

Wild Ground

Wild Ground

EMILY USHER



First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of PROFILE BOOKS LTD

29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Copyright © Emily Usher, 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Freight Text by MacGuru Ltd

Designed by Barneby Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 80081 561 2

eISBN: 978 1 80081 563 6



For all the friends from those days.

1

I tell myself that the memory comes from nowhere. Not a memory exactly, but not a dream, either. More like a series of fragmented scenes, playing out behind my eyes in the space between asleep and awake. I haven't thought of it all in years. I spend most of my time trying not to think.

I am back there, in that place they sent me to. Caged within the walls of a sprawling building on the edge of a spa town known for middle-aged women in cashmere twinsets and quaint cafés that serve overpriced cream teas. Except it isn't a spa. It's a unit, intended for people like me, people with dead eyes and messed-up heads and teeth falling out of faces.

Whenever anyone asks me what my name is, I say the same thing. Chrissy. My name's Chrissy. The nurses exchange a look, pat my arm, scribble something down on their clipboards. I know it isn't my name, of course I do. But every time I look in the mirror it's her I see. My mam. And then, inevitably, I lose it, lift up my fist, smash it against the woman staring back at me. The mirror doesn't crack, Chrissy just stays there, mocking us both. So I fling myself at her again, fling anything I can find, until eventually there are arms on mine, lifting me up, out, down, sinking a sedative into my skin.

The memory shifts so that I am in the common room, sitting in a semicircle with the other inmates. Except they don't call us

that. 'Service Users' is the term they use, as if we have any say in being there. Some look near enough normal, like they might not seem out of place ordering a scone and an Earl Grey only a stone's throw from where we're all locked up. Others are in a bad way, their features swollen, their skin sallow, ravaged by the life they've led.

The telly is on, as it always is. We stare at the screen, but I am the only one watching it. A documentary about a rainforest, far, far away, plants of every size and colour.

You know, I say out loud to no one in particular, a quarter of all medicines start off in the rainforest.

No one says anything back, although a few shift uncomfortably in their seats, cast nervous glances my way. Someone behind me clears their throat.

Almost every drug on this earth comes out the ground.

All right, Jennifer, the nurse sighs. Quieten down, please.

I ignore him, set my attention on the lass sitting to my left. She can't be much older than me, her skin grey, the inside of her elbows covered in tracks that she doesn't bother to hide. It's a seed, I say, nodding at the marks. It starts with a seed.

She edges away from me, folds her arms over her chest. I smile to myself, turn back to the telly, watching a utopia of reds and yellows and blues unfurl on the screen, soaring trees and mad fauna.

Papaver somniferum. The flower of joy.

The lass looks up at me coldly. What yer goin on about, yer crank?

Poppies, that's all they are. Same flower everyone sticks on as a paper pin fer Remembrance Day. When the petals fall away, I say – lifting my hands in the air and then letting them float down to my lap – they leave behind a pod, and inside it there's a black, sticky gum.

That's enough, Jennifer. The nurse presses a hand firmly on my shoulder. My eyes move back to the screen, but still I am talking, remembering.

And they take that and they mix it up, mix it with all sorts of

chemicals and shit, I carry on, shaking the hand off, addressing the room now. Sell it on and then sell it on again, until eventually it reaches us lot, people like us, who've got nowt else to live fer.

The nurse moves around to my side of the sofa, grips me hard by the elbow. I try to pull away, but another one has joined him now, dragging me to my feet.

See, they say green is one thing, I call over my shoulder as the two of them lead me out of the room by force. They say it's white and brown and all that other shit that'll put you in t'ground. But it's bullshit, see? It's none of them things. What hurts is *people*. People you love, you know what I'm sayin? They're the ones that can mess you up. They're the ones that will ruin. Your. Life.

I open my eyes with a start, my lungs empty, my mind swirling in a terror thick as tar. Squeezing my hands between my knees, I begin to count. To ten at first. One hundred, one thousand. I count the movements of each of my limbs as I climb out of bed, count the steps to the bathroom, the turn of the shower tap, the cracks in the tiles on the wall. The tip of my tongue runs along the surface of each of my teeth, counting, counting. Tallying and calculating, filling my head with nothingness.

That same day, I see Denz again.

2

I don't recognise him at first. Or perhaps that's not quite right. Perhaps it's more that I hope he is someone else. He hovers in the doorway of the caff, watching the blood drain from my face. The familiarity of his outline turns me to stone. The broadness of his shoulders, the thick neck. The scar under his eye that cuts across the dark plane of his right cheekbone. Danny used to think it was the shit, that scar.

Minutes pass, or maybe just a split second. Fionnoula must have been talking to me because the next thing I know, she's there in my ear.

Jen. Je-e-en? Are you still with us, love?

I steady myself on the counter, clear my throat. Sorry, Fi, what was that?

Denz is walking towards me, although I can't bring myself to meet his gaze again. Instead I act as though he's no one, except we both know it's too late to play that game. It's only when I take over the tea he ordered that he looks straight at me and says it out loud.

Cheers, Neef.

He uses that name like a weapon. A lifetime has passed since anybody called me that. But there he is, saying it like nothing has changed at all.

We don't speak again, but I can feel his eyes on me. When he

leaves the caff that afternoon, I have to hold myself back from following him, letting him lead me like the Pied Piper towards the person I used to be.

He comes again the next day, walks right in like he owns the place, puts a fiver on the counter, asks for a tea and then sits down, doesn't even wait for the change.

Still like to act the big man, I see, I say as I slide the three pound coins back across the table to him. I put his tea in a paper cup but he doesn't take the hint to leave. Instead he looks at me steadily, a spark of something dancing in his eyes. Denz always hated me, could see right through me, knew what I was before I had even become it.

Still got as much mouth as you always did, he shoots back.

