a critique of the class and Faye herself, ending with “I don’t know who you are [...] but I’ll tell you one thing, you’re a lousy teacher” (Cusk 2015, 158). In the next chapter, Faye reflects:

the worst aspect [...] was its element of impersonality, which had caused me to feel like nothing, a non-entity, even while she was giving me, so to speak, her full attention. This feeling, of being negated at the same time as I was exposed, had had a particularly powerful effect on me. (167)

If we substitute “You’re a lousy teacher” with “You’re a lousy writer/mother/wife/woman”, we might hear this as Cusk voicing her own feelings about Long, Liddle and her Mumsnet critics all forgetting she’s a person as well as an author. The scission between writer and author-function means there’s inevitably an “element of impersonality” to any discourse around an author’s work, but what’s striking about Cusk’s experience is how it exposes the

contradictory double-standard of sameness and difference that female writers are held to. While maintaining the element of impersonality that no doubt caused Cusk (the actual writer) to feel “like nothing, a non-entity”, the criticisms of her memoirs were also deeply personal, exposing her at the same time they negated her.

More than a critique simply of her own treatment, however, Faye/Cusk’s word-choice can also be read as a challenge to the modernist notion of impersonality. In his 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T.S. Eliot ([1919] 1982) put forth an “Impersonal theory of poetry”, arguing that it’s poetry rather than the poet that holds importance, thus the aim of the artist should be to “sacrifice”, “surrender” and “escape” their personality in favour of their work (39-42). Similar ideas were being explored by authors such as James Joyce ([1916] 1992), whose 1916 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* sees Stephen Dedalus assert: “The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak” (166). Virginia Woolf ([1929] 2000) takes a related position in her comparison of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë in *A Room of One’s Own*, claiming Brontë “had more genius in her” than Austen, but failed to erase herself sufficiently from her work (63). Quoting from *Jane Eyre*, Woolf finds the author’s personal “hate”, “fear” and “bitterness” (61) coming through, and suggests it means:

she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. (63)

These are not dissimilar to the criticisms levelled at Cusk’s memoirs: too angry, too personal, and deformed and twisted by her inability to look beyond herself. Woolf acknowledges that the “integrity” she finds missing in *Jane Eyre* has, historically, been more difficult for female writers to achieve because they’ve lacked both the tradition Eliot requires all poets to engage

with and the material circumstances to devote and sacrifice themselves as fully to their work as men (66-69). She also notes the limitations of having to work within literary forms created by men. The novel, she suggests, may have been “young enough to be soft in [the female writer’s] hands” but asks:

who shall say that even this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use? No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle [...] for the poetry in her. (70)

Later, however, Woolf calls not for the invention of a new, female form, but for ‘androgyny’. She imagines the soul divided into two powers – one male, one female – and suggests it’s only through the fusion and spiritual co-operation of the two that the creative mind can be “fully fertilized” (88-89). Through androgyny, she sees, like Eliot, an ideal creative state in which the artist can set aside personal passions and grievances in order to digest and process only the emotions necessary for their work. “[I]t is fatal”, Woolf claims, “[...]for anyone who writes to think of their sex [...] It is fatal for a woman [...] in any way to speak consciously as a woman” (94). The ideal, androgynous mind is instead “resonant and porous”, “transmits emotion without impediment”, and is “incandescent and undivided” (89). This is not Cusk. She made the ‘fatal’ errors of thinking and speaking consciously as a woman in her memoirs. But the lesson she learnt was not the same as Woolf’s. Unlike the modernists, neither she nor Faye can celebrate the “element of impersonality” because they understand the violence and double-standard beneath it—the attempt to both expose and negate.

In her essay ‘Shakespeare’s Sisters’, Cusk (2020) notes that in the eighty years since Woolf published *A Room of One’s Own*:

aspects of female experience have been elaborated on with commendable candour, as often as not by male writers. A book about war is still judged more important than a book about ‘the feelings of women.’ Most significantly, when a woman writes a book about war she is lauded: she has eschewed the vast unlit chamber and the serpentine caves; there is the sense that she has made proper use of her

room and her money, her new rights of property. The woman writer who confines herself to her female ‘reality’ is by the same token often criticised. She appears to have squandered her room, her money. (168)

When Cassandra criticises Faye in *Outline*, it’s not just as a teacher but also as a writer and, in particular, a woman writer confining herself and also her students to the ‘unimportant’ topic of ‘reality’. She perceives Faye as having wasted the class’s time and money by asking them to think about their personal experiences rather than use their imaginations; “At least Ryan, she said, had taught them something” (Cusk 2015, 158). This statement is all the more damning coming from another woman. In ‘Shakespeare’s Sisters’, Cusk (2020) discusses how women attack one another to protect the limited privileges they themselves have found under patriarchy:

For the woman writer, this is a scarifying prospect. She can find herself disowned in the very act of invoking the deepest roots of shared experience. Having taken the trouble to write honestly, she can find herself being read dishonestly. (175)

Outline’s gendered critique of impersonality highlights something else Foucault’s example of Shakespeare omits: what Cusk (2013) calls “the feminist principle” of autobiography (153). She sees a deeply personal “disjuncture between how women live and how they actually feel” (Viner 2012, 10) and, as such, argues for the “inherent radicalism” of authentic writing about femininity and lived female experience (Wade 2015, np). For her and others,²⁷ authenticity does not have to mean full referentiality, but it does mean the autobiographical details of the artist cannot be fully disconnected from her work. For female writers, at least some details (especially their gender and the geographic and socio-political circumstances in which they live and write) absolutely have the ability to modify the functioning of their names. Woolf may have called for androgyny, but if we were to discover

²⁷ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) highlight how feminist autobiographies often “challenge the boundaries of conventional autobiographical form” by mixing fact with fiction, fantasy with reality, and the self with others (247).

that she wasn't in fact female it would, of course, affect the way we read her works.²⁸ In

Transit, Faye says:

For a long time [...] I believed that it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there. But my decision to create a disturbance by renovating my house had awoken a different reality [...] I had started to desire power, because what I now realised was that other people had had it all along, that which I called fate was merely the reverberation of their will, a tale scripted not by some universal storyteller but by people who would elude justice for as long as their actions were met with resignation rather than outrage. (Cusk 2016, 198)

The trilogy might appear to take a quieter, less angry approach than her memoirs, but running through from beginning to end is Cusk's gendered, highly personal outrage. These books are an attempt to "create a disturbance", not by renovating a house, but by renovating both autobiography and fiction. Instead of sending her towards androgyny, Cusk's experiences of being read dishonestly have led her to fulfil Woolf's original prediction: she's sought "free use of her limbs" to create a new, deliberately female technology. She cannot control her author-function, but emerging from the ashes of her creative death, she's found a new vehicle for the poetry inside her and is ready to confront her discourse.

The conclusion to the trilogy, *Kudos*, is overtly concerned with authorial recognition and the gaps between a writer, their work and their public persona. It's 2016, Brexit is on the horizon, Faye has remarried, her children are about to go to university, and she's found more success as a writer. The book opens with her listening to someone on a plane, an immediate echo of the beginning of *Outline*. This time, however, she's flying to promote her books at a series of European literary festivals. Throughout the novel she speaks to other writers, editors, publicists, journalists and event staff about the state of publishing and the sense of the author as a commodity. Early on, Faye's publisher asks about another author, "Why should

²⁸ Recent controversy following Spanish crime writer Carmen Mola being revealed as the pen-name of three male authors is proof, I think, that this is true for contemporary writers as well (Bayley 2021). Female writers also have more of a tradition of publishing under male or androgynous pseudonyms (e.g. Currer Bell, George Eliot and J.K. Rowling) to modify the way their authorial names function.

her photograph be accurate?" (Cusk 2018, 34), destabilising from the get-go any expected verisimilitude between the person who writes and the person the reader perceives. Later, a woman on the board of directors for the festival Faye is at mentions that she's less and less convinced by the purpose of these festivals:

while the personal value of books had – for her at least – increased [...] she had the sense that the attempt to make a public concern out of a private pastime – reading and writing – was spawning a literature of its own, in that many writers invited here excelled at public appearances while producing work she found frankly mediocre. (104-5)

These moments alert us to the 'story'/fictionality of authorship. Like this woman, Cusk's highlighting the irony and sadness of the way, at least in our current moment, the author-function can be seen to trump not just the actual writer's existence but often also the works themselves. Francine Prose (2018) notes:

these novels about a writer tell us nothing about the process of writing, and very little about what Faye has actually written. [...] This may be because so many of the people Faye meets (writers and publishers included) care more about the surface trappings of authorship—the career, the conferences, the public appearances, and especially the sales of the writer's books—than they do about literature, a subject in which they display almost no profound or genuine interest at all. (528)

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Faye's encounters with the press. Although we might assume her interest as an interviewee must lie in the contents of her books, every time she's interviewed we see journalists project themselves onto her and fail to ask about her work. The first speaks for 19 pages about her own life and divorce, then abruptly ends the interview saying, "I think I have everything I need [...] In fact I looked up all the details before I came" (Cusk 2018, 84). Faye herself thus proves superfluous to the process of getting to know 'Faye' the author. Later, another interviewer takes this a step further when he asks if she has considered moving to live in the sun. Faye says no, but he insists: "I've thought about it [...] and I believe it would be the right thing for you to do" (198). He's transposed his impression of 'Faye' the author onto Faye the person and seems to have

decided that through her author-function he is able to know her better than she knows herself. In refusing to accept her answer, he refuses to see any scission, but the brilliance of Cusk's new technology is that the reader now has to see it. In recognising the gap between Faye the character and 'Faye' the author that this man (and of course it's a man) is certain he understands, we're forced to contemplate the difference between Cusk and the 'Cusk' we think we know.

