



**REPRESENTATIONS OF CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY
BRITISH FICTION**

A novel entitled THE HATCHLING and a critical reflection submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work, except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Brunel University or other institutions.

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Abstract

Since 1991, when *The Story of Tracy Beaker* by Jacqueline Wilson was published, a canon of fiction featuring young, care-experienced protagonists has emerged in contemporary British novel-writing. British care-experienced fiction deals with the various unique issues associated with growing up the care system in the United Kingdom; including issues of identity and belonging, biological-essentialist approaches to motherhood and the maternal; and harmful stereotypes of expected 'poor outcomes' among care-experienced people (C.E.P.s). While some works of fiction with care-experienced characters look to disrupt negative cultural stereotypes around C.E.P.s, other examples approach the care experience uncritically, reinforcing popular perceptions of looked-after children as necessarily pre-determined to fail, monstrous or evil.

The work submitted comprises of the following:

1. A novel, entitled *The Hatchling*
2. A critical reflective essay

The novel is work of autoethnographic literary fiction which draws on my own experience of growing up in the care system. It follows Bess, a fifteen-year-old girl in foster care who falls pregnant. The pregnancy raises questions for her around the nature of motherhood, whether 'bad' mothering is a hereditary condition, and whether one can choose their mother(s). The reader follows Bess as she meets Boy, the father, to the moment of her discovering her pregnancy, and through her decision-making process as to whether she ought to keep the baby or have an abortion.

The critical reflection portion of this thesis will examine recent examples of care-experienced fiction in contemporary British literature, across children's, young adult (Y.A.) and adult fiction. It will focus on portrayals of young female protagonists with care experience: their relationship with the maternal and biological-essentialist attitudes to motherhood; issues of

identity and belonging; and where tropes of 'poor outcomes' are reinforced and where they are subverted. In addition, the exegesis will examine my own novel as a contribution to the emerging care-experienced canon, demonstrating the necessity for more nuanced and critical approaches to the care experience, from 'Own Voices' communities, in contemporary fiction.

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THE HATCHLING: a novel

by Kirsty Capes

Chapter 1

JUNE, 1999

The long and short of it is this: the day is the kind of hot that sticks plimsolls to tarmac if you stand still for too long. In the Golden Grill kebab shop, there is a public toilet, not a cubicle, but a single room with dirty magnolia tiles that need re-grouting and oily lipstick smears on the mirror, and the metallic smell of periods clogging the air. I'm waiting for Eshal, my slimy forehead pressed against the cool tiles on the wall. My hands, damp with sweat, even after running them under lukewarm tap water for several minutes. My face in the mirror, distorted by those cherry-coloured imprints of puckered lips, with my skin the colour of the tiles and too much eyeliner, a sheen coating my upper lip. The pregnancy test in my backpack, slung in the corner. My eyes glassy. The sense of being stuck inside a womb overwhelming.

The first thing I ever learned about my biological mother is that she was very into astrology. Zodiacs. I have a pattern of freckles on my lower back, which, if you look at in a certain way, resembles the Big Dipper, and I wonder whether she has the same constellation on her own body.

When I was born, I was already dead. I exited the womb with my umbilical cord wrapped around my neck. I wonder if my mother hoped I stayed dead. I wonder whether or not it's time to do the pregnancy test; whether I really counted the days right, whether I'm even late at all, or this is some gross trick my brain is playing on me, addled by the smell of chip fat in the kebab shop. I think about buying a burger but imagining how it will feel in my hands, leaking ketchup onto my bare knees, makes me feel sick. I turn the limescale-encrusted taps back on and splash hard water over my face, smelling my own skin.

I think about Boy. What he would think if he saw me now. Sometimes Boy and I climb up to the spot on St Anne's Hill with the bricked-in observation deck, and we make bets about who can get down faster, and we run so hard I feel like my legs will swing out from under me and I'll break all my teeth on the ground, and he always wins because his legs are so long and much stronger than mine which are pudgy from too much sleep and too many kebabs. And when it's autumn he picks up leaves and twirls the stems between his thumb and forefinger before giving them to me. But we haven't done that for a while now.

I rattle my backpack, listening for change, and realise that I spent the last of my money in the pharmacy, and now I have none for chips. The little frosted-glass window in the bathroom is open, and outside I can hear Bora or one of the other guys dropping a rubbish bag into the industrial-sized metal bins.

The time is 3.04pm, per the Hello Kitty wristwatch I stole out of Clarissa's jewellery box. I unzip the front pocket of my bag and take out the long box I got from the pharmacy. I open it and two of the three plastic sticks inside clatter to the floor. I gather them up quickly, embarrassed despite my total aloneness. I ease my denim shorts down to my knees and wait as the build-up of water in my bladder streams out. I hold the one pregnancy test that didn't hit the floor between my legs, clumsily, dousing my hand in my own hot urine as I do so. I wonder whether it's wet enough. When I pull it out from between my thighs the applicator on the end is a stark artificial pink, the colour of kids' toothpaste, little droplets of pale yellow liquid discolouring the white plastic.

I think about pulling my shorts up but for the moment it seems like too much effort. I think about my biological mother, how she might have found out she was pregnant. Her waters broke in the cinema, three weeks earlier than expected. She was watching *The Karate Kid*. I feel like these things ought to be important: me, with the Big Dipper on my back. Her, watching *The Karate Kid* (who was she with? A boyfriend? Her mother? Was she alone?). And then me again, deciding enough was enough and fighting my way out of her body, ripping her open so that while I was being resuscitated in intensive care, nurses violently rubbing my body, she

was being stitched back together, the muscles in her thighs quivering with the pain and the effort of expelling me from her. She was so sure I would be a boy because a palm reader told her so. After they sewed her up and took her to see me, in my little transparent plastic box, she asked them, tripping out from the gas and air maybe, where my penis was. The nurse who was with her gently told her she had had a girl. She didn't believe I was her baby. She thought I'd been swapped.

All these stories told in therapy at the Family Centre, to make me feel as though I knew her my whole life. To pre-empt any signs off *behavioural deficiencies, attachment disorders, sociopathic tendencies* associated with *early childhood trauma*. The case file turned into fairy stories that would make sense to me in ways the truth would not.

The pregnancy test is positive.

I see the pink cross and I can't see the off-white sink, the tiles, the slimy lipstick kisses, the permanent-marker love notes and pentagrams. I concentrate and strain my eyes until they burn and everything disappears from sight, except that little pink cross.

If I screw my eyes shut and open them quickly the tiles make psychedelic patterns in purple and blue. I check my watch again and, impossibly, it's only been five minutes.

In two months' time there is going to be a Total Eclipse.

My skin is salty. I think about cockroaches surviving a nuclear winter by curling up into the foetal position in the mud. I tug my feet up to my knees, mindful of the puddles of urine and God-knows-what-else on the floor.

I wonder how I am going to survive a nuclear summer.

I wonder what on God's green Earth I'm going to tell Boy. My bum is stuck to the plastic toilet seat. I haven't shaved the back of my thighs and the hairs are poking into my skin.

When I was ten I went through a phase of compulsively banging my head against the wall. When I was twelve I tried my first cigarette and I was so ashamed of myself that I hit myself in the face until I swear on my life the shape of my skull changed, my forehead flattening like one of those pre-homo-sapiens.

I wonder if I hit myself in the stomach enough this will all go away. Wonder if the shape of my body will change. Stupid of me, because of course it will.

I'm fifteen years old.

The test might be wrong.

It's probably not wrong, though.

My muscles aren't working properly. The pee stick slips from my fingers and clatters onto the floor by my feet. I pick it up plus another from the box, nestled in with the paper instruction leaflet. I take my litre bottle of Coke which is perched on the windowsill and finish off the dregs. I sit back down on the loo, manoeuvre another one of the sticks between my legs. I catch sight of myself in the mirror, my arm awkwardly bent between my legs, my hair in a lopsided ponytail, long but ratty and full of split ends, in dire need of a cut. My eyes are tiny little black bugs in my steaming face, different kind of shine to it now. A fearful shine.

I pull up my damp shorts, buttoning them so my stomach strains against the waistband. I recently learned what a muffin-top is, after hearing a group of girls at school talking about it in the changing rooms, comparing their non-existent belly fat with one another, each of them competing to have the biggest, the most obscene, pinching their flesh in violent fashions, leaving red marks which turned slowly pink, their sing-song self-detriment so naked and fake in the dim strip lights. I could see all their hip bones. They took too long to put on their shirts to be ashamed, their lacy A-cup bras scooping their adolescent breasts together into artificial cleavage, and Eshal and I mocking them the next row of benches over, her prancing around on tip-toes, pressing her boobs together with one hand, the other rolling at the wrist high above her head, mimicking the Royal Wave. Me, snorting with scornful laughter but being sure to

button up my own shirt the quickest, un-tucking it to obscure the bulge brimming over the sides of my skirt. Now, here, in the Golden Grill toilets, it's more pronounced than ever.

I cap the second stick, stuff it into the front pocket of my bag along with the used one, without checking the pink cross. I wash my hands slowly, taking time to lather the spaces between my fingers with the slither of soap balanced on the hand dryer. I grab my bag and bike helmet and leave the bathroom. Eshal has just walked in. And she is like:

Hey. Alright? as she spots me coming out of the loo.

And I was hoping she wouldn't see me. Bora the kebab shop guy is peeling strips of meat off the skewer with a long double-handled knife. Fat particles steam up the air, I imagine that I can feel them landing on my face and burrowing into the pores of my skin.

Hey Bora, I shout across the shop. One of the pensioners from the Greeno Centre enjoying a portion of chips at a yellowing table looks up. I tell Bora, That's got to be a health and safety violation.

What are you talking about? Bora shouts back over his shoulder. You know we don't do that health and safety shit here, Bess.

I'm talking about Bora's knife. He holds the knife like a bicycle handlebar, each hand firmly gripping either end of it, the wooden handles stained with fat and sweat. He lifts the knife high above his head and drags it over the meat pulling it down and towards him in a practiced motion. The knife gathers momentum under the pressure of Bora's pull, and when it breaks free of the meat it stops inches from Bora's stomach, every time moments from slicing into his abdomen. Bora is lean, but I can see the sinewy muscles in his shoulders working under the strain of it. The blade of the knife is sharpened to a needle point, but the colour is dull beneath the strips of meat it pulls away.

I walk up to the counter. Bora sets the knife down on the counter and wipes his hands on his shirt. He reaches under the counter and hands me and Eshal a lollipop each. Mine is orange flavour. I unwrap it carefully.

Sweets for my sweets, says Bora.

I say to Eshal, I've got no money.

What, for chips?

I shrug. For anything.

And I feel so desperate. And I hold my breath and think of Boy while she watches me, chewing on her lollipop.

That's cool, she says, I'll front you. She reaches into her back pocket and pulls out a fiver.

Inside my backpack is the pregnancy test, fizzing against my back like a hot poker, and inside me is the feeling of being a cockroach and the air is hazy and my lollipop sticks to my tongue all sour.

I say nah, don't worry. I was just leaving.

Are you fucking joking? I just got here. I've got money! She waves the fiver in my face, fanning me.

Sorry! I say. You were late, anyways! Turn up on time, dickhead, and maybe I'll let you buy me chips. I'm trying to joke around but Eshal notices the manic note in my voice.

Wait, what's up, Bess?

I can't look at her in the face. I'm thinking cockroaches and Boy's dick poking into my back and the permanent marker message on a broken sink tile in the Golden Grill toilet that said CARRIE IS A SLUTTY SKANK BAG and another one in pink that said CALL BELINDA FOR HOT SEX with a scribbled-out phone number and how the heat wobbles off cars and

roofs and what am I going to tell my foster parents and Jesus what about Boy and everyone and I think about being a baby in a plastic box in St Peter's Hospital, being choked by my placenta. I think about all the water contained in separate concrete cradles across all of the Pits, the reservoir by my house hovering fifty feet above my head while I'm sleeping. If the reservoir broke its banks now we'd be at the epicentre of the flood, like when stars implode and cave in on themselves.

I can't tell her. I can't. I stare at her, trying to convey how serious I am without having to announce my situation to the whole of the Golden Grill. Then, I don't know why, but I stick my tongue out at her. It seems to work.

Fine, Eshal says, her eyebrows knitting together, just go. And as I'm leaving Eshal turns back to Bora and I hear her ask him if he's got any weed.

Chapter 2

The town where I live is cut up by the M3 and circumvented by the Thames. Shepperton is famous for its film studios and parakeets. I've lived here since I was four years old and I've never seen a film star. My house is on a council estate close to the Studios on the edge of town. When I first arrived here the social worker driving me to my new home pointed out the stone gargoyles on the roof of Stage H behind the barbed wire that kept people out of the Studios campus. My fingernails scratched at the seatbelt as I watched them. Six of them along each side of the building, black silhouettes against the clouds, teetering on the lip of the roof so that a nudge might push them to their deaths.

My foster mother Lisa tells me that the parakeets escaped from the film studios when they were filming *The African Queen* in the late 40s. I don't know whether that's true but I like to take photographs of them and imagine the escape. The whole world stretching out beneath them, a huge new openness in their stomachs.

From my bedroom window on the estate, I can see the park, with two big horse chestnut trees on the green where the parakeets roost. The parakeets have dark orange beaks the colour of dried blood. I can also see Stage H. And the long sloping sides of the reservoir, just beyond the farmer's field, but none of the water inside it. If I climb out of the window and sit on the porch roof facing in the opposite direction, I can see the River Ash Woods where everyone goes to fly tip and inject heroine. And then the tin houses which are what everyone calls the pre-fabs from after the Second World War. Those houses were supposed to be temporary but they were never demolished. That's where the kids who are too poor for the Studios Estate live, the ones who come to school with holes in their trousers and scabby chins and stains on their shirts. Behind them are the Pits, which used to be gravel pits once upon a time, but I guess whoever owned them didn't need the gravel anymore because they're all filled up with water and shopping trollies now, with mounds of the leftover gravel peeking out of the water line and forming little brown islands overgrown with weeds. There are

footbridges there that connect the islands, so high that when you jump from them into the water your toes graze the bottom of the lake.

The ceiling in my bedroom is speckled with loads of tiny puckered nipples of paint. I wake up and count them, look for faces in them. I do this all the time. It's like the faces are watching me, waiting for me to pick them out.

We've been out of school for four weeks already. I've just finished Year 11; I've had my last exam. And now when I wake up I forget for a moment that I'm done with school forever, and I listen to the washing machine downstairs. The window is open and the air is like cold milk on my skin.

And for a moment, I've forgotten about yesterday – the Golden Grill, Bora, Esh, the pregnancy test – and the whole summer is stretched out before me in the sky outside my window. And one of the houses across the road has a rusty old swing in its front garden, someone's dumped it there. And it's like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and I'm thinking maybe today me and Esh can steal that swing and paint it, or maybe throw it into the Pits. Or I could find Boy and see if he'll drive us to St Anne's Hill and let me put my head in his lap and pretend to sleep and he'll stroke my hair and then I'll pretend to wake up and kiss him long and hard and he'll fall in love with me again. And then I remember that I'm pregnant and I look out the window and there's a dead fox in the road and my foster dad Rory is scraping it off the concrete with the metal shovel that my foster mum Lisa uses to dig weeds out of the gaps in the patio slabs.

I should tell someone. I can't tell *them*. I can't tell my social worker Henry, who is useless. I ought to tell Eshal, and probably Boy. I climb onto the porch roof with my Pentax, the K1000, one of the most reliable manual cameras commercially available, through the open window, roll a cigarette, and shoot my neighbour Billy (two years below, collects Pokémon cards) as he tries to throw the rope of a tire swing over a low-hanging branch of one of the horse chestnuts on the green, but fails because he's too short to reach it. Stage H behind the barbed wire fence is dwarfing him.

I shower quickly, and watch myself in the mirror while I wash. I stand so my reflection is in profile, the water running over me. There are so many parts of my body that could be better if I just tried a bit harder. I could have a body like Hannah Barrington's if I stopped eating chips all the time. And now I'm going to get even fatter, this thing growing inside me. My belly button is going to turn inside out.

I wonder how many weeks I am. I don't even know what that means. It's just something pregnant women say.

I practice saying it.

I whisper it: I'm pregnant. I'm having a baby. I'm *with child*. I'm expecting. How far gone am I? I'm not sure. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say that I am pretty far gone. No one can save you now, Bess.

I wander downstairs and Lisa is hoovering the living room. She turns off the vacuum cleaner as I enter, strands of her blonde hair stuck to the sides of her face, her earlobes red.

Afternoon, she says.

Funny, I reply.

The lunchtime news is on the TV. The picture is showing a crudely put-together diagram of how exactly the Total Eclipse is going to happen. And how soon, NASA's going to land the *Lunar Prospector* on the moon and find water. Guaranteed.

Let's hope we all survive the millennium.

What are you doing today? She asks me, but not in a conversational tone.

Lisa has this habit of fluttering her hand to her neck when she's nervous, and on her upper arms she has these little chicken-skin bumps, called keratosis pilaris, where the protein molecules get stuck in the hair glands. It's from not exfoliating your skin. That's something that really pisses me off about her.

I always wonder what it would be like if she wasn't my foster mum, if I'd never been taken into care. What kind of person I would be now.

Whether I would end up pregnant, I suppose.

Wonder what it's like to have a mother who loves you unconditionally.

I'm not saying Lisa doesn't love me. She does. A lot. Even if she doesn't say it. Even if she's not allowed to. But there is a disclaimer on it. There are caveats.

She says, can you get your shoes off the carpet, please.

I take my shoes off and put them on the table.

It's bad luck to put shoes on the table. Not to mention disgusting.

Wow, thanks, Lisa, I reply, and she touches her neck in that nervous way, her eyes pale and liquid, because she hates it when I call her Lisa.

Now she's saying something about keeping the house clean because she has a student coming over in half an hour.

I'm not listening to her. I'm looking at the fridge magnet with a picture of Rick Astley on it and wondering whether Boy has been fucking someone else.

Mum goes: *Bess*.

Everything in our house is pink because that's her favourite colour. She says pink is the colour of luxury. I always thought it was the colour of femininity and sex and weakness. Purple is the colour of luxury, because it's royal.

She is still trying to dislodge me from the kitchen. Clarissa joins us and pours herself a beaker of squash. Clarissa says, in her know-it-all voice, it's only bad luck if it's new shoes.

We both give her blank looks, Mum's hair falling across her face.

On the table. Shoes on the table. Only bad luck if it's new shoes.

There you go, I say, looking at Mum.

Clarissa is ten and the sparkling, legitimate, blood-related daughter of the family. When Lisa brought her along to my Year 10 parents' evening at Our Lady no one could believe that, with my dark hair and moony cow face and beetle eyes and her dusty blonde ringlets and brown eyes the size of UFOs, she was my sister. Well, not really my sister. But she kept trying to hold my hand and introduced herself loudly to all the teachers as my sister.

I'm the Other Child.

Mum and Rory had Clarissa about a year after they fostered me. I am their first and last (so far) foster child. I think they felt a bit guilty thinking about the prospect of putting me back into care after Mum got pregnant with Riss. Maybe they were worried I would have attachment issues. Foster kids get that sometimes, because they haven't been nurtured properly in their early childhood development. I read that in a pamphlet Mum left in the loo.

Rory's not too bad. He tends not to talk too much which suits me fine. He doesn't make me call him 'Dad' like Lisa does with 'Mum', which I must admit is a big relief. He has just come in from scraping the fox up and Mum is telling him off for washing the fox guts off the shovel in the kitchen sink. I catch Clarissa's eye and she is trying not to dry heave, I think.

Mum is saying, Can you not do that with the hose in the garden, for chrissakes? I've got a student over *any minute*.

Yeah, Dad, it is pretty disgusting, Riss says.

Which student? Rory asks Mum, ignoring her thing about the shovel.

Mum answers that it's Hannah and I say that I'm going out.

There's a surprise, she responds.

Can I come? Clarissa asks.

I shake my head, just as Mum says no.

I traipse back upstairs with my shoes to grab my bag and a change of clothes. While I'm up there I call Eshal from the house phone. I hear the doorbell go. Mum opens it and Hannah Barrington's voice fills up the hallway, bouncing off the walls which are in a shade of pink called 'crepe'.

Hannah is in the year below, half Spanish and very thin. Fun fact about Hannah Barrington, once, when I was in Year 8, she cut a chunk of Eshal's hair out with some child safety scissors during assembly. Then Eshal and I bumped into her and her sister Mary Beth from four years above on the bridge by the golf course one weekend in November last year. Apparently Eshal slighted Mary Beth in some way or other because she dragged her through the fence onto the eighteenth hole and beat the shit out of her, held her face into the grass long enough that her arms and legs twitched at the joints, making her limbs spasm, because she couldn't breathe. Hannah was there too. She held all of Mary Beth's stuff while she kicked Esh so hard in the stomach she coughed blood for a week straight afterwards.

Mum tutors Hannah for Maths and English, and a couple of other kids from the year below when she's not working at the Opticians. So, I get to see Hannah in our dining room once a week looking for the hypotenuse.

I try to sneak out the back door. My stupid clunky boots echo off the walls in the stairwell.

Mum's all like, Bess where you going? Are you actually going out wearing that?!

I ignore her.

Mum tells me to bend over. She wants to see if she can see my bum in this skirt. This is the test. If she can see my bum when I bend over I have to go and change.

I look at Hannah, who is smirking.

She's still saying bend over I need to see if your bits are on show.

Nahhhhh.

Mum says, show me your arse, girl.

I tell her to stop objectifying me.

She waits. I bend over, pretending that Hannah Fucking Barrington isn't in this room and isn't going to tell all her gal pals about how much of a joke my life is. I want to punch my Mum in her stupid face.

Mum's like, Bess I can see your ovaries from here put something decent on before you go out please.

Are you fucking joking, Mum (I don't say this out loud just in my head). And I turn around and I can see her looking at me her eyes all watery-pale and her jaw square and her neck mottled pink and I plonk back upstairs and change into a pair of jeans. I stash my skirt into my bag.

Halfway down the woods, on my way to meet Eshal at the pub, I dip into the undergrowth, propping my bike against a tree, and change back into my skirt.

I stick my headphones in and press play on my Walkman. The song is 'Strawberry Letter 23' and it makes me feel invincible. My neighbour Billy rides by on a bike. He lets out a low wolf whistle, except because he hasn't quite mastered it, it comes out a bit pathetic. I say WHY ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME loud enough to make him peddle faster. I spit at him and miss.

I cycle towards the High Street, which is a mile to the east of my house, over the motorway bridge and onto the other side of the M3. The Pits are to the south, behind the Studios Estate. The further east you go in Shepperton, the posher it gets because it's closer to the river. On the actual riverbank, near Manor Park, the houses are worth millions of pounds and the grass is always mown in neat straight lines like a cricket pitch. There's no McDonald's but there's two pharmacies because everyone is old and they're always getting sick. Luckily

for me and Eshal there are plenty of pubs and no one bothers to ask us for I.D. We spend all our spare time together. Or, we used to, before Boy.

It's 2.30 p.m. I'm not supposed to be in the pub.

I'm sitting in the farthest corner next to the fruit machine, a dirty sofa with a sticky brown table. I'm here with Eshal but she's gone to the toilets to fix her wonky fake eyelash. I am on my third lager and lime, and my belly is starting to bulge out between my shorts and my crop top. Now I *look* pregnant as well as actually being real-life pregnant.

Eshal is tottering back to our spot in her platforms, eyelash fixed but eyeliner smudged so badly it looks like she's been socked.

Eshal is the only Asian girl in our school. Well: she was until our last exam two weeks ago. Now the whole of Our Lady is pasty white and the Hampton lot need someone new to pick on. My bet is on the tin house kids.

People in Shepperton like Hannah cut people like Eshal's hair when she's not looking in assembly because it's so long and shiny and easily reached. Because she's brown and different and infinitely more beautiful and interesting than any of you fuckers.

I take out my camera, my favourite of the four I own, a Diana Mini I nabbed from a car boot sale for a pound. I wind it up and snap a quick picture of Esh, who is making fish faces into a hairbrush compact mirror, still poking at her eyelashes.

I know that look you've got on, she says.

I feel my cheeks warm, a little ashamed at how easily she can read me. Am I so transparent to people? Or just Esh? I got my period for the first time in the middle of biology when I was thirteen, and I was too scared and embarrassed to go to the school office to get sanitary towels. So I went to the toilets and wadded up a load of tissue and shoved it in my knickers. When I came back, she looked at me and knew immediately what had happened.

Esh is just like that, a mindreader. I didn't have to say a word to her. And when class finished she went to the school office and got pads for me, pretending they were for her, and we crawled under the fence at the back of the rugby pitch and ran to her house, and we skived the rest of the day off and watched *Kilroy* and ate Magic Stars until we felt sick, until her dad got home from work and kicked me out. They grounded her for a month after that.

She snaps the compact closed and leans forward, close enough that I can smell the soap she uses on her hands. Not hand soap, washing detergent, the strong stuff which I'm pretty sure, has bleach in it. It gives her such bad dry skin that it comes off her hands in huge drifts when she scratches it, which is a lot. Eshal got called Curry Clunge for two years before she figured that if she rubbed chilli seeds into her fingers and delivered a swift slap to any of the offenders they would stop bothering her.

She's still looking at me, her eyes beady, with her pointy chin jutting out the way it does when she wants the dirt. She knows me like the back of her hand. She knows every little secret about me, and I her. We're soulmates, me and Esh.

Come on, what is it? Is it Boy?

I feel small, like Billy trying to hook the tire swing over that big conker tree a hundred years older than him.

Kind of.

She leans back in her seat and rips off a hangnail swiftly. I see a little bubble of blood appear there. She says, I should've known it would have something to do with Scumbag of the Year.

I shrug and chew at my own fingernails, chipping off the nail polish with my teeth.

You're not pregnant, are you?

Her comment is flippant, half-joking, but she can read my mind just by looking at me. She watches me go very still. And she knows that she's bang on the money.

I tell her everything.

Chapter 3

The thing about Boy is it's not a love story.

Sometimes when I stare at the ceiling in bed finding faces in the dots, I imagine him outside my house like John Cusack in *Say Anything*, blasting Peter Gabriel out of a boombox. Climbing through my bedroom window, coming to save me. Except I'm not Diane. I'm not even Molly Ringwald in a John Hughes movie. I'm Allison in *The Breakfast Club*. The one with lice.

One time, after we've been hanging out for a few weeks, Eshal says to me, is the L word on the cards? And I imagine a deck of cards and the letter L is on all of them. I imagine drawing the edge of a playing card across my skin, the thin line and the beads of blood it leaves behind. That is what it feels like.

The me now, a year on, hasn't spoken to Boy for weeks and it's the same feeling – like falling in your sleep and waking up thinking you're dead. He doesn't belong to me anymore, except for the piece of him growing inside me.

Here's how I meet him. I teach Clarissa the entire rap part of *I Got 5 On It*. You don't realise until you read the lyrics in the album booklet that that whole song is about smoking weed. This is what gets Mum mad initially, and we start arguing. Every time Mum and I have a row Clarissa goes really small in a corner somewhere and Rory watches but never says anything and sighs a lot and rubs his forehead, pinching the skin between his eyebrows and taking off his watch and cleaning with a corner of his shirt. And when I can't listen to her shouting anymore I leave the house and I walk or cycle to Eshal's house, or wherever Eshal might be if she's not at her house like the Pits or Manor Park which is at the end of the high street and slopes onto the banks of the Thames.

So, I've been at the Manor with Eshal, our bikes lying down on the grass by the river, sharing a spliff and listening to the *Black Caesar* soundtrack on my Walkman, which she hates but she has no choice because it's my player, my rules. Now I'm on my way home. I'm on

Squires Bridge Road at the top of the actual Squires Bridge, a Victorian thing with big ornate pillars on either side. Tree branches claw at the sky. It's almost dark, and silent because there's no traffic around here after dusk. Only trees stirring in the breeze and squares of light from the houses illuminating the pavement.

Behind me there's a roaring sound, like an engine revving to the point of breaking. It's getting louder and closer. Ahead is the church of St Mary Magdalene. The church is glowing under floodlights, the old overgrown gravestones casting long shadows across the walls.

A little silver Ford Fiesta skids past me over Squires Bridge, whipping around the corner towards the church. A thumping Prodigy bassline spills out of it as it passes. And a noise between surprise and annoyance escapes me as the car narrowly misses knocking me off my bike. I feel the wind rush through my legs in the wake of the car, and it liquefies my bones. And I get the feeling like I've missed a step on the stairs, like something awful is going to happen.

I watch it happen like it's all going in slow motion. People say that all the time, but it really is true. As the car smashes into the church I see every minute detail of the picture, like the old newspaper dragging itself across the road in the low breeze, Tony Blair's face crumpled across the front page, the houses on Squires Bridge Road with orange lights on in downstairs windows, and in one of them I can see the TV is on, showing the Argentina-England World Cup match.

The car careers from one side to the other, the exhaust bouncing off the road, the tires slipping across tarmac leaving scorched marks and the smell of burning rubber. It knocks itself up the curb and slams into the low brown brick wall at the perimeter of the church. The sound of the brickwork splitting and crumbling under the impact of the car is deafening. Much louder than you would expect. Then, after it comes to a stop, the car hisses loudly as the wreck smokes in a pile of rubble where the wall used to be. The only thing I can think is that the whole thing would look incredible on film.

The Mary Magdalene church is eight hundred years old (some of it, anyway) and someone just smashed into the side of it. I am setting up the shots for a film noir in my head.

The passenger door opens and a boy stumbles out in black and white and my vision is complete. He is probably nineteen or twenty, all cut up and bleeding from the crash. He is Boy but I don't know that yet. The smell of hot metal and melting plastic fills up the road, displacing the dead air. The boy is stumbling in the middle of the street, rubbing his head. He's wearing a light t-shirt and dark jeans but that's all I can see from here. He's pale and looks tall, maybe six feet, and his hair is dark and longish. He has a narrow face. He keeps moving his hand to brush his hair out of it.

An elderly woman wearing a dressing gown has opened her front door on the opposite side of the road.

Do you know how bloody old that church is? She screeches.

The boy shouts something back but I don't know what it is. I'm dazed, dizzy like I was in the car with him when it crashed. I watch him stagger back towards the Fiesta and assess the damage. He tugs gently at the passenger door – the side facing me – and the door falls off.

The woman in the doorway shouts again.

She yells: is that your car, young man?

And then: I'm calling the police.

He stumbles up the road.

I'm thinking maybe he's drunk or on drugs or something and I should probably just cycle away but he's walking towards me and I can't move.

Give me your bike, he shouts from fifty yards down the road.

And I'm like, nah mate, and the tone of my voice is an octave lower and it wobbles as I speak, and suddenly I can feel my fingertips throbbing with my own rapid heartbeat.