I ignore him, go back to the counter, pretend to be busy even though it's dead in there. The minute the clock hits four I turn the sign on the door to Closed, make a big show of it so he can't pretend he hasn't seen. That's when he stops me.

Neef, can we talk?

For a second I freeze, steadying myself against the doorframe. There isn't anyone here by that name, I say, enunciating my words, not dropping a single *t* or *h*. So I suggest you fuck off elsewhere.

He does nothing more in response than give me the same slow nod that I despised all those years ago. Then he leaves without another word.

Danny would be ashamed of me if he'd heard how I'd spoken to him. He's still my dad, he would say, his jaw set, his eyes scalding. Whatever you think of him, he's still my dad.

Yeah, I'd bite back, but he's no one to me. He never was.

3

The caff I live above isn't mine. I don't even run it, just work there, six days a week with Sundays off, and only then because it's closed. I've tried to talk Fionnoula and Ali into keeping it open, seems daft to close it on a Sunday, all the extra trade we'd get from people passing through Streatham on a weekend. But Fionnoula won't hear of it. Sundays are a day of rest, she says.

Fionnoula goes to Mass every week, but still calls herself a bad Catholic. It's like a private joke between her and Ali. The Bad Catholic and the Bad Muslim, they'll quip, exchanging this look that's only for them. They've been together for years and years, longer than I've been alive, she likes to tell me. But they've never married. Mostly because they couldn't figure out where to do it, and besides, who would come? She laughs when she says that but I know it hurts her.

It was hard for them at the start, being together. Too hard for their families, Fionnoula says, although that's her being kind, trying to forgive. It's better now, down here at least. People from all corners of the earth walk past the caff every single day and still there are some who don't like it. Folk can be strange like that. But at the start, she says, it was terrible. All the looks, the names, the turned backs. They got a brick through their window once, with a note tied to it. She's never told me what it said. It doesn't surprise me, though, how tough it was. It would have been strange to see

the pair of them together even when I was a kid, round our neck of the woods at least. I just have to think of all the ways Danny used to get it, growing up in that pallid town where barely anyone looked like him.

The only reason I walked in the caff all those years ago was because I saw the hunched-over bloke with the ripped-up shoes and dirty coat go in before me. I figured if they let him in, I might be all right. That bloke's got different shoes these days, but he still wears that same old brown coat. That's why we call him Sandy. No one knows his real name, no one's ever asked. He drinks tea with milk and two sugars and if you put a coffee in front of him, he'll sip it slowly with a downturned smile, but he'll never tell you he doesn't want it. Some days he'll have a bit of toast; most, he doesn't bother. He's as thin as a rake and Fionnoula would happily feed him more if he'd have it, but he'll only take what he needs, he has his pride. I don't know his story, how old he is, where he comes from. All I know is that he's there every day. Him. The old lady with the scarred face and the limp who works down the corner shop. The night cleaner whose empty eyes never seem to close. The shy musician with the long, greying dreads that fall all the way down his back. We're all the same. A flock of silent souls circling around each other day in, day out, safe among chosen strangers. None of them know me, either. Not even Fionnoula and Ali, not really. They'd be disgusted by me if they did. They call me Jennifer, Jenny. Jen, sometimes. I don't care which. They don't know who I used to be, that I've spent almost half my life pretending to be someone else.

Fionnoula thinks I'm a dreamer but Ali knows better. Not that he's ever said anything. It's just the way he moves around me on those days when he catches me staring, unblinking, at the steam curling out of the kettle, or turning circles with a damp cloth on the same patch of table over and over again. Mostly he'll leave me be, but every so often I'll feel his hand on my shoulder, warm and heavy, a reminder that he's there. It brings me back somehow, when he does that.

Fionnoula has another tack. She'll swipe me round the back

of the head with the corner of her tea towel, or wave her hand around in front of my eyes. He-llaaaaw? Anybody home, Lady Head-in-the-clouds? she'll trill, her accent still so sing-song Irish no one would guess she's lived down here all this time.

And then I'll snap out of it, come to. Sorry, I'll say. You caught me at it again.

It's easier to let her think it's a daydream, but in fact it's the opposite of that. It's doing anything I possibly can for it not to be a dream, for my brain not to get carried away with itself and take me to the places I want to stay away from. Sometimes it's a song, a lyric on the radio, or a flat vowel that sounds like home. Other times it's the gap between a stranger's front teeth, the way someone shifts their weight, the cadence of a laugh.

When I first arrived in London, I'd see Danny everywhere. On the back of every bus, the corner of every street. But as the years passed, I got better at blocking him out. Sometimes months would go by without me having that sense of him, the feeling that if I were to turn around he'd be there, within arm's reach. Just the other day I followed a lad all the way down the High Road, hoping that when he turned it would be Danny's face I'd see. I caught myself in time, the foolishness of it. Turned around and walked the other way.

I didn't have any choice in the end, knew that if I had any chance of pulling through I would have to forget all of it, the bad and the good. But still I have these moments, these days when thinking gets the better of me. Because there were parts that were bliss, there were parts that were full and faultless and laden with joy. When Danny and I were kids, when we were innocent and daft and just the sight of each other, the split second of a look, could make us keel over laughing. And then later, in that middle bit. Fuck, that bit. It was beyond. The way everything we did, everything we felt, we did, we felt together. The way we loved and loved and loved each other. The way we loved each other.

4

I've all but convinced myself that I imagined Denz's visit to the caff, that me seeing him was a sign I'm going mad all over again. I've been waiting for it to happen. But then he shows up a few days later, asks me to go for a walk with him, like it's the most normal thing in the world. I tell myself to say no, but when I open my mouth that isn't what comes out.

We make our way towards Streatham Common in silence, like the strangers we've become, or maybe always were. Denz doesn't look all that different from the version I've tried to bury in my head. He's not as big as he once was, and there is a heaviness around his eyes, his mouth, that wasn't there fifteen years ago. But he still has that same feel, the same foreboding air.