Elsewhere, Faye encounters two characters who do recognise her scission but are confused and somewhat affronted by it. Both express surprise that she's remarried given what she's written about having gone through. "You have put it in writing," one says, "and that brings with it all the laws" (225). This is reminiscent of Diana Leach's (2012) critique of *Aftermath* in which she wrote that she was "amazed" that after "146 pages of invective against marriage" Cusk was "with a man again" by the end of the book (np). Again, Cusk is holding up a mirror for her readers, asking us to acknowledge our own projections and thus destabilising her author-function.

Destabilisation is one of Cusk's most powerful tools in these books. Prose (2018) notes that, throughout all three, subtle things undermine our belief in the 'realness' of Faye's world and point to this being "fiction within fiction" (527). Like so much else, this comes to a head in *Kudos*, where another interviewer tells Faye that he's read her book and would like to treat her as one of her characters, "with himself granted the power of narrator" and hoping to provoke her "into feats of self-revelation by means of a simple question" (Cusk 2018, 142-44). The question he asks is what she's noticed on her way here, which is the prompt question Faye asked her writing students in *Outline*. For Dix (2017), retrospective fiction is often "profoundly metafictional" (2) as authors seek to construct or redefine their sense of self through "reflection upon reflection", or what Mark Savickas calls "conscious[ness] of consciousness" (68; Savickas 2011, 15). It's perhaps unsurprising then, that this metafictional

moment brings Faye and Cusk closest together. Though Faye's work is never fully described, we're able to imagine here that it is in fact Cusk's work—*this* work that we are reading. As with *Black Wave*, these books become objects within their own narrative,²⁹ which means we see suddenly in Faye's outline not her passivity and absence but Cusk's power and presence. If Faye's authoring these works as Cusk is, then she's much more in control than her narration suggests. She's *creating* this world and these characters with an agenda, just as Cusk is.

In another section, Faye meets Ryan again, the author and other tutor from *Outline* who found children slowed him down and was struggling to write a follow-up to his debut short-story collection. Faye sees him across the room and notes he's lost half his bodyweight and is on crutches. He looks emaciated in oversized clothes and she wonders "what he had done to deserve it, and whether I myself was in some way responsible for it, because at one time I had believed that people like Ryan lived their lives with impunity" (Cusk 2018, 111). This subtle moment invites us to question Faye's authorial power, but also to recognise that Cusk is not just "in some way" but in *all* ways responsible for Ryan's (and every other character's) fate here. It seems briefly that Cusk and Faye have united to give Ryan – and by extension the people like him that we assume they both believe live their lives with impunity – his just desserts. However, a few pages later, we discover Ryan's initial appearance was an illusion: his fortunes have in fact risen and he's "the guest of honour this evening" (122). Cusk and Faye are thus parted once more because, while Cusk is obviously equally as responsible for Ryan's success as she would be his failure, Faye is revealed as just another

²⁹ This type of *mise-en-abyme* is a popular trope in autofiction, especially the kind Worthington discusses, and a key secondary signpost. What seems slightly different in both Cusk and Tea's use of it than in most male authors', however, is its ambiguity. Cusk, especially, hints at the endless mirrors in which we might see her writing Faye (who is herself writing a character, who is writing a character, and so on...), but also obscures those mirrors. Rather than offering a complex but solvable Escher-like puzzle, she frustrates and undermines any search for pattern or symmetry. Faye is always *not not* her, but also actually *not* her, meaning we're forced to continue puzzling and troubling and thinking.

character. She may be a writer and she may even be writing a book just like this one containing a character just like Ryan, but that's only within the fiction of this story. *This* Ryan and *this* world are beyond her power.

When Ryan explains to Faye how his fortunes changed another challenge to the author-function is introduced. In *Outline*, he told Faye he couldn't recognise himself in his previous works. He remembered "the bursting feeling of writing them, something in himself massing and pushing irresistibly to be born", but could no longer access that feeling and almost thought "that to remain a writer he'd have to become one all over again" (Cusk 2015, 45). By *Kudos*, that's what he's done, but at the cost of his own name:

He'd taken on a writing partner, a female ex-student as it happened, and they had made an anagram of their names, though obviously, he said, since he was the front man, as it were, it made sense for their fictional author to be male. (Cusk 2018, 118)

There are layers to this situation and its significance within the book, not least that it's the female writer whose gender and body have been erased in this partnership,³⁰ but it's the similarity to rather than difference with Cusk's situation that strikes me. Ryan and his partner have taken the author-function into their own hands by deliberately creating an even deeper scission between themselves and the potential discourse around their work. In a way, this is what Cusk has done too by presenting herself as an outline. After her 'creative death' she had to find a way not just to go on writing after writing, but to *become* a writer all over again. The way she found was through erasure of herself in favour of her author-function. In 2015, she

³⁰ This might be Cusk (2018) pointing again at the idea of a couple merging their male and female characteristics, and/or Woolf's theory of androgyny, but I think it's mostly a more pointed nod towards the unequal treatment of male and female writers who use themselves as material. *Kudos* also features a barely disguised Knausgaard figure who a female author tells Faye is "our most important novelist at the moment" because he writes about his life and family—"subjects our other male writers would not deign to touch" (138). Later, she leans in to admit, "Though of course if he were a woman [...] he would be scorned for his honesty, or at the very least no one would care" (146).

claimed, “*Outline* was true to myself: I don’t want to exist as an exterior person in the world” (Wade 2015, np). Two years later, she said:

There seems to be some problem about my identity. But no one can find it, because it’s not there—I have lost all interest in having a self. Being a person has always meant getting blamed for it. (Thurman 2017, np)

What she means in both these statements, I think, is not that she doesn’t actually have a self and doesn’t want to exist full-stop, but that she doesn’t want to have to deal as an FBP with the dual sameness and difference of her author-function. She would rather deepen the scission and separate herself entirely. That way, the discourse around ‘Rachel Cusk’ the author could continue, while Rachel Cusk the person could live her life, free of simultaneously impersonal and personal criticism, free of strangers projecting onto her what they think they know about her, and free of the posturing that goes along with book promotion. In this way, she might be seen as *calling* for the death of the author, even as she maintains a presence within her texts. This separates her from the authors Worthington sees as responding to the perceived loss of authorial capital and directs us, I think, to a fundamental difference between the white American male autofiction Worthington discusses and that by those who have been culturally othered.

Liz Stanley (1995) highlights the privileged bias at the heart of the denial of authorial relevance, calling it “A very convenient death” for the white, middle-class, intellectual men who argued for it and pointing to the fact that it arose at the very moment anti-colonial, anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements began to challenge and threaten their authority (16-17). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988) similarly sees it reflecting “the bottomless anxieties” of Western culture’s “most privileged subjects” (67). In examining the works of authors including Bret Easton Ellis, John Barth, Philip Roth and Dave Eggers, Worthington (2018) sees that “the author-character emerges within the text in order to control it from within, to highlight the continued textual presence, rather than the death, of the author” (80). For these

authors, Barthes' death and Foucault's scission are unpleasant because they suggest their irrelevance and impotence as flesh-and-blood writers. For authors who have not traditionally found their work centred in discourse, or who have been prevented from writing, publishing, or having their work taken seriously, however, the stakes of both death and scission are much higher. Worthington sees that for a male author, "All this persona shaping suggests [a] desire to participate in and control the construction of his authorial image" (171). When the scission is such that it means a writer is attacked for something perceived within their authorial image (as it was for Cusk), or that they are excluded from their own discourse (as I'll discuss in Chapter 5 happened to Meena Kandasamy), or that their work is wilfully misinterpreted or misused, that desire becomes a need.

Worthington claims autofictions by women and minority writers are rare, at least in comparison to those by white male writers, and that those that exist often employ the third person "as though the author-characters in such autofictions are reluctant or unable to assume the authority of the first person" (89). Given the slipperiness in definition and labelling of autofiction, it'd be difficult to check the accuracy of this,³¹ but if true I wonder if it has less to do with a reluctance to claim authority and more to do with different approaches and agendas. What Cusk demonstrates in the trilogy is that participating in the construction of one's authorial image doesn't necessarily require an overt demonstration of power and relevance. Rather than trying to bridge the gap between herself and her authorial image, she uses these books to highlight that gap and ask us, like Foucault ([1969] 2009, 303), to "re-examine the empty space" left by her absence.