I can see him more distinctly now. He's taller than I thought, maybe six two or six three, and he has the appearance of someone who has recently had an unexpected growth spurt and he doesn't quite know what to do with all the extra length on his limbs. He looks like one of those house spiders that disappeared behind the sofa six months ago and has re-emerged with knees. Behind him, his fucked-up car is billowing black smoke into the sky so that the church spire is hidden behind it.

Boy is coming towards me. And I notice other things about him, like how even though he's got a smirk on him like he doesn't give a shit about anyone or anything in the whole world, he has these brown eyes which are almond-shaped and shiny as though he is about to cry. He's got dark features and a mouth that looks like it could turn persuasive. His face is scratched up from the crash and on one side there is a layer of grit embedded into his cheek. And his jaw is very square, his cheekbones jutting out like he doesn't get enough food.

And he's watching me. I'm suddenly conscious of the blackheads on my cheeks, and the cheap cracked lipstick I'm wearing, which I haven't bothered to reapply and that's now probably sweated itself halfway down my chin. I've always had trouble with maintaining eye contact. One of Mum's attachment theory books suggests that it's because I can't form meaningful attachments with other humans due to being deprived of basic nurturing during my key developmental phases as a baby.

The air is still.

The boy is slowly advancing toward me.

I'm like, Bess, come on girl, get your shit together.

The boy says What? very loudly and for a moment I wonder whether he heard my thoughts. But that's stupid.

Nothing, I say.

The boy is now directly in front of me, his feet planted firmly on the pavement, blocking my way forward. He stops and pulls a tooth out of his mouth. He winces as he does it. I watch him, trying not to flinch or make some involuntarily noise of disgust. Who pulls their own teeth out? It's very hardcore, I have to admit. I'm impressed by it.

I say to him, is that supposed to scare me? Is that a threat?

He says, no, sorry. I think I hit my mouth on the steering wheel.

He opens his mouth wide, and despite myself I look. I get close to his face and peer into his mouth from below, and I feel his hot breath on my cheeks, and I smell the blood. The gum from where the tooth was pulled is now pooling with bright red blood, filling up his whole mouth. He moves away from me and gobs a load out on the ground by my front wheel.

He says: Give me your bike.

Are you having a laugh?

No.

The woman who was shouting now has an old-style Kodak camera and she has padded out across the road in her slippers towards the wreck of the car. She is taking pictures like she's a forensic scientist.

The boy yells back over his shoulder, what the fuck are you doing, woman?

She shouts back, still flashing the camera, stay there, please, the police are on their way.

He takes one long step towards me from my perched spot by the bridge. I can't move. He grabs the handlebars and shoves them hard, his grip surprisingly firm despite his skinny frame. I reckon I could ordinarily take him in a fight, but my arms feel weak, and I'm trembling and I can't tear my eyes away from his mouth which I know is still filling up with blood.

He says, give me your bike.

I say, what are you going to do if I don't, hit me? And then I feel like this was the wrong thing to say. Maybe I have just given him an idea he didn't think of before.

He smiles a bloody grin.

I decide that I don't want to risk it. I pull my leg over the saddle and step off.

And he's all like, Thanks, babe.

And that's it.

That's the meet-cute.

That's Woody Allen and Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*. It's Leonardo DiCaprio seeing Claire Danes for the first time through a fish tank in the loos at the Capulet party. It's Gene Kelly jumping into Debbie Reynolds's car in *Singin' in the Rain* – except Boy's jumping onto my bike, not into my car, and he's stealing it, not hitching a ride. And he's doing it because the only other car available has been smashed into a church. By him.

I have to tell Mum and Rory about the bike. It was a new one too. Me and Esh went round town all last summer washing cars and split the cash we made down the middle. Eshal bought a bunch of books about animals and I got the bike.

Mum says, this is why we don't buy you nice things, Bess. Because you don't look after them.

She's lying. I know the real reason they don't buy me nice things is because the social only gives them an extra thirty quid when it's my birthday.

Rory says, come off it, Leese, she's just been mugged, give her a break.

I just think you ought to be more careful, Bess.

She rubs her head like she's got a migraine. I pretend to watch TV but I can tell she's looking at me, trying to piece together something to say to me.

I wait, until I can't stand the feeling of her eyes on me and say, what is it?

You never bring home good news, Bess, she says, her hand hovering at her neck.

She plods upstairs for a bath and Clarissa buggers off to her room soon after and I'm left with Rory who is intensely interested in the end of the England-Argentina match.

I say to him, do you have any martial arts moves left over from the army?

He says, I'm an engineer, Bess. I don't know any martial arts. They don't even teach martial arts.

Okay, what about guns. Do you have any guns?

You're not shooting your mother.

I wasn't planning on it, I say wryly. He flashes me a quick grin.

What I know about Rory and the army: He was supposed to be in for maximum tenure, which is twelve years. He was in Argentina for a bit, and then when that was over he got sent to Kuwait. Except he took a short cut one time on a training exercise. He was driving an HGV full of expensive equipment, worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. He decided to drive up a hill rather than take the longer road route. Halfway up the hill the engine got clogged with so much dust that it cut out and the lorry rolled back down the hill, and all the equipment inside got bashed up and ruined. Rory got put in military prison for three days and in the end he missed the whole of Desert Storm. He got deployed in Northern Ireland for a few months, then he came home to my Mum and me, a four-year-old foster daughter he'd never met before. Eleven months later Clarissa turned up. I think the whole reason I got fostered in the first place was so Mum could have someone keep her company while Rory served out his twelve years in the army. In the end, I think he only did five or six. He never talks about it except for when

there's stuff on the news about Afghanistan or Al Qaeda in Yemen, he mutters stuff under his breath about quote-unquote Arabs and calls Tony Blair a cunt a lot.

I lie on my bed and try and find faces in the dots.

Sometimes I give the faces names and personalities. I'm not a freak. There's just nothing else to do here. My two life choices are to either do really, really well at school so I can get out of Shepperton as quickly as possible and study film in London, or become one of the locals in the Crossroads who drink so much that all their teeth have fallen out.

I could go either way right now. I just need to get through this year at school and I can get out. Apply to a good college, work hard, get into University, move away. Me and Eshal are going to do it together, because Eshal wants to be a vet, she's already picked the vet college in Basingstoke she's going to get into, and after that she's going to the Royal Veterinary College to get her degree. After uni, she'll be a super high-flying top vet with loads of awards and her own documentary TV show, and I'm going to be the director, following her round with a camera crew while she saves all the animals, performing impossible life-saving operations on budgies and rabbits and horses and stuff. It won't be like that crappy daytime TV documentary shit. It's going to be cinematic, unflinching, hard-hitting. And I'll win a BAFTA for it. It's going to be called *Eshal Bhandari: Animal Whisperer*. We've got it all planned out.

Mum has put Clarissa to bed. Everything is quiet again.

I think about the sounds of the boy who crashed into the church. The sound of his Doc Martens crunching over the shattered glass and crumbled up brickwork as he manoeuvred his way out the car. Heavy feet. The sounds his hands would make if he put them on different parts of my body: hair, back, shoulder, face. The sound of his voice, low, and his speech becoming less enunciated as his mouth fills up with blood.

Chapter 4

It's not until Fair day that I see him again.

Eshal and I are watching the birds in the beer garden in the Three Horseshoes. I point to the birds and she names them for me like this:

Common quail, *coturnix coturnix*.

Grey partridge, *perdix perdix*.

Common moorhen, *gallinule chloropus*.

And the parakeets above us, their green wings blurring against one another.

Eshal says: They're from India. Did you know that? Immigrants. Indian rose-ringed parakeet, *psittacula kramri manillensis*. Did you know that they escaped from aviaries in London during the Great Storm?

Not what I heard, I say, wrinkling my nose at her.

The parakeets dart and swivel above us.

We're tucked around the side of the beer garden because Eshal's brother Anwar is at the Fair today and if he sees her in the pub he will tell her parents and she'll be grounded for approximately the rest of her life. Eshal's family are Muslims. She doesn't really buy into it, though. I don't think she does. It's one of the things we don't talk about.

Shepperton Village Fair is probably the only cool thing that ever happens in this town. It's on the Manor Park Green at the end of the high street, but it spreads up the high street too and into the shops and the residential roads and suddenly the whole of Shepperton is a fair.

The best thing about it is the raft race. The idea is you make a raft out of old shit you find in your garden and paddle it down the Thames from one end of Shepperton to the other,

starting at Ferry Lane and ending at Manor Park just before the river curves under Walton Bridge. This year the theme is 'Countries of the World' and Billy's been building an Antarctica raft in his back garden since March. Antarctica is not a Country of the World. I can see the raft on his patio if I lean out of the bathroom window far enough. The main feature of it is a load of cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other with a white sheet draped over it followed by cling film, and the accents painted with blue paint. It's supposed to be an iceberg, but it looks like a giant blue marshmallow.

Me and Eshal are watching the high street to see if we can spot Anwar but instead there's a giant blobby marshmallow bobbing up and down in the crowd.

Holy shit, Billy's actually going to sail his iceberg.

What? Says Eshal.

I explain to her about Billy and his raft.

We must see this, Eshal says. She downs the rest of her drink and drags me onto my feet.

We make our way onto the field, hopping over the metal barrier. The trees that border the green give way to tents and gazebos, food vans smoking, and people everywhere. The air is thick with the smell of people and food and fairground rides line the edges of the field.

We find a patch of grass on the river bank that hasn't already been claimed and sit down.

So, who is it we're looking out for? Eshal asks for the third time.

Billy, you know, my next-door neighbour? Every time I see him he shouts GOTH at me and makes a cross sign with his fingers.

He's riding a giant blue marshmallow.

We wait for ten minutes or so as more rafts cross the finishing line to smatterings of applause from the sunbathers on picnic blankets, all announced by megaphone from a woman further down the bank perched precariously on a borrowed lifeguard's chair. She announces each raft with increasing enthusiasm compared to the last.

This is raft F-six which is Hayley, Jemima, Ellen and Darcy who are all in Year 2 at Littleton C of E, and they've decided to do their raft up as China! How adorable.

Cue four dots in geisha kimonos (Japanese, not Chinese) trying to paddle the Jade Palace up the Thames. Their kimonos are so waterlogged they can barely lift their arms.

Kimonos are Japanese, I say, not Chinese.

What is it about people in this town and their flagrant disregard for basic geography? Eshal asks, her eyes still fixed on the China/Japan raft.

Who needs geography when Shepperton is the centre of the universe, don't-you-know, I say in a hoity-toity voice, making her snort. She does the royal wave.

Oh look, the megaphone woman chirps, here comes Pakistan, raft F-twenty-two, which is Brian and the three Johns from the Barley Mow pub on Watersplash Road! Good effort, boys!

The boys are more men, all pudgy and dressed in white, paddling their raft with cricket bats. They're being overtaken by a Scout group on raft F-one who have dressed their boat as Italy, and have managed to do a papier maché colosseum, which the announcer tells us breathlessly took them three months to construct.

One of the Scouts pulls out a water pistol and starts firing at the Pakistanis. John number three pulls his cricket bat out of the water and cracks it abruptly on the boy's head. A hundred metres down the bank, a woman with a toddler strapped to her chest stands up and screeches a string of profanities at Brian and the three Johns.

You realise he's an eleven-year-old boy, you twat?! She shrieks at the cricketers. They spot her and make a performance out of laughing at her.

She keeps screaming until the woman with the megaphone comes down from her lifeguard chair to shut her up. Except the mum wrestles the megaphone out of her hands and begins shouting through that instead. Now everyone on the bank is watching.

The woman: LIKE TO SEE YOU DO THAT TO SOMEONE YOUR OWN SIZE JOHN MARSHALL I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE I KNOW WHERE YOUR WIFE GETS HER NAILS DONE I'LL FUCKING HAVE BOTH OF YOU ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD BOY WHAT SORT OF MAN ARE YOU YOU TOSSER

John number three turns around, pulls down his creamy white cricket trousers, and moons the entire bank.

I'm going to make a photo series called 'Trouble in the Village', I tell Eshal.

That's not even funny, she says. Do better.

Meanwhile I've spotted Billy's raft through my camera lens, making his way past Pakistan and Italy, both of whom have come to a stop a few metres away from the bank as the woman continues to scream megaphone abuse at them.

Eshal picks up a half-eaten Chinese takeaway carton. The slimy noodles inside are leaking grease. We stand up, brush the grass off our backsides and edge slowly towards the bank, level with Billy and three of his nerd friends. Eshal has expert aim. She nails her first shot; the takeaway box hits Billy's raft square in the centre of his marshmallow. The noodles leave a nasty orange residue before they slide slowly down the cling film covering the iceberg.

I pick up a half-full carton of chips, drenched in ketchup and mayo. I'm aiming for the tip of the iceberg but I miss and the chips carton smacks squarely onto the back of Billy's red buoyancy aid. Billy turns around to see what's hit him and, seeing all the ketchup and shit

dribbling down his back into his ass crack, he roars. His eyes search the bank and land on me and Eshal, who are low-fiving on the edge of the river. Billy shouts at his friends who all start paddling faster. He's got chips in his hair.

I attempt another chips carton but the wind catches it and it floats harmlessly into a bit of dead water towards the opposite bank. One more, says Eshal, and she pulls a can of Dr Pepper out of the front of her backpack. She shakes it and lobs it at Billy's raft. The can cracks against the wooden stern and explodes, drenching the two front paddlers in sticky fizz.

There's a dad on the ground with his kids next to us tut-tutting and giving us evil eyes.

Time to go, I say, and we hop scotch over the people on their picnic blankets back towards the fair.

Somewhere behind us I register that someone is shouting Eshal's name.

I tell her, someone is shouting your name.

She turns around, her eyes searching the crowd for a familiar face. Then she blanches.

It's fucking Anwar, isn't it?

She breaks into a run and yanks me with such force that I almost trip over her. We're back in the middle of the fair and there's a brass band by the Girl guides tent. They're playing 'Geno' by Dexy's Midnight Runners.

Eshal feels me slowing to watch the band and yanks my wrist again.

Come on! She hisses.

I follow her, keeping pace as she weaves through the aisles of baked goods, barbecues and nick nacks.

We're almost at the road. I look back over my shoulder. I can't see Anwar anywhere.

Can we stop now, please? We've probably lost him, I tell her.

Eshal's eyes are wild.

He's a sneaky fucker, she says, he'll pop up anywhere.

I say, let's just stop for a minute and catch our breath.

I'm not as fit as Eshal. She does cross country every Wednesday with the school. She does kickboxing at her Mosque's youth club in Ealing every Saturday morning.

We reach an empty picnic bench next to a burger stand and sit down. I count the silvers in my pocket and buy two cheeseburgers and a can of coke to share between us. Eshal asks me whether the meat is halal and I start to laugh but then I realise she's being serious. There is a very white, very skinhead looking butcher who is flipping burgers in the van and glaring at Eshal like she just kicked his dog. Eshal sets her burger down in front of her and watches me eat. It's delicious. Proper meat. The kind of cheese that melts in your mouth.

Sorry, I say, my mouth full of cow meat, I forget.

You're a shitty friend, she says, and I think (hope) she's joking.

Eshal spots something over my shoulder and she ducks her head under the table. I glance behind me to see what's caught her attention but I kind of already know. Anwar is striding towards us, his eyes narrowed and his mouth turned down, which is a shame because Anwar is pretty buff-looking when he's not angry.

He arrives at our picnic bench. Eshal is still under the table top pretending she doesn't exist. Anwar stares at her.

I say, Hi Anwar, are you enjoying the fair? How's Uni?

Anwar glances at me.

He says, Bess, please can you tell Eshal I can see her.

I say, Eshal, Anwar can see you.

She says, Sup, Anwar.

Anwar says, I hope that's a veggie burger. He means the cheese burger Esh just lobbed over her head when she spotted Anwar coming.

I say, How's your mum, Anwar?

Shut up, Bess.

I smile my biggest sweetest smile up at him.

Eshal, what are you playing at?

Well, I didn't eat any of it, if that's what you're asking.

I saw you throwing food at that boy on the river!

That wasn't us. That was our doppelgangers.

You think this is a joke?

You think this is a joke? Esh parrots back at him.

Eshal!

That kid is *evil*, Anwar, I'm not kidding.

Anwar mutters something in Bengali under his breath and grabs Eshal's arm.

What are you doing? Get off me.

Anwar tells her, I'm going to have to explain to Mum. Honestly, Esh, what's wrong with you? He looks at me like he's asking me the same question. I look away.

He hauls Eshal up and, ignoring her protests, marches her along the walkway back towards the road. I wave them off and pick up Eshal's burger off the ground. There's no dirt

on it. I take a bite. There's a girl with a *Little Mermaid* balloon watching me from the picnic bench along. She's watching me eat the floor burger.

THAT'S DISGUSTING, she yells at me. I poke my tongue out and cross my eyes at her.

I wander back towards the road, planning to start the thirty-minute walk home. I light a cigarette by the fence before hopping back over. On the other side of the war memorial, a familiar flash of red catches my eye. I look over and I see my bike leaning casually against the fence by the Three Horseshoes.

I stop, squinting past the roundabout. It *looks* like my bike. I cross the road to get a better look. Yep. The yellow APOLLO logo across the frame is all scratched up. It's got the one bead on the spoke left over from when those things were in fashion and I used to ride around rattling like death breath. The bike is chained to the High Street road sign. I can't believe it. He steals my bike and then has the cheek to lock it up?!

Because God forbid someone steals your already-stolen property.

I look around. I can't see the guy anywhere. I remember his face so clearly – a square jaw with a dusting of stubble, with straight white teeth, even though he was missing one and gargling blood. Big black eyes with thick eyelashes. The kind of guy who steals your bike and you don't even mind. My mouth is dry just thinking about it.

I don't know what to do. Should I just wait here until he comes back and confront him? Should I try and work out the combination on the lock, or just wrench it open? Should I take the quick-release front wheel off and make a run for it?

I'm about to test the lock when I spot the thief bouncing across the road. He's taking long, loping strides, his knees bending gracefully with every step. He's looking behind him, his neck bent awkwardly, watching something further down the street, so he hasn't seen me yet.

I panic. What exactly am I going to do when he gets over here, demand that he gives my bike back? He'll laugh in my face.

He is turning around now. I step over the wall ringing the flower beds in the pub garden and duck behind a petunia bush. He draws level with me, totally unaware of my presence, and bends over to unlock the bike. I think about this dickhead cycling round on my bike for three weeks while I've been walking everywhere and scuffing my platforms so badly that I actually had to rub them down with Rory's shoe polish.

The thief sits astride the bike and pushes off – in fifth gear.

The gears click and strain under the pressure.

And I'm thinking, does he even care about what that's doing to the derailleur?!

Of course, he doesn't. It's not his bike. He stole it. From me.

I stand up from the petunia bush and make a grab for him. He catches sight of me and a flash of recognition crosses his face, but by then it's too late. I reach out and shove him hard, with all my weight behind the movement, pushing him off the bike in slow motion. My bike topples and he crashes onto the pavement, crumpled.

He looks up at me, grit stuck to the side of his face just like outside the church that day.

What the fuck?! He shouts.

The rage that made me push him over is already gone and I realise exactly what I've done, attacked him in the street. I just stare at him, frozen, my ears throbbing.

He lifts the bike off himself and stands up slowly. He leans over, holding his knees, breathing heavily. I think I winded him.

You stole my bike, I tell him.

You let me have it.

His response takes me off guard, but I carry on.

I tell him, I'm taking it back now.

He straightens up and I pick the bike up off the pavement. I wheel it past him, ready to leave. I want to say something cutting before I make my exit but I can't think of anything so I stare at him gormless for a moment before I go to pedal away. I click the gears back into first.

What's your name? he splutters out. Were you *hiding* in that bush?

I say, you've got dirt on your eyebrow.

He scrubs at his brow with the heel of his hand.

He says, I'm Boy.

I say, that's nice for you.

I want to go. I look up to the flats above the kebab shop. There's a magpie sitting right on the edge of the roof. I've got a horrible sense of vertigo just looking at it. The sky is burning orange behind it, so bright that the magpie is just a silhouette.

I look back at Boy. He's still waiting for me to tell him my name. Still dizzy, but I'm not looking up anymore. I give him the dirtiest look I can muster and turn back towards the high street, kicking the bike into motion, my feet pumping the pedals in perfect time with my heart pumping loudly in my head.

Chapter 5

When I see him next it's the last day of Year 10. It's a year before I'm pregnant with his foetus. I still barely know him.

Eshal and I are mooching out of the school gates, an earbud each plugged into my Walkman. Today it's The Temptations, 'Ain't Too Proud to Beg'. Eshal is saying, *please* for the love of God, can we just for once listen to Oasis? It's the last day of school, let me have this. And I say, OK, where's the disc then? And of course, she doesn't have it because her parents don't let her buy that kind of music, and she pouts and I grin at her and sing *please don't leave me girl*.

Our school is the seventies kind, with flimsy windows, the metal frames painted with chipped white paint, underscored with cheapy plastic green panelling. We walk out into the forecourt, with kids cramming onto the school bus, squirting water bottles at each other and soaking their shirts. Even the teachers on going-home duty look more chilled out. It feels like the end of *The Breakfast Club* and we are all John Bender.

I've told Eshal all about Boy and my bike and what happened after she left the fair. She's just as intrigued as I am. She was grounded for a week after her brother Anwar ratted her out for throwing food at Billy and eating beef even though she didn't. Eshal's parents, Mr and Mrs Bhandari, are super strict. They both think I'm a bad influence. Not like Esh is the one that gave me my first cigarette, rolled me my first spliff, the one who nicked our first six-pack of lagers out of the offie on Laleham Road for the both of us. She made me fake an asthma attack next to the pilau rice as a distraction while she pegged it out the front with the Thatcher's and a family pack of Jaffa Cakes. Mr and Mrs Bhandari keep talking about how if she can't get her act together they won't let her go to veterinary college or the RVC and they'll send her to Bangladesh to live with her grandma for a year instead, and make her get married to a nice Bengali boy. Mrs Bhandari is what our English teacher Miss

Hanger would call a *formidable woman* (e.g. Lady Macbeth, played by Francesca Annis in the Roman Polanski version – not Helen Baxendale, although she was still pretty good). (Except, you know, without the murder and the madness et cetera.)

I suddenly think I see Boy here, now. Today, Our Lady of the Assumption has a big empty blue sky behind it, the same colour blue as a swimming pool. The sunshine makes me feel giddy. Seeing Boy standing on the pavement opposite School, leaning casually against the railings, looking a thousand per cent badass, might be my imagination. I see him everywhere these days. I spy him – or a stranger who looks like him – from by the science portacabins. Eshal is next to me.

Is that *him*? She asks me.

I don't know. I only saw him twice.

That's a lie, obviously. I remember all of it. The blood, especially. But I don't want Eshal to know that.

And the over-long hair on the person at the corner of the Greeno Road staring unnervingly in our direction certainly looks like Boy's hair. The way his arms hang limply by his side, as though not sure how they got there or what they're supposed to be doing, look like Boy's arms.

He's staring at us, I say.

I'm going to kill him.

Eshal says that, not me.

I grab Eshal's arm and pull her back to me just as she takes a stride forward, a determined look on her face, her earphone popping out of her ear.

Just leave it, I say. He's not worth it. I got my bike back. But even as I say it I can feel myself growing tense, though not in the same murderous-rage way as Eshal. I feel a

little *ashamed* to see him. Me, here in my school uniform, shirt soaked through with backwash from someone's water bottle. Nails bitten down, tights laddered, eyeliner streaking. I am aware of my whole body.

But it's the principle, Eshal says. Her eyes are fixed on him, blowing the stray strands of her hair away from her face and then sucking them back in a pendulum motion like she's about to go super-saiyan in *Dragonball Z*.

Eshal says, he needs some retribution.

No, he doesn't. He's not worth our time at all. Let's just go the other way home.

I can feel the heat in my cheeks. I should be angry too, but I'm not, really. I'm just faking it.

I say to Eshal, let's gooooo. And in my ear The Temptations are going, *Now I've got a love so deep in the pit of my heart...*

She's not having it. Her pointy witch's chin sticks out.

I take her arm again and steer her around to the other side of the bus, so that we're out of possibly-Boy's line of vision. We round the corner and practically slam into Hannah Barrington and her sister Mary Beth.

Mary Beth is smoking a cigarette and leaning lazily on the handles of a toddler's pram. Inside the seat of the pram is Jay Jay – I don't think that's his real name – Mary Beth's little boy. Mary Beth is having some sort of argument with Hannah. She waves her cigarette and stabs it at the air as she punctuates each point.

I can feel in the tenseness of Esh's arms that she's either ready for a fight, or ready to run. She still hasn't got Mary Beth back for beating her up on the eighteenth hole at Sunbury Golf Course. Mary Beth is big though. When she shifts her body, I can see her stomach hanging out from the bottom of her belly top.

Eshal still can't close her left eye properly because of Mary Beth. I say to her, come on. But her legs are locked to the ground. Her fists are balled up so tightly that I can see her knuckles turning white.

They haven't spotted us yet. There's still time. I glance back over to the other side of the road and possibly-Boy is still standing there, watching us, his long lanky arms folding neatly across his chest.

Mary Beth has spotted us. She turns around, her face puffy and pink from the shouting she's been doing at Hannah.

Hey Hannah, look who it is, Paki Girl and Demon Goth.

Apparently, they are united against the force of me and Eshal, the argument forgotten.

When I was in Year 9 I made a pizza in Food Tech and Hannah Barrington chased me down the A-Corridor until she caught up with me and stole my pizza right out of my hands. She unwrapped it from its tin foil and cream pied a wall with it, slamming it like a pancake against the yellow-painted brickwork on the staircase. Even after I'd cycled all the way home I was still crying, and Mum asked me why and I told her and she rang Hannah Barrington's mum and had a *right go*. Which obviously made things about four million times worse, and the next day at school not only was there still a faded circle of tomato sauce on the A-Corridor wall which someone had written "Bess's shit pizza" next to in biro, but Hannah Barrington was holding court in the playground mimicking the pinched nasal voice my mum does when she's really angry. It was a good imitation, to be fair to Hannah. But it was still embarrassing. Everyone knew what happened, and that Bess's mummy who's not even her real mummy anyway had to fight her battle for her. Eshal saw the *Bess's shit pizza* wall art too, and saw Hannah doing the impression of Mum, and she got one of the big waist-height bins from the quad and dumped it over Hannah's head. After that I didn't cry, I just followed Eshal's lead and threw my stationary at people.

I notice that Jay Jay's hands are slippery with dribble.

Eshal says to Mary Beth, what are you doing here, still trying to pass your SATs, Mary? I thought you would've gotten the hint by now.

Mary Beth's forehead wrinkles.

Eshal elaborates, the hint that you're dumb as shit.

Hannah says, go back to Curry Town, *Eshal*. Go back to the cult, *Demon Goth*.

Full of purposeful steps today, Eshal takes another one. Toward Mary Beth.

It's so lucky that your kid didn't inherit those pig nose genes you've got going on, Eshal says.

Shut your fucking mouth. I can smell your curry breath from here, Mary Beth retaliates. At least I can eat pig, dirty Paki.

Eshal's neck is tense. I can see what she's thinking. She's imagining how Mary Beth held her arm behind her back until she screamed and cried. And how Mary Beth sat on her chest and let a globule of saliva slide slowly from her mouth, until the string of spit connecting it snapped and the gob landed on Eshal's face.

Hannah pushes Eshal from the side, slamming her into the bus. The force of it knocks Eshal aside easily and the metallic thud rattles the side of the vehicle. A couple of Year 7s sitting on the bus glance out of the window, their eyes big.

Mary Beth pulls Jay Jay out of the way. The pram gets caught and almost topples but Mary Beth catches it at the last moment.

She says, Hannah what the fuck?!

Hannah ignores her.

Eshal is still pinned against the bus under Hannah's forearm.

I say, just leave it out, Hannah. I want to sound aloof and annoyed, like the whole thing is beneath me, and I've got somewhere to be, better things to do. But my voice comes out like a squeak.

Eshal almost shoves Hannah out of the way but Hannah pushes Eshal back into the bus with the palm of her hand on her chest.

Mary Beth stands next to me, watching Eshal struggle against Hannah's arm. My face is so close to hers – Mary Beth's – and I can smell her breath. I can see that the sweat on her back has soaked through her navy crop top and made a dark patch on her clothes.

Eshal's eyes are glassy. She looks at me.

I try again, Hannah, stop being such a cunt. Get off her.

Mary Beth interjects, actually, yeah Hannah, I've got places to be. I don't have time for you to be playing who's-the-biggest-slag with curry breath.

Eshal shrieks SHUT THE FUCK UP MARY BETH and her voice is out of control and for one horrible moment I think that she's going to cry.

Hannah relaxes begrudgingly. She releases Eshal and shoves her one more time into the bus for good measure, and Eshal's head bangs against the bus, making a hollow metallic sound.

You're a fucking know-it-all bitch, you know that? she screeches at Eshal, almost hysterical, almost like she's going to cry herself, and what I see in her pale freckled face is hatred, or maybe fear, I'm not sure which. I wonder how it got to this. I grab Eshal and yank her away before she goes for Hannah. I repeat our mantra to her as I tug her away.

Not worth it. Not worth it. Not worth it.

One of the Year 7s has gone and blabbed, and now Monsieur Alain, our French teacher, has just rounded a corner.

He says loudly, does someone want to tell me what's going on here?

I take in Eshal's blossoming pink neck and her hair all in knots. She is panting hard. She sneers back at Hannah and Mary Beth.

Fucking council house scum, she shouts at them. I want to tell her no, that's too far, but Monsieur Alain starts, Eshal, language, you girls come with me –

We don't wait to hear what else he has to say. We dodge around the side of the bus before either of them have the chance to retaliate and sprint out the front gate. No time to get our bikes. We keep running down the street, weaving through the masses of schoolkids ambling down the road towards the train station. Monsieur Alain is patting Hannah's shoulder. She's turned on the crocodile tears. Further down the road ahead, one of the PE teachers whose name I don't know is listening to his walkie talkie. He glances in our direction as we head towards him. I wonder what they told him. *Apprehend the brown girl and her fat friend.*

We stop.

Esh looks at me, genuine fear now on her face, more genuine than when Hannah had her against the bus.

The last time someone called home about Eshal getting into fights her mum grounded her for a whole summer.

Which is bullshit, because most of the time it's some racist brute hassling Eshal, and there's nothing she can do to avoid it.

This is not fucking happening again, she says loudly. She turns around and strides back towards the school. I follow her, unsure of what her plan is.

Eshal crosses the road and I understand her plan.

She hops over the metal barrier which is supposed to stop cars mounting the pavement. She crosses the road without looking. I follow her. She strides right up to Boy, who

is still leaning against the fence. Up close I can tell that it is definitely him. I wonder whether he saw what happened with Hannah and Mary Beth. I wonder why he didn't come and try to help us, or stop them.