He stops at a bench, tries to make small talk while he rolls a spliff; a comment on the weather, another about a fat Labrador chasing something up a tree. I sit as far away from him as I can, stare straight ahead until he turns to look at me.

You're not an easy girl to track down, you know.

I wasn't hiding, I say.

He pulls a lighter from his pocket, sparks up. It's taken time, man. These days you can find near enough anyone just by typin their name into a computer.

Wouldn't even know how to turn one of them on.

Denz smiles as though I've made a joke but I keep my face blank. You angry? he says. That I'm here?

I count to ten silently in my head, wait for the feelings to go, but they are still there and so I go again, all the way to twenty, thirty, forty this time and then . . . No, I say. I don't care.

There is a long pause and even though I don't look at him, I know that he is watching me. I heard you'd left, he says eventually. Disappeared, that's what they told me. It didn't surprise me much. We're all good at disappearin, aren't we? You and me. Chrissy.

My eyes smart at the sound of my mam's name and I cough, shove my hands deep in my pockets.

I haven't been back there in years.

He doesn't need to explain that he is talking about the little town I once called home, all pretty on the outside until you break it open and see the rot and the darkness underneath.

Lived all over since I left Leeds, he carries on. Few years in Manchester, few in Spain.

I yearn to ask him about Danny but pride or fear bite my tongue and I stay quiet, press the toes of my plimsolls into the dirt.

Ended up down here for work, stayin with me cousin. You'll remember him. Lewis.

I shrug like I don't, but I do. Of course I do.

Yeah. Well. He's been here a while. Got family in London from his dad's side. Sorted me out with a job. Security.

Something in his voice makes me look at him then, and I see the regret pulling at the corners of his mouth. You don't like it? The job?

Denz blinks, rubs his chin with his palm. Been doin it years, it's all I know, he says. Always told meself it were just temporary, that I'd get back to studyin at some point. I were gonna be an engineer, once upon a time. He shifts in his seat as if to reset his thoughts. But it's good money, a decent gig. That's what it comes down to. Pays the bills.

He offers me the spliff but I shake my head. The smell, that smell. I close my eyes, breathe in his smoke.

First time I saw you were here, he is saying. I were out, walkin, can't even remember where I were goin. I like it, me – just goin for a mooch on a night. Space to think, innit? And I saw you, from right across the other side of the grass, runnin. I had to look twice, to be sure, and even then. You're fast, man. Proper fast. It were like you were bein chased.

He pauses, takes a few slow draws.

You'd disappeared before I got anywhere near close enough for a proper look. I shouted after you, though, and I thought I saw you slow down, but it were only for a second and then you were gone.

A memory comes to me. A sound, a voice, catching in the wind. A name that doesn't belong to me any more.

I came back every day for near enough a week before I saw you again. That's when I followed you back to t'caff. You've hardly changed. Looks-wise at least. But your eyes. Your spirit, man—

I cut him off. What do you want with me, Denz? Why were you looking for me?

He takes one last pull of the spliff before flicking the roach into the grass.

It weren't you I were lookin for. Not exactly.

What?

I were . . . He pauses, rubbing at the joints of his jaw with his knuckles as if to relax the muscles. I were hopin you could tell me where Danny is, he says at last.

It takes me a moment to speak again, but when I do, my voice sounds strange. I don't understand, I say.

Denz turns his face towards me, looks at me for a long time. I aint seen Danny in nearly two years. And I had this idea in me head, see. That mebbe he'd come lookin for you.

Well, he didn't, did he?

You tell me.

I get to my feet, not wanting to be here any more. I've worked so hard not to let my mind go there, to travel back to a time of Danny and Denz and Chrissy and all the other ghosts of before. They don't exist, they never did. And yet here they all are, their

names, their faces floating around in front of me, as though Denz has picked up the past and poured it out into the air.

I have to go, I mumble, but Denz puts out a hand to stop me and, when I look at him, I see the pleading in his eyes.

You'd tell me, wouldn't you, Neef? If he'd been in touch?

A beat passes before I take a step back, another, another. And then I turn, walk, run as fast as I can away from him. Cold air cuts at my cheeks as I cross the common, past the hairdresser's, the chemist, the supermarket on the corner. Past the kids in their gaggles, dawdling home from school, their ties hanging loose round their necks. I run towards the crowds, dodging and weaving and searching face after face after face. I run until it feels like my legs will give way, until the tiredness knocks me dead, takes me back to the caff, forces me down on my bed.

Danny is missing. Danny is lost.

5

Some memories are easier than others. Like if I go right back: way, way back to when I was really little, in the flats, only me and Chrissy. Before there was an us, a Danny and me. It's not that those times were perfect, idyllic, anything like that. It's just that the memory of them slices a little less deep.

I never thought of where I came from as anything other than normal, living in those Lego towers with all of us stacked on top of one another. The walls in those flats were so thin you could hear the flushing of every bog, the whine of every telly, the tremor of every slammed door. Chrissy used to say that was its beauty and its curse. You never had to explain anything, never needed to say what had happened to that fella you'd been seeing, or why her down the way wasn't speaking to you, or who'd made your face swell and burst like a bag of jewels. I only realised later what other people thought of it, when I'd tell them where I'd spent the first twelve-and-a-bit years of my life and I'd see the kids' eyes shine with awe and the grown-ups fill with pity.

We never had a family before we left the flats. I don't know that I ever craved one especially. We weren't any different from any of the other kids I used to knock about with. But I reckon Chrissy wanted one. To be part of one, somehow. Plenty of people would disagree with that. They'd say Chrissy never gave a shit about anyone or anything other than herself, and maybe they'd be right

in a way. But there's a difference between wanting to be my mam and wanting to belong somewhere.