³¹ My sense from my own reading is that it's at least in the process of change, but Jacob White (2013) makes the opposite claim that much contemporary autofiction "derives [...] from feminist autotheory, queer writing, immigrant writing, writing by those from marginalised racial and ethnic backgrounds, and writing by people with disability, in which contexts the novel functions to open up and embody spaces of selfhood denied within dominant cultural narratives" (18).

Cusk seems to be an author who has always understood this empty space. In discussing *A Life's Work* with her, Julavits (2017) recognised what many readers didn't, that Cusk's nonfiction 'I' "is not, or is not exactly, Rachel Cusk." In response, Cusk described it as:

the trench that I've dug very, very, very laboriously between something that looks like a person, that looks like an identity and then the person who's actually creating. [...] There's a very, very big difference[...] (np)

This difference malfunctioned in her memoirs because she was attacked as *both* self and author. But, with the trilogy, she's dug an even deeper trench and found a better technology with which to communicate the difference. Ironically, in doing so, I think she *has* also bridged the difference by proving herself powerful enough to modify her author-function. As Oyler (2020) notes, "the novels have effectively overhauled her image: She is a weathered, previously misunderstood genius, whose stony exterior is special evidence of her discernment" (np).

Unlike Barthes, Foucault ([1969] 2009) tells us the author:

should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its interventions in discourse, and its system of dependencies. (314)

He was, of course, one of the white, middle-class intellectuals Stanley and Fox-Genovese see as benefiting from the toppling of the originating subject, but he did also acknowledge that the author-function is neither universal nor constant. It operates differently in different discourses, at different historical moments and in different cultures. This allows us to consider revisions to the boundaries of what constitutes an 'author' in the present moment. Autofiction, perhaps because it too arises from an uneasy scission and is neither universal nor constant, provides a format within which writers like Cusk can suggest their own revisions and playfully but seriously challenge the function of their names within discourse.

At the beginning of *The Last Supper*, Cusk (2010) describes her then-husband's "concrete and indelible" relationship to his name, which she sees as "the opposite" of the experience of the artist. Of herself, she writes:

As a child my own name seemed strange to me, abstract, like a mathematical symbol whose representative function remained mysterious even once I'd grown accustomed to what it looked like. It was only when I began to write books and put my name to them that I understood its associative purpose. (14)

This initial recognition of her author-function seems positive and affirming, perhaps because it solidified a creative identity that was always within her. As with encoding the IA, however, putting your name to a book is only the beginning; once it's done, that name is out there, free to function in both associative and dissociative ways. At the end of that same book, Cusk reminds herself, "I am not a victim of perception" (215). Two years after writing that, she became one, but in figuring out how to write after and beyond her creative death, she seems to have renegotiated her relationship with her author-function and reminded herself (and us) once more.

Chapter 5: The Double as Other

Looking at autofiction through the lens of either the IA or the author-function highlights the sense of multiplicity at the core of the writing self, and both approaches, I think, point to autofiction as a form of doubling. Because it crosses the boundaries between text and reality, the horror and disequilibrium traditionally associated with the literary double also have the potential to transgress those limits, and it's this, I believe, that makes it such an unsettling genre—for both writers and readers.

In 1919, Sigmund Freud expanded on Ernst Jentsch's (1906) analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman's 'The Sand-Man' to identify the '*unheimlich*' as a specific type of fear derived from something simultaneously known and unknown (Freud [1919] 2003, 124-134). Most often translated as 'uncanny' but literally translatable as both 'un-homely'/'unfamiliar' and 'un-secret'/'unconcealed', this dual meaning and simultaneous effect of the *unheimlich* is at the heart of the disturbance created by the figure of the double.

Ralph Tymms (1949) sets out two types of double: the duplicated self and the divided self (16-17). In examining the IA and the author-function from the perspective of the real author/FBP, we've seen that the writing self is always a divided self and that writers live a kind of double life. Autofiction's blurring of the boundary between the true and the invented can be read as an illustration of this divided, double existence, where the acts of writing and living rarely feel cohesive. Tymms sees double-by-division and double-by-duplication as "distinct psychological approaches", but admits they are uneasily separated and "constantly mingle" (16). In introducing to their semi-fictional landscape a character with their own name and/or characteristics, I believe the author of autofiction embraces this mingling by also creating a duplicated doppelgänger.

Paul Coates (1988) argues that *all* fiction writing is a negotiation between the double and the Other and suggests an author is always at risk of losing herself to the characters she invents. He writes:

Stamping one's own features upon the face of a character may be a fearful authorial manoeuvre intended to limit the dangers, posed by his or her otherness, of the character assuming independent, vampirical life.
(1)

Doing so in an autofictional setting is, I think, a little different. The author of autofiction, particularly when writing *after* autobiography, has often already come to terms with both their characters' and their own (vampirical) otherness. In many cases, this seems to be what draws them to the genre: a desire to see and examine themselves *as* Other, despite – or even because of – how uncanny this might prove.

Andrew Webber (1996) outlines nine features of the literary doppelgänger, many of which correspond to the relationship between author and character in autofiction. His first is that the doppelgänger is “above all a figure of visual compulsion”; it’s either seen or almost seen out of the corner of the eye, creating an autoscopic encounter in which the “subject beholds its other self as another, as visual object, or alternatively is beheld as object by its other self” (3). Similarly, in sitting down to write, the author of autofiction consciously chooses to make herself other in order to *see* (and perhaps *be seen by*) that other. As Trevor Pateman (1998), who compares the practices of writing and clinical psychoanalysis, suggests, “The page is a blank just as the psychoanalyst is a blank, and as a blank invites the transference of the writer in which the writer’s other seeks out its other” (162).

Webber’s (1996) second and third criteria are that the doppelgänger “operates divisively on language” and “is an inveterate performer of identity”. Like the protagonist of autofiction, it “echoes, reiterates, distorts, parodies, dictates, impedes, and dumbfounds” in its enactment of the subject’s own identity, mirroring the self while simultaneously destroying any fixed notion of selfhood (3). Webber also points to the way the doppelgänger contests the

subject's identity on both cognitive and carnal levels, the perpetual power-play between ego and alter-ego, the threat of displacement from the doppelgänger, its intertextual appearances, and its constitutive role in creating returns, repetitions and doubling-backs within the structure of the text that contains it (4-5). We've seen these repetitions and doubling-backs as well as the contestation of identity when Michelle acknowledges the other (both 'real' and imagined) versions of herself in the second half of *Black Wave*. We've also seen Cusk grapple with the author-function's power to displace the self (and her own attempt to displace it through erasure of the self) in the *Outline* trilogy. There thus seems to be at least a familial resemblance between the autofictional character and the literary doppelgänger.

In Otto Rank's ([1914] 1989) original psychoanalytic formulation, fictional characters are shown to encounter their doubles as representations of primitive but universally abiding fears—namely of death, the soul and the unconscious. He points to “typical traits” shared by authors occupied by the motif and identifies them as “pathological personalities who [...] went beyond even that limit of neurotic conduct otherwise allowed to the artist” (33-35). Each, he found, “suffered—and obviously so—from psychic disturbances or neurological and mental illnesses” (35). I've no desire to pathologise the authors I'm writing about (or myself), but I've already mentioned Winnicott's connection between creativity and mental illness and it doesn't seem much of a leap to imagine the founding fault line Dix and Genon attribute to a turn towards autofiction might count as a form of 'psychic disturbance'. It appears to me that autofiction allows an author to go a step further than the writers Rank considers and manufacture a metaleptic encounter with their own double. However, the disturbances, anxieties and potential neuroses of authors of autofiction are not, I believe, of the general kind, but specifically linked to their identities as authors. For some reason (and as we've seen with Tea and Cusk, these can be internal, external, or both), these writers have a harder time being writers than others. As such, the second, split and multiplied

selves they create may hold the universal fears of more traditional doubles, but their primary role is to represent the fundamental contradictions at the heart of the writing self.

Despite this distinction, what happens when an author succeeds in manufacturing this metaleptic encounter is no less volatile than when a fictional character meets their double. Webber (1996) argues that the traditional doppelgänger “represents the abiding interdependence of real and fantasy worlds, by rendering them impossibly co-present at the site of the Doppelgänger encounter” (8). When the site of that encounter is not itself contained within a text, but held only loosely by the porous boundaries of autofiction, this co-presentation of real and fantasy worlds – of art and life – risks, in Cusk’s (2016, 198) words, ‘creating a disturbance’ both on and off the page. An encounter between an author sitting at her desk and her doppelgänger staring out from the text holds the potential, I think, to be life- (or at least art-) changing.