Boy watches us come to him.

You're Boy, right? Eshal demands. He is head and shoulders taller than her.

I think you owe my friend Bess here a favour. She indicates me with a thumb over her shoulder. He looks up to meet my gaze and I can feel a lump forming in my throat. The houses swim around me.

What are you actually doing here? I ask him, still too shrill.

Eshal says it doesn't matter. What matters is that he owes you.

Boy looks like he's going to laugh. Instead he turns around and says, come on.

I nudge Eshal, indicating that I think that this is a bad idea and maybe we should just get caught and accept our punishment.

Eshal understands all of this wordless communication. She says, under her breath, I don't care if he's a psycho, there is no fucking way I am spending another summer in my bedroom reading aloud to myself from the Qur'an.

So, we follow him and I feel like I can't breathe.

And we're already in his car. A bashed up blue Ford Sierra. Not the one he wrote off at the church, a different one.

It's parked by the gates to the Greeno. I don't think the teachers saw where we went. Eshal sits in the front seat. I sit behind Boy, on the bit that doesn't have the deep crater of a cigarette burn in the seat. The whole inside of it smells like stale smoke. A troll doll with bright pink hair hangs from the rear-view mirror.

Boy takes us to his house. The whole time we're in the car he says barely anything, despite Eshal's relentless questioning –

Is this your car or did you steal it like you stole Bess's bike did you steal the car you crashed into the church how comes you crashed a car into a church have you got a grudge or something were you high tell the truth though you were high weren't you are you high right now should you be driving do you even have a license are you old enough to have a license where are you taking us is it your house where do you live is it on Green Lane because that's where I live and we can't go down there in case my parents see me do you have any cigarettes –

Boy says that he is nineteen and that is the only one of Eshal's questions he answers, indirectly. I wonder why he chose to answer that one, of all of them. I'm embarrassed by my own surge of disappointment that he's too old to like me. We drive towards the Studios and pass it. Boy is slamming on worn brakes that groan as we pass the speed camera, towards the BP garage and over the A308 junction into Ashford, on School Road. He pulls into a driveway with two overflowing wheelie bins on the pathway.

Do me a favour and move those bins, he says, turning to Eshal. I forgot how deep his voice is. It sounds just like how toast smells.

Eshal gets out of the car.

Alright? He says, once we're alone.

It's not a *hello* alright, it's an *are you okay with this* alright.

I don't know if I'm okay with this so I say nothing, shrug and try and communicate something meaningful with my eyes alone. The window in the back seat is smeared with tiny fingerprints the size of a small child's, but not handprints. Like someone has rested the tips of their fingers on the window for just a moment, a hundred times over.

He opens the door and steps out, and I follow his lead. He doesn't use a key for the front door to the house, he just turns the handle and it pushes open. I follow Eshal inside, pulling her back to let Boy walk a little ahead so I can whisper without him hearing.

I hiss at her, we are staying five minutes and then we are leaving.

Duh, you think I want to stick around? This guy is a total creep.

Boy can't hear us because he is in the kitchen at the end of the hallway looking in the fridge. The carpet in the hallway is dark and musty, bits of fluff and dust trodden into it. The word COCKZ is spelled out in plastic magnet letters on the door. Somewhere in the house or on the street outside there is a baby crying.

We stand awkwardly in the hallway, watching Boy close the fridge door and walk out the back of the kitchen into the garden, which is overgrown with broken fence panels and an ancient rusted flatpack metal shed entangled in the undergrowth. Some cheap plastic white garden furniture is arranged in a U-shape on the tiny patio. We follow Boy and perch ourselves on the edges of the plastic chairs.

Boy lights a cigarette.

What now? I ask the garden.

Boy shrugs and exhales a plume of smoke.

You can stick around for a bit if you want. Watch some TV or something. Or I can take you home.

I imagine Boy dropping me outside my house in his bashed-up Sierra, my mother twitching at the curtains, the tirade of questions that would follow.

Clearly Eshal is thinking the same thing because she goes, uh, no thanks.

I can't think of anything to say so I ask Boy how he sleeps with all the noise from School Road outside.

He says, that's the least of my problems when there's a baby.

I feel my mouth twitch involuntarily. I didn't just imagine the crying.

Eshal, forever the tactful one, thinking for both of us, screeches, you have a BABY?!

My feeling of being very very *too* young intensifies.

Boy shakes his head, no, my sister's baby. She lives on the first floor.

Where are your parents? Eshal asks. Boy shrugs and blows smoke rings at the sun.

And we sit and wait for something to happen, someone to say something, each of us not wanting to be the person who does, and none of us do, so we look everywhere but at each other.

I take the 400 bus home that evening, and I watch the flat, broad silhouette of the reservoir through the window, milky blue sky behind it, and then the bus is in the shadow of Stage H as it rounds the corner onto the estate, and I think I see him there, by the park, only a fraction of a look, his chin turned in my direction, and our eyes meet for half a second and I feel my whole body throb in that moment, me and him locked in that glance, through the bus window which is grey with exhaust fumes and scratched up with graffiti, and of course it's not him at all, and it takes me a while to regulate my breathing, and I wonder what is happening to me.

When I get home Mum has had a call from school already about our altercation with Mary Beth and Hannah.

She shouts.

She is going to call Henry about my behaviour. Henry is my social worker.

She doesn't call anyone when Clarissa is playing up. Because Clarissa doesn't have a social worker.

I say, why don't you just fucking deal with it like a normal mother instead of threatening to send me away every time I mess up?

She calls Henry anyway and tells him that she can't cope. I open my bedroom window as wide as I can so I can hear her talking on the telephone through the open window downstairs. I hear words like unacceptable and difficult and attitude. I think I hear her crying.

Later when I'm sleeping she comes upstairs with too-sweet tea for me. She says sorry for shouting and she is trying to be a good mum, her hand hovering at the back of her neck and sometimes mine. We don't hug. I say sorry for being a moody teenager and I will try and be less angry and not get in fights. And we both know that it is so much more than this, whatever it is that is going on between us. We pretend that it's just about being *good* – a good mum and a good daughter – like we are actors playing parts, and when she leaves I feel like I haven't eaten in days.

On the weekend, I walk to school and get my bike back from the bike lockers. I cycle to Boy's house on School Road and think about knocking. But I don't. I have this jittery feeling in my tendons and I feel like something terrible is happening to me.

Chapter 6

And now it's later in the summer, just before we start Year 11, the grass and the trees turning brown, the sky dark and angry and Boy and I are on the edge of something but I don't know what it is yet, a year before I'm in the Golden Grill loos pregnant with his foetus, my boobs all weird and achey. In this moment, I'm in Manor Park at the end of the high street, waiting for Eshal, thinking to myself, *I spend my whole life waiting for Eshal*. The grass is dewy wet and the river is choppy. The boats moored further along the bank rock as the water slaps against their sides.

Manor Park Jesus is asleep on the bench.

Everyone in Shepperton knows Manor Park Jesus. He deals weed and pills out of the flat above the bookies in the High Street, but for some reason prefers to sleep under the trees in Manor Park rather than under a roof. Me and Esh share a joint with him on Sunday afternoons when the weather's nice. He's been arrested in every pub in Shepperton and probably most of the ones over the bridge in Walton too. He's been a permanent fixture of Shepperton for as long as I can remember.

The first time I properly met him, though, was when he was being arrested outside the Three Horseshoes. Manor Park Jesus was yanking against the handcuffs, which were already strapped around his wrists. His earring was on the floor – a slim scratched-up gold hoop. As Manor Park Jesus struggled, the police officer kicked the earring around the pavement. When they moved a little further down the road towards the patrol car I slipped through the crowd that had gathered and picked up the earring. Jesus saw me do it. I saw that his left earlobe had been split in two and blood snaked down the side of his neck

He shouted over his shoulder as the policeman tried to force his head into the car.

Look after my earring, he yelled at me.

I was ten. I'd escaped my foster parents for a moment as they stopped to get cold medicine for Clarissa in the pharmacy.

He shouted again. Look after it.

I closed my fist around it and held it high in the air, showing him.

His face relaxed and he let the policeman put him in the car.

On the way home, I took the earring out of my pocket and examined it. It was smooth but scuffed-black and the thin bit that goes through the earlobe was the colour of rust. Mum noticed.

What is that? She asked me, twisted round in the passenger seat, the seatbelt cutting a tight line across her bony chest.

I said, it belongs to Jesus.

Mum said, for Christ's sakes, don't be ridiculous, Bess.

She took the hoop from between my fingers and threw it out of the open car window.

When Manor Park Jesus got out of prison a few weeks later I went to see him on his bench by the river after school one day. I told him I had lost the earring. I thought he might hit me. Or stab me. Instead he just laughed.

Today, he's having a bad day. He's asleep on a bench and he's lost his shoes. It is almost the end of the summer and the park is dead compared to how it was on Fair day. I sit down by the river and pick up a stick. I ping it at Jesus and it flicks him in the cheek. He wakes up.

Only me, Jesus, I tell him.

What's that for, you little shit?

The sky feels like it is too close, and today the river itself is a dull charcoal grey.

I sit down and let the wet grass soak into the seat of my jeans. I watch the kids on the island stoke a makeshift barbecue. The air smells of rain and woodsmoke and blood.

Eshal comes back from the shops with cigarettes and we light one each. Jesus wanders over from his bench and bums one too.

We sit quietly for a while, and then Jesus says, one day you will see that I'm a genius and you'll marry me.

Eshal asks me if I have a crush on Boy.

She wants me to say no, I can tell. Esh and I have never bothered with boys. We think they're stupid and dirty. We tolerate a few of them as acquaintances – the ones who play Dungeons and Dragons in the library at lunchtime and don't make comments about our tits. We've always agreed that *boyfriends* as a concept is all a bit pathetic. But then, there's never been anyone at school who I've properly *fancied*. And if Eshal ever liked a boy she'd never mention it. Not that she'd be able to act on it anyway, because boys – especially white, non-Muslim ones that you aren't engaged to – are a big fat NO in the Bhandari household.

Boy's different from the boys at school, though. He's older, for one: way more mature. He has a house, a job, a car. And that day when I saw him outside school, I don't want to admit to *anyone* – not Esh, not myself – what kind of weird backflip my appendix did when my eyes landed on him standing across the road. That feeling is the first time I've ever wanted to keep something from Esh.

I don't answer her straight away. I remember taking the bus home at dusk, the day we met him and he took us to his house, and looking out the window at the sun dropping down over the Pits, turning the sky pink, and thinking about all the things that are wrong with me, things that he will hate.

I say to her, whenever I'm alone I imagine that he's watching me. So, I do things how I would like him to see them. I am constantly self-conscious.

I say, whenever I'm somewhere busy like the High Street or on the train I imagine bumping into him. I create these conversations in my head between us. I keep seeing him in strangers.

Eshal tells me I need to sort it out.

I know, I know.

Also, Eshal says, this guy is nineteen years old. As much as you're amazing hot and cool, there's no way he is going for you. You've only just turned fifteen.

I know.

She says, you're letting him define you. Don't do that. Don't ever let a boy – don't let *anyone* define you. You should learn yourself first before you learn another person. Don't forget, Bess. Don't let him know you until you know yourself.

Her face is apologetic as she says it.

Who died and made you Cher? I ask her.

She looks so earnest. I start on at her with a pitchy rendition of 'Believe' and she smacks me on the head until I stop.

I don't see Boy for the rest of the summer. In September Clarissa wakes up in the middle of the night screaming. My bedroom is down the hall from hers. I hear her before Mum and Rory do. She has rolled over awkwardly in the night and her right elbow juts out from the joint, pushing so violently against the skin that it threatens to break it from the inside. She won't stop screaming.

Rory comes in first and kneels by Clarissa's bed.

I ask Clarissa if she can show me her arm and she does, her eyes great big flying saucers like Uma Thurman on drugs in *Pulp Fiction*.

Rory examines the arm. It's definitely dislocated, he tells me.

Clarissa says, am I going to die?

I say, for crying out loud Riss, you're nine years old, get a grip.

Rory makes me sit with her while he goes to wake up Mum. Clarissa's all twisted up in her bedsheets, hot and snotty and tearful. The bedroom is blue from the moon coming through the slatted blinds. Rory comes back in. We're going to take her to the hospital.

I heave Clarissa out of her bed, with effort, just as Mum comes in.

Mum says, no, no, what are you doing?! Put her down! Let Rory do it!

She whispers it even though everyone in our house is awake and in this room.

She hisses at me. Put her down. Don't touch her.

Clarissa is crying again. Rory lifts her gently from my arms and holds her gingerly. She cradles her arm.

Mum decides that she will go in the car to the hospital with Rory and Clarissa.

I sit down on Clarissa's bed and listen out for the door to slam. It's 2.43am. I go out onto the porch roof through my bedroom window, and light a cigarette. I watch Stage H in the dark. It looks like it's alive, stirring. The air is warm. A car pulls into the driveway of the house opposite, booming house music, and a man approaches the driver's window, hands over money, takes a baggie and then the car reverses out and drives away.

I take my bike out of the shed and cycle along Old Charlton Road towards Boy's house. At the speed camera, about halfway, I realise what I'm doing and turn back.

When I do eventually get to see him it's because I'm in his supermarket. The Tesco in Sunbury. It's been three months, nearly Christmas. I'm alone because Eshal's grandmother is

dead, and she's gone to Dhaka for the funeral. In the chocolate aisle, Boy is stacking shelves in a blue shirt.

It takes me a moment to realise what he is wearing and doing. He works here. His long hair is pulled into a scruffy knot. He looks even lankier in the black uniform trousers. He turns to face me and I duck around the corner of the end of the aisle. When he moves away a little I follow him. He looks tired. His arms are thin and pale. They look as though they might be malleable and could curve around each other until they are tangled like Stretch Armstrong.

I follow him around Tesco for twenty minutes before a security guard approaches me and asks me if I'm planning on buying anything. I pick up a Kinder Egg and pay for it with the copper coins that have fallen through the holes in my pockets into the lining of my coat.

I wait for him in all the places he would never think to look, because I know he will come soon. I can't explain how I know this. Whenever I look in a mirror I practice facial expressions to use on him. Secret faces that only he will know about. I imagine that he can read my mind, that he's getting all the messages I'm sending him in my head.

Lisa knows something is wrong. We sit at dinner and I feed Clarissa with a spoon because although her arm is almost healed it's not ready to come out of the sling yet, and she can't use cutlery with her left hand. She's not a baby anymore; she's probably playing it up. But Mum insists.

When I drop a spoon of peas down Clarissa, each one bouncing off her sling and landing in her lap, for the fourth time, Mum loses it. Starts yelling. What the hell is wrong with you?

Nothing, I say, just tired.

You've been tired for weeks.

I shrug.

Are you listening to me, Bess?

When I don't answer, she slams her fork down on the table. It clatters against the side of her plate. We all jump. Me, Clarissa and Rory. The table jerks with our collective wince. For a moment I wonder whether she's going to hit me. But weirdly I don't feel afraid of her. When she talks to me it's like she's at the other end of a swimming pool. Eshal isn't back from Bangladesh and I've been stuck in this house for days.

And eventually, one day in December when I leave my house for school he's there on the street. I mean, he is actually there, sitting on the bonnet of his bashed-up Sierra smoking a cigarette and watching the sheep on the fields that slope up the sides of the reservoir.

Right outside.

Thank God you came. Thank God because I was suffocating.

I don't say this, but I think it.

I stop and watch him for a moment. He's staring at me. He lifts his arm high above his head and holds it there.

The pavement is dry and smooth. The sky still feels too close.

I shout at him, as loud as I can without alerting Rory inside.

What the fuck are you doing here, you creep?

He says, I got you a Kinder Egg. You like those, don't you?

Of *course* he didn't hear my thought-messages to him. Of *course* he didn't realise that I had been waiting for him, and that it was now time to come.

I feel like if I move he might jump on me and beat the shit out of me because he knows. He knows I stalked him at his job. That *I'm* the creep, not him.

He says after a moment, I'll give you a lift to school.

He's wearing his Tesco uniform. I walk slowly to the car, listening to the slapping sound my girlish school shoes make against the concrete. Boy already has the engine running. I slip into the passenger seat, slam the door, glancing one more time through the living room window as I do, half expecting Rory to be watching my every move.

He's not there. Boy does a U-turn and pulls away.

We don't go to Our Lady in the end.

We end up by the river. It's all very *Dazed and Confused*.

Luckily today there is no Manor Park Jesus asleep on the bench so he can't rat on me to Eshal.

I smoke Boy's cigarettes and he sits in silence, stripping a blade of sedge grass of its seeds with his fingernails.

Eventually I say, sorry for following you 'round Tesco. I didn't mean to. Really. I didn't even know you worked there. I just saw you and couldn't help it.

I hear the words as they come out my mouth and realise what I sound like. Couldn't help it. Desperate. I wait for him to pick them apart.

He doesn't. He says, it's fine really. You're a weirdo, though, do you know that?

I say, yes, I know.

Then I say, look at it this way. If you didn't steal my bike none of this would've happened. So really, it's *your* fault that you've got a weirdo following you around.

He laughs but it sounds forced. He's wearing sunglasses, even though it's November and it's cold and the sun is hidden behind thick black-grey clouds. The light is waning even now.

He stretches back on the grass, and I think about doing the same thing, stretching out like that, but I can't because my body is rigid and I'm hyper-aware of every single move that I make, and what he will think of me, the way I hold my arms, the way my body looks sideways, how the light hits my face.

And on the weekend, he picks me up again.

We go to his house and I help him paint the walls in the living room, which is also his bedroom. The bed is a z-bed folded into a sofa. The whole time we are painting I imagine myself vomiting all over the walls.

I say, do you not have any friends to help you do this?

He says, all those guys at Tesco are like forty. They all live in their mums' basements. Wanking all day.

Where are your parents?

He is standing on a chair by the window, poking a paintbrush into the very top corner of the room.

My dad's in Brighton. My mum's not around. It's just me and Keris here. Keris is my sister. And obviously her kid.

I don't ask anything else. The TV plays an advert for a loans company. Lombard Direct with the cartoon blue phone.

When we're finished the walls and ceiling are white like new bedsheets. I have a glob of paint on the inside of my nostril. I can't breathe properly. My nose whistles as I exhale through my paint nostril. I can hear it happening and I try to breathe through my mouth instead. But my throat is so dry it has closed up. I alternate between loud mouth-breathing and whistling air past the paint in my nose.

Boy says, what the fuck is that noise?

I show him my nose. I have a paint bogey, I say.

His face splits into a huge grin, his teeth all glittery. Come here.

I come here and he shoves his thumb up my nostril. The pad of the thumb is rough against the inside of my nose, but the fingernail is hard and smooth. He pulls the glob of paint from my nostril, yanking out several nose hairs with it.

He holds up the paint bogey. I position my index finger between his and flick it as hard as I can. It bounces off the window and disappears behind the sofa.

You're disgusting, he says.

I throw my hair back like I'm a L'Oréal shampoo model.

Another time he calls my house phone at four pm. Mum answers the phone and calls me to collect it.

She says, there is a man asking for you on the phone. You don't know any men, do you? Her hand drifts up.

I shrug and take the phone to my bedroom. I lie on my bed and watch the dots on the ceiling morph into faces as I talk to him

Boy says, Sup, weirdo.

How did you get my number? I ask him.

I need you to get this gum out of my hair. Keris said she won't do it because Zack's got injections. I'm starting a shift at two. I can't turn up with gum in my hair.

How the fuck did you get gum in your hair?

Zack did it. Keris has this shitty habit of leaving gum in receipts everywhere. Who the fuck leaves gum lying around when there are toddlers in the house?

I say, Boy, I've got no clue how to get gum out of hair.

Can you at least try? It's right at the back. I can't do it properly by myself.

As I pull on my boots and put the phone back in its cradle on the windowsill downstairs, I wonder why he's not asking anyone else to help him.

Mum asks me where I'm going.

Just to a friend's. Do you know how to get gum out of hair?

Which friend? Eshal is still in Bangladesh, isn't she?

A new friend.

Who?

No one special!

I drag my bike from behind the bins in the back garden. Mum watches me leave through the kitchen window. I pretend I can't see her.

We end up cutting the gum out. Boy hates that there's a huge chunk of hair missing at the back of his head.

It looks uneven, he says. I look like a Furby.

Nah, it looks intentional. For sure.

He says, Don't patronise me, but I think he's joking.

I say, fine, and pick up the scissors. I cut the rest of his hair to the same length as the chewing gum patch.

He stares at it in the bathroom mirror. I hold a second one stolen from Keris's bedroom so he can see it from all angles. He looks like Shakespeare or something, with an awkward short bob. It's completely ridiculous.

The bathroom sink is full of black hair.

I say, I'm not cleaning up this mess, okay?

Boy is still watching his reflection, the crease between his eyebrows disappearing and reappearing as his jaw works. He opens the bathroom cabinet and takes out a set of clippers.

Just get rid of all of it, he says.

You're not serious.

I'm deadly serious.

I shave clumps of his hair off, holding fistfuls away from his head and letting the clippers slide effortlessly against the roots. I pull his ears back to get the clippers behind them, going all the way to the bottom of the back of his neck to get the downy fuzz reaching into his shirt collar.

When I'm done I tell him, you look like a convict.

He runs his hands over his head, rubbing the tiny hairs protruding from his scalp.

It's a very strange sensation, he says.

He offers his bald head for me to feel. I place my hands on it and slowly begin to circle the crown. I rub my hands round and round for what seems like hours. I imagine the bathroom darkening into night, the world turning without us, the end of humanity in a nuclear apocalypse, and I am still here rubbing his head as he kneels before me.

You're right, I say. It's like I can feel your brain through your skull.

I slow my hands to a stop. He is quiet.

We catch each other's eye at exactly the same time and burst out laughing.

Chapter 7

Christmas in 1998 is quiet because Eshal is still in Dhaka at her nanuji's funeral. On Christmas day, we visit Mum's brother, my uncle Jason, who lives alone in a flat in Brentford on a shitty estate even worse than ours, but actually when you go inside he's decked the place out like it's a palace. Everything in cream with gold and black bits. The sofa is a kind of chaise longue with a gold-painted frame. Clarissa and I sit on the edge of it, our shoes not touching the floor. Jason has tried to serve us mimosas three times but Mum keeps telling him no. Now Jason's asking Riss about school. Riss is a straight-A student. She tells him about a science project she's been doing, something to do with a papier-maché volcano and baking soda. I pretend that I'm not listening but the way she explains makes it sound really cool.

Impressive, Jason tells her, and takes another sip of a mimosa, which Mum says is honestly just glorified Bucks Fizz.

And what about you, Bess? He asks me, any plans for after school? Are you heading off to college?

Bess doesn't like to plan, Mum says, smirking, and I make a note of the tone of voice she uses so I can mimic it back to her later.

I want to go to film school, I tell Jason, ignoring her. I like Jason. He looks me in the eye when I talk to him. He makes the kinds of noises when I speak that make me think he cares about what I'm saying. He makes me feel like I'm more important than Riss, not the other way around like it is with most of Mum's and Rory's family.

What sort of films are you into? He asks me.

I shrug. I don't know. Anything with Julia Roberts? Tarantino. John Hughes. Have you seen *The Breakfast Club*?

It's one of my all-time favourites.

He opens up a cabinet underneath the TV set and takes out a VHS case. He hands it to me.

Limited edition director's cut, he says.

Holy shit.

Bess, language, please, Mum says.

Can I borrow this? I ask him.

Keep it.

Holy *shit*.

Bess!

Give her a break, Leese, Jason says, rolling his eyes comically.

You're going to tell me how to raise my kids?

He doesn't answer and after a moment she looks away.

Rory says, Jason do you need a hand with anything in the kitchen? And Jason whose whole face relaxes says yes please, Rory, that would be great. And they both go into the kitchen which is really only a section of the same room with a plasterboard wall separating it and Mum, Riss and I sit in silence for a while, *The Breakfast Club* still in my sticky hands. And my face is burning red, I can feel it.

After Christmas dinner, we open our presents. My dead biological grandmother, who is called Emelie, has sent me fifty pounds from beyond the grave, care of Henry my social worker. This is a yearly tradition that's been happening since she died, like some kind of staggered inheritance, and I'm pretty sure she has delegated enough fifty-pound notes to send me for every birthday and Christmas until I retire. She even picked out all of the cards herself and wrote messages in them. I don't know too much about her apart from what she writes to me posthumously. This year she has sent me a poem by Emily Bronte, called 'Love and

Friendship'. She had lung cancer, and I think it was a slow dying. After I got taken into care I stopped seeing her. Stopped contact, is what they call it. Stopped contact with anyone from my birth family, actually. And then when I was seven she died. My social worker at the time took less than thirty seconds on the phone to give me the news.

The things I remember about my gran are a huge farmhouse in the countryside with a treehouse and a garden so big and complex that it felt like a maze; and an unidentifiable perfumed scent which I have never found in any Superdrug or Boots or Debenhams despite trying, sniffing endless bottles and spritzing my wrists until I'm a cloud of flora, until a pissed-off beauty counter attendant asks me to buy something or leave. My grandmother had a lawnmower that you had to sit down inside to operate. I sat in her lap and she drove the lawnmower through the maze-garden. That's all I know about her, apart from the fact that after I went into foster care she refused to talk to my real mother. So now I suppose she sends me the money to make up for something that she never did wrong.

For Christmas, Mum and Rory (Mum picked it, bought it and wrapped it. Rory probably has no idea what it is) have given me a leather-bound notebook, a diary I suppose. It's beautiful. I say thank you. Later on I can hear Jason in the kitchen asking Mum in a hushed whisper whether that was all they got for me, look at all the stuff Clarissa got, it was so much more, do you not see how unfair you're being to her, and Mum replies something angrily which shuts him up quickly and they come back into the living room, where the rest of us are watching the *EastEnders* Christmas special and eating mince pies, and I can't stop my face from turning bright red again, and Mum looks at me and she knows that we all heard them and then she tells us it's time to go. And that is our Christmas.

When Eshal comes home from Bangladesh in January just in time for the start of the Spring term she wants me to tell her all about Boy. She's been away for half a term of school. It's weird her being back. Every time I try to tell her I can't bring myself to do it. I want to keep

the things Boy and I do together private and that's the first time I've ever felt like keeping something from Eshal.

I realise that she is my only friend, apart from Boy. And I'm not sure he even counts.

She says, so what's he like?

I tell her I don't know.

Bullshit, she says.

We're in Art, finishing up our projects before the final exam in May.

It's true. I don't know anything about Boy, still.

Eshal leans close to me so her long wispy hair is tickling my shoulder and goes in a stage whisper, you're not *fucking* him, are you?

She says *fucking* like it's a dog that just took a shit on her new platforms.

Oh my God, Esh, get a grip.

I'm just asking!

She waits for me to answer and when I don't she says, Well, are you? And I realise that I've got something that she hasn't for the first time in like, ever.

I wink at her as Miss Turvy comes over to check our work. And she widens her eyes at me. And for the rest of the day things are weird between us and we can't quite keep a conversation going.

It's February now and no one wants to think about exams but we all are, all the while pretending like we don't care. I tell Eshal I can't hang out on weekends anymore because I have to revise for Physics or English but really, I'm with Boy.

I ask him, what is your most secret fantasy?

He says, if there was guaranteed no repercussions, I would eat a human being.

He asks me what mine is. I tell him I always wanted to be an astronaut.

On the weekends Mum thinks I'm in my bedroom most of the time but I'm climbing through the window onto the porch roof and shimmying down the drainpipe. No one notices I'm gone.

It's been three weeks since Eshal got back from Dhaka and I still haven't seen her outside of school. I know she's probably fuming that I haven't asked her about her nanuji and the funeral but I try not to think about it. She probably wants to rage about her dad lining her up with their latest bachelor pick in Bangladesh. She hates it there. Not just because of the bachelor thing. In the part of Bangladesh where her grandmother lives they don't like Muslims. They shout abuse at her and her family in the streets. So, even in the place her family comes from, she doesn't belong. She pretends it doesn't get to her. She says, it doesn't matter because I am on a higher plane of existence to these motherfuckers. But then other times she says, it's like I'm not good enough for here or good enough for there. So where is it that I will be good enough?

I take the drainpipe route to Boy's. On the porch roof, shivering in the frost, I can see the top of the warehouses and a tiny bit of the reservoir behind them.

I sit there for a moment, watching Billy trying to get over the barbed wire fence into the Studios, his small breaths coming out in pale clouds, his nose sticking out, red as a glacé cherry, from the collar of his parka. He can't get his leg high enough to hop it. Eshal rounds the corner by the park and spots me on the porch roof.

She says, what the fuck are you doing up there?

I motion for her to shush, and point at the living room window where Mum is marking homework in front of the telly.

I get off the roof by way of the drainpipe and motion for Eshal to follow me around the side of the house towards the woods.

When we're out of the way she says, what the hell Bess? Why haven't you come to see me yet? It's been like three weekends since I got back and you haven't even called me.

I look at her and I'm not sure how to answer. Weak February sunlight filters through the horse chestnut trees lining the footpath in the woods.

My nan died. You didn't even ask me how the funeral was.

I say, uselessly, I'm sorry.

She's angry. Her chin juts out like Clarissa's used to when she was about to throw a tantrum. She lets her hair fall across her face, something she only does when she doesn't want me to see that I've upset her. Her nose points through a parting of hair in front of her face.

Where are you even going?

I shrug, and my stomach is hot.

You're going to Boy's, she says. Statement, not question. I don't answer.

Fine, she says. I'll come with you.

She looks exhausted, like she hasn't slept in days.

Eshal, I say, I'm sorry, alright? Fucking get over it.

She doesn't answer, and I hear those words leave my mouth and I realise how I sound, how truly awfully selfish I am.

When Boy opens the door and sees me, his face grins, all glittery, an expression with which I'm becoming highly familiar. Then he sees Eshal behind me in the driveway.

Eshal wanted to say hi, I tell him.

She pushes past me into the house.

Hi Boy, she says. She marches into the kitchen and opens the fridge. Boy watches her do it and says nothing. She takes a carton of orange juice out of the fridge and unscrews it. She swigs.

That's really unhygienic, I say from the doorstep, but my voice is small and she doesn't hear me.

She closes the fridge and takes a seat at the little kitchen table, kicking off her trainers. On the table, there is a deck of cards. She opens the packet and empties the cards onto the table.

Boy isn't your real name, is it?

Boy sits down at the other chair across from her and picks up a card, spinning it between his two index fingers.

Eshal asks Boy if he has any cigarettes.

I'm sorry, I tell him.

Eshal looks up at me, bewildered, why are you sorry? She asks, too loudly.

Am I embarrassing you? She says. Am I?

She tells Boy, I'm her bodyguard, okay? I'm her Mum.