Chrissy barely spoke about anything to do with her life before I came along. She'd been in care since she was a little kid, I knew that. Passed and parcelled from one foster family to the next until social services decided she was old enough to stand on her own two feet. Some were better than others, she told me, although that was as far as she ever got. There was one lady that had been the nicest of the lot, Margaret or Marsha or something along those lines. We went to her house a few times. I remember Chrissy sipping tea awkwardly on the sofa, and me playing with a box of old toys on the floor while the lady fussed around us, trying to make small talk, passing me little bags of dried apricots and raisins that made me retch when I tried to swallow them. I'd spend the whole time burying the bits of chewed-up fruit in among the toys when she wasn't watching, so that on each visit I'd unearth more of it than on the last, moulding and rotting between the joints of a Barbie doll's legs or inside the wheel of a Fisher-Price car. One day there was a row about something, an envelope that had been on the side ready for the cleaner to pick up. Chrissy lost her temper and ended up smashing her teacup against the living-room wall. The visits stopped after that.

Chrissy was smarter than a lot of people gave her credit for. Book-smart, the type that would have done well at school, given half a chance. She never had boyfriends when I was really little. We didn't even have a telly, she used to read all the time instead. Tattered paperbacks from the charity shop, newspapers, magazines. Anything she could get her hands on. For a while she had a library card, we both did. It was only round the corner from us but to me it felt like another world. The building had a graceful type of beauty, all ornate sandstone and red brick, with a great big clock on the tower. I used to pretend we were royalty when she took me, climbing up the steps to our castle, our own private fortress of books. Most days it was only the two of us in there and we'd stagger up to the counter with our arms full, before loading our finds into an Asda carrier bag for the walk home. If Chrissy

was still in a good mood by the time we got back to the flat we'd sit on the bed together and she'd read aloud to me, encourage me to do it myself, sounding out the big words, holding my hand in hers to trace the shapes with the tip of my finger. We had the letters of the alphabet stuck up all over the flat, written out on scraps of paper in fat black marker. F for Fridge. B for Bed. M for Microwave. Chrissy would set me spelling challenges that she'd mark out of ten, rewarding me with a Push-Pop or maybe a bag of Wotsits if I did well.

By the time I was five or six I knew my way around words better than most grown-ups. Chrissy was proud of that, she was always getting me to read stuff out loud if she knew we had an audience. Now and again we'd make up stories together, put ourselves in the middle of the books we loved. Annie, the Little Princess, Pippi Longstocking. It was our favourite game, to imagine ourselves in a different life.

When I was seven, Chrissy got a boyfriend. I don't remember all that much about him, only that he used to take the piss out of her always having her head in a book. What you wastin yer time fer? he'd gripe. D'yer reckon it meks you look clever? Reckon knowin a few big words meks you better'n anyone else?

The fella didn't last long, but his words did. Up until him, my mam had dreams. She wanted a job, wanted to do one of them courses. She might like to be a teacher, she thought. He laughed so hard when she told him that I hoped he would choke and pass out. For a moment Chrissy stayed silent, but then she started laughing too, pretended she was having him on. I don't know what happened between them, only that by the time he was gone she'd lost interest in books, started putting all her efforts into men instead. I missed our stories, tried my best to bring her back, but when I'd start on telling our tales in front of one of her fellas she'd shush me like she was embarrassed, like it might put them off if they got an inkling that either of us was smart. Stop showin off, Jen, she'd hiss. No one likes a cleverdick.

I couldn't get my head round what had changed and so I'd kick off, cry and shout and make a scene, until in the end she'd drag me out of the room, or sometimes the fella would do it for her. Eventually we stopped going to the library, she said there were better things to be doing with our time, although she never told me what. The books got lost among the chaos of our lives and we racked up so many late fees that I was too embarrassed to show my face in there again.

I never doubted that Chrissy loved me when I was little, but the bigger I got, the less certain of it I became. On some days she'd talk to me about everything, anything that popped into her head, wittering on about an article she'd read in a magazine, or so-and-so down the way, or did I think this pair of jeans looked good on her, that top, this eyeshadow? She'd call me her little marra, her little mate, and I'd bask in those moments, those hours, nodding along, saying the right thing, trying my best to keep it going, keep her happy and talking, knowing that soon things would change.

There's probably a name for it now. A label, a condition. A name for all those days when she was silent. Cold, long stretches that seemed to last for ever, when she'd stay in bed for hours, so still it was as though somebody had switched her off. I'd talk to her, make up stories about the two of us finding a pot of gold buried underneath the flats, a long-lost auntie who'd left us a million quid in her will. I'd grab her shoulders in both my hands and shake her, and still she'd stare at me with such emptiness that I'd convince myself something terrible had happened to her brain, a stroke or a seizure or some other nameless thing that would leave her devoid of personality, a vegetable for the rest of her days.

The thing is, I could take all that. I could handle it just about, because Chrissy was there, she was solid and real. Nothing was as bad as the times when she'd disappear. Really, physically disappear. Often I could sense it coming, as though she were preparing to untether, readying herself to float away. The thought of it happening was almost worse than the event itself, that I might go down the park and, when I'd come back, she'd be gone.

I never knew how long she'd be away for. Sometimes it was only a night, often longer. At the start she'd arrange for someone to take me, one of the neighbours usually, although she never told them she'd be gone for as long as she was, so that in the end she'd burned all her bridges and no offers of help came her way any more. But by then I was ten or so and I suppose she thought I'd be all right on my own. She'd usually leave me a fiver or a tenner maybe, and a note, always a note, full of long, flourishing words and madcap descriptions. The adventures she was going on, the things she would see. Don't worry, Little Marra, she'd sign them off, I'll be back in a bit.