Is this potential for disturbance limited to the author, though? Seen only in this way, autofiction might be considered what Genette (1991) terms ‘intimate paratext’—a communication addressed by the author solely to herself (267). Dix (2017) in fact argues that retrospective fictions *are* intimate paratexts and can be read as privately addressed accompaniments to an author’s previous works (86). I agree these genres are often paratexts, reshaping and recontextualising what’s come before, but believe the playful and performative nature of autofiction points towards it being equally as public as it is private. If the encounter between author and their double-character was all that mattered, autofictions wouldn’t need to be published and wouldn’t, I think, find such passionate readers when they are. To look at just the relationship between author and text is to see only half the picture, because autofictions are not written solely for writers, but for readers too.

What I haven’t attempted to examine yet is the relationship between an author’s search for and encounter with the self and their choice to do so with and through an audience.

My readings of Tea and Cusk have focused on why they turned to autofiction to confront their writing selves, not why such confrontations should be and are interesting to a reader. If the exploration, or even reconciliation, of what it means to be a writing self was all that mattered, perhaps these texts *should* be intimate paratexts, written in private notebooks and kept locked away in drawers. Authors like Tea and Cusk, however, seem compelled to do more than just explore these selves; they're also driven to communicate and engage *as* those selves with others. And, perhaps more importantly, others seem keen to receive such communications.

To understand the relationship between authors and readers of autofiction, I've found it helpful to turn to translation studies and particularly Stéphanie Panichelli-Batalla's (2015) work on autofiction as 'fictional metaphorical self-translation'. In some ways, any kind of life-writing might be considered a form of translating oneself into text, but Panichelli-Batalla argues there are specific overlaps between the motivations of and issues faced by authors of autofiction and those that choose to translate their works from one language to another (29). She sees authors turning to both for similar reasons: wanting to reach a wider audience, fear of misrepresentation, wanting to make political or ideological statements, and standing up to the silencing of censorship or exile (32). Drawing on Genette's (1982) description of autofiction as "fictionalization of the self" (293) and Rita Wilson's (2009) work on translation and autobiography, in which she explores the latter as a "metaphorical extension" of the act of translation (186),³² Panichelli-Batalla (2015) urges us to see autofiction as the simultaneous acts of "translating oneself to oneself and oneself to others" (33). I will examine these points more fully in relation to Meena Kandasamy's works later in this chapter, but for

³² Interestingly, Wilson (2009) also explores themes of doubling in autobiographical and self-translated works. Like me, she notes the double's use to communicate the division between "the 'I' that writes and the 'I' that lives", but also explores how it highlights the even deeper splits and multiplications within bilingual and migrated writing selves (186-197). Coates (1998), too, makes an argument that a preoccupation with the double often stems from an author's suspension between languages and cultures (2-3). The suspension between reality and fiction, though, can prove equally as strong a prompt.

now want to highlight that this simultaneity and the intimate connection between self-discovery and self-presentation is yet another element of the genre's duality and, I think, key to understanding its impact on both writers and readers. In considering what the author of autofiction is trying to translate – the splitting of the self, the sense of alienation from their 'image' as author, the threat of displacement and the sometimes violent contestation of their own identity – we see that a successful fictional metaphorical self-translation has the potential to create as big a disturbance and just as uncanny an encounter for the reader as it does for the writer.

Meena Kandasamy's Public Portraits of the Self

In its preface, Kandasamy (2019) calls her third book, *Exquisite Cadavers*, an “experiment” an “ouliipo” and a “history of struggle” (2). She doesn't call it autofiction and, for reasons that will become clear, I respect her right to choose the genre of her work. However, I want to include it in this study because of the ways it sheds light on the difficulties of both being and trying to communicate a writing self. Read in conjunction with her second and definitively autofictional novel, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife* (2017), it challenges readers and critics to reassess their assumptions about works of both fact and fiction, and highlights the particular problems facing women writers of colour working in these liminal genres.

When I Hit You is the story of a young, unnamed Tamil writer struggling to survive the first weeks of a physically and emotionally abusive marriage. Her husband moves her to Mangalore, away from her family and the language she speaks, and begins to take control of all parts of her life. He restricts her internet usage and replies to emails on her behalf before deleting all her correspondences and changing her passwords so she has no hope of recovering them. As a freelancer, this is catastrophic: she has no contacts, no way of finding

or accepting work, and no means to reach the outside world. Stuck in the three rooms of their home, where he repeatedly rapes her and injures them both in attempts at manipulation, she and the reader begin to wonder what makes a writer. Can you still be one when the tools of writing are taken from you? For the unnamed narrator to survive, the answer has to be yes. She writes letters to imaginary lovers then deletes them before her husband gets home, manages to type and submit an article on a mobile phone while hidden in the bathroom visiting his family, and writes in her head when she can do so nowhere else.

Running through this book is the question of story and what it means to live inside one. Through the young wife's struggle to narrate herself out of her ordeal, Kandasamy asks us to consider how stories are told, manipulated, passed on and owned, and how the self is shaped by the stories it writes, rewrites and refuses. It is story and imagination that ultimately save the narrator. Once she can picture a future-self crafting her present into narrative, she understands she's going to survive:

I am thinking of how I am someday going to be writing all this out and I am conscious that I am thinking about this and not about the moment, and I know that I have already escaped the present and that gives me hope, I just have to wait for this to end and I can write again, and I know that because I am going to be writing about this, I know that this is going to end. (87-88)

The narrator has been exploring and testing her multiplicity throughout, slipping into the second and third person and even imagining her life as "a movie that will never be made and never hit the screen", complete with pre-prepared publicity material (22). Here, we see that sense of multiplicity solidify into a doppelgänger (although interestingly one that embodies the possibility of hope and survival rather than Rank's fear and death). The passages describing the narrator's abuse are, unsurprisingly, difficult to read, but there's relief for the reader as well as the character in her recognition of the division between present and future, wife and writer. As readers, we too "know that this is going to end" because it's the future-

writer rather than the present-wife that's written the text we're reading. Drawing attention to this distances both us and the narrator from the version of herself experiencing these things in the moment. She's found cognitive separation and, through that, a form of carnal separation as well. The 'real', past self who really received "stinging slaps" (87) and whippings from power cords, leather belts and twisted electrical cables (154) no longer exists except in this narrated and contained other.

The details of Kandasamy's brief, abusive marriage are not hard to find. She wrote about it for an Indian news magazine (Kandasamy 2012), has spoken in interviews about her experiences of going to the police (Melia 2017; Self 2019), and her ex-husband has made accusations against her in the press (OpIndia 2020). The referentiality of this book, however, is not the point, as is made clear in the final lines:

I am the woman who has tried to shield herself from the pain of the first-person singular [...] I am the woman who stands in place of the woman who loathes to enter this story [...] I am the woman sheltered within words, the one distanced into a movie running in her mind, the one asked to bear the beatings, the one who endures everything until something snaps so that fate can escape her. I am the woman conjured up to take on the life of a woman afraid of facing her own reality. (Kandasamy 2017, 248)

Kandasamy's autofictional 'I', even when spoken by the narrative's future-writer rather than past-wife, is thus explicitly shown to be another double—a self she has separated from herself in order to process and explain what happened to her and how she came to be the writer she is. The subtitle's nod to Joyce positions the novel as *Künstlerroman* as well as autofiction, but also suggests the process of metaphorical self-translation is internal as well as external. For the character within the marriage, the act of storytelling, even when limited to her mind, is the first step in self-translating her way from abused wife to survivor, which will eventually lead her to become the writer fictionally metaphorically self-translating these experiences for an audience. The novel is thus less about the abusive marriage at its core than

about the relationship between living and writing, and about the mirrored and multiplied selves one encounters when experience feels like material and your material is experience.

The penultimate chapter ends with a prophetic quote on this topic from the husband:

Everything is writing material for you, isn't it? This marriage, this love, this dream I'm trying to build for the both of us.

Tomorrow, you'll be making a book out of it. There will be interviews and readings. You'll travel, pose for photographs, jumping across cities, jet-setting around the country, going to bed with any man you fancy that night. The writer. The free woman. (241; original emphasis)

Said at the time in anger but reclaimed by the wife as epitaph, this can't help but feel victorious. The reader knows that Kandasamy has indeed “made a book out of it”, so we hope both she and the character have also been able to travel, pose for photographs, jet-set around the country and take their pick of lovers. We hope they are both now writers and free women.