I don't answer but for some reason I feel like crying. The boiler turns on upstairs and we hear footsteps.

Someone shouts from the hallway: Have you seen Zack's mittens?

Boy shouts back, no, try the airing cupboard.

Who's that? Eshal asks. Your girlfriend?

My sister, Keris.

Cool. Shall we go and say hi?

She'll be down in a minute. We're going out, actually, so you're going to have to shove off soon. Thanks for the social call, though.

Boy looks at me when he says this.

Where are you going? Eshal asks, flicking her hair back, her eyes blazing under her eyebrows.

I turn away and rearrange the letters on the fridge door.

We're going to see my Dad.

You have a *Dad*?

I say, what kind of a question is that, Eshal?

Well, he might have come into existence through mitosis. Like in Biology. Bacteria. We're revising for that in school, Boy. We've got exams. Bess really wants to get an A in Science. Don't you, Bess?

Sure, I say.

Keris comes back down the stairs with Zack in front of her on uncertain feet, chattering loudly about something. When they reach the kitchen he stares and clutches at her legs. She's not at all what I expected. She is almost as tall as Boy and just as skinny, but instead of dark hair she has a shock of bushy ginger hair encircling her head like a halo. Her face and bare arms are scattered with dark freckles. Zack is, by comparison, a chubby two-year-old with a slobbery thumb in his mouth, but with exactly the same shade of copper-bronze hair.

Oh, cool, Keris says, which one of you is Bess?

Eshal points at me, and I'm kind of flattered that Boy thinks enough of me to mention me to his sister.

You're the one who did that to my brother's hair? She asks me, gesturing to Boy's bald head. It looks so much better.

You guys have to go now, Boy tells us, his voice monotonous.

What, you're not coming with us? Keris asks. Zack climbs onto Boy's lap, yanking at his t-shirt, casting wary glances at me and Esh. Boy says, Zack, mate, say hello to Eshal and Bess. They're my friends. But the kid turns his face into Boy's neck and makes a protest noise.

They're not coming to Brighton, Boy tells Keris.

Oh. Okay.

We can come, Eshal says loudly.

That's okay, I say.

No. Seriously, it'll be fun.

Keris says, I don't see why not. Our Dad lives in Brighton. Is that okay?

We love Brighton, don't we, Bess?

I haven't been to Brighton since I was nine. I picture miserable kids dropping ice creams on the pavement and screaming to get off the merry-go-round.

Sure, I say again. I say it to Boy. I look at him and he looks back, his eyes boring into mine. I briefly think about the CD that's playing on my stereo in my bedroom with the door closed, surely by now on its third go of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. Mum will be getting suspicious soon.

And then I'm like, fuck it, I don't care.

And I don't.

I'm still looking at Boy, and he's looking at me.

Eshal stands up from the table. Zack stares at us both, suspicious, his eyes all round and shiny.

Chapter 8

We all squeeze into Boy's bashed-up Sierra, which turns out to be Keris's, I realise, as she slides into the driving seat.

We share it, Boy explains.

No, we don't, Keris clarifies, I own it and Boy steals it because he smashed his own into a church.

Boy says nothing. I sit in the back with him and Zack strapped into a baby seat, while Eshal gets in the front passenger seat and asks Keris about a million questions about herself and Zack.

How old are you?

I'm twenty-three.

How come you guys don't live with your parents?

We never knew our Mum and we don't get on with our Dad.

So why are you going to visit him?

Because I wanted to introduce him to Zack. He hasn't met him yet.

Where's Zack's Dad?

Hit and run.

Oh my god! Did he die?

No, although it might be better if he did. I mean, he *hit* me and *ran*. Also, he's in prison for traffic offenses.

What did he do?

Hit and run.

Oh.

Yup.

So, do you have a boyfriend?

Nope. Just me and Zack. And Boy, I guess, too.

Keris beams over her shoulder at Boy and I understand that their smile is hereditary. I wonder if their Dad's got it as well.

Keris bombs the car down the M25 at a speed that shoves my head back against the head-rest. She's got *The Lion King* soundtrack shoved into the tape player and Zack mumbles his way through most of the lyrics, Keris sometimes joining in with him. But when the chorus for 'The Circle of Life' kicks in Zack and Keris both suddenly start screeching along to it at the top of their lungs. When the tape finishes – the last song being 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight', Keris rewinds the tape and we start all over again. Then she reaches over Eshal to the glove compartment and pulls out *The Little Mermaid*. She switches the tape over and winds it forward until she finds 'Under the Sea' and the whole process begins again. The whole time she's doing this, her eyes on the tape player and not the road, we are hitting eighty-five miles per hour on the motorway. When we get further out of London and closer to the coast, she eases up a little bit on the accelerator and I see Eshal visibly relax. I look out at the fields with the window rolled down and even lean out and take a couple of pictures with my Pentax, fortifying myself against the blistering winter wind. The sun is low and orange, making long slim shadows of the trees lining the motorway. Zack bashes his little hands against the window, going LOOK MUMMY when he sees the sea, leaving trails of saliva against it like snail tracks.

And when we pull into Brighton, the air in the car changes, and it's obvious that everyone here loves the sea. Even though it's February and the sea itself looks like broken bits of slate. It sets my teeth on edge. I wish I'd worn more layers. Keris winds the front-seat windows all the way down, even though it's freezing.

Just so we can smell it, she explains.

We park on a steep residential road, about two hundred yards away from the sea front. The road is straight so we can see the pebbled beach below us from where we're standing. I remember that Paul Weller song about being lonely. *Like a loser's reach*, I never understood that line. I think about that old film noir *Brighton Rock* with all the gangsters. Brighton looks different when it's not in black and white. Eshal and Keris are already best friends, nagging like they've known each other for years. I could never talk to strangers the way she does. I can't even talk to Boy like that.

We wait for Keris to lock the car up, all three of us staring out to the sea. Boy stands arm's length away from me and I'm convinced he's doing it deliberately because he knows it will upset me. I move over to him and touch his arm lightly, something which I've done many times when we've been alone in his room, just hanging out. He jerks away, still not looking at me. I realise what a horrible mistake this has all been. I wonder if I'll even ever see him again after today.

We walk up the hill, Keris holding tightly onto Zack's hand, the brown pavement slabs loose and the gaps between them clogged with damp soil. We stop at the middle house on a long terrace of three-storied grey-stone Victorian-style buildings. Keris buzzes and the orange door clicks open. We climb a narrow dingy staircase to the first floor. Keris knocks on the flat door, breathless.

When Boy's dad opens the door, I understand immediately why he was so nervous about this. Their dad, whose name is David, isn't wearing a shirt and his fly is undone. The flat stinks of pot.

Keris says, hi Dad, and the pep has gone out of her voice.

The dad pulls Keris into a sweaty-looking hug and looks at Zack who's clinging onto her, his eyes distrustful and his thumb in his mouth.

This is the sprog, then? He asks Keris.

No. Keris says, this is, and points to Boy, and they both laugh.

Alright, boy, the dad says, and he says boy, not Boy. With a lower-case b. A nickname, not a Christian name. I always knew Boy's name wasn't really Boy and I always wondered how he got it. I guess this is how. Later, Boy tells me that he and Keris joke that their Dad forgot Boy's name when he was a baby and it's been too long to politely ask someone to repeat it.

We all bundle into the flat and me and Eshal are introduced as 'our friends'. Well, actually no. What really happens is David says very loudly who's the Paki then? which makes Eshal's face blossom a deep dark purple colour and Keris looks mortified and mouths 'sorry' to Eshal, her eyes frantic, and Eshal just kind of shrugs, one side of her mouth pulled up into a look of indifference but I know she must be fuming. But Eshal having a go at this man is so much different than biting back at the kids at school, most of who are shorter than Esh if not as skinny, and I don't think she's got any chilli powder on her to slap onto his face and I think to myself absentmindedly, my throat burning, so this is exactly the shape and size of a real-life cantankerous old cunt. You get the same sort of racism in Shepperton, but it comes with at least an *attempt* at civility. Racism of the middle-class. Not quite Surrey Hills but really, *really* fucking trying to be. And I don't know about those hoity-toity Village Fair lot but *I'm* still poor as dicks, and so is Esh, but in a different kind of way. And so is David by the looks of it, but that doesn't stop him from being a bigoted knob jockey of the first degree. And it doesn't stop any of the three other white people in the room doing any sodding thing to stop him. Because we're all cowards, and that's the truth of it.

The flat is revolting. It's a studio with one door which leads to a bathroom. There are three rickety chairs that look like they've been jacked from a skip, and an unmade sofa bed with a load of twisted up sheets on it. Keris sits on the edge of the sofa, holding onto Zack a bit too tightly, and he's straining to get away from her and explore. The windows are grimy and

the carpet is thick with fag ash and the surfaces are coated in dust with empty beer bottles everywhere.

Eshal and I settle on the other two chairs and David reclines on the sofa bed. Boy stays standing.

How have you been, Dad? Keris asks, while Zack hangs off her neck like a monkey.

Nothing new to report, David answers.

Nothing new in three years? Says Keris.

Not really. What about you? You've been busy, clearly. David points at Zack who just glares at him again.

Clearly I have, Keris replies, beaming, and I realise that she is one of those people who doesn't have a bad bone in her body.

This is Zack, she says, gesturing to him. Zack, that's Mummy's Daddy, that's your granddad David, say hello to your granddad.

Let's have a look at him then, David says, holding out his arms. Zack starts to cry.

What's all this nonsense about, little man? David says to him, putting on this awful baby-talk voice that makes me cringe.

He's a bit shy with strangers, Boy says, his lip curling.

David looks up, as if only noticing Boy just now.

And how is the boy? He asks. Still stacking shelves?

Nothing new to report, David, Boy says. Just like you.

Just like your father, David agrees, but the way he says it is loaded, like it's not a good thing for Boy to be like David, and it's not a good thing for David to have Boy be like him.

Go on, let him down so he can have a play, David says as Zack tries again to climb off Keris's lap, his face going red.

Where can I put him? Keris asks, looking around the apartment.

Just stick him on the floor. He'll be alright.

Keris looks at the floor. Eshal and I look at the floor too. I notice there is an unemptied ashtray on the carpet next to the sofa. I glance up at Keris and catch her eye and her face is so open, it's so easy to see what exactly she thinks of letting Zack play on this floor. David doesn't notice because he hasn't properly looked at any of us yet.

Maybe not, Keris says, he'll be alright for now.

Zack says I WANT TO PLAY IN THERE MUMMY, pointing at the kitchen, wriggling around on her lap.

We're not staying long, Boy says.

What? David turns back to him. Come all this way to see me and you're only here five minutes?

Well, we actually came here with our friends, Boy says, gesturing to me and Eshal. And we want to take Zack to the beach.

I haven't even made you a cup of tea yet! Silly me. Where are my manners? David slaps his bald head comically and tries to catch my eye. I think he's expecting me to laugh, so I do, high pitched and irregular. Eshal looks at me with this stricken expression and I know she feels as weird as I do about this whole situation.

Actually, I think we'll go now, don't you, Keris?

Keris looks relieved and the more time I spend looking at her the more I think that she is completely incapable of masking her emotions. She says, Yeah, okay.

Come on, Boy says to me. Let's go.

Nice to meet you, Eshal says half-heartedly to David, but Boy already has the door open and is pulling me out by the sleeve.

David doesn't say anything. He just stands in the middle of his living room and watches us leave single-file through his front door.

Outside, Keris says, I'm sorry, that was a mistake.

Boy says, it's okay. And he pulls her into a hug.

Keris says, I thought he might have changed. He sounded so – ordinary – on the phone.

People don't change, Boy says.

We walk along the seafront up to the pier and Boy buys chips with shrapnel from his coat pockets. Keris lets Zack out of his pram and we watch him toddle around on the beach and try to fit rocks into his mouth. He is fascinated by the sea, not breaking sight of it even as he is banging pebbles together in his fat hands or eating chips out of Keris's. But when Boy takes him right up to the edge of the tide and lowers him so that the water splashes against the soles of his shoes, he screams and doesn't stop until Boy lifts him out and gives him back to Keris.

Eshal watches the horizon with a philosophical look on her face for a long time before announcing: this is the weirdest day ever. And your Dad is a total fucking creep. Sorry.

Keris says, don't be. He is.

I follow Boy back up to the edge of the water and he slides his hand into mine. It's like we are in *The Piano*, waiting for our piano to arrive on the beach, and he is the mum and I'm the daughter. And I feel like this is progress, from him flinching at me. His hand is rough in mine and it's making my fingertips go fizzy and I think of that song line, *like a loser's reach*, what it might mean, perhaps I am a loser, perhaps I am *reaching*, perhaps I just misheard the lyrics and Paul Weller is saying something completely different.

I say, sorry your Dad's a jerk.

He says, it's alright, everyone has fucked up parents.

The tide throbs against our feet and then pulls away gently, displacing the tiny stones beneath. The sensation of the water tugging at me makes me feel brave.

I tell him, my biological mother tried to kill me when I was baby.

He turns and looks at me and I look right back at him, determined not to break the moment. He chews the inside of his cheek. And his hand is damp with seawater and it is still in mine. And my cheeks burn with the cold. And everything feels and smells and tastes a little sharper.

I've never told anyone that before, I tell him.

He says, I'm really sorry, Bess. And I shrug and screw up my face to show him that it's okay and that I don't want to talk about it. I just want to show him that we're kind of kinspeople.

I say, you know you're never going to get to eat a person, right?

He nods, and you'll never be an astronaut. You'll never make it out of here. He spreads an arm wide in front of him, showing me the beach, the pier, the sea, the world.

And I say, I know. I know.

Later, we go to a small pub called The Bear a little bit away from the seafront. Keris orders drinks and we tuck a sleeping Zack away behind our little booth. I sit three seats over from Boy, and Eshal and I try to guess what his name might be. His mouth is an Andrew but the way he moves it when he talks is a George. His cheekbones are Jasper and his skin is the colour of warm bone china (Henry). If I were to give his hair a name, now that it's all shorn off, it would be Christopher.

Boy doesn't answer, and Keris refuses to give it away, a smile playing on her mouth. We drink wine and our guesses at Boy's name become more and more unlikely. Barnabus, Fitzpatrick. Julie. He shrugs at each suggestion, neither confirming nor denying.

Eshal's words become slower and less pronounced. I'm trying to catch Boy's eye and communicate the sensation that is slowly gathering in the pit of my stomach, like a storm in July. The parting of the red sea in reverse. I know he can read my thoughts. I know it.

And I'm following Boy out of the bar, leaving Keris and Eshal behind to talk about birds and dads and the sharp air pierces every pore of my face. Sea spray is salty in my mouth and on my fingertips.

We go down the verge towards the sea. He has swiped the last of the bottle of wine from the table, offers me a swig. I shake my head, which is swimming. Keep it.

He smiles thanks and returns to gazing at his shoes, fiddling with the lid of the bottle.

I say, Well. This is a fucking dive, isn't it?

What?

Dive. Water pun.

I wait. He doesn't get it.

Come on, weirdo. I pull off my boots and stand up on the pebbles, waiting for him to do the same.

A questioning look. The sea is black and loud. I suddenly feel very brave.

We're going for a swim, I tell him.

We lose sight of the pub as we make our way down the incline.

We sprint into the sea, waylaid by the throb of waves as each one hits us like a slap in the face. The cold is a kick in the teeth and I push myself into it. My dress absorbs the salty

water and clings to my body, all of it exposed, the things I would rather hide on display, and I'm not so sure but I think to myself, for fuck's sake, Bess, you've come this far. You might be in love. Just get on with it.

Boy is still hovering closer to the shore, shirt on and only waist deep.

Come on! I yell at him.

He does. He unbuttons his shirt, throws it, and wades in, jeans still on, inhaling as the sensation of cold and grit and movement hits the upper part of his body.

I move backwards into deeper water, facing him, brave, taunting him to follow me. So cold I can hardly think. Like *Titanic*. Eventually he comes. I stop, treading water, and he moves so close to me that I can see the water pooling in the concave bit of his chest.

He watches me watch him.

He says, What?

I say, What? But the sounds of our voices disintegrate in the wake of the tide against the pier.

Moving closer to me as the waves tug at his middle, and then drifting away again, watching me watch him. Some kind of internal struggle, an argument with himself. And something momentous is about to happen. I can feel it. In my head, there is a voice that might scream but sings instead.

I'm gasping for breath. He is listening closely to my thoughts.

I tell him in my head, it's like *Titanic*.

And he laughs aloud like he heard me, and he kisses me. His mouth is warm and there is salt on his lips.

A proper kind of kiss.

How do you feel? Don't you feel free? He says, speaking the words into my mouth.

And we wade slowly back towards the shore. The tide throws us onto the beach and drags us back over the stones.

Chapter 9

He doesn't say a thing to me on the ninety-minute drive home. We are both wet and shivery. When I step out of the car he's asleep, like he even could, like it all meant nothing to him. Keris says goodbye and he stirs, but doesn't open his eyes.

Keris hesitates, as though she wants to say something but shouldn't. I wait, but she just waves me off as she pulls away from the bus stop.

When I get in the house, Mum is in the living room in her dressing gown. I consider just going straight upstairs and ignoring her, but that would only make the inevitable row worse, so I take off my boots by the stairs and head into the living room. Mum is waiting, holding the landline telephone in one hand and the remote control in the other. The TV is on mute. Mum isn't watching it, she's watching me as I come in. She doesn't look as angry as I thought she would. She looks tired.

I sit down on the sofa, and wait for what feels like an age.

Finally, she says, *well?*

I wait. In a small voice, I say, sorry.

Sorry? Is that it?

I shrug, say nothing.

Are you going to tell me where you've been all night?

It's 1a.m., so all night is an exaggeration. I went out with friends, I needed a break.

Trust me, Bess, your whole life is a break.

I don't answer.

You know what won't be a break? I'll tell you. When you fail these exams and you can't get into college or get a job because no one will hire you, and you'll be forced to stack shelves for the rest of your life.

Her voice rises in pitch and volume as she speaks. I think of Boy stacking shelves, and how I followed him round Tesco. It feels like years of things have happened since then.

These are the most important exams of your life and you are pissing it away to go and mess about with Eshal. Why is your hair wet?

I think of Boy's mouth, all salty, on mine in the middle of the sea. I'm silent.

Mum says, you're throwing everything you've worked so hard for away on some stupid scheme you've got going on.

I say nothing.

Is it a boyfriend?

What? No! Of course not.

I can tell when you're lying to me, Bess.

It's not a boy.

One day, when you've developed some common sense, you're going to realise that no boy is worth your future, your education or career. But at the moment it seems you're happy to be slutting around and not bothering with school. I don't know why I'm even surprised.

What I'm doing with Boy is not slutting around. Not in the slightest.

I stand up, my face hot and prickly. I know I'm going to cry. I turn away from Mum and go to head up the stairs. Rory is sitting on the middle landing section.

Having a good snoop, were we? I snap at him, my voice cracking.

Mum shouts from the living room, don't you dare talk to him like that!

I sprint the rest of the stairs and slam my bedroom door, childish. I throw myself onto the bed and feel the hot tears pool on my eyelids and spill over onto the pillow. I don't even know why I'm upset. I knew this was coming. I should have expected it. I lay there and listen to Mum and Rory's voices distorted through the floorboards, wait for them to pad slowly up the stairs and close their bedroom door before I switch out my light.

When I leave school on the Wednesday after Brighton, Henry is waiting for me in the school office. I say goodbye to Eshal and go to meet him. Henry is my social worker. In the eyes of social services, I'm classified as 'settled' due to my *permanent care placement*. So, the only times I ever see Henry is when I'm in deep shit. When Mum has called him.

Henry is tall and skinny, in his late twenties, fresh off the boat in social worker terms, with blondish neat hair and, sometimes, the remnants of poorly-removed blue or pink nail polish on his fingernails. When we get coffee he asks for *soy milk(?)*. I think Henry might be a drag queen in one of those big gay bars in Soho on the weekends.

Henry takes me to Café Mocha in the high street.

What the hell is going on, Bess, he says, without bothering with our usual niceties of how have you been over the last six months.

I hate it when he's like this.

I say, I'm not going to talk to you if you treat me like one of your case kids.

Henry is here to tick his boxes, ones that say I'm not into crime or hard drugs or getting bullied or suicidal or anything. I'm such an easy case. Most kids get totally fucked by the system, end up in eight different care homes in as many months and then therapy for behaviour disorders, or in jail for robbery or GBH. When I was younger, I always felt like by getting placed with Lisa and Rory, I was the luckiest kid in the system. Foster parents for life. Other times I feel like I have the worst luck ever. Once I asked Henry why Mum and Rory don't

just adopt me, seeing as it's agreed that I'm never being re-homed (re-homed, like a dog), and he looked super uncomfortable and said something vague about money. I worked out afterwards that Mum and Rory don't get paid to adopt, but the local council pays foster carers. Not much, but enough to make it worth your while. When I was younger I didn't understand why Lisa always saved the receipts for food shopping, or petrol if we went out somewhere, or the hairdresser's, dentists, all that kind of stuff. When social workers visited she handed them over. Took me ages to realise I was being *expensed*. I asked Lisa about it. Asked her why she never wanted to adopt me. What the receipts are for. Does she claim back for the heating and water I use, too. And her neck went pink, and her fingers fluttered to her throat, and she told me I was ungrateful, shouted it, really, and there was a roaring in my ears like I was listening to the ocean through a seashell. Later on, when I was in hospital they told me I'd hit my head so hard against the wall that I blacked out. And after that she stopped giving receipts to social workers – at least, she doesn't do it in front of me anymore.

I thought we had an understanding, Bess, Henry says, pouring two sugar sachets into my big coffee. The best thing about having social worker visits is that they always take you somewhere nice and pay for your food.

We do have an understanding, Henry, I reply, copying his condescending tone.

What are your grades looking like? He asks me.

Fine, I say.

And what are your college applications looking like?

Fine, I say again, but they're not. I haven't so much as picked up a prospectus from the school library.

I'm thinking about going into the military, I tell Henry.

Bullshit, he says, taking a sip of his latte.

He tells me this: it's obvious that you're dying to get out of care at your first possible chance. We're not going to re-home you when you're so settled here, just because you're bored or angsty.

I'm not angsty, I interject.

Your options are either to get on the housing register and wait about five years to get anywhere, and then be a slave to the system for the rest of your life – or find a job that is going to pay well enough to help you get out of your foster placement, or go to university. Both of those things require getting a good education.

Yes, I say.

What do you want to do with your life, Bess?

I think of Boy at nineteen-almost-twenty stacking shelves in Tesco.

I want to get educated, I tell him. I want to make films. I want to make *the* films. Can you name a female film director off the top of your head?

Henry thinks for a moment. No, I can't.

Exactly. I'm going to be the name that pops into your head when someone asks you that question. And after I've done that I'm going to be the name that you think of when someone says think of a film director, *any film director*. That's what I'm going to be.

Henry drives me home but I ask him to stop and drop me at the church in Littleton. The wall that Boy crashed into is low, hip-height, and someone has re-bricked it where the car damaged it. I wander around the graveyard and look at the headstones for each grave, imagining the lives of the dead people.

And someone behind me asks, Anyone you know?

An elderly woman is standing by the church door, in the archway. She's watching me.

I shake my head no.

I remember you, she says.

Really?

I worry, stupidly, that the woman is a ghost. I wonder if I'm dreaming.

That boy stole your bike. The one who crashed into the church.

I look at her face properly and remember. The woman who yelled at him and called the police.

Hello again, I say awkwardly. I didn't recognise you without your dressing gown.

She laughs and asks me whether I ever got my bike back.

I wonder whether this is a trap. I feel all curled up and rigid, like a woodlouse when you poke it with a stick. I look for something to kick but the only nearby thing is a headstone and that seems inappropriate.

She says her name is May and she runs the women's group at the church.

We do beginners' knitting classes on Tuesday nights, she says pointedly.

Sounds great, I say.

You should come.

Maybe.

I'll see you on Tuesday night, then.

I don't say anything.

You should probably get out of the graveyard now, May prompts me.

Yes. Sorry.

I leave, stepping carefully over the graves, feeling her eyes on my back the whole time, my cheeks hot.

When I get home I call Boy, a knot forming in my stomach. He answers on the third ring, his tone irate. He realises it's only me and his voice relaxes. I haven't spoken to him since we made out in the sea in Brighton.

What are you doing tonight? I ask him.

Nothing, but I need to scrape together some cash quickly, so I can't really hang out.

Why? What's going on?

Not much. My dipshit of a boss underpaid me and now we haven't got enough for rent.

How much?

Eighty or so. We need it tonight, too. We're already a week late.

I can hear Keris shouting in the background for Boy to get off the phone, and Zack crying.

Listen, Bess, I've got to go. But we'll get together soon, okay? Tomorrow?

He hangs up without waiting for me to respond.

Mum is watching me as I put the phone back in its cradle.

Who was that? She asks me.

No one. Just Eshal.

I wish you wouldn't lie to me, Bess.

Who says I'm lying?

I wasn't born yesterday.

Rory is in the kitchen making tea but I hear the tinkle of the spoon against china stop as the hysterical note in Mum's voice rises. Clarissa is on the living room floor doing homework but she stops too and stares at the two of us with her big glassy eyes.

I say, I can see where this is going so I'm going to leave before we have another screaming match, 'kay?

I step over Clarissa and walk up the stairs. I hear Mum shout a reply but my ears are ringing so loudly that I can't decipher what she's saying.

Upstairs, in my room, I open my desk drawer and take out a photo album. In between the last two pages there is an envelope full of the money that dead grandmother Emelie sends from beyond the grave every birthday and Christmas.

The envelope has written on it in cursive script, "To Isabelle, lots of love Nanny Emelie".

I count out the notes in the envelope. Altogether there is eight hundred and fifty pounds. The number surprises me, even though it makes sense, considering the number of years I've been in care.

I count out two notes, a hundred quid, and slide the rest back into the envelope and the drawer. The money feels strange to me, like charity from a stranger, even though I don't need any charity and if I ever spent it it would be on stupid, material things that run out like food and makeup and clothes and film for my cameras. It makes sense that I should help Boy out with it.

I cycle to Boy's and knock. He opens the door, holding Zack, his eyes wild. Zack is crying. He looks like he's trying to explode.

Boy goes, I thought I said don't come around?

He doesn't say it. He shouts it over Zack's screams. Partly to be heard and partly because he is angry. I feel like I'm shrinking.

I think I can help you, I tell him.

What?

I said, I CAN HELP YOU.

Boy still looks mad but he moves aside so I can get in. I go to the kitchen and find Keris sitting at the table with a jar full of coins in front of her. The coins are being extracted and arranged into piles to make up pounds. She looks up as I come in.

Hey Bess, now's not a great time, she says, and despite everything she manages to smile.

I sit down opposite her and take the money out of the front pocket of my bag. I place the fifties in front of her like an offering, like two halves of a whole. A very expensive cake.

Boy has followed me into the kitchen.

Where the hell did you get that? He says.

Keris stares at the money, and then at me, her eyes wide with shock.

She says, Bess.

I say, you'll have to pay me back, obviously. But not, like, quickly. Just when you have the money.

Bess, you have no idea what this means. We were about to get evicted. The housing association's been calling all morning. Boy was just about to sell the TV and the microwave.

Where did you get it, though? Boy says again.

It's just savings, I say, and I turn around in the chair to look at him. His eyebrows are even more furrowed than they usually are, and his face is blazing.

We can't take this, Boy says to Keris, I'm going to take the TV to Daley's and see what they'll give me for it.

Boy, don't be stupid, Keris says. She takes my hand across the table.

I nod. It's no trouble, really. I wouldn't do it if I couldn't. You know?

Boy nods. He picks up the money.

This is more than enough to cover it, he says.

Good.

I'm going to call Eric.

Our landlord, Keris clarifies to me.

Boy takes the phone from the kitchen wall and dials a number. He puts it to his ear.

I'm paying you back as soon as I get paid, he says to me, his eyes boring into mine. I nod. Then Eric answers and he says, I've got your money, you fucker.

I don't know why but I feel like I've crossed a line that has always been there, but I've only just now realised that it exists.

Eric the landlord turns up half an hour later and he and Boy have a very loud argument on the doorstep as he hands the money over. Keris won't stop hugging me and calling me a lifesaver. I'm lightheaded.

Later, Keris and Zack go to sleep upstairs and I help Boy plug his TV back into the wall from where he'd boxed it up to sell it. He can't get the aerial right, though, so the picture is fuzzy and keeps cutting between two channels.

Boy doesn't say anything to me for a long time. I feel like it's his turn to try and tell me something meaningful, since it's always me doing the talking. I wait and wait and wait and still nothing. Finally, I say to him:

Are you giving me the silent treatment?

He doesn't answer immediately, and then he says, No I'm watching this programme.

Yeah, right.

I wait again, but he doesn't continue. Outside it's getting dark and I want to curl up into a ball on the corner of his sofa bed and go to sleep and never wake up.

I imagine picking up the TV and throwing it through the bay window so all the glass smashes.

I say, I feel weird about what happened in Brighton.

He turns to look at me properly, and our elbows are touching.

I know, me too, he says.

I can't do another whole conversation where I make statements about things that are important and you just say *I know*.

He grins and says, I know.

Because this is important, Boy.

I know.

I laugh despite myself.

He says, I'm sorry, I'll be serious now.

I reach out and 'get' his nose between my index and middle fingers.

He says, I really like you, Bess.

I feel like I'm going to throw up all over him.

I say, I like you too.

He says, I think you are sweet and funny and kind and thoughtful.

I say, same. High five?

We high five. And then he kisses me again. Hesitant at first like in Brighton and then harder. Properly. His hands on my face and then my back and then my hips and then my legs.

The TV is almost completely static.

Chapter 10

After that, that's it.

I can't stop thinking about him. I see him every night after school and all day on the weekends. Sometimes we hang out in his room and sometimes he drives us to high up places so we can see far away and make up stories about the people who live in the tiny patchwork houses, in a haze of pollution and pylons. Or we sit on the railings of the bridge at the Pits and throw stuff – sticks and bits of moss and dirt – into the water, black crescents underneath our fingernails.

I steal one of his jumpers and wear it over my blazer to school every day until a teacher confiscates it. Eshal kicks me under the table. Is that Boy's? So, are you guys a thing now?

Yeah. We're a thing.

Eshal doesn't like it. She frowns at me and mimes puking.

Sometimes I catch myself touching my own face softly. I ask him, am I your girlfriend now?

He says, come on, Bess, what are we, twelve?

One time he rings the house phone on a Saturday morning and Lisa answers it before I can get to it.

She says, please stop calling my daughter, and then hangs up.

Mum!

She tells me, there is no way in high hell that you are having a boyfriend when you're just about to start your exams. No. Fucking. Way, Bess.

I walk out to save having the argument.

Boy thinks it's funny.

Your mum's scary, he says.