She did come back, in those days at least. Except by then I would be chewed up with nerves, panicking when I didn't have her within my reach, clinging to her like shit to a shovel. For a while the guilt would soften her and she'd pull me in close, let me crawl onto her lap and press my cheek into the crook of her neck. But within weeks I would sense it coming again, feel the itch of her feet, the need for me to be out of her hair. It would make me physically sick, my stomach hurt and my head pound, and she'd get angry, say I was faking it, attention-seeking, didn't I get it, couldn't I see? That she just needed some bloody space?

Often she would turf me out, tell me to go and play, make some mates. I was getting too big to be hanging around her legs all the time, she'd say. I did as I was told but I never made any friends, not really. Not until I met Danny. I could hold my own with the kids from the flats, could give as good as I got, pretend I was like them even if I didn't feel like I was. I'd taken to carrying a little notebook around with me by then, writing my imaginings down instead of trying to share them with Chrissy. There must have been hundreds of stories and poems in there, all of them different but each of them the same. Me and Chrissy living another life.

Writing wasn't what kids did round my end, and so I'd shove the notebook in the waistband of my trackies every time I caught sight of them, act the little gobshite, put on a front. The ones my own age never bothered me. It was the big ones that got under my skin, the lads especially. But I learned soon enough that they

weren't interested in my words. All they cared about was winding me up over Chrissy.

Oi, where's yer mam? Tell her to come down here and open her legs fer us!

Bet she'd do it fer a fiver, but she's fit though, innit? Tell her I'll up it to a tenner, the dirty mare.

She'd do it fer nowt, that one. She'd do us all in one go. Not long before you're old enough to join in, either, eh?

I worked out quickly that what I saw as beautiful in Chrissy was the same thing that men saw as theirs to stamp on, that they took the way she looked as permission to grab and paw and whistle at her, as though she were a stray dog let loose in a park.

It was because of them, the handsy men and boys, that I learned how to fight. A thousand of their leers loaded into each of my fists. I'd knocked a girl in my class clean to the floor when she called Chrissy a prossie, said she'd slept with the fella that was married to her mam's sister. When I told Chrissy she'd looked puzzled, cocked her head to one side, her thinking face. What's his name? she'd said, taking a long drag on her cigarette. As though she couldn't be sure, like one just faded into the next, like yes, maybe she had, but she was bugged if she could remember any of the details.

6

We used to share a bed, me and Chrissy, except when she had a fella on the go, which was a fair amount of the time. That's when I'd have to go on the mattress in the front room. Now and again when I had nightmares she'd let me drag it through to the bedroom, but that was worse. I'd lie there, pretending not to hear the grunts and moans of bodies rolling together above me in the bed, my bed.

The bloke Chrissy had right before we finally left the flats had been the worst in a while. I was twelve when he turned up. He only lasted a couple of months, but in that time, everything shifted. He had this way of looking at Chrissy like she wasn't even human, like she was meat, or prey that he could hunt. When he spoke to her his words came out on a knife edge. Get me a drink, or give me a cig, or get that little shit out from under my feet. The worst part was that Chrissy did as she was told. I don't know if it was fear or thrill or just that she was too stupid or weak to do anything else, but she'd always say the same thing in the end.

Go play, love. I'll come find yer in a bit.

I knew what was going to happen as soon as he'd arrived that day, all jerky and frantic, his eyes scattered, his pupils too dark. Chrissy put herself between the two of us, shielding me as he paced up and down like a caged animal in our tiny front room. I hadn't wanted to leave, tried my best to make excuses to stay,

but Chrissy wouldn't have it. Go play, love, she'd said, but I stood rooted to the spot. Jen, go play. I'll come find yer in a bit.

In the end she took me by the hand and led me out into the hallway. I kept twisting my head to catch her eye but she wouldn't look at me, pulled herself loose from my grip and closed the door behind me. When I tried the handle, it was locked.

It didn't take long for it to start. The pounding of fists, the splitting of skin. The sound of my mam screaming. I ran to the next flat, banged on the door, but no one came, so I tried the next one, and the one after that. I knew they were home, the cowards, the fucking cowards.

I was at the end of the footbridge when I saw him leave. He was calmer now, his movements controlled and smooth, like kicking the living daylight out of Chrissy had left him soothed. At the last doorway he passed me, glanced at me like he'd never seen me before, and I caught a glimpse of his swollen hand, the dark, sticky stain on his upper lip.

We added another bolt to the door once Chrissy got out of hospital. She rang the council from the phone box at the bottom of the car park to ask them to change the locks, but they put her on hold for so long she ran out of coins. The lad in the hardware shop must have felt sorry for us because he sold us the biggest one he had for half the price on the ticket. Either that or he fancied Chrissy, except I doubted it, looking at the state of her.

She told me after that that she was sworn off men for good, and for once I believed her. I didn't see her with another fella for a good two months. But then there was Barry.

I don't know where she met him, maybe some bar or club in town, although I couldn't imagine him knocking around anywhere like that. Chrissy brought him to the flats after a couple of weeks. I'd been sitting on the floor writing in my notebook when they came in. I hadn't understood why he was there at first, thought maybe he was from the council coming to check on us, they did that sometimes. She offered to make him a cup of tea and as she walked past, Barry patted her backside. It made me sit up straight, him doing that. I didn't like men touching Chrissy. She

hadn't seemed to mind, though. She never did. I'd heard one of the other mams say that was half her problem. There were always men round at the flat by then, always laying their hands on her, talking to her like she belonged to them. But they never looked like Barry, with his bulging belly and basset-hound face and hardly a hair left on his head.

I didn't take my eyes off him the whole time he was there that afternoon. It must have made him uncomfortable; but it didn't stop him making an effort, trying to make conversation, calling me 'the famous Jennifer'. Chrissy kept telling him not to mind me, that I was funny with strangers, that I'd come round soon, talking about me like I was a difficult puppy instead of her kid, even though she knew why I was the way I was. After he left she tried to avoid me, but I cornered her that night when she was in the bath.

You said you didn't want another fella. Not after last time.