Unfortunately, reality failed in its half of this autofictional bargain. What Kandasamy discovered on publication was that her freedom as a writer has limits. Despite her insistence that *When I Hit You* is a novel and a work of autofiction, critics and reviewers repeatedly referred to it as memoir, “memoiristic narrative” (Faleiro 2017) or “memoir-like” (Goyal 2017). In the Preface to *Exquisite Cadavers*, Kandasamy (2019) writes:

I was [...] clear, as an artist, that the book was constructed as a novel, a work of auto-fiction. [...] In working towards and writing (what I explicitly call) a novel, the artist in me was defining an experience for an audience. By describing it, offhandedly and repeatedly as a memoir, some reviewers were side-stepping the entire artistic edifice on which the work stood, and were instead solely defining me by my experience: raped Indian woman, beaten-up wife. [...] I was not even given the autonomy of deciding the genre to which the book I had spent years writing, belonged. (1-2)

Elsewhere, she's pointed to the specific double-standard of white male writers such as Knausgaard being allowed to define their own work (Lea et al. 2019). Though the critical response was different, it's easy to see parallels with Cusk's experiences and imagine that

what Kandasamy faced in this moment was a malfunctioning of her chosen technology. The source of that malfunction was similarly located in misogyny and sexism, but for Kandasamy also compounded by their intersections with racism. Like Cusk, her next work was devised as a response to this experience and, as such, might be seen as another example of ‘writing after the trauma of writing’, as well as, I think, another response to Woolf’s call for a new, female ‘vehicle’.

Kandasamy (2019) tells us she set out,

to write a novel based on a story as removed from my own as possible.
A story where each influence, each linchpin behind every freewheeling
plot-turn, would be referenced and documented. (2)

Exquisite Cadavers contains two parallel narratives physically split into columns on either side of the page.³³ The main, fictional narrative follows a young couple in London, Maya and Karim, as they navigate their relationship and the world around them. Karim is a student filmmaker from Tunisia, struggling against the prejudices and assumptions of his tutors to make the art he wants to make. Maya is a light-skinned, mixed-race Londoner racked with anxiety and abandonment issues. They argue constantly, but present a united performance against external aggressions. Their relationship troubles feel claustrophobic and circular, contained within their flat and observed only by the silent objects of domesticity, but the wider political backdrop is ever-present and pulls into catastrophic focus when Karim’s brother is arrested in Tunis. The short, poetic narrative offers little sense of closure, but is deeply unsettling, ending with Maya, now pregnant, waiting alone for news and wondering over and over: “What’s the worst that could happen?” (95-99).

In the margins of this tale, in smaller font, we find a first-person account of Kandasamy’s life and process while writing Karim and Maya’s story. She charts her inspirations and research for the book alongside scenes from her own marriage. Following the

³³ She derived inspiration for this structure from Jacques Derrida's (1990) *Glas*.

reception of *When I Hit You*, she tells us she's determined to make her next characters wholly fictional. She extracts Karim from a short film she sees in an art gallery (4) and tries to make Maya "relatable" to British readers by building a composite "of every Englishwoman I see [...] Amy Sarah Claire Naomi Gill Lucy Allison and god yes god Kate" (72). Sometimes the marginal notes feel like narrative in their own right, sprawling over pages with little or only tangential links to the fictional story. Other times, the threads connecting them are fully visible. Kandasamy talks about her father when inventing Maya's (18-27), notes the horror and absurdity of the Prevent programme at her child's prospective nursery just after Karim has come up against it (41-45), and watches archived documentaries on mixed-race marriages in Britain while he and Maya face increasing Islamophobia (49-56). Kandasamy is explicit about her inspirations, as well as her trials and errors with these characters. What feels fluid and symbolic within the fiction is often rendered blunt and random by its author's confessional reflections, such as when she admits finding the documentaries via Google's 'I'm feeling lucky' option (49) or making Maya pregnant only because she is and needs a point of connection with her character (73).

As the title suggests, Kandasamy was influenced by the Surrealist game of consequences in which images or words are composed in secret by various collaborators, then revealed together as a humorous or monstrous whole. In these divided pages, Kandasamy attempts to present herself to us in parts, dissecting art from life, the political from the personal, the writer from the written. In the preface, she says, "I hoped to confine myself to the margins and allow the story to progress purely in tandem with the ideas and templates I had chosen" (2). Having failed to effectively communicate the complicated comingling of her divided and duplicated selves in *When I Hit You*, she opts here for division only. From the outset, however, she seems aware that this might not be possible, and challenges the reader to judge: "Have the margins always remained disciplined? Have they exhibited any tendency to

respect my decision to cautiously separate the fictional and the real?” (2). She posits the book as an experiment and, beautiful though it is, on this level I think it’s a failed one. Rather than neat separation, what *Exquisite Cadavers* most illustrates is the messy blurring of fiction and reality. Early on, Kandasamy’s partner asks of her story:

Is it about us?

No.

Is it based on us?

No. Maybe.

...Is it political?

No, love. It is very domestic. (5)

The combination of certainty and ambiguity, truth and lie in this exchange prepares us for the slips we are to encounter throughout. The physically split layout is an effective tool for communicating the divided self, but the most interesting moments are when that self bleeds horizontally across the page. For example, despite Kandasamy’s claims that Maya is in no way her, at one point we discover Kandasamy once played a character called Maya in a film—a character the director “could not say for sure [...] was real or a figment of the hero’s imagination” (34). This information is offered without commentary and the reader is left to guess whether this was a conscious or unconscious namesake.³⁴ Details like this allow us to glimpse the connections between ontological layers and make us question the rigidity of the gap between the columns. Even trying this hard, Kandasamy cannot fully erase herself from Karim and Maya’s narrative, and the overall impression the book offers is that the personal and the artistic are as intricately enmeshed as the personal and the political.

Panichelli-Batalla (2015) claims “What the author of an autofictive self-translation wants is to be recognized in his work of fiction, as well as to be able to hide behind it if necessary” (41). She links this to Winnicott’s work on communication, which I’ve touched

³⁴ Kandasamy also fails to comment on the fact that Maya and Karim share and split her initials, a detail that’s unlikely to have been accidental so through omission casts further doubt on her marginal claims.

on already. Winnicott ([1963] 2011) sees both the child and the artist playing “a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which *it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found*” (191; original emphasis). While for the child this is part of healthy development, in the artist Winnicott sees this “inherent dilemma” as the reason she must continue to create (137). Both desires cannot be satisfied at once, so she can never come to the end of her task. I’m not sure I fully agree with Panichelli-Batalla that the desire to both hide and be found is *more* present in authors of autofiction than those of other genres, but I do think autofiction has a unique way of highlighting and addressing this dilemma. The signposts of autofictionality create a kind of peek-a-boo, telling us that the writer is here but also not here, that the character we’re reading is a self but also an Other. The reader is thus invited into the game of hide-and-seek and presented with a mirrored dilemma: one that asks us to consider whether it might equally be *joy to have to search but disaster not to find*.

This only works, however, if writer and reader are in agreement about the mode of reading required for the genre; that is, if the reader agrees to play the game. Kandasamy has said that she was initially reluctant to write about her marriage, understanding that young female writers of colour are too often seen as “people who can only write our stories [...] the story of what happened to us” (Winchester 2020, np). Upon *When I Hit You*’s publication, this was indeed how she was seen. By critics who refused to engage with her autofictional game, she was recognised as an abused Indian woman, but not as an artist. In the margins of *Exquisite Cadavers*, she explains how disastrous this was:

The reception reinforced my perception that, to a Western audience, writers like me are interesting because

- we are from a place where horrible things happen, or,
- horrible things have happened to us, or,
- a combination of the above.

No one discusses process with us.

No one discusses our work in the framework of the novel as an evolving form.

No one treats us as writers, only diarists who survived. (Kandasamy 2019, 10)

By explicitly dividing her writing self this time, Kandasamy forces her reader to recognise the labour of art-making and thus the artist that she is.

Unlike *When I Hit You*, *Exquisite Cadavers* offers the reader little choice but to engage with her game. Kandasamy provides no instructions for how to read the book, leaving us to decide whether to approach the two texts one-by-one or to switch back and forth. (And, if we do the latter, should it be done chapter-by-chapter, paragraph-by-paragraph, sentence-by-sentence?) These options force us to be active readers and to accept at least some responsibility for the indeterminate relationship between truth and fiction on its pages. In Chapter 1, I discussed the *tourniquet* or revolving door as a fruitful metaphor for understanding what autofiction asks of a reader. Many readers of *When I Hit You* refused to remain inside Kandasamy's *tourniquet* and read it purely and passively as memoir. With *Exquisite Cadavers*, she once again constructs a revolving door, but this time leaves the reader to decide whether or not it spins. It's in our power, if we want to, to immediately take an exit and read only one of the texts (the real or the imagined), or to read them consecutively but independently, but to do so we have to make an active choice. If we choose to read both texts (as I assume most readers do) and to look for the connections between them, this is equally active and results in us having ourselves to blame for the uncanniness and discomfort (as well as the pleasures) of remaining inside the *tourniquet*.