I say, you have no idea.

Henry calls me to check up on me.

Lisa says she barely sees you anymore.

She's paranoid.

Have you filled out your college applications?

Yes, of course, I say into the phone as I stare directly at the untouched pile of papers on the floor.

I tell Boy everything. I don't think anyone knows as much about me as he does, now. He knows every single thing they ever wrote down in my case file. We wrap his duvet around us and our legs tangle together as I tell him these things in a small voice. He watches my mouth as I speak. We are so close that his breath warms my face and I can smell his toothpaste.

He says, are you a virgin.

And I reply, of course not, but I'm lying.

I feel like I'm constantly teetering on the edge of being a child to him.

Sex hangs in the air between us and neither of us want to talk about it because it would be like looking directly into the sun. It is so bright. I wonder whether he would even try anything with me, because I'm so much younger. But when I see him now things get more and more intense. He takes my shirt off and slides his hands into my trousers and I mimic him clumsily. I think of the girls in the P.E. changing rooms at school – the girls like Hannah Barrington – who

seem to have lives and money and mobile phones like they're Alicia Silverstone in *Clueless*, who wear thongs and push up bras and hang around in shopping centres and shave not just their legs and armpits. I love those bright lacy bras they wear, the ones you can see through their white shirts. They look beautiful and dirty at the same time. Their birth control pill packets peek out of their makeup bags accidentally-on-purpose when they reapply their foundation in the A corridor toilets. Who always know the right thing to say to a boy, the right kind of look to give him

In March I dream that I'm the Lunar Prospector – not that I'm *inside* it, but that I *am* it, silver-coloured cylinder with cranes for arms – and I'm orbiting the moon and as I'm spinning around and around in the vacuum of space, the Earth is imploding below me, burning up like a big old supernova, melting, dripping off the edge of the galaxy, and here I am, all the way up here, and I'm okay.

And now I'm staring at the mirror on Boy's wardrobe and wanting to break it.

We are in Boy's bedroom and I can see myself lying on his sofa bed, unfolded, and him lying on top of me, through the mirror. He has one finger inside me.

I feel like I could still give more of myself to him. I want to tell him something real. I say, did you know my real name is Isabelle?

He is frowning at the wall behind me, concentrating on his knuckles under the denim of my jeans, but now he is looking down at me, bewildered.

Of course I knew that, he says.

I know for a fact that he did not know that. It's one of the few things I didn't tell him.

He says, why are you talking about that now?

I say, why not?

I say, don't you think it's weird that both of our names are secret?

He says, well, yours isn't a secret now.

His fingers are clawing out my insides. I don't think that's how it's supposed to feel. His fingernail digs into something inside of me and I wince.

You okay?

Yeah.

I wonder if there's something wrong with me. Maybe my vagina doesn't work like other people's. Maybe this is supposed to feel nice, but I don't work properly, so for me it just feels gross.

Boy kisses me hard on the lips. His teeth bash against mine. He takes his hand out of my underwear and unpops the button of my jeans. As he pulls them down I help him by wriggling my legs out of the fabric.

He positions his body over mine.

He is still fully clothed and I am in my underwear.

I notice that there is a clump of pubic hair escaping from the side of my knickers, black against the paleness of my thigh. It looks like a spider perching on my leg.

And I think, wow, this is really happening, isn't it.

The sun is cold and it is making everything in the room look whitewashed like the walls.

I look back at the mirror and notice that the way my head is resting makes me have a double chin. I re-position my head to a more upright position, so he doesn't see how ugly I can be, but the position is unnatural and it sends a shot of pain up my back.

What are you doing? Boy asks.

Nothing.

Why are you twisting your head like that?

It's comfortable.

Isabelle is a much nicer name than Bess, Boy says. Why did you change it?

I didn't change it. I just shortened it.

He snorts and tries to kiss me again. He's talking into my mouth.

He's saying, as if Bess is short for Isabelle. It's a whole different name.

He hesitates, then reaches under me and unclips my bra. As it falls away I bring my arms up to my chest, self-conscious. It's too tight in here. Boy can see every part of me.

Boy asks me what I'm doing. I don't answer. My mouth has gone really dry. I look up at him. He gently tries to pry my arms away from my chest, but I lock my elbows and refuse to let him.

I say, can't you close the curtains or something?

Why would I want to do that?

He is propped up on his elbows but this time when he kisses me he lets his full weight rest on top of me. For someone so skinny he's surprisingly heavy. All of the air is squeezed out of my lungs.

Boy says, you look really pretty in this light.

He looks nervous, or something.

I think, does that make me look not pretty in other lights?

He never calls me pretty or anything like that.

He's watching my face and I'm not eye contacting him. I'm watching the mirror and the ceiling and the window.

He kneels up and takes off his jeans. His hands might be trembling, but I'm not certain. Then he pulls off my underwear, unhooking them from my ankles, so now I am completely naked.

I close my eyes and try to control my face. I still have my arms crossed over my chest, utterly rigid.

I feel his weight leave the sofa bed and his desk drawer open. I keep my eyes closed. He slides the drawer shut and opens the one below it. I listen to the wood scraping along the metal fixture. He moves the stuff in the drawer around. And then his weight is back on the bed, over me. And I crack one eye open an inch to see him rolling a condom onto his penis. I've never seen it (his dick) in the light before. I've only ever felt it in the darkness of the back of the car or under his duvet.

Boy asks me if I'm cold. I'm not but I nod anyway, hoping he'll let me get under the blanket. He doesn't offer and instead clambers on top of me again. His arms snake under me, wriggling to find the space between my back and the mattress, and pull me up to him. With his legs, he parts my knees and lowers his hips towards mine.

I say, can you close the curtains please.

I can see people walking their dogs past his house. I can see cars driving by.

He obliges, gets off me and draws the curtains.

I'm thinking this is it this is it this is it.

I thought I was going to die a virgin. I must still be the last virgin left in my year at school, apart from Eshal, but she has a legitimate, Allah-related reason to be.

Boy reaches down and repositions his dick. I watch the ceiling. I feel him press into me. No, against me.

I wait.

In Sex Education they said it would hurt, but I can't feel anything.

I look at Boy, who is still concentrating very hard. He reaches down again, this time brushing his hands against the inside of my legs, at the top. He leans back and pushes my knees out further in opposite directions. He leans down for a better view.

Oh my *days*.

He puts two fingers halfway into my vagina and opens them up.

Like, he is prying me open.

It's unpleasant.

I feel like maybe I should have shaved like Hannah Barrington, worn some Ann Summers knickers or sprayed my crotch with perfume or deodorant or something.

Boy is breathing heavily. There are actual beads of sweat rolling down his forehead.

I imagine that I am drowning. I hold my breath, hoping Boy will notice that his breathing is the only noise in the room. He doesn't.

I say, shall I go on top?

I feel like that is something people who have sex say.

Boy exhales and disengages himself from my legs.

I'm 99.99% sure that penetration has not yet occurred.

Maybe there really is something wrong with me.

Boy lies on his back and I get on top of him, straddling him. We've done this a million times but always fully clothed, and not with the intention of sex in mind; at least not for me. I take hold of Boy's penis and position myself on top of it. I *know* that this is the right position. I found one of those top shelf magazines in the woods on the way to school once and I'm doing it exactly like the girls in the pictures are. I let all the strength out of my legs and push down

on Boy. But something won't give. I'm stuck hovering above him like I'm squatting to pee on the floor.

Boy is looking at me expectantly. I can't make eye contact with him so instead I'm looking at the *Godfather 3* poster behind his bed, which is slightly wonky, and suddenly I want to cry.

He says, are you sure you've done this before?

I'm like, of course, are *you* sure?

There's no need to be such a bitch about it.

I *dismount* and lie down on my back next to Boy.

This is so stupid.

I wonder if God is watching me now. I wonder if Eshal's dead grandmother is watching me now. If *my* dead grandmother is watching me.

Boy reaches for the remote and switches on his TV. I take his cue that our 'sex' is over. I scramble to collect my clothes from the floor around his bed and dress myself. I feel horribly ashamed. I wonder if he'll ask/tell me to leave. The sun is ebbing through the curtains leaving a soft orange light illuminating the dust mites.

There is a football match half way through on the TV and the commentators are discussing Fulham's offense strategy.

In the hallway, the front door slams and Keris shouts a hello.

I look at Boy. He is still in his boxers. I sit up straighter.

A moment later, I can hear Keris walking through the hallway, dropping her keys on the sideboard in the kitchen, putting Zack in his high chair. She pokes her head around the side of Boy's door, which is slightly ajar.

Hi you two, she says.

Hi, Keris, I say.

Boy says nothing.

I stare at the TV.

Keris says, where are your trousers, Boy?

Boy shrugs.

I catch her eye and Keris raises her eyebrows at me. I shrug too, imitating Boy. She leaves and shuts the door with a sharp click behind her. I look at Boy again. He is watching the TV screen, chewing the inside of his cheek. I don't know what to do so I close my eyes and pretend I'm falling asleep. I shrink into him and he lets an arm slide around me so I can get closer.

The commentators are shouting because someone has scored. I think about mirrors. I imagine the mirror on Boy's wardrobe, smashing.

It gets darker.

When Boy shakes me awake it is totally black. He is whispering my name. My hair is stuck to the side of his face; it's too hot and the duvet smells like sleep. Musty. In the darkness, his mouth finds mine and we are kissing. He pulls me closer to him.

He says, I'm so sorry about earlier.

I say, it's okay.

He kisses me again.

I say, just so you know. I was lying. I'm a virgin.

Boy says, it's alright, I kind of guessed.

I put my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat.

He says, just so you know, I've only done this, like, twice before, so I'm not exactly an expert either.

We don't have to do anything, he says, we can just hang out and watch TV.

My skin feels prickly. I'm still wearing my jeans.

I say, come here.

And he does.

No more mirrors smash.

After the first time it's easy, like we've been doing it for years and years. On the fourth time, I come and I understand what people were going on about. I'm on top of him and he looks extremely pleased with himself.

After, I can't stop looking at him. He says, What?

Nothing. I say.

No, seriously, tell me.

Just that I understand now. Why everyone talks about how good sex is.

He grins at me again, his eyes black and glittering in the darkness of his bedroom.

I tell Henry about Boy – not about us having sex, just about *him* – because I can't not tell anyone. Eshal won't talk to me anymore, because I flaked on her too many times. I'll call her and make it up. When I tell Henry about Boy, he's pleased for me.

Look at Bess. All grown up with a boyfriend.

I beam at him. We are in Mango Café eating Thai green curry on a Friday after school.

What's he like?

He's interesting. He knows these random things that no one else knows. Like, did you know, that there is a thing called spontaneous human combustion and it's when you randomly burst into flames. For no reason. And the only thing left of you is your shoes. It actually happens.

So how old is he?

Maybe when the eclipse comes around in a few months everyone is going to spontaneously combust, right?

Right. So how old is he?

I mash up my sticky rice and make it swim in the curry sauce.

Bess?

Don't freak out, alright?

How old is he?

He's older.

How much older?

He's nineteen, right, but he's a young nineteen, okay? And I'm an old fifteen. You know that, Henry. Don't be a dick about this.

Henry leans his heads back and his lips move like he's praying.

He says, for fuck's sake, Bess.

What?

You know what.

Of course, he tells Mum and Rory. Mum freaks out and the whole thing is so predictable. Step one: Mum shouts for a long, long time while Rory and Henry stay very quiet

and occasionally nod and go 'mmmm' to punctuate Mum's points. Henry sips tea out of one of our chipped *Star Wars* mugs. Step two: I have to stay in my bedroom until they decide what to do with me. Mum shrieks with a voice that sounds like she's about to cry, but she never actually does. Step three: I am grounded all summer and I am not to see Boy any more, not that they even know his name, but Mum did say *that boy*, which is alarmingly close to the real thing. Step four: everything goes quiet and while they all believe I'm thinking about my actions and repenting, I'm actually dry humping the drain pipe into the front garden and sprinting towards the reservoir.

When I get to his I tell him about Henry and Mum and Rory.

They think you're a pervert, I tell him, expecting him to laugh but he doesn't.

Can I stay here for a while? I ask him.

What, like, for the night?

Like, a week?

He looks at me, and I can see already that his whole face is closing up. He folds his arms.

That's not a good idea, Bess. Stay here for a night or two. But I've got to get on with my life, you know? And so've you. You can't run away from your parents every time you have a row.

I know that really, he's right, but it still stings. I feel like he's putting himself deliberately out of my reach, like I'm a child and he's hiding the big bad world from me because I can't take it. I realise that he knows so much more about me than I do him, and that's what makes him so much more powerful than me. He can give affection and take it away as the wind takes him. When I try to do the same he doesn't seem to care. I want him to draw me into him and hold me, but his arms are still folded and now he's turning away to go into the kitchen.

Running away from your parents because you don't get on with them, I say to his back. Hang on, where have I heard that before?

He tucks one of the kitchen chairs into the table but it slams against the edge and makes a racket.

Wow, that's harsh, Bess.

I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated.

It's cool. But I can't put you up, alright? You've got to get through it.

I nod and then he pulls me into a hug and embraces me, his mouth finding mine. We stand in the hallway and kiss until his hand slides down my back and back up under my shirt, then we go to his bed and have sex then sleep all night. When I wake up Keris is in the garden spooning mushy green food into Zack's screeching mouth. It's warmer now. Zack is only in his nappy. The sky is still a diluted shade of blue, still not quite in full-on summer yet.

I say hey to Keris and she murmurs a greeting as she successfully deposits another spoonful of food in Zack's mouth.

Zack must be hard work, I say to Keris.

Yeah, he's worth it though, she replies. And she smiles, more to herself, not to me, like she's remembering something happy.

We sit quietly for a while. Someone a few doors down is mowing the lawn and the air is full of the smell of cut grass.

Then she says, what the hell are you doing, Bess?

She doesn't shout it, like my Mum or Henry does, she says it quietly and sadly, like she knows that it's a bad idea to say anything before the words are even out of her mouth.

What?

With my brother. I know he's a nice guy, but look at him. He's got no future. He works in Tesco. He can't pay his own rent. You're so young. You don't need to deal with all that shit. You're clever, right? Why aren't you focusing on getting into college and stuff? Boy said you want to make films, right? Why aren't you concentrating on that stuff instead of bumming around with him?

I look at her, a little stunned.

Keris, what the fuck?

She shrugs. I know. I know, it's none of mine. Keep my nose out, not my place to say and all that. But I'm just putting a disclaimer on it, alright. On this. This whole thing.

She gestures around her with the spoon, indicating the house, the garden. The world. Some of the green goop falls from the spoon and lands on her shirt.

Another time I'm in bed watching the faces moving on the ceiling, their eyes boring into me, their little mouths contorting, and he knocks on my window. It scares the shit out of me and I have to stop myself from yelping out loud. He's crouched low on the porch roof, his limbs all gangly and wrapped around himself. He looks like a cat burglar with a brown beanie pulled low over his eyebrows. When he sees that I've seen him he flashes this glittering kind of smile that makes me want to cry. I skip out of bed, conscious that I haven't showered and all I'm wearing is an old Brentford football shirt and these babyish Groovy Chick knickers with holes in them and my hair is all greasy pulled back into a ponytail. It's almost midnight and everyone's in bed. I push the window open and shush him as he climbs in, knocking the stack of CDs on my windowsill over with his foot.

What the fuck are you doing? I shout-whisper at him.

I wanted to see you.

What? Why?

I just did, alright?

And he pushes me onto the bed and I understand what he means. He wants to have sex. So we get wrapped up in my duvet and he lets me take all his clothes off and we are quiet and gentle with each other so as not to wake anyone, and it's actually quite beautiful, and my heart is singing.

And afterwards, I say to him, *Say Anything* much?

And he says what?

And I say don't worry.

And after a moment of silence, I say, I thought you were going off me, anyway.

He doesn't answer immediately. He's going through my drawers. My wardrobe, my bookshelf. Pulling stuff out, amused at himself, at the things I keep in my bedroom, the things that I believe to be precious

What made you think that?

Boy. You basically told me you didn't want to hang out anymore.

I never said that. When did I say that?

He's reading one of the birthday cards that my dead grandma Emelie left me, with their poems and little inspirational quotes and psalms. He's pulled them all out of my bedside table drawer.

He asks me, Is it hard being in foster care?

I think about it for a moment, and tell him, it's not as hard as some other people have it. At least I've got people looking out for me. At least I've got a roof over my head.

He puts the stash of cards back in the drawer and climbs into bed with me. It's cold, but we wrap ourselves around each other and soon we're matted with sweat. When I wake up

again – at three or four in the morning – he’s already gone, left the window wide open. I hop out of bed, goosebumps covering my body, and pull it shut with a soft click.

I go to see Eshal. She’s in her bedroom, splayed out across her bed in a fan of textbooks, scribbled-on pieces of paper, flash cards, post it notes and the rest. She looks up when I come in.

What the fuck do you want? She hisses at me.

I sit down on her bed, taking care to avoid knocking all the revision stuff on her floor. I give her my best eyelashes, blinking rapidly.

What? She says.

Sorryyyyyyyyyyy.

You’re a shit head, Bess.

Yes, I am, I reply.

You know this woman’s got me in here six hours a day working on this shit? She gestures downstairs through the floor at Mrs Bhandari and then at the fan of work surrounding her.

I need to get out.

I can help you, I tell her.

You could’ve helped me weeks ago. Where have you been? Actually, don’t answer that. I already know where you’ve been.

Sorry, Esh.

Nah you’re not. It’s cool, everyone has that one guy they ditch all their friends for. At least you got it out the way early, eh?

I shrug.

I ask her, do you think dead people can watch what you're doing from heaven?

What do you mean?

Like, do you think your grandmother is watching you like your life is a movie and making judgements about everything that you do?

Eshal narrows her eyes at me. She says, I don't know. But the one thing my nanuji wanted to see before she died was me married off to a nice young Bengali boy. Who would love me and have a good job and give me an allowance for food shopping and all that kind of stuff. That's what happened with her and my grandpa, my nana. They were so happy together. I see why she wanted that for me.

I say, it must have been hard to have her kick it knowing that you're never going to be that person.

She says, I guess so. But I'm not going to live my life through her or my dad, see? In Bangladesh, I'm a commodity. You know that word, right? Someone is always trying to *buy me* or *own me*. When I eventually get married my dad is going to have to pay my husband, right? How messed up is that? When I was in Dhaka for my nanuji's funeral a man *literally* grabbed me on the street and I had to push him off me, and then I got in trouble because I shouldn't have pushed him, I shouldn't have made eye contact, that's not how a *bhodro meye* behaves. My parents want me to be this good little Bengali girl who behaves like she's supposed to and respects her parents and reads the Qur'an, does salat every day. But I'm not like them. They were raised in Dhaka and I was raised in Middlesex. That stuff... it's not me. But then, here isn't me either. So, who am I?

I don't know what to say to her.

She says, and the marriage thing. They're going to make me get married as soon as my exams are over.

Are you serious?

I'm so sure. In Dhaka, they kept introducing me to all these third and fourth cousins I never knew I had.

Is that legal?

Technically? Yes.

Fuck. What about vet school?

Who needs vet school when I've got a nice wealthy *swami*? I feel like if I ever need to rely on any man for anything – money, stability, love even – that's going to be my biggest failure, you know? Bigger than anything. Bigger than failing these exams because I've been too busy worrying about my friend and my numb-nuts Dad to revise properly.

I say, Esh, I'm so sorry. I've been a shit friend. I had no idea about Dhaka and everything.

Eshal says, that's because you only care about yourself, Bess. It's fine. If my nanuji's been watching me do all this stupid shit she'll be haunting me for the rest of my life. So, I guess there's no heaven, right? Or any kind of heaven where your ancestors watch over you. Because I'm not haunted.

She flashes me a huge toothy smile and I match it.

Anyway, seeing as you haven't been around, I'm actually going to boss the Chemistry exam next week. Because of all the extra revision I've been doing.

The Chemistry exam is next week? I interrupt, and she's registering the look of panic on my face.

Oh, Bess, she says.

There's something else though. The Chemistry exam is next week, which means I have six days to revise two years' worth of science. But it also means my period is late. Like, weeks late.

That's how I end up in the Golden Grill with a white plastic stick stuck between my legs, hands covered in my own pee. And then the pub and Eshal doing her makeup and guessing it, because she knows me better than I know myself.

I lift my face up to the mirror and breathe on the glass. I hit the mirror. Again and again and again until my hands are bleeding.

Chapter 11

Eshal wants me to do another pregnancy test.

Just in case, she says.

Just in case of what? I ask her, just in case the first two were playing a hilarious joke on me? Just in case the fertilised egg fell out of my vag while I was taking a piss?

We are lying on the grass in her back garden. She raises her eyebrows at me.

Pregnancy tests can be wrong, she says. I ask her why she's got that stupid look on. The corners of her mouth upturned, her lips pursed, her left eyebrow cocked. Eshal has an extremely angular face, with a pointy nose and a pointy chin, like someone pinched them and pulled them forward. She says nothing this exciting has ever happened to her.

Glad you're enjoying this, I tell her. She rolls over and stretches lazily in the grass, ignoring me.

We're keeping our voices low so that Mrs Bhandari can't hear us through the kitchen's open window. The garden is a broad oblong shape with a water feature and a big picnic table. The grass looks like it's been spray painted with something artificial. Eshal's dad takes a lot of pride in it, I think. Eshal's father has a good job in the city, something to do with finance. My favourite thing about the Bhandaris' house is their big black and chrome winding staircase in the lobby. Everything is very modern and chic, so different from my own house. Lisa likes shag pile carpets, stripy wallpaper and plates with pictures of Princess Diana displayed in floor-to-ceiling glass cabinets. The Bhandaris' house is like a sci-fi Bengali temple in comparison.

I lean back on the grass, and watch two birds chase each other across the space directly above us.

What are they? I ask Eshal. This is a routine we commonly have.

Eshal opens her eyes a fraction to watch. They're flying circles around each other, spinning upwards toward the higher branches of the sycamore tree in next door's garden. Eshal says they are blue tits.

Bit late for them to be breeding, though, she says.

What do you mean?

Most birds are done with their breeding season by late May or early June. I'm guessing they failed; they're trying again.

Gross, I say.

Could be worse. Sparrows and swallows wait for the mother to leave the nest and then they sneak in and kill all the baby Blue Tits. No one really knows why they do it.

There's a knot that has formed in my lower abdomen. It's been tightening ever since the Golden Grill. That was a week ago now. The thought of the birds killing those chicks makes it constrict even more.

Eshal lowers her voice again, glancing at the open window where her mum is cooking in the kitchen. Mrs Bhandari is in her fifties but she looks much older. She is almost completely grey in her hair and her knuckles are big, like doorknobs. The skin on her hands is papery thin and shiny. She always looks worn out, but she never stoops. Her back is straight, and she lifts things much heavier than herself; things that you wouldn't expect her to be able to carry. She's always moving her furniture around. Eshal has inherited this secret strength from her, too.

She holds my wrist now, her fingernails digging into my forearm.

You know you've got to sort this out, don't you? She says, her thick eyebrows knitting together as she looks at me.

I know, I know, I know.

Well, let's sort it out, then!

I imagine all of the acid in my stomach burning through the fleshy lining and dribbling down through my muscles into my legs. That's how I feel.

We hit the pharmacy in the High Street again, and Eshal has to lend me the money because I spent all mine on the last pregnancy test. We watch people walk in and out. There is a mother with twin toddlers in a double pram. I watch her pay for Calpol through the shop window. As she leaves a man in his sixties ties a brown spaniel to the lamppost outside the pharmacy and wanders in. Eshal goes over to the lamppost and pets the dog. She lets it lick her hand and talks to it in a baby voice, *who's a good boy? Are you a good boy?* The dog's owner exits the pharmacy and gives her a dirty look as he unties the dog and unlocks his car.

The pharmacy is empty now. We go in and Eshal walks to the exact right spot, without having to search. She picks a box from the bottom shelf and marches to the counter. I hover behind her. The cashier is the same one who served me last week. Her eyes dart from me to Eshal and back again. She's trying to work out whether I'm the same girl who came in last week, and if I am, whether Eshal is pregnant too or she's here on my behalf. I think I recognise her from school; she was a few years above us. I think she left when I was in Year 8. I think her name is Sheri. I know she's judging me; I can see it in her face. The pregnancy test is in a paper bag and it crumples loudly as Eshal shoves it into her backpack. I look around guiltily again, even though I already know that we're the only customers in the shop.

When we get back to Eshal's she makes me stash the pee stick in the waistband of my jeans and go into the toilet when Mrs Bhandari is looking the other way.

I've had that Aretha Franklin song 'Think' stuck in my head for the past few days; the one where she yells out *freedom, freedom, freedom, freeeeeeeedom*.

I sit down on the loo and stick the pregnancy test between my legs, my hand twisted so I don't end up urinating on myself like before. I'm becoming an expert. I stare at the wallpaper pattern, which is green with blue ducks. Above them is a framed photograph

of Eshal and her family. It's a formal portrait, placed in front of one of those ugly watercolour backdrops. Mrs Bhandari's face, with her straight white teeth and thin lips like Esh's, looks like it is about to stretch sideways and slide right off her skull. Eshal is only eight or nine in the picture, and she is still wearing a hijab. She won a battle with her dad to take it off when she started secondary school. Mr Bhandari, who I have never met despite being friends with Eshal for five years now, is round-faced with an impressive beard streaked with silver threads of hair. He wears thick-rimmed glasses and has a long, pointed nose like Eshal's. Anwar, Eshal's brother who is six years older than her, must be about fifteen in the picture, the age that we are now, except he looks way younger than any of the boys in my year at school, all buck-toothed and messy-haired. He has big thick eyebrows too, but unlike Eshal he hasn't tried to tame them, so they crawl across his forehead, and meet in the middle.

I put the 'lid' back on the stick and balance it on the sink while I wash my hands. I shake it a bit because that's what they do on American sitcoms. I put it back in my jeans waistband. I feel like Molly Ringwald in *For Keeps*. I wonder why they even put a family picture in the bathroom in the first place.

Isn't the toilet a weird place to put a family photo? I ask Eshal as I sit down next to her.

She rolls her eyes and mutters something about her mum.

So, what does it say? Still pregnant? She asks me.

I haven't looked yet, I tell her. It's still cooking. It's in the oven.

So, you're going to get it out and flaunt it around my garden? Are you an imbecile?

I pull my waistband away and glimpse the pregnancy test.

What are you doing? Eshal asks.

I pull it out a bit further, exposing the papery bit of the applicator to the July sunshine, so I can see better. Yep, it's still there. That little pink cross of doom.

Fuck this, I say loudly to Eshal.

How about you shut up before my mother comes out here and kicks your behind, Eshal says. I wouldn't put it past her.

The whole situation is almost laughable now, in this harmless patch of grass behind Eshal's pretty little house, on a quiet residential road in a quiet residential suburb, in a nicer part of town compared to mine. How could I be pregnant? Why does this stuff always happen to me? There will always be some drama to stop me going where I want to go: bad grades, strict foster parents, stupid local council legislation, unplanned pregnancy.

I say to Eshal, This is the icing on the cake for a, broadly speaking, shit existence thus far.

But for some reason, despite all the talk, the terror I had in the Golden Grill toilets has evaporated.

It's just hard to be scared when you're sunbathing on the patio and you can hear an ice cream van jingling two streets away. All I can see in my future is this long, hot, smelly summer stretched out lazily before me. No more school, now. No more curfew soon. I'm almost sixteen. I can do whatever I want.

Maybe I can talk to Henry into not being a totally useless case worker for once and see about getting a council flat; I knew this boy, Jonathan, who I was in respite with for a while. Respite is when they stick you in a different foster home for a while to give your foster carers a break from your difficult behaviour, or so they can go on holiday without you. Lisa and Rory sent me to respite for six weeks when Riss was born. It was a group home with a padded 'quiet room' and locks on the fridges, and all the house parents had training on how to restrain a child without being accused of sexual assault. Jonathan was a bit older than me, and he had what adults liked to call *challenges* so he was moved around loads of different foster placements before they just gave up trying to settle him somewhere and let him live on his own in a flat. When I knew him, we were five and seven, and he's been moving from place to

place, never staying more than six months, ever since. He got put into this programme for Looked After Children (that's what our social workers call us) with *problematic behaviour*, and I think it straightened him out a bit. He stopped getting in fights and starting fires in public places. They even gave him like a thousand pounds so he can buy a washing machine for his flat and stuff. Maybe Henry can sort me out with one of those deals.

If I can get somewhere to live, a council flat, I can find a job doing something low maintenance with enough money. Maybe I could work in Tesco like Boy. He seems to hate it but at least he has money most of the time. Maybe we could move in together. Maybe he would be okay about the whole pregnant thing.

I remember that there was a day last year when he made me meet him after work and took me onto the roof of the multi-storey car park and he'd lain out a blanket and a picnic with shitty wine and cocktail sausages and a disposable barbecue and he made us melted-chocolate-bananas wrapped in chargrilled tin foil, and he let me put my head on his chest and he gently traced the outline of my lips with his fingers, the lightest of touches, while I told him about the constellations. The Bear, the Plough, Orion's Belt, and he said quietly, after a while of just lying there, you really are something, you know that? And he kissed me long and breathless and it was so perfect.

What are you going to say to him? Eshal asks me, like she knows what I'm thinking, like always.

I can't think of an answer. The truth is, I honestly don't know. He's been so weird and distant lately. I've called his house more than once and Keris always picks up and tells me he's not in. Except that I know the only places he goes are Tesco or somewhere hanging out with me. So, where is he all the time? Is he seeing another girl? When I do get to talk to him it's like I'm a nuisance.

I'm going to wait and see, I tell Eshal.

Wait and see for what? Wait until you're showing? Wait until you're in *labour*?

Shut up, I say to her, you're making me feel sick.

Bit too early for morning sickness, isn't it? She looks pointedly at my belly.

Shut *up*.

I knew this was going to happen, Bess. I warned you, even, didn't I? I said *don't fuck with a boy like him*. He's a total waste of space. I bet he's on drugs. I bet he's fucking some other poor girl. I bet he doesn't even brush the roof of his mouth when he brushes his teeth.

Just leave it, please.

Get it together, girl.

She's being mean but she pulls me into a tight hug, her hair tickling the bottom of my chin.

What's happening to us, Esh? I ask her.

I don't know, she says, and when we pull away she looks so desperate that I have to turn away.

I cycle extra fast because if I peddle hard enough I can't concentrate on anything else except regulating my breathing. It's kind of exhilarating. Instead of going straight home I go to the Pits, lock my bike to a tree and walk down the overgrown footpath to the edge of the water. I go to the top of the footbridge and sit down, dangle my feet over the edge with my shoes off, let the evening sunlight warm my shinbones. Out there, all that calm blackish water looking like glass, all those birds, the overgrown islands that populate the vastness of the lake, those thick trees with their leaves that sound like the wind, the M3 over there behind them with its dank-smelling concrete, I feel like I'm becoming embedded into this place. I don't know how to stop this.