She'd laughed, told me to mind my own, that she was big enough and ugly enough to make her own decisions. And besides, I didn't know how hard it was, bringing up a kid on her own. It was about time she had some adult company. I'd rolled my eyes but bitten my tongue. There was nothing else to say, I never liked to row with her.

Early one morning a couple of weeks later I was in our bed, not quite asleep but not awake either, the way I always was when Chrissy hadn't come home from her night out. I heard the keys in the lock but the door stuck fast, she must have forgotten about the bolt. She swore, dropped her bag so that its insides spilled and clattered. I rolled over, hoping she'd go round her mate's. I hated talking to her when she was off her head. But she didn't give up, started tapping at the window, then banging harder with the flat of her palm, her silhouette distorted behind the make-shift curtain she'd made by pinning up an old sarong to the frame. Jen, she said in a hoarse whisper. Let me in. I've got summat to tell yer.

She crawled into bed with me after that, still fully dressed, tucking the cover around us so that our bodies were pressed

together tight. I buried my face into her neck, our hair tangling so that you couldn't tell where I ended and she began.

We're movin to the country, Jen, she whispered into the top of my head. Barry's asked us to move in with him.

7

I'd spent so long imagining another life and yet, when the time actually came, I would have done anything to keep the devil I knew. At least I never had to question where I stood, at the flats. I knew Chrissy would always come back to me in the end.

Chrissy was oblivious to how I felt. She'd promised that we'd have a nice last night together, watch a film in bed and get an early one, so we could be fresh and ready for the move, but at the last minute she decided to throw a party, a 'leaving do' she called it. In the end I'd woken up on the sofa in the flat downstairs, the Nintendo I'd been playing with the girl who lived there still plugged into the telly. The music was still going at ours, the doosh-doosh-doosh beat of it thumping against the ceiling, the sound of furniture scraping and footsteps charging about. I wanted to go up but I'd made that mistake before when Chrissy'd had one of her dos. They'd all been off their heads, white-faced and black-eyed, sweating and gurning and carrying on like they hadn't realised it wasn't still the night before.

It was the first time I'd been in the flat downstairs, they'd only moved in a few weeks back. The layout was the same as ours, though. Sitting room, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom. Each doorway no more than two or three steps from the next. The girl I'd been playing with was asleep on the bed, a toddler wearing a fat nappy

in the cot beside her. I didn't know their names. Whoever else lived there must have been upstairs.

I found a half-eaten box of Coco Pops in the cupboard and leaned up against the window, eating them straight from the packet. I remember being impressed with that, we never had anything like Coco Pops at ours. An empty cig packet was blowing across the tarmac outside and I watched it for a while, twisting and whirling before coming to a standstill next to a bent-out old bike with a missing front wheel, something translucent and slimy-looking trapped underneath the handlebars. It didn't seem possible that this could be the last time I would see that view. The car park I'd walked across every day of my life. The playground where I'd swung on the swings, watching the big kids pass tiny packages hidden in handshakes.

After a while, I heard keys jangle in the lock. A woman came in, stumbling onto the sofa with a can still in her hand. She didn't notice me there, her eyes already half closed as the drink slipped from her fingers, the piss-coloured liquid hissing and frothing onto the carpet. I slid past her out of the door and up the cold, hard metal of the stairwell.

Our door upstairs was propped open with Chrissy's battered old boombox. Someone had had the sense to switch it off at least, but Chrissy's body still jolted to a beat no one else could hear. She had her back to me, the distance between us littered with the wreckage of the party. I hung back, watching for a moment, and then I went to her, wrapped my arms around her ribcage, pressed her bones against my cheek. She didn't hug me back, just stood there, then pulled away and cupped my face in her hands, the chemicals still sparkling in her eyes.

It's today! she said to me, her voice hoarse and scratched but still so giddy that it made me wish I could feel even some of what she did. She didn't notice that I didn't, or maybe she didn't care. She just grinned, spun me round in a circle to the sound of glass splintering under our feet, laughing at the expression on my face, making a gesture with her shoulders that said who cares, who cares about this place, this shithole, we won't be back here, it's

not our problem any more. Stop worryin, love, she said, passing me a roll of plastic bin liners. Just pack what yer can't do wi'out. We won't need much. He'll get us whatever we need.

We waited for Barry in the bus shelter outside the flats for what seemed like hours. Chrissy was all right at first, strolling up and down the pavement, easy, languid, like she was only moving to pass the time. But the longer we waited the faster her steps got, until she was almost marching, except more frantic, more urgent than a march. Up and down, up and down, her ankles quivering in her stilettos, the wet tarmac splattering the whites of her bare legs grey. She'd bought those shoes down the market a couple of weeks before, knock-offs of a pair she'd seen in a magazine at the doctor's. I remember thinking how they didn't suit her, how daft she looked wearing them first thing in the morning. I never said anything, though.

I was sitting on the wall, my head down but my eyes following her. Occasionally she stopped to take a draw of her fag, stretching up onto the tips of her toes so that her heels slipped out of her shoes, twisting her neck to get a better view of the road. My cheeks burned brighter with every minute that passed, not daring to turn around, convinced I'd see them all peering through the blinds at us, a tower full of eyes, floor upon floor of snarled lives. They'd love this. It'd give them something to talk about for days if Barry didn't show up, especially after the carry-on Chrissy had made about leaving. The thought made the blood behind my eyes pound so that I had to squeeze them shut, say a prayer to a god I didn't believe in. Please come, please come, please come, even though it was the last thing I wanted really. Almost the last thing. Anything would be better than hearing that lot gloat.

I tried to make the time go quicker by kicking my feet against the wall, telling myself he'd be there once I reached five hundred, seven hundred, one thousand kicks. The soles of my trainers rubbed against the bin bags at my feet, until in the end one of them ripped and sagged open. Two bags for her, one for me. That was all our lives had added up to.