What is impressive, I think, is not just how effective this readerly game is within the pages of *Exquisite Cadavers*, but how, like Cusk, Kandasamy has used this text to modify her author-function and force a rereading of *When I Hit You*. In translation studies, Brian Fitch (1988) points to the "very particular" relationship between the self-translation and its source-

text (78). Comparing Samuel Beckett’s French and English texts, he notes that rather than just a “recasting” or reproduction, the self-translation can be seen as a continuation of the writer’s original creative process (93). It comes to “complete” the first text, thus undermining its status as independent and ‘original’ and rendering them both “*variants of something that enjoys no tangible textual existence but whose existence is none the less implicit in their very co-existence*” (135; original emphasis). Once produced, neither of these variants can exist fully without the other, so a liminal – or what Marilyn Gaddis Rose (1997, 7-8) terms “interliminal” – space is created between the two. For Gaddis Rose, this is the “space we think in” and rich and important for literary criticism, but it can only be accessed by bilingual readers able to stereoscopically read both texts (53). In the case of autofiction as fictional metaphorical self-translation, the source-text is the author’s life or memories, so stereoscopic reading is impossible.³⁵ *When I Hit You*, as fictional metaphorical self-translation of Kandasamy’s marriage, thus opened an interliminal space inaccessible to her readers. *When I Hit You*, however, might also be seen as the source-text for *Exquisite Cadavers* (which, though not autofiction, is I think a form of *re*-self-translation and, as such, one of Fitch’s ‘variants’). In arguing for bilingual texts to be studied side-by-side, Fitch (1988) concludes:

[...]if the two original texts are too similar to be considered separate works and yet too different for each to be substitutable for the other, they *have* to be brought together in some way so that they can form a unified and coherent aesthetic experience for their reader[...] (228-29)

With *Exquisite Cadavers*, Kandasamy does bring together the two connected but separate texts on its pages to form a “unified and coherent aesthetic experience”, but she also more subtly brings together and unifies her two separate books. Unusually for fictional metaphorical self-translation, the interliminal space between *Exquisite Cadavers* and *When I Hit You* is accessible to a reader (by stereoscopically reading both), and it’s this rare, rich

³⁵ Except perhaps for the author herself, although meaningful stereoscopic reading would depend on her ability to know and understand herself, which as discussed in Chapter 2 is likely impossible.

interliminal space rather than either of the books individually that offers the most comprehensive account of Kandasamy's writing self.

*

I am still, however, skirting around the issue of *why* authors like Kandasamy, Cusk and Tea feel so compelled to offer a public account of these selves, as well as the linked issue of why readers should (and hopefully do) care. Writing autofiction is, I know from experience, a powerful and uncanny activity and one that no doubt would have worth as intimate paratext.³⁶ However, it's the triangular relationship between writer, reader and text that I believe generates autofiction's true significance. For Wilson (2009), "the act of self-translating can be seen as a manifestation of the essential human desire for recognition; a vital urge to be heard and understood" (191). This, of course, requires someone to be there to hear and understand. Dix (2017) draws on career counsellors Peter McIlveen and Wendy Patton's concept of the 'dialogical self', which posits the idea that the self is neither fixed nor wholly internal, but "generated dialogically with others in a number of different varied and changing situations" (39). An individual's sense of self is built dialogically over time through the continuous sum-total of the interactions they have with everyone they come into contact with. Dix highlights that from a constructivist psychological perspective, which sees a person's understanding of exterior reality "created psychologically at the intra-individual level", neither the interactions nor those they're interacting with have to be 'real'; they can impact the constitution of the self just by being "imagined, remembered [...] thought-up [...] or even manifestations of dreams and the unconscious" (ibid). For the writer, this means that their sense of self is subject to manipulation by the dialogical relationships they have with both

³⁶ In fact, Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (1998) suggest dividing the field of creative writing for personal development into three sub-categories based on aim: "'Literary' or product-oriented work", "'Writerly' or process-oriented work", and "Therapeutic work incorporating writing and oriented around the textuality of the self" (201). Only the first of these is overtly intended for a reader, so autofiction produced through the second or third would, I assume, be intimate paratext.

their characters and their imagined or intended readers. The self that authors of autofiction are trying to communicate is thus created, at least in part, by and through the reader they're trying to communicate with. This is interesting to consider in relation to the IA, where I've so far only imagined the relationship between encoding and decoding as sequential rather than circular or symbiotic. It also, I think, resonates with Judith Butler's (2001) argument that "we cannot exist without addressing the Other and without being addressed by the Other" (25). Like Wilson, Butler also sees the autobiographical act stemming from the desire for recognition but says it's a desire that can never be satisfied. For Butler, narrative coherence is suspect and the attempt to fully account for oneself will always end in failure because of limits to the knowability of the self (34). Though unsatisfiable, Butler sees that this desire for recognition has an "obligation to keep itself alive as desire" (28), and it does this through transference and countertransference with the Other. Narrating the self to an Other thus involves "rebuild[ing] the story of one's life" while also "enact[ing] what cannot be narrated, and [...] enact[ing] the unconscious as it is relived in the scene of address" (33). In these chapters I've examined how autofiction creates a scene of address between the writer and their self-as-Other, but just as important and potentially just as unsettling is the one between the writer and reader-as-Other. The transference that occurs within this address opens a holding environment for the split, divided, unknowable self the writer so struggles to reconcile. And, in return, I think the reader is offered a version of the same: a space to hold and explore their own multiplicity, contradictions, doublings and divisions.³⁷

Wilson (2009) sees in autobiographical and self-translated texts that:

the duplications, echoes, recyclings, repetitions, and re-enactments are all geared towards the opening up of the original in order to move

³⁷ I haven't come across much research exploring this, but I believe it's an important area for future study. In interviewing Claire-Louise Bennett, Adam Biles (2021) touched saliently on the topic, describing the "curious kind of way [both Bennett and Knausgaard's works] plunge me back into my own memories" and suggesting to Bennett that "in excavating your memories, your past, you were sort of allowing me to do the same" (np).

beyond it, breaking down the margins and borders of contexts and thus questioning the status of text, context, reader, and author. (190)

In inviting us to play their games, I believe Kandasamy, Cusk and Tea are attempting the same opening-up-in-order-to-move-beyond. They share and question the discomfort and strangeness of their creative selfhoods, but in doing so also ask us to consider and question our own. By requiring us to engage actively with their texts, they encourage us to examine the *reading self* as well as the writing self. Like writers, readers also exist with and in stories, and the liminal landscape of autofiction offers a rare glimpse, I think, of how 'lost' between fiction and reality we all already are. If we are willing to do the work to make them function, autofictional texts reach into our world and force us to reconsider our understanding of the relationships between fiction and life, division and cohesion, self and Other.

Chapter 6: *My Self as/and the Other*

Maybe the World Will End So We Won't Have To (hereafter *Maybe...*) is on submission as I begin this final chapter. Three editors have rejected it, twelve are still to respond. “Be patient,” my agent says, “things are glacial at the moment.” I’m finding it particularly hard to be patient about this book, however. At the beginning of this degree, I wrote a different novel, another autofiction which was more or less the revenge tragedy Harry contemplates and dismisses in Chapter 1. At the time, it felt important to work on both books simultaneously, to figure out what belonged here and what there. Consciously or unconsciously, I was trying to separate my intellectual autofictional drives from my personal ones; I was trying to divide my already divided self and cordon off the part of me that was still – tediously, I felt – committed to ‘writing after trauma’. I wrote and edited that novel through various lockdowns and did eventually feel I’d captured something true to myself within it, but I couldn’t get it to work as a narrative. It was angry and confused, and I couldn’t achieve enough distance from the material. My supervisor suggested I take it one way, an editor another, my agent another still. Eventually, my agent rejected it and I buried it in my Dropbox. Though I’d failed to split myself between two books, once I’d abandoned that one, this one began to work. I didn’t realise until I’d written the Acknowledgements that *Maybe...* is as much ‘writing after *failing* to write’ as it is ‘writing after writing’. And, I suppose, until now, I didn’t fully realise how much of writing *is* failing. In that way at least, *Maybe...* feels like a success. Through its divisions, play and refusal to settle on a single ontology, I do feel the text contains, as best it can, the texts it once was and might have been. And, as such, it does what I set out to do: bring my various identities and personas closer together and communicate, as best I can, some of what *I* experience as a writing self. This out-of-character confidence brings a new wave of anxiety, however. Partly about being judged academically,

but mostly through the knowledge that it will break my heart if this novel doesn't find a publisher. (Would it be too dramatic – too Doubrovskian – to suggest it will break me as a writer?) This book needs to be an object in the world for the project of it to work. Like Tea's, Cusk's and Kandasamy's, this text needs a reader to activate its game.