When I get home, I take a too-hot shower and let the water run all over my body, leaving raw pink skin in its wake. I sit down under the shower head, in the bath and let the water run cold. Mum will be mad that I emptied the tank. It's an old boiler so it takes ages to re-heat. Clarissa starts banging on the door wanting to get in. I wrap myself tightly in my towel, and open the door onto her.

About time, she says, staring at me. Her blonde ringlets are sat on her narrow shoulders just-so. I don't get how she can get her hair to do that with so little effort. She doesn't need make-up to look pretty either, because her skin is the colour and texture of milk and her eyes are so big she looks like Sailor Moon. And I am Queen Metalia, that black and purple cloud mass with slitted eyes and pointy teeth, engulfing all the good things in Sailor Moon's world and rotting them away.

I shrug and shove past her. In my bedroom, I put James Brown into my CD player – the *Black Caesar* soundtrack – and crank up the volume. I open all of my windows. I spin around and around and let myself fall onto the bed, watching the ceiling spiral as though on an axis above me. Mum and Rory aren't home. It's Saturday. I climb out of the biggest window onto the porch roof and light a cigarette as 'Down and Out in New York City' kicks in on the CD player. Over the top of the reservoir I can see the Chubb tower. Behind me the Pits are sparkling in the afternoon sunshine. A parakeet lands on the porch roof by my foot. I shoo it away.

It takes a long half hour for the sun to sink into the woods, but there's still a pinkish glow along the horizon. I have the feeling that I'm being watched and it takes me a moment to realise it's because Clarissa is standing at my bedroom door.

I jerk my head round. What do you think you're doing in here?

She shrugs. She's wearing one of Rory's old ACDC t-shirts, her little skinny arms poking out of it like twigs.

Can I try it? She asks, gesturing to my lit cigarette.

Get out, you're ten.

I'm eleven now.

I'm eleven now, I mimic her, flipping my hair and fluttering my eyelashes.

You're actually such a cow sometimes, Bess, Clarissa says, and turns to leave. I suddenly have an overwhelming urge to tell her. Everything.

Hey, Riss, wait, I call after her.

What?

I'm pregnant, I think. I wonder what her reaction might be. I think she might be impressed; it's the kind of thing she would find cool and interesting, she who exclusively reads Jacqueline Wilson books, even though she's probably too old for them now, and who thinks *EastEnders* is the most dramatically gripping thing on television. Either that, or she would view me in the same way I think of Mary Beth Barrington, who will probably smoke or eat herself to death in front of daytime TV.

Nothing, fuck off, I tell her.

She mutters something back. I'm still on the porch. Billy is cycling down the road towards us, towards his house. Sunshine lighting his bike up like halogen. The CD player clicks and now we're listening to 'The Boss', and I say Riss wait. Come here a sec. And she huffs and does, crawling through the window to join me on the porch, her skinny white legs muddy with bruises.

I say to her, lifting my sunglasses, look, it's Billy.

So?

He's looking up at us. He waves.

I shout at him WHAT, BILLY?

And I see his face blossoming red, from all the way up here. He wasn't expecting a response.

And then Riss, getting it, goes ARE YOU SPYING ON US, BILLY? YOU'RE SO CREEPY.

SOOOOO CREEPY, I agree with her, and she laughs.

BILLY, IF YOU WANT TO ASK ME OUT YOU SHOULD JUST SAY SO, Riss yells, even louder, and I nudge her. Across the road, one of our neighbours has popped his head over the fence to watch us. Billy slows to a stop at the front of our house, dismounts his bike and wheels it up the garden path of his next door, not looking at us.

After Riss is gone, I climb back through the window and into bed. I fall asleep imagining that my head is in the crook of Boy's arm and that he is falling asleep beside me, and that there is no seed embedded in the lining of my womb, slowly beginning to germinate.

Chapter 12

Mum keeps looking at me funny, like she knows something's going on. Every time I sit down to watch TV or to eat a meal, she casts sideways glances at me like she's waiting for me to spontaneously combust, her thin hair drawn back tight, stretching her face across her cheekbones.

In the evenings, I watch the six o'clock news with Rory and Clarissa. I try to ignore the silence that clogs the air between us. I ask Rory questions about Iraq, even though I already know he won't answer. He takes long seconds to speak and when he does he gives one or two-word responses. Sometimes we watch *The Simpsons* afterwards. No one says a word to Mum. I try hard, but I can't bring myself to care enough about it, this thing that is happening between us, where she has at least a mild distaste for everything I do. She seems very far away to me. When she talks I can't hear her over all of the buzzing in my own head. Her thoughts don't seem as real or as acutely painful as mine are. I can't imagine her feeling things the way I feel them, with the same intensity, with the same kind of taste of illness in my mouth and the bad feeling wriggling around my belly like a tapeworm. I feel as though we're trying to communicate underwater. You know when people say, 'that's it'? Like, 'that's it, I've had enough', 'I've had it'. I've always wondered what 'it' actually is. I think she's sick of me. I think I've done 'it' for her.

Eshal and I are no closer to getting a resolution for my predicament, and every minute we stall I think I can *feel* the thing inside me growing and moving.

I know that's impossible. It's probably a kidney bean or something right now. But that's not to say it won't get bigger soon. I haven't been to a doctor; I don't even know how many *weeks* I am. I know you can only get an abortion up to 24 weeks; we learned about it in Biology. We watched this super graphic video of a woman giving birth. She actually let a camera crew come in and film her squeezing it out. It's so gross. I don't understand how a

whole human being can come out of that tiny little opening between your legs. I have what mean girls in gym changing rooms like Hannah like to call 'childbearing hips'. At the end of the childbirth video, the bit of skin between the woman's bum and her vag split open, and all this blood gushed out. The little baby came out all slimy and grey-looking. Not pink like everyone says, *grey*. It was quick. So fast that the nurse had to make a dash for it to catch it as it slipped its way out of there. The dad was there too with a surgical cap on, and when he held the baby he cried. This pale girl called Amy in my class fainted and smacked her head on the radiator as she went down and Mrs Franks had to call an ambulance.

I sneak out and cycle to Boy's house. I haven't seen him for like two weeks now. I don't know if it's even cool to turn up at his house unannounced, even though I've done it a million times before. But I can sense that things have changed between us. I feel like something terrible is going to happen and there is no way for me to stop it because I don't know when to expect it or even what it is. I breathe in metallic summer air and watch the long dusty grass comb itself with the wind through the wire-mesh fence. I look up and watch the moorhens dithering on the breeze, heading towards the river, their little wings flapping violently against the up-thrust, and I am slowing to a stop, pulling up onto the pavement, and inside I feel this overwhelming sense of dread.

When I knock he opens the door.

Jheez, about time, stranger, I say to him, trying for casual / unfazed, but my voice comes out as this stupid pipsqueak noise. He is scruffy, in an un-ironed dark grey t-shirt and loose jeans hanging below his waist, with no belt. His hair is still buzz-cut short. It's strangely comforting to see him like this, like nothing has changed. I don't know what I was expecting, really. I push past him into the hallway, not looking at him because I'm afraid of what I might see in his face. I think, if I can just act like nothing has changed, maybe that will make things normal between us.

He seems to be playing along.

Want a drink? He asks, closing the door behind him and following me into the kitchen. Zack's scooter is not in its usual place by the back door, so I guess Keris has taken him out somewhere. We're alone. The kitchen is in its usual state of disarray, with the sideboards dirtied with splashes of milk, cereal, dry pasta pieces, breadcrumbs and used cutlery. On the square wooden table, there is a stack of opened envelopes and a half-eaten bowl of tomato pasta. On the fridge, the alphabet magnets have been rearranged to spell:

BABY ZACK

MVMMY

B4BY B0Y

Why are you Baby Boy, not just Boy? I ask him.

I don't know, he says, distracted. Did you want a drink, or no?

He wanders over to me and opens the fridge, takes out a Tesco own-brand bottle of fizzy orange from the shelf on the door and offers it to me.

No thank you, I say, imagining how ugly I'll look drinking in front of him.

I help myself to the back door and head out into the garden. I sit on one of the plastic garden chairs. I listen to him pottering about in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards, washing his hands, pouring the drink into a glass. He's stalling.

One of Zack's toy trains is half-buried in the long grass beyond the patio. I pick it up and wipe the dew onto the lap of my jeans. Boy wanders out and pulls another plastic chair from under the table. There is water in its seat, so he tips the chair forward and lets it run off onto the concrete.

What's up?

Not much, I reply, thinking I'm pregnant I'm pregnant I'm pregnant. Any false move, I think, and he'll see me for what I am. A little girl, really, just a kid, with a slight lisp, damp skin, the return of acne on my shoulders, another human growing inside me.

He offers me a cigarette from a crumpled packet he takes from his back pocket. I let him light it for me and it feels romantic. I watch him as I smoke, determined not to be the first to initiate a conversation. He is looking absentmindedly at a spot beyond me, above next-door's garden. Maybe he's watching the birds. I don't want to turn around and check what he's looking at because that might seem offensive, like I'm suggesting he should be looking at me. I guess he *should* be looking at me; we are having a conversation after all. Or trying to. I wonder how Eshal would behave if she was in this situation. She would probably flick him between the eyebrows and go, oi, dipshit, I'm over here, don't be rude. After a silence that becomes more and more embarrassing as it gets longer, I give up.

What have you been up to? I ask him, feeling like a child.

Not much.

I called you a few times, I say.

I try to underplay the enormity of my desperation. The countless times I picked up the house phone and dialled his number, the times when I was halfway to his house on my bike before forcing myself to turn around.

He rubs again at his stubbly head. As he does, I change my mind about how it makes him look. I used to think short hair made him look more dangerous, but I've realised that it's not dangerous at all; it's alien.

What would you do if I was pregnant, I ask him in my head.

He glances up at me suddenly like he actually heard me, like I said it out loud.

You're being weird, he says to me.

Erm, no. *You're* being weird, I reply, aware of how I sound. I haven't heard from you in ages.

He shrugs, I'm not obligated to keep in touch with you.

What?

He doesn't look at me, and shrugs again.

I think about it for a moment, picking out the words I want to say carefully. Each silence between us stretches out longer than the one preceding it. The green paint on the door to his kitchen is peeling away at the bottom, exposing the damp, mildewed wood beneath it.

I think about what Eshal said, about not letting a boy ever know you until you know yourself.

I say, whatever's going on between us, Boy, you're still a shit friend.

He finally looks at me. I try to stop my eyes from watering.

He says, what do you mean, whatever's going on between us?

You *know* what, I say, and my voice has stopped with its high-pitched shrillness. I feel angry. And he's looking at me now. And that makes me even madder.

Don't fucking pretend you don't know, I tell him, gesturing vaguely at the air between us, at the concrete slabs that make up the patio.

What is going on here? He asks.

I pick at a scab on the second knuckle of my left index finger.

You know what, I say again. And by the look on his face it's obvious he knows. He is far away, though. I want him to remember the gentleness with which he made little plaits in my hair, running his fingers through them until they unravelled in his hands. The way he touched quiet parts of my body – the backs of my knees, my earlobes, my ankles. When we

climbed a tree at the Pits and got stoned in the branches, laying on top of each other, our limbs all tangled up together, and he told me he could feel my heartbeat through his belly, the way I pressed my head against it.

I want to tell him how at night I close my eyes and imagine him sleeping next to me, snoring lightly with one arm draped across my body, and his presence puts us both in a little bubble where no one can reach us. I imagine that he is watching me from above and through mirrors wherever I go, that he is always thinking about me when I think about him, that when I look at the moon at night he looks at it too and he knows that we are both looking at the same thing. I want to tell him how I know he can hear my thoughts. But it's all wrong.

I stand up to leave.

He tells me to wait and stands up with me. He holds out his hands to me. I look at him, and at the garden, the fence panelling which is rotting like the green door.

I step forward and let him pull me into a hug. I breathe in the smell of shaving cream on his face and stale cigarette smoke embedded into the fibres of his clothes.

I'm sorry, he says, his voice tickling my ear because his mouth is so close to it.

It's fine, I say, it's fine.

I leave because I don't want to annoy him by being there too long, though he has that look on his face that means he wants to have sex. I know what will happen after: he'll turn to face away from me until I gather my things up and leave, making the effort to click the front door shut quietly even though no one is sleeping. I wonder whether he's just been having a bad few weeks and it's all been in my head. The way he touched me at the end was intimate. As I cycle back towards Shepperton I spot Keris in the Ford Escort driving towards the house. It looks like someone has reversed into the front of the car, or otherwise Boy or Keris has hit something, because the bumper is all crumpled up like a piece of tin foil, and the left headlight

is hanging out of its socket. She spots me and I wave at her. She doesn't wave back, just flashes me a tight smile before returning her attention to the road.

I keep going, past the farmers' fields and the reservoir and Stage H.

I stop at the top of the road and touch my belly. I wonder if it's got fatter or I'm just imagining it. I cycle to Eshal's.

She opens the door and she is wearing her headscarf, something I haven't seen her wear except for in old pictures and when she goes to visit her uncle in Walthamstow. She's not wearing any makeup, either. She looks unfamiliar without it, and with none of her hair showing.

What's going on? I ask her.

They're taking me to meet a boy. A family. A friend of my dad's son.

What?

She looks exhausted.

Can you go, Bess? I can't see you right now. My parents are on one.

Fucking hell, are they *marrying you off*?

She looks hurt. I can't believe her.

It's not like that. Don't talk about it like that, okay?

I look at her like she's crazy. We're still standing at her door. I notice that Anwar has come out of the living room and is hovering a few feet behind her, listening to our conversation. It's kind of sad, actually, that he's basically an adult and he's eavesdropping in on his little sister's conversations. Thinking about it, Anwar always seems to be popping up in some way or another when me and Esh are together. I wonder whether he is officially keeping tabs on her.

Hi, Anwar, I say loudly.

Go away, Bess, he says, fake boredom colouring his voice.

You're serious just going to sit back and let this happen to you? I ask Eshal.

She ignores me.

You're letting this happen, Anwar? I say loudly, directing my voice towards him where he stands in the hallway. He at least has the good sense to look humiliated.

Eshal says, Bess, you have got no idea what is going on here. It's none of your business. You wouldn't understand it anyway.

Why are you shutting me out like this?

Because I know what you'll say. I know what you'll do. You've got this habit of whitewashing things, you know?

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

She goes to say something but seems to change her mind.

Just shut up about my shit and focus on your own, okay?

She extends an index finger and jabs me, hard, in the soft pudge of my stomach. Dumb, I look down at the spot where her finger connected, just above my belly button. It is an aftertaste kind of pain, the kind you feel when you apply pressure to a bruise.

Last year, before I met Boy, me and Esh got invited to this party at some kid from Esh's cross country club's house. It was our first ever party – like, proper party with alcohol and people getting fingered on the trampoline and stuff. Esh didn't want to go but I was desperate. I made her lie to her parents about visiting her cousin for the weekend, and then she came to mine and we got ready together. We shared a bottle of vodka mixed with flat Coke on the bus – except I drank three quarters of it. Then when we got there, the party was shit. No one talked to us. Turned out the boy whose party it was, Christopher, was expecting to shag Eshal, and

obviously she wasn't interested. So, she spent the majority of the night helping me throw up in the bathtub and politely telling this boy Christopher to fuck off in fifty different ways. And then when we got home Lisa and Rory thought she'd got me drunk, thought it had all been her idea, so Mum rang Mr and Mrs Bhandari and spilled the beans, and I'm pretty sure her dad actually smacked her because she turned up at school that Monday with a fat lip, but I was too scared to ask. It was all my fault.

Fine, I say.

She shuts the door without saying anything else. I stand there for a moment staring at it, so close that my nose and my waist are almost touching it. Mum always tells me that my posture is bad, I stick my belly out and slouch my shoulders. Through the frosted glass of the door I see the shape of Mrs Bhandari moving back and forth, her silhouette visible against the light coming through the kitchen. I turn away and wheel my bike out of the driveway.

I cycle around aimlessly for a while, stopping at high points like the M3 motorway bridge to watch the landscape below, the farmers' fields that were once orchards before the first world war, before the soil went bad and no one could grow anything there apart from long reedy grass. Now there are a few old cob horses grazing lazily, each one wearing a sheet-like jacket across their backs, their tails swishing to keep the horseflies away. Further than the fields, beyond the reservoir is Heathrow airport and the Chubb Tower in Sunbury, black against the orange of the sky. It's almost dusk. This day feels like it's gone on forever.

I cycle back towards the Studios but don't turn down my road. I go towards the Pits, over the motorway bridge and past the church. I pump the pedals through the overgrown footpath, with tree roots sticking out of the hard soil. At the top of the bridge, I lean over the wall and watch the sun go down, turning the black water orange.

The railings are cold against the soft palms of my hands. My face feels itchy in the gentle breeze. I lift my hands up to scratch it on both cheeks. Down below, in the water, I can

see a mildewed shopping trolley, its limbs poking out like a skeleton's. I have a sudden urge to throw up.

I think, I need to get out of here. Not just the Pits. Not just Shepperton. Like, I need to be *rid* of this place and everything about it. I don't just need to be out, I need to be *away*. But now, there's a thing growing inside me, and it's going to tie me to this place forever.

I think, I need to get it out of me.

I need to get it out of me. Sooner rather than later. I look around me, as though an answer might appear out of the trees. A doctor might saunter up the bridge to meet me, a spoon in each hand, ready to scoop the foetal matter out of my womb and into the water. Then I wouldn't feel so heavy, as though my lower abdomen is weighing me down like an anchor. I would feel light, like a bubble, and I would float up up up into the atmosphere until the air becomes too thin to sustain me and I would pop, and tiny droplets of me would sprinkle down towards the M3. A light shower. I need to get it out of me. I need to kill it.

I prop my bike up against the wall and climb over to the other side of the railings, sit on the ledge.

I look down to the water. It's about twenty feet below me. I place my right hand on the metal railing, coated with flaking plasticky black paint. The steel is cold. As I lift my hand away I see that little flakes of the paint have stuck to my palm because it's sticky with sweat. I look down.

I lean back on my heels and propel myself forward.

I feel the pit of my stomach drop. Like there is a hook in my navel that has just been yanked upward, like that feeling you get when the car drives too fast over the hump in a bridge. The black stains against light concrete, the long angular shadows cast by the bridge, the darkening trees, the skeleton in the water, they are all a blur.

I panic. Let out an awful, embarrassing, garbled screeching noise.

And then I am in the water, and it's up my nose and in my armpits and soaking into my shoes and my clothes. And I hurt all over. I feel so stupid. I propel down down down before my body slows and I stop sinking. I swim long strokes to the surface and break free into the night air, my teeth chattering, the rank smell of Pits water all around me. I grab onto the trolley to keep myself afloat. A weird whimpering noise is coming from me.

I wait a moment for the ripples around me to settle a bit. And then I drag myself, my clothes leaden, over to the side of the lake. I crawl up onto the bank, the soil sticking to my hands and my knees, the smell of pine needles in my nostrils. The M3 roars with traffic.

I scream again, my eyes burning, hit myself on both sides of my head twice. So stupid. Disgusting. I want to cry but I don't deserve to. I don't want to give myself the satisfaction.

And my thoughts are as follows: That's it. I've had it. I'm getting rid of it.

Chapter 13

A few days later, Eshal and I sit on the riverbank and pull fistfuls of grass up from the ground and sprinkle it into the water below us, watching the colour of the blades darken as they become saturated with water.

How was your engagement party? I ask her, only half joking.

How's your pregnancy?

I kick her in the shin.

But really... what's going on? I thought you wanted to go to that vet college in Basingstoke? And then the RVC after that?

Well. We're not sure now. It looks like the plan is going to change.

I wait for her to say more but she doesn't. And when the silence between us is too much I ask lamely, what else have you been up to, then?

Turns out Eshal has been in the library at Walton. She chose Walton Library because it has internet computers installed and Shepperton Library doesn't. Also, less chance of detection the further away from Shepperton you go. She's been doing some reading and looking on the web for some information. Information about pregnancy.

There are a few options available, she tells me. Most of them involve having to tell your parents.

Nope, I cut her off. That's not going to happen. Not even remotely. Not a chance in hell.

Have you actually thought about what you want to do? Like, are you actually going to *have* it? Or are you – you know – going to...

Get rid of it? I finish off for her.

Well. Yeah.

I lean back and stretch my neck out so I'm staring straight up at the big blue sky.

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to go into space? I ask Eshal.

Don't change the subject, Bess.

If someone gave you the chance to be an astronaut, would you do it?

I don't know. Listen to me.

Eshal talks about doctors and clinics. There is an impartial advice service that you can ring up on a Freephone and they let you know what your options are. Options, options, options. Like choosing which panini to have from the cafeteria. Like deciding whether to wear the red or the black shoes to the party. God.

I think about Boy saying I would never be an astronaut. It's true. I won't be. I looked it up on Careers' Day. You have to have twenty twenty vision and be extremely physically fit. I have glasses for reading and, well, I'm not exactly Denise Lewis either.

Do you want to have a baby? She asks me.

My stomach feels like it is twisting tighter and tighter, like water being wrung out from a wet flannel. I think about jumping off the bridge. I think about what my future will look like if I have a baby now.

I wouldn't be able to go to uni, or even college. I'd never be able to make films. No one is going to employ an uneducated teenage mum. I would be a walking statistic. Another example of why foster kids are such catastrophic failures. Which I am, no doubt about that. But it's not because of *me*. It's not *my fault*. I could be happy and functional if only I had people who *belonged* to me, and I belonged to them.

I would be broke forever with a baby.

I'll probably have to stay in Shepperton with Lisa and Rory for a long time. She wouldn't be in charge of only me, she'd be in charge of the baby too.

I think about what Boy would say. He would never forgive me for doing this to him.

Well? Eshal asks me. Do you want it or not?

No, I say. There's no way I'm keeping it.

Well, then, she says. If that's your decision, we need to get cracking.

She starts talking about adoption services.

No way, I say. I'm not putting it into a system.

I think of being four years old and being taken to live with Lisa for the first time, driven to an unfamiliar house by an unfamiliar person and being left there with a stranger who made me call her Mummy. Scared to sleep in case Cruella de Vil from the Disney movie comes to get me, too scared to let Lisa wash me in the bath in case she drowned me.

I stand up and sit down and stand up again. I need to get an abortion, I tell Eshal.

She waits. It's cooler now, as the sun is dipping behind the trees on the opposite bank. There are kids on the island, on the other side of the river, swinging on a tyre tied to an overhanging tree branch and launching themselves into the murky water below, completely oblivious to their own self-preservation.

There's a clinic in Brixton, Esh says. That's the closest one to us. I worked out the train journey. But you have to go to the doctor's and get it signed off.

If I got to the doctor's, will they tell Lisa and Rory? Social services?

I don't know, Bess.

I look at her, thinking maybe she's being deliberately patronising with her tone, but I see my own desperate expression staring back at me.

According to this website I saw, there are certain herbal medicines you can use which supposedly forces you to have a miscarriage. We could try that. Or we could do it the old-fashioned way.

What's the old-fashioned way? I ask, kicking my feet against the concrete.

Well. Coat hanger in the bath, right? That's what they used to do in Victorian times.

As *if* they did that!

They did. On my life. It was on the website I was reading,

And what if the website told you to walk in front of a bus, Esh?

Shut up. If you're serious about this we need to find a way to get the medicine that we need and try it that way first. I'm going to Holland and Barratt on the weekend...

God, they're hardly going to sell abortion pills in Holland and Barratt!

Well, I don't know, do I!

I make this exaggerated exasperated noise at her and flop down on the grass. We sit in silence, pissed off at each other but neither of us willing to leave. After a while she slips her hand into mine and we sit there like that, together, until the sun goes down.

On my way home, halfway towards the Crossroads I spot Hannah Barrington walking out of the Mango Café with a guy. For a split second, I think the guy she's with is Boy, and my body goes heavy, and suddenly everything is momentarily sharper, like I am taking everything in more acutely than I ever have before, and then I realise that the boy with Hannah is a couple of inches too short, and his skin is a little too tanned. And Boy would never wear a red tracksuit. Stupid.

Hannah spots me too and I become tense, ready to throw something back at whatever spiteful thing she is going to shout at me. But instead she just waves.

Sometimes I wonder if I died, how long it would take for him to wonder where I am or try and get in touch with my parents or Eshal to find out. Would he come to my funeral? There's something satisfying about picturing your own gruesome death and imagining how devastated everyone you know would be.

I would fucking *haunt* him.

When I get home, I call Eshal.

I want to do it, I say to her.

Do what?

I'm in my bedroom, but I lower my voice anyway: the abortion. I want to do the abortion.

I believe the correct grammar is to *have* an abortion, Bessie.

Just, shut up and tell me what I need to do.

Well, I really don't fancy sticking a coat hanger or a crochet hook up your foo foo, Eshal says, and her words make my belly button tug at my stomach like I've just missed a step on the stairs. And I'm still for a moment, listening to the static on the phone, her soft breathing, the way my own heart is thundering away in my ears.

And I say quietly, Well. What then?

Supposedly it's quite effective if you just take a super-hot bath and drink a bottle of gin.

And where did you read this?

On the world wide web.

You know anyone can write any old shit on the internet, right?

There's plenty of other ways to do it, you know. I could punch and kick you in the stomach repeatedly. Or you can ask Boy to run you over in his car. Or you can douche yourself with bleach. That tends to get you into hospital, though.

Let's do the bath thing.

Good idea.

I trust her completely.

Chapter 14

Esh calls me again and asks me to come over to her house. When I get there the kitchen is empty. The quiet is unnerving. Eshal sits me down at the table. She places a tray with different compartments in front of me, and each compartment is filled with a different foodstuff.

Here's one I made earlier, she jokes, posing with the tray like the guy from *Art Attack!*

Some of the food is easily recognisable, like the sesame seeds and ginger. But there are others that look and smell unfamiliar.

What's all this? I ask Eshal.

She meticulously details the properties of each type of food to me, and explains how each one can induce a miscarriage.

The orange stuff is carrot seed soup. There are also papaya and parsley leaves there too.

It's mostly about Vitamin C, Eshal tells me. Vitamin C causes the uterus to contract and the cervix to dilate. Or the other way around. The cervix contracts and the uterus dilates. I can't remember. But basically, stuff with Vitamin C in it induces miscarriage.

She places a small pill bottle in front of me. I pick it up and check the label. Vitamin C pills.

Take all of them, she says.

Are you sure about all of this? I ask her.

Of course not, numb-nuts. The only way to be sure is to go to a clinic and get it done properly. But you're not willing to do that. So, this is the next best thing we have.

She sits in silence opposite me, picking at her nails, and I realise that she has big dark shadows pitted under her eyes. If I look close enough I can see the hollow eye sockets of her

skull defined in the shadows of her skin. She looks exhausted and I suddenly realise how horribly ungrateful I have been. I steadily make my way through the food she has prepared for me.

Do you feel anything yet? She asks me as I finish the last spoonful of soup. It has an unpleasant nasal taste to it, like celery.

I shake my head no.

How long is it supposed to take? I ask her.

I have no idea.

I feel full from all the food. My belly protrudes like there's something stuffed under my dress. I look pregnant.

Eshal sits down opposite me again – she has been fussing in the kitchen and nervously pacing while I've been eating – and touches each of her fingers together, one by one.

I suppose I should run you a bath, she says.

And you've got gin? I ask her.

Yes.

She looks worried.

This is the last time I'll pay for you to get pissed, she says, half-joking.

Mate, I owe you several nights out after this, I say, trying to match her tone, but the tremor in my voice makes me sound like I'm going to cry. Despite it, I feel calm. It almost feels as though this isn't happening to me, like I'm watching it happen to someone else and therefore I don't have to be emotionally invested. My voice seems very far away from me as I speak, like it doesn't belong to me. Eshal makes sudden, darting movements like she is a trapped bird.

She sits me in her bedroom while she runs the bath. I pass the time by leafing absentmindedly through the pages of one of the books on her desk. It is a science textbook, and each page is laden with beautiful and intricate diagrams of the anatomies of birds. I choose a page at random and come upon an illustration of a sparrow hawk, with its innards cross-sectioned and meticulously labelled in an antiquated script. *Accipter nisus*. The pages are thick and heavy. I run my fingers along the grooves in the paper. One passage discusses the sparrow hawk's talons and how they have been developed to become effective tools for snatching prey from the ground. On the next page, there is an osprey. I flick through a few more pages and realise that all the birds in the book are predators. Eshal comes back into her bedroom.

What kind of book is this? I ask, waving it at her.

That? It's for vet school.

Thought you weren't going to vet school.

I'm not. Well. I don't know. The bath's ready.

I stand up slowly, the palms of my hands flat on my thighs.

Did you bring a change of clothes? A swimming costume?

I shake my head no.

Eshal pulls open one of her drawers and takes out a baggy t-shirt with a picture of a dolphin.

Put this on if you want.

It's weird that, considering how much Eshal knows about me and what we're about to do, I'm shy about changing in front of her. She senses this and steps out of the room, closing the door. I take off my dress, and pull the t-shirt over my head, leaving my knickers on but taking my bra off. I leave them in a messy pile on the bed. Eshal's bedsheets are patterned

with tiny starfish and seahorses. I look in the mirror and draw my hair back into a ponytail. My cheeks are flushed, but there are dark pits under my eyes, like Esh's. My legs are soft and pale, with a web of faint veins visible through the skin on my thighs, a fuzz of three-day-old shaving stubble. My toes, with chipped blue nail polish, are curled under my feet, as though they're cringing.

I open Eshal's door and wander across the hallway, the magnolia carpet scratching against the pads of my heels, into the bathroom. Eshal is sitting on the toilet with the lid down, her legs tucked under her. She is leafing through a stapled wad of photocopied paper. The bath is running, and steam vapour rises from the gushing water. The bathroom is already a few degrees hotter than the rest of the house. It seems unnatural, considering how hot it is outside, and how everyone has been taking cold showers through the heat-wave. I feel my heart-rate go up.

Are you ready? Eshal asks me.

I say, I suppose so, quickly before I have time to think about it and change my mind.

I lift one leg over the side of the white bath and dip my foot into the water.

Shit, it's hot! I say.

Well, that's kind of the point.

I lower my body into the water, gasping at the heat as it envelopes me. The temperature is scorching. I struggle for breath.

You'll get used to it in a minute, Eshal says with confidence, but her face looks worried.

It hurts, I say. I lift an arm out of the water and show her the angry pink colour my skin has turned from the elbow down, a sharp line showing the contrast between skin that has been in the water and the skin that hasn't. It looks like I've been sunburned and now I have terrible

tan lines. Eshal relents and turns the cold tap a fraction to the left. I'm still panting. There are white spots behind my eyes.