After a while Chrissy came and sat beside me, picking off the plastic fingernails she'd stuck on the day before, asking me if I thought he'd changed his mind, lighting each new cigarette with the end of her last. I didn't answer, too busy worrying that the rain was going to ruin my shoes, stain the stiff white leather and the big pink swoosh glittering on each side. Barry had turned up with them the weekend before. He'd seen me sitting on the steps at the back of the flats in bare feet, said he'd been worried about all the smashed glass on the floor.

Danny liked those trainers. It was one of the first things he said to me in fact. He told me, in that throwaway manner he had, that they were cool, and I'd sneered back that they were shit, that I was only wearing them because I felt sorry for Barry, the sad old bastard, wasting his money on crap that I didn't even like.

Chrissy spotted him first. She jumped up, waving her arms about: he's here, he's here! And there he was, in that clapped-out BMW that had seemed so posh to us at the time. Swinging his door open, clambering out, looking all flustered, sweaty, his face a patchwork, a roll of flesh spilling over the top of his trousers. He was apologising, a stream of half-formed sentences, like he was out of breath even though he'd only been sitting behind the bloody wheel. Something about the delivery from the brewery, a burst barrel, traffic on the A1. Chrissy didn't notice. She was that relieved to see him that she almost knocked him off his feet, despite the fact she weighed close to nowt wet through. His face lit up then and he wrapped his arms around her gauntness. I looked away, trying to unsee the yellowing stains under his pits, but Barry must have noticed me standing there like a spare part because he let go of Chrissy more quickly than I think he'd have liked to.

Hello, love, he said, reaching out as though to ruffle my hair and then thinking better of it, pausing halfway through the action so that his hand hung suspended in mid-air between us. He drew it back, resting it awkwardly on his hip. I followed his eyes to the bin bags at my feet, watched him glance around as though he was looking for the rest of our stuff. Chrissy was already in the passenger seat by then. I slid past him, climbed into the back.

8

I am wiping tables in the far corner of the caff when Denz strolls in. It's only been a few days, but he smiles at me and lifts his hand in a wave, like he's forgotten how our last meeting ended. He walks to the counter where Fionnoula takes his order, but my eyes don't stray from him for a moment.

Why are you still here? I snarl quietly as I take over his tea, my back to the counter so no one can watch our exchange.

Denz shifts in his seat. I just want to talk, Neef—

Don't call me that, I snap, raising my voice without meaning to. I know, without looking, that Fionnoula is watching us now.

Shit. Sorry. Jen. I just . . . I want to talk to you.

About what? I don't know where your son is. I haven't spoken to him in fifteen years, since I was a bloody teenager, Denz. I told you already, I can't remember anything from those days.

He sighs, but I can see by the look on his face that he's not going to let it go. Look, I know a lot went on back then. But if you would . . . if you could talk to me, that's all I'm askin. That we go somewhere. Later, when you finish work. To talk.

I glance over my shoulder, my eyes meeting Fi's.

You okay? she mouths, her brows knitted. I smile tightly, nod my head, then turn back to Denz.

Okay, I say. Fine. Okay.

*

We meet outside the caff at the end of my shift and Ali watches us, eyeing Denz from behind the counter with a wariness that makes my heart swell.

D'you fancy a drink? Denz asks and I shake my head, burrow my chin into my scarf. Summat to eat then?

I make a noise that could mean yes or no, and Denz looks up and down the street uncertainly. I know I'm being difficult. I take pleasure in it.

We end up in the McDonald's on Brixton Hill. Denz buys me a Diet Coke, orders himself a Big Mac meal, although he doesn't take a bite.

You ever think about goin back up north? he asks me as we sit across from each other on the red, shiny seats.

No, I tell him honestly. We are quiet then and he toys with his burger, picking out the gherkins, moving them to one side. You ever been back to the pub? I ask.

He looks up at me, surprised. Relieved, perhaps, that I have opened my mouth. The pub went under, he says. You know it were never the same, after Chrissy left. It int even a pub any more. They've turned it into a charity shop now.

I pick up my Coke, suck hard on the straw. I don't know how I feel, hearing that.

I pass through the town now and again, he carries on. Not that I keep in touch with anyone.

You never did have many friends there.

Something like amusement plays across Denz's face. No, he says. Not many could stand the sight of someone like me, could they?

Behind Denz a little girl dressed in a dirty school uniform rips open her Happy Meal, squeals with delight at the plastic toy and waves it in front of her mam's face. The woman bats her hand away, her eyes glued to the screen of her phone.

You sure you don't remember Lewis? Denz says.

I look up then, my eyes locking with his. Are we here to talk about your cousin? Or Danny?

Denz carries on like I didn't even open my mouth, and I see again how little he has changed.

Tall bloke, wore his hair in locs. Used to come round mine a lot when you and Danny were kids. Moved to London after he got sick of all the aggro from t'pigs.

I shift in my seat and Denz's eyes narrow like he's losing patience. You and Danny used to say you'd do the same, soon as you were old enough. Reckoned you'd make your fortunes down here. Proper little pair of Dick Whittingtons, you were.

Did we?

Yeah. He leans forward in his seat, his eyebrows raised expectantly. Yeah, you did. You used to talk about it all the time, you must remember that?

I don't remember much, I lie.

Well, he says. Looks like you found your way here.

A current of anger shoots up my spine, making me sit up straight. Get to the point, Denz. You asked me here to talk, and I'm here, aren't I? You say you weren't looking for me, and yet somehow you found me. So let's get into it. What is it you want?

Denz leans further across the table towards me, his voice measured. I can understand why you're angry. And I can understand why you wouldn't trust me, why you wouldn't want to tell me . . . He catches himself, tries again. I just know, in me gut, that the reason Danny disappeared is because of you.

Really? You're really going to sit there and blame me—

No. No, I didn't mean it like that. Please, Neef. Hear me out.