In discussing how to write about live theatre and performance, Peggy Phelan (1997) critiques the desire to document and represent a performative event as trying to preserve “an illustrated corpse” (3). For Phelan, because performative events are “instances of enactments predicated on their own disappearance”, attempts to describe them using direct signification fail to capture either the physical bodily reality of live performance or its relationship to death and loss (2, 11). Drawing on Jacques Merleau-Ponty's (1968) questioning of the language of philosophy and how to “make it equal to what philosophy wishes [...] to say” (102-3), she puts forward a methodology of ‘performative writing’ which dispenses with the illusion of authenticity and the desire to describe and preserve, and instead attempts “to enact and mimic the losses that beat away within [the original performance]” (Phelan 1997, 12). She notes that this involves invoking “critical fictions and factual phantasms”, “co-mingling” and a type of mimicry that ends up destroying “what it most wants to save” (3, 12). These, I think, might also be ways of describing autofiction. If one supplants performative events for personal memory, or life lived, then memoir becomes the ‘illustrated corpse’, attempting to faithfully preserve the past but failing to capture either the bodily reality of or the loss inherent in being a self that must live via a series of instantly lost moments. Autofiction, on the other hand, like Phelan's ‘performative writing’, breathes new life into what has disappeared by co-mingling fact with fiction. It may destroy the fully referential truth, but it does so to save the self and to *create* something else—something more equal to what it wishes to say.

Although a proponent of ‘orthodox’ autofiction containing no fiction except “the work on language”, Catherine Cusset (2012) makes a similar claim that memoir is ‘constative’ – “tell[ing] the reader what happened” – while autofiction is ‘performative’ – “bring[ing] the reader *inside* what happened” (1-4; original emphasis). Jacob White (2023), who teaches and writes from the assumption that none of us can ever truly know who we are so we all spend our lives “synthesising the factual and fictitious into its own coherent story”, also sees that autofictions have a “performative charge” and identifies that this comes from the fact they “acknowledge themselves as *artifacts of experience* rather than simply *narratives of experience*” (4-6; my emphasis).

A key feature of the artefactual, performative, Frankenstein’s monster-like creature we create when writing autofiction – which following Kandasamy we might consider an ‘exquisite’ rather than merely illustrated corpse – is that it not only puts the self on the page in a live, unpredictable way, but in doing so it opens an equally live and unpredictable relationship between that self and the Other—its audience. My desire for *Maybe...* to find an audience is acute but not uncomplicated. In *The Ethics of Storytelling*, Hanna Meretoja (2018) makes a case that all narratives have a “(per)formative character” in that they help construct, shape and transform our lived reality (47-48), but also acknowledges that there are two sides of narrative: one that’s “inextricably intertwined *with* the process of experiencing” and another that aims to communicate a retrospective interpretation *of* experience (61; my emphasis). The latter is still performative in Meretoja’s eyes because it can shape later experiences, but I’d argue that, because it maintains a distinct difference between narrative and experience, this is closer to Phelan’s ‘illustrated corpse’. The live performativity of autofiction and the exuberance with which it so fully intertwines life and art, attempts, I think, to collapse the difference between narrative and experience. This collapse, however, brings real-world risk. By placing our readers inside a *tourniquet*, we ask for their active

participation in the performance of the text and thus create a kind of continuous present for the exchange between reader and writer. Unlike the illustrated corpse, the exquisite one cannot be dismissed as relating only to the past; instead, it continues to perform each time it is activated by a reader. This means not just the work itself but also its relationship to and impact on us as authors, as well as those around us, can continue to change. Any book might be recontextualised over time, of course, but the ongoing performative exchange we initiate through these works leaves more room for them to modify our names as authors and even, sometimes, our flesh-and-blood selves.

So why would we want to create a text with a life of its own like this? I've already explored the overlaps seen in psychoanalysis between creativity, play and mental illness, and wondered if those of us driven to mingle fiction and non-fiction in the search for the self have a harder time enduring the external world than others. In performance studies, too, Richard Schechner (2006) notes that 'play' is not always as innocuous or innocent as it first appears. His work on "deep play" and "dark play" examines what motivates individuals to take part in games where the potential rewards of 'winning' are far outweighed by the risks and costs of losing (118-19). As touched on within *Maybe...*, I believe authors of autofiction often engage in deep and dark play, which not only brings into question their own rationality, but also the ethics of the genre.

So far, I've considered only one type of other: the unknown reader. The reader, however, is not always a stranger trying to decode us from our words alone. Some readers know us external to our text(s), and as Winnicott ([1971] 2005) intimates, "there are certain disadvantages" to this (88).³⁸ The most obvious disadvantage is the risk of being turned into material. In all types of life writing, representing others on the page poses ethical questions,

³⁸ There can also be certain disadvantages for the writer in having readers that know us, but given we're the ones choosing to expose ourselves in this way, the ethical implications are lesser.

but dragging others into our deep and dark play, activating our interpretations of *their* selves in a live, performative manner, and exposing them to our unknown readers' decodings is perhaps the most intrusive thing a writer can do.

Writing this novel as part of a PhD has meant I've had to consider its ethics from the outset and that I've worked hard to find a way to conduct this research in as ethical a manner as possible. It has not, however, assuaged my fear that autofiction may itself be an unethical practice, and it cannot exempt me from the consequences of dragging others into my games. Just as urgent as my desire to find a publisher, then, is a question that's haunted me throughout: *can authors like me be forgiven?* In search of an answer, I'd like to confront three of autofiction's most controversial case studies.

Chris Kraus

Kraus's (2016) *I Love Dick* follows a character called Chris Kraus as she falls into an emotional and intellectual obsession with the eponymous Dick, whom she met only briefly at a dinner party. The novel reads as a deeply personal exploration of the links between gender, sexuality, academia, art and creativity, but caused controversy upon publication (and again when it found new readership) specifically because of its performative interactions with the real world. The titular 'Dick' was quickly identified within the press as cultural theorist Dick Hebdige, who objected to his representation and filed a cease-and-desist order against Kraus. Hebdige called the book "despicable" and criticised Kraus for her and its intrusion into his life (Zembla 1997, 20). These real-life events play neatly into the themes of the book and especially the character Chris's musings about "Who gets to speak, and why" (Kraus 2016, 148). Its critics question why Kraus chose to use Hebdige's real name

and whether it's fair to draw another person into one's art like this. I don't know the answer to these questions, but I do think its popularity and cult-like status are inextricably linked to the depth of the game Kraus plays. If the object of the character's obsession was himself fictional, Kraus's deliberate fictionalisations and impositions would make much less effective statements about gender and art.

Karl Ove Knausgaard

Knausgaard's six-volume autofictional series portrays in minute detail the intimacies of his and those around him's lives. The final volume, *The End*, records some of the consequences of writing and publishing the first books, including his wife accusing him of "performing a character assassination on her" (Knausgaard 2018, 965) and his uncle calling the first book "verbal rape" (88) and threatening to sue. Towards the end, Knausgaard muses:

No one has the right to inflict injury on another person. Sitting in front of the screen in the computer games bunker, I was afraid, desperate and sorry, but I also knew these feelings would disappear when I wrote [...] because in the written 'I' the social 'we' disappeared and the 'I' was free. It was only when I got up and left my desk that the social 'we' returned and I was able to feel ashamed at what I had written and thought, with varying degrees of intensity, according to how deeply I was in the writing process. (1009)

This reads to me as a kind of 'sorry, but not sorry.' Knausgaard acknowledges the ethical failings of the books, but only as he continues to write them. On a literary level, this is fascinating, but on a moral one, it feels deeply problematic.

Serge Doubrovsky

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, is Doubrovsky's (1989) *Le Livre brisé*, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. Doubrovsky began this book about his marriage to his wife Ilse with her consent and cooperation. As he wrote, he offered her chapters to read and critique, then incorporated her critiques into the book. At one point, however, while he was in New York and she was in Paris, he sent her chapters describing her abortions and miscarriages, her alcoholism, and their physical fights. Ilse was alone when she received and presumably read these chapters and, tragically, the next day she was found dead. She's said to have been taking anti-depressants and to have been drinking, but no conclusion was reached over whether her death was suicide or an accident. The link between Doubrovsky's chapters and his wife's death won't ever be fully known, but Doubrovsky continued writing and used the second half of the book to explore his guilt. In 'The Limits of Autofiction', Catherine Cusset (2012) translates:

I am a piece of shit. This last judgement crushes me, I collapse,
YOU DIDN'T PROTECT YOUR WIFE FROM HERSELF,
truth suddenly terrifies me. [...] She received the writer's hand
smack in her face. [...] My ink poisoned her, the game of truth is
sometimes fatal. (11)

Like Knausgaard, he acknowledges the problems with what he's done but only as he continues to do it, and in later works he concludes that a book and literature in general matter more than the means by which they come about. I'm troubled by this and, like Cusset, left wondering "about that uneasy feeling that the reader experiences when the writer is in self-denial or asks the reader to absolve him" (13).

I mentioned previously that Booth fails to identify whose morality he's referring to when discussing cleansing and the IA, and I think this is a critical question of artistic production in general. Because the writing self is a divided, multiplied self, it inevitably has divided and multiplied loyalties. As Knausgaard identifies, there's often a key conflict between the 'I' that writes and the social 'we' that must live in the world. What's best for a work of art is not necessarily what's best for an FBP or for those around her. So how should we judge Knausgaard, Kraus and Doubrovsky's books—on their literary or ethical merits? Does the fact that they're published as fiction make things better or worse? Were the risks they took and the pain they inflicted worth it for the light they shed on the writing mind? Even if they were, can a genre built on these foundations ever be considered ethical?