Can you turn the lights off? I ask Eshal, aware that the fluorescent bulb is causing my head to pound. Eshal pulls the light cord, and drags the blackout blind down over the small frosted window above the toilet too. She takes the bottle of Gordon's gin off the windowsill. The glass clinks against the tiles. She unscrews the lid and hands me the bottle. As I take a swig she turns the water off. I take three gulps of the gin, and cough as it stings its way down my throat.

I hand the bottle back to Eshal. She sits back down on the toilet, picking up her papers again and examining them.

You need to take another drink in five minutes, she tells me, not looking at me.

The dolphin t-shirt is clinging to my skin, the top half of it which is wet but not submerged in the water already turning cold.

My skin feels like it is covered in tiny blisters. Eshal looks at me worried.

What? I ask her. She doesn't answer.

I twist around in the bath, every movement feeling like someone is sticking needles in my skin, and watch the clock. After five minutes Eshal picks up the bottle and hands it to me. I take another swig. Its passage is made real by how it burns its way down my throat. I wonder what kind of damage this is all going to do to my body. Hopefully enough to eject a foetus from my womb, I think to myself, and I'm surprised by my own callousness. But that is what we're here for, after all.

We wait some more. The water is marginally cooler than it was. Slightly more bearable. After the third time Eshal hands me the gin bottle I start to feel woozy. I stare at my legs, which are distorted underneath the bath water. They look wobbly, the edges of my skin rippling against the white porcelain.

I spy some mould on the edge of the bath, where it joins with the tiles on the wall.

Have you got some mould remover? I ask Eshal.

She has been watching the clock and flinches as I speak, cutting through the suspended silence of the bathroom. My voice bounces off the white tiles.

What?

Mould, I say, pointing to the black spots on the sealant.

I can hear my voice rising and lowering without any real cause for it to do so. I'm slurring my words.

I think I'm getting drunk, I say out loud. Eshal watches me.

Fifth, sixth, seventh swig from the bottle. It's been almost an hour. The gin is one-third gone. Eshal keeps letting a little water out of the bath and pouring more in, scalding, from the tap. The chord for the light switch is swinging back and forth methodically even though there is no wind and no one has touched it. At the end of the chord is a little ceramic mermaid, green and purple. She's not wearing a bra.

That's a bit rude, I say.

What? Eshal says again. I don't answer.

I want to lie back and go to sleep in the bath. I inch forward a little so I can get a more horizontal position, but I slip and lose my grip on the sides of the tub. The bath mat shifts, and I fall backwards, and the hot water slops up to my shoulder blades and I gasp at the pain. Something hard hits the back of my head. I think it's the tap. And I'm looking up at the shower head and I want to scream and scream and scream.

Fuck, Bess, are you okay?

I'm fine, I say, struggling to focus on her face. It's very important that I show her that I'm fine. I'm fine I'm fine I'm fine.

Bess?

I touch my hand to the back of my head and bring it to my face. There's a small amount of shiny blood on my fingertips. At least I think it's blood. Everything is swimming. It could just be a pink patch of skin.

Eshal is talking about stopping and getting me out the bath. My skin is raw. She is talking frantically. Maybe we should go to A and E.

No no no no don't stop no.

Eshal looks frightened: Bess, you can't see yourself. You're not well.

I point at my stomach. Prod it with my fingernails. One fingernail at a time.

It's not done, I say. I can feel it. We need to get it out.

I have been shouting.

I remember when we were both twelve and we found an injured starling on the side of the road near my house. I got a shoebox and Eshal ushered the bird in, and we poked air holes in it and stuffed the box with tissue paper. My mum cut up an apple and we put that in there too. It hopped around frantically and made tiny but rapid movements; it had injured its wing and couldn't fly. That's what Eshal looks like now, with her little, worried, angular motions. After some deliberation, we decided to take the starling to the vet in the High Street but on the way there the shoebox, which I had strapped to the handlebars of my bike, came loose and thudded onto the pavement. The bird immediately escaped it and ran, disorientated, into the middle of the road. Within seconds it was squished under the tire of a Renault Megane.

I hold my hand out to her and she gives me the bottle of gin. I drink and drink and drink, and pour the dregs into the bath water for good measure. Maybe I can absorb it by osmosis. Eshal makes a noise like she is disgusted.

I look up at the ceiling. There's a cobweb in the corner and a money spider is sitting on it. Slowly it spools a thread of web down to the bath taps.

Bess?

Eshal is very far away now. The other end of a church hall.

Bess, you've been sick. We need to get you out now, okay? That's it. We're done.

I look down at myself and see that the dolphin on the front of Eshal's t-shirt is now covered in putrid yellow stomach acid, little lumps for all the Vitamin C things I ate downstairs. All the tablets. Seems so long ago now, in Eshal's kitchen. And I don't remember that happening. The smell of the sick is suddenly overwhelming, like it's in my blood.

I apologise to Eshal.

It's fine, she says. Look, you don't need to cry. Please stop crying.

She turns on the shower part of the taps and holds it over my head, letting all the sick rinse off me. I scream because the shower water is boiling. Eshal shushes me, apologising over and over, and changes the temperature so that it's cooler but I am still screaming. I can't stop. She clamps her hand over my mouth as she rinses the sick off of me. It covers the water, a filmy layer, like an oil spill, the little lumps floating like air bubbles.

Eshal pulls me up by the shoulders but I can't get up. I'm too heavy. She is worrying that I'm going to drown.

I realise that she was telling me to stop crying because I am crying. Sobbing, noisily. Ugly. Ugly crying.

I think about what Boy might say if he could see me now. He probably wouldn't say anything. He would probably just leave. I am such a mess. I am so devoid of hope. I am going to die in this bathtub. I know it; I can feel it.

Eshal is crying too now, still trying to drag me out of the bath. I try to help her by lifting myself up but I have lost control of my body. All of my limbs weigh a hundred tonnes. I'm throwing up again before I have time to realise that there is bile rising in my throat.

Eshal is shouting even louder now but she is a mile away. My eyelids are heavy. I feel so

I slide back into the bath in what feels like a gentle movement, but the motion causes the sick-contaminated water to slop over the edges onto the towels, the tiles, Eshal's feet.

Eshal grips my hands and I hold onto hers like she's pulling me up from a ledge. My hands are like claws in hers.

We are suspended in this moment, tethered to each other.

We are staring into each other's eyes like lovers, hers are panicked and I can't feel mine or see them so I don't know I don't know I don't know. The tug of sleep is harder and harder to resist. I slip into it; the heat of the bath is suddenly soothing instead of blistering. It's very nearly peaceful.

It's like I'm cocooned in Eshal's bathtub. It's like I'm in a womb.

Chapter 15

I dream that I've gone to heaven, and everything is light. Heaven has many rooms, each of them coming off a corridor that's neither indoors nor outdoors, but is definitely in the sky. All of the doors are locked. But the heaven corridor is also the Maths corridor on the C floor at Our Lady of the Assumption. And it's also a hospital corridor and the light is not a good light; it's artificial strip lighting. Passing above my head like white lines on a road. On the M3. And there are tiny carpet beetles crawling all over my skin and eating all my clothes, the hairs on my arms, burrowing into me until the only thing left is my brain in a skeleton. And there she is. My mother standing in my bedroom door at midnight, her silhouette illuminated by the yellow light in the hallway. And she is saying, are you hurting yourself? Are you hurting yourself again? Have you been hurting yourself again?

When I wake up the first thing I see is the ceiling tiles, all pure dimpled white, hexagons fitting together. It's calming. My digital alarm clock is also going off too. So, I'm at home, but this isn't my ceiling. These aren't my walls. It's not my alarm clock either, it's a machine with blue and red lights on it, and coming off the machine is a thin clear tube, and the tube connects to me, and there is a clear liquid in it being slowly syringed into my body through a needle sticking out of a yellow plastic thing attached to my wrist.

So I guess I had my abortion after all. I went to the doctor's like I was supposed to and had a real abortion.

I look over to my left and see Mrs Bhandari (of all people) sitting in a visitors' chair, her knuckles kneading her face. I feel my own body, my dry, scratchy throat, my pounding head, my aching bones. My abdomen, which is intact but sore from retching. I remember everything.

Where's Eshal? I ask, and my voice is sandpaper in my throat. I try to cough, and it burns, but doesn't hurt. I must be smacked out on medication. I feel like I'm floating two feet above the hospital bed.

Mrs Bhandari looks up, suddenly alert, when she hears my voice. For a second she looks relieved to see me. But the moment passes quickly and her face contorts into something like contempt. She is wearing a dark blue sari with a grey diamond pattern on it. Her eyebrows are furrowed like how Eshal looks when she's annoyed or confused. Actually, I've never noticed how much Mrs Bhandari looks like Eshal before. Well, I suppose it's the other way around. Eshal looks like Mrs Bhandari. Except Mrs Bhandari's skin is like paper that has been folded and unfolded so many times that it has become soft and thin, with tiny fibres covering its surface. Mrs Bhandari's hair is stringier than Eshal's, and is threaded with fine silver strands.

Where's Eshal? I ask again.

Nowhere near you, thankfully, she says.

What happened?

Mrs Bhandari leans back and links her hands together, her elbows propped up on the armrests of the ugly hospital chair.

She says, Eshal told us everything. Myself and the doctors. Your mother and father are on their way to the hospital. You're in a lot of trouble, young lady. Eshal, too.

I have nothing to say in response to her. I grip the cold metal of the bed frame and feel shame wash over me, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

How dare you, Mrs Bhandari says, how dare you drag my daughter into your mess like this? In my own house, too. I have never met a girl so disgusting or disrespectful of others in my whole life.

She says, quietly, I pray to God that that baby is still alive inside you. Otherwise you're going to hell and you're taking Eshal with you.

I cry, and Mrs Bhandari relents and takes hold of my hand and strokes it softly. We are in a cubicle on a busy ward, and there are turquoise coloured curtains separating me from other patients on the ward. But I can still hear them. They are talking quietly to doctors and visitors. Some are crying like me. One, a woman, is having an argument with someone.

You are a stupid, selfish girl, she says.

I know. I know. I'm sorry.

It's too late for sorry, now.

I know.

We sit quietly and I wipe my nose on the sleeve of my hospital robe. I feel wholly pathetic.

After a while the curtain to my cubicle is tugged aside and a tall woman steps in.

Isabelle Johnson?

Yes, I say.

The woman turns to Mrs Bhandari, would you mind giving us some privacy? Unless you're a relative...?

The woman is tentative. Mrs Bhandari is clearly not my relative. She's very, very brown.

Mrs Bhandari just raises her eyebrows, though, and stands up.

We'll wait until your parents get here, she says, and then we're leaving. She doesn't have as much venom in her voice as before. Her saying 'we' makes me realise that Eshal is in the hospital somewhere too.

The tall woman is blonde and put-together. She perches on the chair and smooths her hands over her grey skirt.

Isabelle, my name is Doctor Jacobs. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about what happened today.

I wait until it's clear that she wants me to answer her.

Okay, I say.

My colleague has already spoken to your friend Eshal, who explained exactly what's been going on. But I wanted to hear everything in your words, too. Do you want to tell me about the situation?

She has produced a legal pad, I don't know where from, and has a pen poised over a fresh page, ready to take notes.

I think about where I can even begin.

Well, I say. I found out I was pregnant.

When did you find out? Dr Jacobs asks.

I think about it. It was about a month ago. After we finished school.

So, let's say the second week of June. Does that sound right to you?

I think about it.

Yes, because we had a science exam on the twentieth, and me and Eshal were still revising for it.

Great, Isabelle, Dr Jacobs says. I notice that I can ever-so-slightly see the shape of her bra through her cream shirt.

She asks me a bunch of questions about my health, whether I have any allergies, whether I smoke, how often I exercise, et cetera.

When was the last day of your period? She asks me.

I don't know.

Can you give me a rough date?

I don't know. Maybe, like the beginning of May? Or middle. I'm not sure. I'm sorry.

Don't worry, Isabelle. Just relax, okay?

I try to release the tension in my body. I'm coiled up and rigid. Every time she says 'Isabelle' it's like someone has just dragged their nails across a blackboard. It makes my innards curl up.

Dr Jacobs flips her legal pad closed.

Just so you know, we've pumped the alcohol out of your stomach today. You drank a dangerous amount of gin, Isabelle. You're very lucky that your friend had the sense to call an ambulance, otherwise it's possible that you could have died.

She pauses for dramatic effect. I think to myself how easy everything would be if that's what had actually happened.

I hope you're aware of the serious health risks of binge drinking. I hope you're not going to engage in this kind of behaviour again. Did you take any other substances? She asks me seriously.

No, I say, and she nods. Then I remember: Actually, wait. I had quite a lot of Vitamin C tablets.

Alright, she says, and I feel like I can see the hint of a smile on her face.

You'll notice as well that you've got a quite a few dressings on you.

I hadn't noticed at all but now that I look at my arms I see that from the wrist up to just above the elbows, my skin is dressed in thick white gauze. It feels like there is more on my back and legs too, but I can't see it.

You've sustained several second-degree thermal burns to your body as a result of coming into contact with scalding water and steam. We're going to keep treating these burns here in Outpatients until you go home, where we'll give you a treatment plan. We'll write you a prescription for antibiotic treatment for when you leave. For now, we need to rehydrate you and ensure that none of your burns become infected. We're treating you with intravenous antibiotics and codeine to deal with the pain. That's why you probably feel a little woozy.

She says, I want to talk to you now about your pregnancy.

I feel my eyes sting again. I look up at the clean tessellating ceiling tiles and count the edges of the hexagons, tracing their shapes with my eyes.

As far as we can tell without conducting an examination, there is no evidence that you have miscarried. We'll need to scan your belly to evaluate whether there has been any damage to the foetus. And we will have a chat later today to discuss your options, alright?

I don't move.

Isabelle, were your actions today – the bath and the drink – an effort to abort your pregnancy?

Of course, she already knows the answer to this.

I nod slowly, my eyes still shut.

Are you going to tell my parents? I ask her.

We have no legal obligation to share any details with your parents or guardians, Dr Jacobs says. In this case, as you're in care, your legal guardian is Surrey County Council.

This is something I've heard before. Many social workers have told me, with triumphant, self-satisfied faces, that they're my *corporate parent*. Another stupid foster care term that means fuck all in real life. It makes it sound like I came out the womb in a suit and tie and I've been raised in a bank ever since. But what they really mean is that instead of having actual people as guardians, the entire local council is responsible for me.

Dr Jacobs continues, If you like, I can be here to mediate when your foster parents and social worker arrive, how about that?

I say, yes.

Isabelle, considering your condition, I would strongly advise that you do tell them, alright? This is a very upsetting and difficult thing to be going through – for any woman, let alone a fifteen-year-old girl. There is plenty of support available from the NHS but the best possible help you can get is at home.

I let out a fake laugh, you obviously don't know my mother.

You would be surprised, Isabelle.

It's Bess, I tell her.

She tugs the curtain back open and exits my little cubicle. I watch the tube, watching it slowly pump clear liquid into the pale skin around my wrist. My hands are pink and shiny and raw. I lift the corner of one of the gauze strips covering my left arm and see a large slimy blister, the size of a two-pound coin. Shit.

I lay still and try not to think of anything. Every time an inkling of pain begins to hover at the fringes of my consciousness, it ebbs away quickly and is replaced by a pleasant numbing sensation. I assume it's the painkillers. There is still some pain, though, like the keening ache in my belly. I imagine pulling my fingernails out one by one. I wonder if it would hurt at all.

After what seems like hours but probably isn't, I hear my mother's voice permeating the soft humdrum of the ward. She is saying, is she in here? Is it this one? Oh, sorry, I was looking for my daughter. Bess Johnson. Do you know where she is?

I wonder about yelling to her to alert her to my location but I can't bear the thought of it, how my voice would sound calling out to her. I realise that I am afraid. She finally arrives at my cubicle, ripping the curtain open and casting her eyes down at me. She is windswept, red-faced, sweaty, breathless.

Oh my god, Bess.

I laugh, because I can't think of what else to do. It comes out a little maniacal.

What have you done to yourself? Jesus.

Rory wanders in behind Mum, and pulls the curtain closed gently. Mum sits down on the squeaky blue plastic hospital chair, the one that Dr Jacobs was sitting on.

What's going on? Mum asks again.

Well, I've got second degree burns, I tell her.

Rory is staring at me like I'm a dead body.

Mum says: We were so worried. Eshal's mum didn't say much on the phone, just that you were in hospital and you were getting your stomach pumped. What happened?

Me and Esh were drinking, I say.

Jesus, Bess.

And I drank a bit too much, and I ran a bath but it was too hot. So, I burned myself.

Lisa watches me, and I can tell from her expression, which is pinched, that she doesn't believe me.

A nurse announces her presence with a cheery hello that is totally at odds with the atmosphere of my cubicle. She pulls back the curtain, dragging in a trolley covered in a greenish plastic sheet, bumping into the back of Rory.

I'm going to have to ask you to leave for a brief moment, she says, I just need to examine Miss Johnson.

We're her parents. You're really telling us to leave? We just got here!

It's only for ten minutes, the nurse says. She has a very open face and a soft, calming voice, with a sing-song tone to it, which is why I think Mum follows Rory out of my cubicle.

Hello Miss Johnson, the nurse says, in the same Maria from *The Sound of Music* type voice. I'm going to just do a quick scan of your belly, alright?

Okay, I say.

She pulls a chair up and sets up her equipment, pulling the cover off the trolley. On it is a small TV with some wires and components coming off it.

The nurse adjusts my bed so that I'm lying in a more horizontal position. She pushes some button on the monitor and the machine whirs into life. She untangles a curly telephone cord with something that looks like a walkie talkie on the end of it.

I'm going to squirt some of this gel onto your stomach, alright?

I nod. She pulls back the thin sheet covering me and it's the first time that I realise I have been dressed in a hospital gown. How weird that I didn't notice that before. The nurse pinches the hem of the gown and gently shifts it upwards, avoiding contact with my skin which I notice is red and raw all over my thighs and hips too. Everything below my knees is covered in dressing, including my feet. I wonder how I'll walk. My body looks like an organ out of a biology book, all shiny and blotchy pink. As the nurse pulls my gown past my hips I notice I'm wearing gross disposable paper knickers. I wonder who took my knickers off for me. Who put

these paper ones on. Whether they did it gently. Whether some poor orderly got a face full of pubes.

The nurse warns me of the coldness a nanosecond before squirting a huge dollop of a clear lubey liquid onto my stomach. The initial chill makes me flinch but as she spreads the stuff over my stomach it actually begins to feel quite soothing. It's as though this is not my body and it's not me experiencing these things. I'm a third party, a bystander, watching everything happen from a corner of the room.

Now she's prodding my stomach firmly with the walkie talkie device. She flicks a switch of the screen and that familiar ultrasound display that you always see in *Casualty* and *EastEnders* comes up. It is a blurry black-and-white semicircle with very little on it in terms of discernible objects. Just weird smudged masses of what I guess is tissue from inside my womb.

I crane my neck to see the screen. I don't know what I'm looking for. A little kidney bean inside the static, or would seeing nothing at all be better? I don't know how many weeks I am, or anything. I still don't really know what 'how many weeks' means.

How many weeks am I? I ask the nurse.

Oh, don't worry about that now, sweetheart. Doctor Jacobs is going to discuss all of that with you this afternoon.

I don't respond. The nurse prints out something from the side of the machine, I assume the scans, and wheels her trolley of equipment out of the cubicle.

Dr Jacobs will be back in a few minutes, she says.

Mum and Rory come back into the cubicle.

Dr Jacobs will be here in a few minutes, I tell them.

Will you please tell us what the hell is going on? Mum asks again.

I just look at her.

For goodness' sake, Bess.

We sit in silence, listening to the conversation in the cubicle next to us. It is a drunk man, shouting quietly at his wife. In forced whispers. I suddenly feel so exhausted, like I haven't slept in a year. I want to sleep for days and wake up a new person. Someone who is not me.

The curtain twitches again, and Mrs Bhandari half-steps in. Behind her is Eshal. We lock eyes for a moment and my face stretches involuntarily into a big grin. I'm so happy to see her. My stomach is singing. But she doesn't smile back at me. She's been crying, I can tell. Her hands are balled up into little fists and shoved under her armpits, like she's hugging herself. Her hair is all scruffy, which is unlike her. She never leaves the house without her ritual hundred brush strokes.

Esh? I ask, uncertain.

Good, you're here, Mrs Bhandari says to my parents. Eshal looks at the floor.

Nazrin, what on Earth is going on? Mum asks her, slightly too aggressively. The doctors won't tell us a thing. This stupid patient confidentiality rule. Never mind the fact that she's our daughter...

Mrs Bhandari looks at me as though I aggravate her with my very presence.

Your daughter is pregnant, Mrs Bhandari says, almost shouts. And now Eshal's crying for real. There you have it, alright? And she's dragged *my* daughter into it. The whole thing is despicable. You'll forgive me if I don't wait around to see how it all turns out.

And then she's gone, and she's dragging Eshal out by the arm too, and Esh is struggling against her, going, Mum, *stop* and then, MUM STOP IT YOU'RE HURTING ME. And then in the corridor, past the curtain, I hear Eshal still shouting, and getting louder and louder. And Mrs Bhandari shouts back at first, and then there's a third voice. Esh's dad, Mr

Bhandari, has turned up. And he's louder than both of them put together. And he's saying words like shameful and embarrassment and how dare you and Bess and God and Dhaka and now Eshal is going back at him, first in English and then in Bengali, her voice straining through sobs all wobbly and awful and we just sit in the cubicle, me and Lisa and Rory, and we all listen and pretend not to listen, not looking at each other, eavesdropping on this private moment that I caused but don't belong to, and then a member of hospital staff is telling them to leave before she calls security and then they're going, their voices getting quieter and quieter as the distance between me and Esh gets further and further away, until they're gone and all we can hear is the hushed, shocked silence of the ward in the aftermath of their fight. And I so desperately want to go after her, to call her back, to drop-kick her dad in his stupid head, but I'm hooked up to this machine with three different tubes and I say to Mum, to Rory, can't you do something? Can't you go and get her? PLEASE. And Mum says, it's not our business. You've done enough damage. Bess. And then I remember that Mrs Bhandari has just spilled it, everyone knows. And in some ways it's a *relief* that it's not just me and Esh dealing with this horrendous, enormous secret alone anymore. Like, now it's all out there. There's nowhere to hide at all. There's no point lying any more. But now Esh is gone, maybe forever, and it's just me.

God, says Rory rather helpfully.

God isn't going to help you now, Rory, I tell him.

To my surprise, Mum is crying. Her face in her hands, her shoulders gently bouncing up and down, big shuddering heaving breaths coming out of her. The skin on her neck blotchy-bright.

It catches me by surprise. I try to remember a time I saw her cry. I can't.

I think of all of the ways I can kill Mrs Bhandari and make it look like an accident.

I feel deflated.

How long has this been going on for? Rory asks in a low voice, clearing his throat, seating himself at the end of my bed.

Has what been going on for? How long have I been pregnant or how long was I in the bath tub? How long have I been an alcoholic? How long have I been sexually active?

Bess! For crying out loud.

Sorry. I shouldn't joke about it, I'm not really an alcoholic.

I remember the drunk man in the cubicle next to mine and call out 'sorry' to him, too.

We're going to have to ring Henry.

Oh, God, yes. Henry. Social services will want to know all the intimate details for my file. What position did we do it in? What colour was my underwear?

As if on cue, Dr Jacobs sidles back into my cubicle, this time clutching a bunch of different leaflets. I read one upside-down as BURNS VICTIMS: TREATING AND MANAGING YOUR PAIN.

Ah, hi again, Isabelle.

It's Bess, I say at the exact same time as Mum does.

Sorry, Bess, Dr Jacobs corrects herself, and quickly introduces herself to Mum and Rory.

I wanted to discuss your treatment after you have been discharged today. Burns are particularly difficult to manage. I trust that you'll be looked after by Lisa or Rory?

I glance warily at Mum.

We haven't talked about it yet, I say.

We can manage the burns, Mum says dismissively. What we need to know more about is how the hell my daughter came to be pregnant –

I think that much is pretty obvious, Mum –

And what the bloody hell we're going to do about it.

Dr Jacobs steps back out into the ward momentarily before returning with a wheelchair.

Bess, why don't you hop into the wheelchair and we can have this discussion somewhere more private?

I shrug and ease my legs over the side of the bed. The movement makes me suddenly very aware of how painful every part of my body is, especially the raw sections which are touching scratchy bedsheets.

Ouch, I say.

Mum helps me off the bed, an unreadable look on her face as she sees the dressings on my arms and legs. Dr Jacobs pushes me out of the cubicle and through a security door. Rory is wheeling my IV drip along beside us on a coat hanger type thing. Dr Jacobs lets us into a room marked BEREAVEMENT and the door shuts with a loud click behind us.

Once we're all sat down, Dr Jacobs says, first of all, Bess, I think it was a very brave and mature thing to do to tell your parents about the pregnancy.

She didn't tell us, Mum says. Nazrin Bhandari did.

Dr Jacobs pauses and then says, well, whatever the situation, this is where we are now. So, we need to discuss options. Lisa and Rory, I'm not sure if you're aware of so-called do-it-yourself abortion methods. Bess's injuries sustained today are unfortunately a result of a similar attempt.

I turn to look at them. Neither of them are displaying any emotion. Eyes wide and attentive.

It's quite clear to me that Bess is very young and not at all equipped to deal with this pregnancy, nor the possibility of motherhood, on her own.

She's got us, Mum snaps.

Yes, of course she does, Dr Jacobs says. What I'm saying is that there are several options open to Bess at this stage and it's important for her to know exactly what is available to her.

Now, Bess, I've taken a look at the ultrasounds we conducted earlier and, despite the damage you've sustained today, the foetus is unharmed and perfectly healthy.

Mum claps her hands involuntarily. I've never seen her look so haggard.

Dr Jacobs goes onto talk more about the ultrasound but I don't hear her.

You mean to say, I interrupt her, that after all that. All the shit I did today, it's fine? Are you sure?

Absolutely, Dr Jacobs says. You're young and healthy, which means that your womb is a very habitable place.

Very habitable place, I repeat.

Yes, Bess.

I swallow vomit down. I glance around the room. It's dimly lit, but tastefully decorated, with terracotta coloured walls and a potted plant on the windowsill. Behind Dr Jacobs' head there is an oil painting of a lake. I wonder how many people have sat in this room to be told that their mum or dad, husband or wife or kid didn't make it. That the body is going cold and rigid as we speak.

Is this where you tell people their relatives have died? I ask Dr Jacobs.

Mum goes, Bess!

No, it's alright. Yes, it is. And it's also where we offer counselling to bereaved families. Why do you ask?

I just thought that maybe you were going to tell me I killed it.

There is a moment of silence as the three of them process what I have said.

Do you mean you thought you had successfully aborted your pregnancy? Dr Jacobs asks me.

I nod yes.

Is that what you wanted, Bess?

I nod again, and hot tears are streaking lines down my cheeks.

What am I going to do? I ask her. Ask them all. They cast blank looks back at me. I wonder whether they are thinking I am a monster or a victim.

What am I going to do? I say again. I lean forward and place my forehead on the cool glass of the coffee table and close my eyes, waiting for someone to answer me.

Chapter 16

Every day a nurse called Emily comes in and re-dresses my bandages on my legs and arms. The cleaning ointment smells like peppermint chewing gum. They move me to an emptier ward that has long, thin windows that reach to the top of the ceiling. Most of the time I'm alone apart from nurses who drift in and out to check the machine and tubes pumping stuff into my body. I watch people enter and leave the ward – patients and visitors – but they are always far away from me, the long distance stretching between us so it feels like I'm watching them on TV. I've been here the longest out of everyone.

The window next to my bed looks out onto a small courtyard, which is completely surrounded by hospital buildings. I'm on the twelfth floor out of fifteen. Sometimes there is a man in the courtyard, and he runs the perimeter of the area, in white trainers, red football socks and a hospital gown. He runs laps and laps and laps until a nurse comes into the garden to collect him. One time I count how many laps he makes before the nurse finds him. It's seventy-two. When the nurse arrives, she talks to him sternly. I can't hear what she's saying because the window is chained shut. Before the man goes with her he stretches his neck out and stares directly up at the sky, his arms slightly pulled backwards and away from his body. It looks like his ribcage is about to break open, to reveal a whole other person underneath his skin.

Mum and Rory come and visit me every evening at 7p.m. Rory brings egg mayonnaise sandwiches for me, because he thinks there are no nutrients in hospital food (I don't think egg mayo sandwiches are that much better), and when I refuse them he eats them noisily, breathing heavily through his nose, getting egg in his moustache. Mum sits on the chair at the edge of the bed and asks me quiet tentative questions. What did you do today? Did they let you go outside? What did you eat? Did they change your bandages? Has the doctor seen you?

I answer minimally. We are all avoiding the subject of the pregnancy like it's a social faux pas. I can't bring myself to be the one to raise the question of it, because I feel like this is an uneasy ceasefire between her and me, and it could break at any moment. I feel as though bringing it up would be like asking them for help, like asking Mum for help. I can't bear it. She is being so soft. I wonder whether she's thankful that it was me, and not Clarissa, who got into this trouble. She is probably thinking, at least it was Bess, at least it was someone else's daughter, not mine. We are all pretending, for now, that the pregnancy doesn't exist. And all the time I'm in hospital, the foetus is growing inside me.

Clarissa hasn't come, although I guess she's too young to get it. That's a lie. She's eleven; she knows what pregnancy is. I wonder if they've told her. Eshal hasn't been here and I hope it's because Mrs Bhandari is keeping her away rather than she doesn't want to come. Boy doesn't know that I'm here at all. Not that I would want him to come and see me, especially when I'm looking so pathetic and my hair is so lank with grease from not being able to wash it that it is plastered to my scalp, and parts of my skin are shiny purple and excreting pus. Doctor Jacobs has offered to have someone come and wash my hair for me but the thought of someone holding my head under water makes me want to scream.

When Doctor Jacobs arrives, I tell her, Sputnik was the first-ever artificial satellite and it was launched by the Soviet Union in the nineteen fifties.

Doctor Jacobs says, that's not what we're here to talk about, Bess, stop stalling.

Henry has turned up too. A surprising addition to mine and Dr Jacobs' usual pow wows. When I saw him, I must have had some kind of expression of shame come over me because he gave me a look like I was a wounded sparrow and then went, oh Bess, oh Bess, oh Bess, and he flipped his mint-green neckerchief-scarf-thing over his shoulder so that it wouldn't dangle in my face, and drew me into his bony arms. He smells of glue. I wonder whether it's his washing powder or his aftershave, or he's been sticking sequins onto his chest as his drag queen alter ego, who I have secretly named in my head Chlamydia Queen.