I bite my lips between my teeth. Denz takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly.

Danny were always a bit of a lone wolf, you know that. Never really had any mates, anyone he were close to, not since . . . He glances at me uncertainly, clears his throat. Well, you know. He spent a lot of time on his own, used to go off by himself, few nights here, few nights there. He never said where, and I knew better than to ask. We had this big blow-up in the summer about two years back, over summat of nowt really. We were always rowin, mind, but this time it were enough for the pair of us to need a bit of space, you know?

Then round Christmas I thought I'd give him a bell, make

peace, except when I tried ringin him the number were disconnected. I got in touch with his landlord, but he couldn't tell me owt other than Danny had moved on at the end of his lease a few months before, and the lads he worked with hadn't seen him in time. I couldn't even say if there were summat that triggered it. All I know is that for the last few years he were so angry with me.

Why?

Denz seems to think this over for a while. Danny never understood, he says eventually, why I wanted so badly to keep you apart.

No, I shake my head vehemently. That's not why he left, Denz. If that were true, it would be him sitting here now.

Like I said. You're not easy to track down. The only reason I figured you might be here were because—

Because what? Because of the plans Danny and I made? You don't think he could remember those too, if he tried?

Denz studies me carefully. Lewis reckons he saw him. Danny. Reckons he spotted him a couple of times. Round here.

What?

That's what he told me. Once in a crowd at the station. Another time getting on a bus up Brixton Hill. Says it's always just been a glimpse, and both times he's lost sight of him before he could get close enough to be sure. I had me doubts, to be honest; he still smokes too much, our Lewis. But I'd been thinkin of comin down here for a while, I always had this feelin about Danny and London. Except I didn't find Danny, did I? I found you.

It takes me a moment before I can speak, takes everything I have to keep my voice steady. Listen to me, Denz, I say to him. Danny isn't here. He's never been here. I haven't seen him since I was eighteen years old, and I haven't seen Chrissy in even longer. And you know why? Because you took them away from me. Because, for some fucked-up reason, you were hell-bent on keeping me apart from the only two people I've ever cared about. You told me to leave Danny alone. You said that. You told me I would ruin his life, and I believed you.

Neef—

Don't call me that, I yell, pushing myself back from the table

with force. The little girl and her mum are staring at me, the toy discarded, the woman's phone hanging limp in her hand. My chair teeters for a moment before crashing to the ground and I cross the floor, yank the door open. I want to be far away from my memories, from Denz, but he follows behind me, beside me, in front of me, blocking my path. I will not look at him, my breath sharp and ragged.

Look, he says. I never expected you to be glad to see me. But I just want us to keep talkin, please. I know I have no right to ask, but . . . please, can you take this?

He thrusts a scrap of paper at me, a row of digits already scrawled on it as though he's been preparing to give it to me all along. If I don't hear from you, you have me word, I'll leave you alone. But take it. In case you change your mind.

I stare at the phone number in his hand, swallow the hurt in my throat. I don't want it, I don't. But despite myself, I take the paper, shove it deep into my pocket. He nods at me slowly.

Thank you, he says.

I watch him walk away.

9

Every brick of the town that Danny and I spent our teenage years in is still imprinted on my memory, whether I like it or not. The pubs, the chippy, the Chinese takeaway that shut down and someone started a rumour that it was because they'd been using rat meat instead of chicken. The drive from the flats was short, less than an hour, but the landscape changed quickly from black and white to colour. A tapestry of fields, cows, sheep, houses, bigger and bigger at every turn. It seemed impossible to me back then that my childhood home could exist just a few miles down the road from that picture-book place, full of bustle, everybody moving with reason, with purpose. Mams out running errands, old boys on their way to the pubs for opening time, those funny little gaggles of out-of-towners eating picnics by the river, shivering in their shorts and T-shirts under the watery sun.

The Lamb and Lion didn't look like the pubs from round our way with their barred-up windows and piss-streaked doorways. Danny used to take the mick out of me, said I always had a way of making everything sound more romantic than it really was. But there was something almost human about Barry's pub, standing there proudly in the middle of the high street. Those shiny black planters overflowing with flowers that I learned soon afterwards were Danny's handiwork, the polished brass letters above the

doorway. That sign, the fierce-looking beast watching over the little white lamb.

Barry pulled into the car park behind the building, stopped in the spot nearest the back door. I took it all in. The beer garden, the cut grass, the wooden bench-tables shaded by parasols. The boy.

He was hunched over two empty beer kegs at the far end of the car park, a cap pulled low over his face, although I could tell he was watching us by the angle of his shoulders. Barry called towards him, made a crude 'oi' sound, asked if he was going to say hello. It was then that our eyes locked. I took in the clear, dark depth of them, the high cut of his cheekbones, the gold of his skin. But then he turned his back, pulled himself up onto the wall that circled the car park and jumped out of sight.

It seemed to set Barry on edge, him disappearing like that. He started making excuses, telling me he was a funny lad, a loner really, a head full of strange ideas, the corners of his mouth turning down as he spoke. You'll see a fair bit of him, though, he said. His nana, Mary, works in t'kitchen.

I was only half listening, my eyes on Chrissy as she climbed out of the car and walked towards the building, trailing her fingers along the rough brickwork of the pub walls. She was smiling, chattering on about wasn't it gorgeous, and doesn't it look like something out of a magazine, and can you believe we're going to live here? To anyone else she would have looked happy, ecstatic even. But to me there was already an uncertainty in her eyes, as though she was lost, or thinking about something far away.

Barry stepped towards her, put a hand on her shoulder and she leaned into him, stroked his cheek with her fingertips. I felt my stomach harden and he cleared his throat, peered in at me, sitting awkwardly in the back seat.

So are yer comin in then?

I turned my head towards the spot on the wall that the boy had jumped from, feeling it already. The something between us.

Yeah, I nodded. I'll come in.

*