Weighed against these case studies, it's tempting to see Tea's project of writing a memoir in which everything is fiction except herself as a manual for the only ethical approach to autofiction, if not life writing in general. However, it's one even her own character couldn't follow. The original divergence between 'strict' and 'general' autofictions has, I think, already proven that directives about what and how much should be fictionalised fail. This is a fluid, ambiguous and experimental genre and, as such, can no more be contained by rules or guidelines than by fixed definition.³⁹ However, writing about others always poses a dilemma between an author's right to free expression and other people's rights to privacy and I don't think experimentation exempts authors of autofiction from considering this.

Over the course of this project, confronting the ethics of my practice has *become* much of that practice. I didn't set out to write a novel about the ethics of co-opting my partner's, my ex's and my family's lives into a story about my own, but, like Tea, part-way

³⁹ Even referring to autofiction as a genre, as I have been, may be too limiting. White (2023) suggests a turn towards autofiction "isn't necessarily a shift in genre [...] but a shift in stance" (6) and Lorenzo Marchese (2023) makes a case for it being "a logic of narration", which does do a better job of recognising its presence in forms other than the novel, e.g. poetry, art and photography.

through I found myself unable to continue without turning that into my subject matter. What I find interesting about Kraus, Knausgaard and Doubrovsky is that they've also each turned the ethical controversies of their texts into topics within those texts. This does, I believe, set autofiction apart from other literary scandals and areas of dubious morality.⁴⁰ In thinking about the ethics of storytelling in general, Meretoja (2018) notes:

an important distinction can be made between *naturalizing narratives*, which hide their own mediating and interpretative role, and *self-reflexive narratives*, which openly present themselves *as narratives*, that is, as selective, perspectival interpretations that can always be contested and told otherwise. (12; original emphasis)

She makes further distinction between *subsumptive* narrative practices that use naturalizing strategies for violence, appropriation and to close down critique, and *non-subsumptive* narratives that self-reflexively draw attention to their own limitations so as to resist and challenge simple understandings and to invite wider ethical examination (112-13). The self-reflexivity of autofiction may not be enough on its own to excuse certain texts' wrongdoings, but I think it does offer an element of hope for the genre. For Meretoja, "narrative self-reflection can be a means of understanding the complexity of our responsibility as implicated subjects" (102). The writing subject is a doubly implicated subject—we're implicated, as Meretoja notes everyone is, "in what's going on in the world around us, including its structures of inequality, injustice, and violence", but also in our own representation and restructuring of these things through our works (ibid). What's key is that, in examining their writing selves, Kraus, Knausgaard and Doubrovsky committed to tell the truth about those doubly implicated selves, including the rather distasteful truth that they're willing to privilege their writing 'I' over the social 'we'. Whatever else is fictionalised, each of their books do in

⁴⁰ Such as 'hoaxes' like JT Leroy, disproved memoirs like *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (Defonseca 1997), or non-consensual family accounts like Julie Myerson's (2009) *The Lost Child*. (Although, interestingly, the latter might be considered the source-text for her autofiction *Nonfiction* (Myerson 2022), which does explicitly consider the morality of the betrayal at the heart of both books.)

fact offer a fully referential and non-subsumptive glimpse at the most monstrous and normally most hidden parts of being an author. I hope I've found kinder ways to do so in *Maybe...*, but the sheer honesty of even Kraus, Doubrovsky and Knausgaard's self-reflection might, I think, allow the autofictional endeavour to be considered ethical even if individual texts are not.⁴¹

⁴¹ I'm keen to continue exploring this elsewhere. For Meretoja (2018), narratives are neither 'good' nor 'bad', but they are essential and powerful, especially at this point in global history (304). If autofiction might be seen not just as a mode of enquiry into the writing self, but a mode of *ethical* enquiry into that self, the genre may challenge its criticisms of narcissism and prove itself vital.

Conclusion

In bringing together the IA, the author-function, doubling, self-translation theory, performance studies and psychoanalysis, I've worried about spreading myself thin in these chapters. Practice-led research, however, has always for me meant interdisciplinary research and I've found these varied fields weaving organically and inextricably throughout the project. Being a writing self is complex and, like the genre of autofiction, refuses easy or linear examination, so it seems appropriate to me that it can and indeed should be approached from several simultaneous angles.

In these chapters I have situated autofiction as a limen, or threshold, whose position betwixt and between the firmer locations of fiction and autobiography grants authors unique opportunities to both explore and communicate the divisions at the heart of the writing self. By examining Michelle Tea's personification of her own IA in *Black Wave*, Rachel Cusk's invention of a new technology to harness and modify her author-function in the *Outline* trilogy, and Meena Kandasamy's simultaneous doubling-by-division and doubling-by-duplication to self-translate (and then *re*-self-translate) herself to an audience in *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers*, I have shown how autofiction's indeterminacy between truth and fiction creates a holding space for an author's own indeterminacy between living and writing. I've also touched on the parallel holding space offered to the reader of autofiction and explored how the performativity and 'liveness' of autofiction brings real-world risks and raises key ethical questions that authors cannot ignore.

In writing *Maybe...*, I have tried to demonstrate the same arguments, but also to perform my own expansion and widening of the autofictional limen to investigate and communicate (at least some of) my writing self. Like Tea, I found this only possible via metaleptic slips between multiple narrative levels. Building a layered, Russian doll-like structure to the novel allowed me to explore how the protagonists of all three fictional levels

(Tasha, Harry, Natalie) are *not* each other but also *not not* each other, and thus to more deeply examine their identities as *not* me but also *not not* me. Each one is a double as well as a personified IA, but in also making Tasha and Harry FBPs writing their own character-IAs (Harry and Natalie respectively), and in allowing Natalie to take the FBP chair after her final showdown with Tasha, I hope to have eroded – or at least worried – the distinctions between their narrative levels as well as my own. This is one of the various ways I have tried to construct a playful but not unserious *tourniquet* for the reader and to ask them to contemplate along with me the fraught relationship between living and creating.

Throughout my research, I've been deeply struck by Dix's (2017) application of career construction theory to the analysis of literary careers. As discussed in Chapter 4, his focus is on how the 'late stage' of a novelist's career often involves a turn towards critical and meta-textual self-reflection. The 'late' category doesn't apply to my work here, but Dix's analysis has made me reflect on what did lead me to this project and autofiction in general, and I think there might be a messier, less defined argument to be made about mid- and early-career novelists also, sometimes, being thrust into a retrospective stage where they must grapple with the same questions of how to write after having written. As touched on within *Maybe...*, at the age of thirty and part-way through an MA in Creative Writing, I received a generous two-book deal with Penguin. Overnight, my actual and fantasised career trajectory was altered. A few months later, my marriage fell apart, and I found my life, too, altering. These events, happy and sad, produced simultaneous destabilisations of myself and my writing self. Professionally, I was being rewarded for the writer/person I had been, but I no longer felt like that person. I was moving into what Dix calls a different "life stage" (16) and the suddenness, strangeness and lack of choice about this move, sent me in a self-reflective, metafictional and ultimately autofictional direction. This accords with Dix's claim that "writers seek to create new forms of writing at new stages in their careers in response to a real or

perceived problem” (158) and also, I think, with my arguments about the difficulty and uncanniness of grappling with one’s own IA(s) and author-function.

What surprises me as I approach the end of it is how complete this autofictional exploration feels. I began with questions about what being a storyteller does to a person, how it changes your relationship to yourself and to others, and whether autofiction provides a space to confront and reconcile some of the complexities of the writing self. It would be absurd to suggest that having written this novel I now *know* my writing self, not least because she’s multiple and will continue multiplying. But I do now know more *about* her and about living with(in) this multiplicity. And with this knowledge I find myself, like *Maybe...*’s Tasha, ready to return to fiction...

But, of course, the ‘I’ of these critical chapters is not entirely me either, even if I have tried to use her in places to suture the scission between me and my author-function. She too is an IA, a double and a ‘second self’, separated from my flesh and blood by this text and subject to the same discomfiting relationship between the encoding and decoding processes. Meaning: this sense of closure is almost definitely another ‘story’ I am telling. As we’ve seen, however, living one’s life inside and alongside stories means that truth and fiction meld. In the thin but expandable limen between the two that autofiction allows us to play in, Doubrovsky’s “fiction of strictly real events” is no more of a contradiction than the divided selves we bring to that play. As White (2023) acknowledges, we all live between the “the factual and fictious”, so for both readers and writers autofiction requires merely “a shift in stance” (4-6). The stance we must adopt for autofiction is not particularly new, but neither is it a static one. In autofiction’s slippery, ongoing, shapeshifting development, it will I believe continue to find better and better ways to hold these multiplicities and to communicate the emotional, if not referential, truths at the heart of the writing self.

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