Now we are sitting in Doctor Jacobs' office, which is pretty much exactly the same layout and décor as the bereavement room. And Doctor Jacobs is talking about options, or rather Options with a capital O. I examine the grain of wood on her desk while she is talking, and it's only when I reach out to stroke it that I realise it is a fake lino with the pattern of wood printed onto it, not real wood.

You don't need to make a decision just now, she says, but you also need to realise that you only have a small window of time to think about everything.

She rattles off my three options like we haven't gone over them a million times. Henry takes notes.

Dr Jacobs gives me two thick glossy brochure-style leaflets. One is green and has a picture of a smiley family on the front. A Mum, with long hot-chocolate-coloured hair pulled back with a headband; a Dad with rolled up sleeves, a five o'clock shadow; and two little kids, a boy and a girl around eight and ten, both with little chubby cheeks and glossy black eyes. All four of them are showing their teeth, in a way that seems more unnatural the more I look at it. The mum looks like she is snarling, and the little girl looks like the corners of her mouth are about to rip her cheeks open. The company's name on the pamphlet is FAMILIES FORWARD, and the letters are entwined with a leaf pattern. The second brochure I have doesn't have a picture on the front, it's plain blue and has the words MARIE STOPES UK in bold white capital letters, and underneath there is a mission statement, the words are *Children are a choice, and every woman has the right to choose.*

My three choices are what Eshal already deduced: have a baby and raise it, have a baby and give it up for adoption, or have an abortion.

I wish that there is an option four, which is that none of this ever happened. I say this out loud to Dr Jacobs and Henry, but neither of them find it funny.

I ask Dr Jacobs who Marie Stopes is. She tells me that it's not a person, it's a clinic which provides abortions on the NHS.

Why can't you do that here?

We don't provide terminations in a hospital. There are specialist clinics for it. You'll have to go there. I can make a referral if that's what you want?

No, I say quickly, surprising myself. Not yet.

I have to stress the time sensitive element of all this, Bess.

I know, I say. I know, I know.

Henry clears his throat daintily, Bess, I've already spoken to your foster carers, Lisa and Rory.

He says their names for the benefit of Dr Jacobs but it feels awfully formal and not at all like Henry. I think he's bricking it that he actually has to do his job for once.

He continues: They've both agreed that they're willing to support you through your pregnancy, if that's what you choose, and also with the adoption process. They've also said that if you want to keep the – er – baby, they would be willing to provide you with lodgings and support, too.

Henry is talking more to Dr Jacobs now than he is to me.

Bess's care situation is a unique one, he explains. Most children are in care for short periods of time, or if they are in care permanently, they tend to move between several different placements. Bess has stayed in the same care placement since she was four, and we've all agreed that there is no need for her to move, unless she wants to.

I'm very lucky with my *unique care situation*, I say sarcastically, and Henry nods, smiling, not getting it, totally clueless like Brittany Murphy in *Clueless*.

These are all things that you might want to think about when you're making your decision, Dr Jacobs says. It's good to know that there is a support network there for you if you

need it. And I'm sure social services will be keeping an eye on you, too, as a young person in care.

Can you stop saying care? I tell her. Why do you use the word *care*? It's so weird. The reason we're all in *care* is because our parents didn't *care* enough to look after us properly. And when we're eighteen we're dumped by social services anyway. Left to fend for ourselves. We're *care leavers*. How exactly does someone *leave care*? Do our foster parents stop caring about us? Do social services stop caring about us? Where do we go after that?

Bess, Henry says my name like a warning, flicking his pen against his notebook.

No, I say. It's fucking stupid. The whole system, it's bullshit. In six months, you'll probably be re-assigned to some other case with some other poor kid whose mother is a junkie or whose uncle is a sexual predator, or whose parents beat her, and you'll pull her into the *care system*, too, and then you'll forget about her too. Job done, right? I've had enough social workers to know that you're all the same. We're all just little pixelated gradients on a bar chart on a fucking PowerPoint presentation, aren't we? We're statistics for your performance review.

Henry blinks at me, the tips of his ears growing pink. He glances at Dr Jacobs.

Don't tell me, I say, breathless, that I have a fucking *support network*, okay? There is no support network. There is no *care system*. There's no such thing as care. It's a myth.

I stand up with my pamphlets and I can feel my burns searing as I leave Dr Jacobs' office, but in a good way, like all of the rotten parts of my body have been cut away and now all the skin is fresh and new.

When Mum and Rory come to collect me at the end of the week Mum insists that I sit in the wheelchair even though I'm capable of walking properly. She folds my things neatly into a canvas duffle bag, and fidgets while we have our 'exit interview', where Dr Jacobs runs them

through how to change the bandages on my burns, my antibiotics schedule and reminds them what I need to be eating and drinking.

And we still haven't gotten any closer to deciding about the pregnancy, have we, Bess? Dr Jacobs says. 'We' – like this is her problem too – yeah, right. Mum nods in quick, muted movements, her eyes big, deliberately not looking at me. Rory leans back in his chair, his forearms spread across the armrests like he's at the pub. Once we're done, Mum makes Rory take the handles of my wheelchair and wheel me out into the car park and offload me into the Fiesta.

What am I supposed to do with this, then? He asks, signalling the wheelchair.

For Chrissakes, Rory, I don't care. Just get rid of it, Mum says.

So, he wheels it over to a parking space next to a big industrial-sized bin and leaves it there.

It's not Tesco, you know, I shout through the window, you can't leave it in the car park like it's a trolley.

He does a half-jog, half-skip to the car and quickly turns the ignition.

Who wants a Chinese tonight, then? he says loudly.

Oh, yes, please, I say.

You think you're getting a takeaway, after *this*? Mum snaps, and the expression on her face tells me that the uneasy ceasefire we've had going is officially over.

. The tone in her voice reminds me that I'm pregnant and nothing has been resolved. It's only got worse.

When we get back to the house Rory takes my stuff up to my room for me and I slowly sort through it. Mum's 'Poison' perfume lingers on my cardigan: she must've sprayed it to mask the scent of fags on the fabric. Sure enough, my little pouch of Amber Leaf tobacco is

gone from the pocket of my jeans, too. Once Rory is gone from my bedroom I pull the lever on the window and delicately manoeuvre myself out onto the porch roof. I lift up a loose roof tile where my emergency baccie is stashed. It's damp but when I roll it up and light it, it burns, and I smoke it even though it tastes like mould. The sun is a long way away from sinking into the reservoir. I squint through the smoke and sunlight, Stage H and its broad flat metal walls casting long shadows over the faces and bodies of the kids in the park. I turn around and look to the Pits and think of the quiet dark water. The dark trees. The M3. It's still there. As if it'll ever be gone. That water will be here at the end of human life on Earth, when we're all dead from the nuclear apocalypse or the millennium bug or in space colonising Mars.

I edge back into my bedroom and lay down on my bed, staring at the faces in the dots on the ceiling. I think about sneaking downstairs and calling Eshal. Her mother would never let me speak to her. Or Boy, but he'd probably make some excuse not to talk to me. I touch my belly and try my hardest not to think about anything at all.

And when I wake up my bedroom is black apart from the streetlamp outside my window. There are tiny flies buzzing around it, drifting closer and closer to it before being shocked back to a safe distance. I wander into the bathroom and check the LED clock on top of the cabinet. It's 2.24 a.m. The whole house is the kind of silent that is so absolute that it's louder than any real noise. I turn the light on and the extractor fan hums into life, and I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. My skin is definitely better than what it was, and I can see when I lift the gauze dressings that underneath it's dry and raw rather than the angry seeping it was doing while I was in the hospital. My face looks thinner, my cheekbones more prominent. My wrists feel thinner too when I circle my thumb and forefinger around one: the two fingers touch.

I stand in the bath so I can get a better angle on the mirror and pull my t-shirt up to reveal my belly. It doesn't *look* any bigger, but it is more rounded. I don't know whether I'm just imagining it, though. Dr Jacobs said I was nine weeks pregnant, which is not long at all. I have a deadline of fifteen more weeks to decide on the fate of the blob germinating in my womb. After that, nothing can be done.

Clarissa pushes the door open and sees me standing in the bath.

What are you *doing*? She asks in a whisper.

Get out, get out!

She doesn't move. She just watches me with her flying saucer eyes. She stares at my belly.

Is it true what Mum and Dad said about you being in the hospital?

I nod.

What happened to your *skin*?

I shrug.

Are you really pregnant? Her hand absentmindedly lifts to her head and she twirls a golden curl between her fingers. She looks like a ghost. She looks like me, kind of, actually.

I say yes, but you're probably not supposed to know that.

Clarissa says she overheard Mum and Rory talking in their bedroom after she was supposed to have gone to sleep.

You're too young to be pregnant.

Well, technically not.

Yeah, but you're fifteen. You're a kid, aren't you?

I think about it. Yes, I suppose.

Clarissa sits on the toilet and wees, still looking at me like I'm a science experiment.

That's so weird, she concludes, shuffling out of the bathroom, leaving me standing in the bathtub. A moment later I hear her bedroom door click shut.

Yes, weird.

Chapter 17

Weird. My bedroom has begun to smell like me, my body, my dirty clothes. It's that smell from spending too much time in one place. It gets into the fabric. I take out the scrapbook of photographs I made. I wrote the digits 1 9 9 9 on the cover using a permanent marker. Half of the pages are still empty. I flick through it and count the faces in the photographs. There are eighteen photographs of Eshal: Manor Park, at school in the playground on the last day, a shirt scrawled with dirty words and goodbye wishes flung over her shoulder. Esh in her back garden with her Twiggy sunglasses and combat boots staring up at the nest box in next door's oak tree. I can almost hear her counting the blue-tit eggs and going on about the incubation period. *Parus caeruleus*. She says it in the voice of an old woman.

There are pictures of Boy too. Twenty-two. Eight of them are Boy with long, floppy hair that falls over his eyes which he always brushes out of his face. The rest are Boy post-shave, and there is even one of him in the bathroom the day I shaved his head. His eyes are glossy with the pale pink fleshy bits showing. He's not looking at the camera; he's looking at an object a few inches behind the camera. There is a smile on his face like he knows something everyone else doesn't.

There are four pictures of me in the scrapbook. One of them Eshal took on the train station platform. The other three photographs of me in the scrapbook are all with Boy, all polaroids with the camera turned around, my wrist bent at an awkward angle, to capture our faces. In all of them Boy's entire face fills the frame and a half or quarter of mine peeks out from the corner. Usually my forehead or chin, sometimes an eye or a cheek. They are all hideous, out of focus, shoddy. Looking at them now makes it seem ridiculous that I ever wanted to memorialise myself. I take a cotton bud from my dressing table and wipe it around the inside rim of the bottle of bleach in the upstairs bathroom. I gently rub the cotton bud over my features in the pictures. The photo paper turns burnt orange, like the skin around a sunrise,

and eventually becomes white, having sapped out all the colour printed onto it. I fold the three photographs in half and tuck them into the back of the book, right into the binding.

Mum changes my bed sheets every other day because she is terrified of my burns getting infected. She complains about the mess, the stale food. She tries to clean up but I sulk until she goes away. She opens the window every morning but I close it by midday. I'm horrendously miserable.

Clarissa sometimes dithers at my bedroom door before padding away. I can tell by the sound of her footsteps, because hers are the softest out of anyone in the house. Every time Mum and Rory go out to work, to run an errand or go shopping I sneak downstairs and take the phone to call Eshal. I one-four-one it so no other member of the Bhandari household will recognise my number and block it. Usually it just goes to the answerphone, and Eshal's dad's stern voice tells me to call back later, or when someone answers it's Mrs Bhandari, and as soon as she hears my quiet breathing on the line she says, Bess, I know it's you. Stop ringing my house. I will call the police.

After the second week, my burns have hardened into bumpy purple callouses and my skin is drying and flaking off all over the place. Mum rubs a special prescription-strength steroid cream with moisturiser onto the places I can't reach. I hate the feeling of her hands on my back and neck. Her fingernails are long and filed into neat squares, with do-it-yourself French tips, and sometimes she catches my skin with one and it hurts like hell. The French tips are so unlike her, the opposite of her mauve smocks and fabric softener and Poison perfume. I think one of the younger girls at the Opticians did them for her. They're sloppy, anyway. You can see where the polish has leaked out under the stencil and turned the crisp line into a wobbly dribbly one. I offer to re-do them for her. I have a steady hand. Mum says no thanks and takes off the varnish with rubbing alcohol.

Eventually, they let me out of my bedroom and I'm allowed to come and eat with the family. Such an *honour*. Mum makes me go to the Opticians with her if no one else is in the house to keep an eye on me and make sure I don't sneak off to the pub or the whore house or wherever it is they think I hang out. I sit at the counter and fill out my college applications, which are months too late now anyway, but I do it. Sometimes I fetch things for Mum when she's with a customer. Sometimes the optician, Mr Clump, who has an impressive snow-white moustache, sticks his head out of the little examination room and hints that he wants a cup of tea and Mum gives me a pointed look, and I go and make tea for everyone. I think Mum is quite happy for me to be here, to be honest, because I'm doing all the shit jobs she usually has to do, like bleaching the customer toilet and polishing the mirrors and going out to get Mr Clump's lunch from the bakery across the road.

One time she pauses and looks over my shoulder to see what I'm working on.

College applications? She asks me. Don't you think it's a bit late for that?

She's referring to the fact that I am ten weeks pregnant now. As if every customer in the shop and Mr Clump will suddenly realise I'm pregnant simply because she is thinking it or referring to it in increasingly vague terms. I can already feel a hot bubble in my throat which I know is going to burst soon.

I shrug.

I suppose I can put them in now and ask to defer for a year.

You don't know where you're going to be in a year yet. You don't what your situation is going to be. Do you?

I haven't thought about it, I tell her, truthfully. And I can feel the bubble travelling up my windpipe, trying to escape. My face goes warm.

Well, that's the thing, Bess. You don't think about anything much, do you? And she turns away.

And in my head, a gameshow host is shouting, *aaaaaaaand we're back*.

On a Tuesday night, at home, I sit at the dinner table and the four of us eat in silence. Lamb chops and mash, my absolute least favourite dinner. Mum puts her cutlery down halfway through tearing the meat off the bone.

So, Bess, have you given any more thought to what you're going to do?

Clarissa's head snaps up so quickly I'm surprised she doesn't give herself whiplash. Her eyes dart from my face to Mum's. This is the closest she's ever got to being involved in the pregnancy conversation.

Well? Mum asks, and Rory puts his cutlery down too.

I look at her, trying to gauge what she wants me to say.

I say, I don't know. Because I don't. Because in all honesty I've been trying to pack this problem up into a tiny little box and file it somewhere in a dark corner in the back of my brain where I will forget about it and it will just go away. Of course, that's not going to happen and eventually I'm going to have to deal with it. But it's a nice fantasy to have all the same.

I want to chime in, Mum says. She looks nervous.

If you don't mind, that is.

Okay.

She takes a deep breath: I think you should keep the baby.

Rory stands up, clears his throat and takes his plate into the kitchen. Clarissa stares, her gob open like she's trying to catch flies.

Close your mouth, Riss, I tell her. She does.

I think you should keep it, Mum says again.

Why, though? I ask her.

You have a family here who can support you. You'll get help from social services. You're not on the street or a drug addict or anything like that. There's absolutely no reason why you're not capable of raising a child.

I shove a spoonful of creamy mash into my mouth.

I can help you with all the shopping and preparation. I can show you how to do it. How to change nappies and do feeds and all that kind of thing. I can go part-time at work to help you look after the baby. We can afford it, just about. You can put college on hold for a few years and go back when the baby starts nursery.

I don't reply, swishing the mash around my mouth until it is all liquid and gooey.

Leese, Rory says. He is at the dining room door. I didn't notice him standing there. Mum looks at him and I realise that she is close to crying.

I just think you need to realise the gravity of the fact that you are carrying *life* inside you, Bess. That's a *human life* in there. She points at my belly as though I can see it through my skin, the little cell cluster all warm and cosy in my womb.

Clarissa looks too, and asks me if I'm going to get fat.

Are you blind? I'm already fat, I tell her. I lift up my t-shirt and push out my belly at her, showing her. Mum looks mortified.

Clarissa goes, Bess, you're such an idiot. You're not *fat*. You just wear clothes that are too small for you. Look: I can see your hip bones. How long until you get *really* fat? Not fake feeling-sorry-for-yourself fat?

I don't know, Riss, and I'm saying it to Mum too. I don't fucking know, okay?

I stand up and push past Rory into the hall and take my shoes out from the cupboard under the stairs.

Where are you going? Mum asks, her voice shrill.

Out.

Oh, no you don't.

What are you going to do, Mum? Tie me up? Lock me up in my bedroom and throw away the key?

Fine, she says, go out. But don't come crying to me when this all comes crashing down on you. Because it will, Bess, I promise you.

I slam the door extra loud. They've locked up my bike and Mum has the key in her desk drawer, because I *shouldn't be cycling anywhere in my condition*. I could walk to Eshal's, but that will take forty minutes, and when I get there there's a ninety-nine per cent chance that Mrs Bhandari will just slam the door in my face anyway. I wander up the road towards the reservoir and think about going to Boy's but dismiss the thought almost immediately as a terrible idea. I haven't seen Boy for weeks. I don't even know if he thinks of me at all anymore. It feels wildly inappropriate to turn up at his house unannounced now, even though that was the norm for us before.

I keep walking to the end of the road, watching the obeliskesque shapes of the film studios sound stages rise up into the evening August sunshine. The studios have a certain smell. It's very distinct, like hot tarmac and traffic fumes. I glance down the road toward Mary Magdalene Church and see a woman getting out of the car and bustling into the grounds. I realise it's the woman who was screaming at Boy when he crashed into the church last summer, May. I check my watch. It's almost seven p.m. I guess she's going to the women's group at the church. I walk down the road and follow her in through the large oak door.

Inside the church is massive, the walls reaching up to a ceiling, melting into black shadows. At the altar, the stained-glass window depicts a saint I don't recognise – a woman. There are no pews, which surprises me. Instead a group of twelve women sit in a rough semi-

circle on plastic classroom chairs. May is there and some other women I recognise from around town.

The women are speaking quietly to each other, laughing occasionally, all fiddling with their knitting, nimble hands winding wool around the thick needles. I approach them, unsure, my boots scuffing against the floor tiles. May glances up and notices me.

Come and sit down, she says, scraping her chair to the side although it's not strictly necessary, there's plenty of room there already for an extra chair.

Who's this then, May? A woman with thick glasses and big round knuckles says, looking up to examine me.

Well, I don't know her name, May says.

It's Bess.

She points me over to the spare chairs, stacked against the wall underneath another stained-glass mural, and I pull one over to the group. I take my seat next to her.

Did you bring anything with you? she asks me, and I shake my head and begin to feel as though I've made a mistake.

You can use these, the woman with thick glasses says, and she kicks a carpet bag over to me. I run my hand across the knitting needles all nestled in together. They make a metallic noise as they jostle against each other. They feel cool and smooth. I select a pair held together by an elastic band. The thick glasses lady notices my choice and shakes her head.

Go for thicker ones to start with. Much easier.

I obey and take out a second pair, each needle about as thick as a pencil.

Better, she says.

Has anyone got any wool?

Someone shoves some at me, a ball of thick turquoise twine, with threads of purple in it. I take it with a small smile. No one is really paying much attention to me at all, each of them working on their own knitting. Some are referring to patterns sketched or photocopied onto sheets of paper, or from magazines. May is twisting her needles around what looks to be the sleeve of a very fiddly baby's cardigan. I turn my attention to one of the other women, who is younger than the rest, maybe in her sixties instead of everyone else's seventies and eighties. She is working on a plain square of red wool, her tongue slightly stuck out in concentration. It looks to be the easiest option compared to what everyone else is doing, so I try to mimic her. I wind my wool around one of my needles and tie a loose knot at the end, then take my second needle and poke it through the first ring. I've seen other people do this before on television and stuff. I have a vague memory of my grandmother (my real one) sitting on a sofa covered in that protective plastic stuff in front of *Springwatch* or something equally as boring, picking away at a jumper or a hat with needles. It's clear that my second-hand knowledge of how to knit is not doing me any good at all. I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing.

May is watching me. After the wool comes away from the needle for a third time, she takes pity.

Give it here then, plonker.

I hand it over and she shows me slowly how to set up the wool by gently looping loose knots around the needle, and how to start a new row.

I make slow progress, clumsily knitting my first row, pulling the wool too tight so that the material bunches and wrinkles. It's better than nothing, though. The other women talk amongst themselves, about their kids, their grandchildren, their husbands, their friends. May's son and his wife recently moved their family to Swindon because her daughter-in-law has been offered a new job with better pay. Deirdre, the woman with the bug-eye glasses, is in the deep end of a cold war with her neighbour over the overhanging petunias in the back garden.

Every morning I go out and snip a few more twigs off, Deirdre says, my neighbour hasn't seemed to notice yet. But once I caught him standing at the kitchen window watching me.

At first, I'm bored by their stupid anecdotes and their tiny lives, where their biggest problems are their kids moving to Swindon and their neighbours' gardens growing over the fence. But it's intriguing, and I find myself listening to Berry (the younger woman who sticks her tongue out when she knits) debating the pros and cons of planting daisies in the window boxes when really, they're weeds but they're also really quite pretty especially when the yolks are big. And another woman tells her, don't be ridiculous, Berry, you can't put weeds in the window boxes. It's embarrassing.

May reaches over and helps me un-knot a piece of wool where I've managed to tangle it while trying to start a new line.

It's the wrong time of year for it, May says while picking at the knot.

Don't listen to them, Berry, I tell her, do what you bloody well like. They're your window boxes, you plant what you want in them.

Too right, Berry says after a pause.

When the hour is up I ask them if I can take a photograph of them. I only have my old polaroid camera. They all cluck about their hair and straighten their clothes and arrange themselves into a cluster, some of them bending down to let the women behind them in. I snap the picture and shake the photograph that emerges from the slot. When I show them, they say 'oooh' and 'aaah' and tell me it's nice to have a young lady around and won't I come back next week they'll help me with my knitting technique and bring extra cakes and how old did I say I was again. I say yes because the church is so big and grand and the knitting ladies are so small inside it and it feels safe and calm, like we are in a big barren cavern and Jesus is watching over us.

When I get home, I brace myself for the telling off but it doesn't come. She's quiet. When I was in the church the heavy knot in my abdomen loosened but now I am home it is back and it feels like a peach pit.

I sit down at the dining room table, facing her back as she cleans the glass on the cabinets.

Fine, I say.

She keeps polishing.

I said 'fine', I say again, louder.

Fine what Bess? I don't have time for you to mess me about with your cryptic bloody crossword.

I meant, fine I'll think about it. Fine I'll think about the pregnancy. The baby.

She stops and turns around. She pulls a chair out and drops onto it like all the air has escaped her body. She brings her hand up to her neck.

She says, I'm proud of you, and I think she means it. I suddenly feel very flimsy. She stands up again and picks up the polish.

By the way, she says, someone called Keris rang a few times. I told her you were out. Where were you, anyway?

I went to the church down the road, I tell her.

The church? Yeah, right. Good one.

There's a knitting group.

Is Eshal still grounded, then?

Yes, for the rest of her life.

Hmmm. For the life of me I can't imagine you knitting.

Can I call her back?

What?

Can I use the phone? Call Keris?

Who's Keris?

A friend. I hesitate, and then say, she's got a baby. He's called Zack. He's almost three.

That's a toddler, not a baby.

Whatever. Can I call her?

Fine. But be quick.

I snatch the phone out of its cradle and sprint up the stairs three at a time. In my bedroom with the door closed, I dial the landline. I know the phone number by heart. Keris picks up on the third ring. She sounds like she's been crying. I can't hear Zack in the background.

It's Bess, I tell her.

Oh. Nice to hear your voice. It's been crazy here. I don't know what to do. As she talks the peach stone in my belly gets bigger and heavier and more uncomfortable.

Keris, what's going on? Are you alright?

She gives a big sniff and I can tell for sure that she has been crying.

Is it Zack?

No. No, Zack's fine.

Then what's the matter?

It's Boy. He's been arrested. He's in jail.

Chapter 18

The next morning Keris picks me up outside my house in her bashed-up Ford Escort which has a new dent in the passenger door, with bright red paint scraped into the metal.

How did that happen? I ask her as I slide into the passenger seat. Today she's got the *Hercules* soundtrack on blast.

How do you think?

I make a face, then check myself.

Don't worry, she says, noticing, I would be mad if I were you too. I would be mad if I were *me*. He's really ballsed up now, hasn't he?

It's a statement, not a question. Zack is in the back strapped into his car seat. I wave at him and he goes BESSSSS in between singing along to 'Zero to Hero', a shock of fine ginger hair exploding vertically from his head like a troll doll. He says MUMMY ARE WE GO TO SEASIDE. Keris puts the car into first and pulls away from the front of the house. I glance up and see Mum looking out through the slatted blinds in her bedroom window. Keris notices too.

Are your parents okay with you coming out? She asks me, and the way she says it makes me feel more Zack's age than hers. Actually, the reason I got allowed out was because I told Mum that Keris and I were going to go talk baby stuff, pregnancy stuff, teenage mother stuff.

Yeah, they're fine.

God, it must be so weird to have parents that actually care about where you're going, Keris says. I make an 'mmm' noise. I'm not about to tell Keris how much I hate them. Keris who had to grow up at sixteen, whose mum ditched her and whose dad is a total loser.

What's your mum like? Is she really strict?

I think about explaining to her about being in foster care for all of half a second before I decide against it. I can already picture the look of pity she would have on her face, the kinds of questions she would ask. Everyone asks the same questions.

Pretty much, I tell her.

I'm going to be strict with Zack, Keris says, but not *too* strict, you know? Not so strict that he hates me. Just so that he knows the rules and knows where the line is and not to cross it. It's different for boys when they get older. When me and Boy still lived with our dad, I was the one with the curfew and I was the one who got all the questions when I went out. No one cared where Boy went, even though he was younger.

Double standard, innit, I say.

But I'm not doing that for Zack. If I have a girl at some point she's having the same rules across the board.

I say, I heard that if your parents weren't strict then you end up being super strict as a parent. Because everyone thinks their parents were bad at parenting.

Keris nods. Was your grandma really laid back then?

Who?

You know. Your mum's mum, because she's so strict.

I hesitate for a moment. I never met Mum's mum – she died when Mum was young. I hear fragments of stories because Mum never talks about her own mother. But I know that when she was a kid, Mum's family lived in Camden in London and her Dad had a good job in the City so they could afford to move out to the suburbs, because back then living in London was like living in the slums, and moving out to the suburbs was like telling everyone you've made it. Mum, her brother Jason and their parents moved to Wimbledon when Mum was

sixteen. I don't know much about what their life was like, just that Mum's dad got really high-up at a City bank and her mother was a housewife in their Wimbledon flat. And that everything her mother did was pristine. She made pie and shortbread every day for them, and the house was always spotless, and the kids couldn't speak when guests were visiting or Mum's dad was having his colleagues over for dinner. And she ordered all the top of the range furniture and new kitchen appliances – fridge, television, wallpaper – from catalogues and all her neighbours were jealous of how lovely her house was and how decent her husband was. Every morning before Mum's dad went to work her mum would wake up an hour earlier and go into the bathroom and curl her hair with a curling iron. And she would put on makeup and heels so that when he woke up for work he saw his wife all ready-made. And every night when he got back to Wimbledon Station she would pick him up in their 1964 Pontiac GTO (cherry red) and at home there would be a homemade three-course dinner waiting for him on the table. And after dinner she would give him his slippers, and she would rub his back and empty his ashtray and then one day my Mum got home from sixth form around four o'clock and found her hanged in the airing cupboard, a dressing gown tie around her neck suspending her from the ceiling, her black patent heels still on her stockinged feet, her pink fingernails freshly painted and filed into points.

So, was your gran strict? Keris asks again, and I think she thinks I didn't hear her properly or something.

Nah, I don't think so, I say, I don't think she was bothered about parenting.

Well there you go, then, Keris. Point proven.

We don't speak and Zack drives his fire truck up the side of the car door.

He's got no friends, Keris says, clearly not talking about Zack.

She continues, I rang his work and told them what happened and the guy I spoke to on the phone didn't know who he was. I had to describe him before the guy twigged who I was talking about. Apparently, he doesn't bother with anyone at Tesco. No one likes him there.

Now I'm freaking out because maybe I shouldn't of rang them at all, because now they know and what if they sack him? It's a criminal record, right? How are we going to pay the rent?

They're remanding him in custody, she says, until his court date.

I make a sympathetic noise but I don't know what 'remanding in custody' actually means. I feel like I would look stupid if I asked, though.

When's the court date?

I don't know. Next month, probably.

What did he even *do*? I ask her.

You know his car? The one he smashed into the church last year? Well, they finally traced it back to him. That car was stolen, did you know that? I sure as hell didn't know it was stolen.

She rolls down the driver's window and spits her gum out.

I swear to God, she says, this is Joel all over again.

Joel?

Zack's dad.

I tell her I'm sorry but really my belly is fizzing up because I'm thinking, Boy is in jail, and we're on our way to see him, I'm going to see Boy, I hope I look pretty. I hope I don't look too fat.

Not your fault, is it? It's his own stupid fault. D'you know, I actually think you were good for him. You calmed him down a bit, you know? Then he messed that up as well. I'm sorry to drag you back into all of this, Bess, I know you probably want to be shot of him. But I just... I didn't want him to have no one. You were the only person I can think of he might be happy to see.

I wouldn't be so sure, I tell her.

Are you in a fight? What happened between you two?

Oh... the usual. You know. He stopped talking to me and I took the hint.

Oh my God, are you serious? I'm so sorry. If I'd known I wouldn't have –

Don't worry about it. This will be good for me, anyway. I can... get it all out of my system.

Keris cringes. What a twat.

I laugh light-heartedly, but all I'm thinking is I'm going to see him. I'm going to see Boy. I imagine what it might feel like to touch him, my skin against his, apart from the single thin layer of atoms between us. Despite everything I'm excited at the prospect, but I can still feel my hands trembling. I sit on them so Keris can't see.

We drive to the police station in Staines and park in the train station car park down the road because it's cheaper. Then Keris and I take one of Zack's hands each and we walk along the uneven path back towards the station. Zack is pointing at the police cars outside and asking whether we're going to visit Daddy but Keris says no, we're visiting Uncle Boy. When we get there Keris gives our names and Boy's name to the sergeant or constable or whatever sitting behind the desk. He looks like he is trying to grow a beard but failing.

We're here to see Boy XXX, says Keris.

Who? Says the policeman.

Boy XXX. Then she pauses and says, oh you probably have him down as David XXX.

The officer checks and confirms that he's here. Keris glances at me.

David? I say.

Yep, she says.

Isn't that your dad's name?

Yep.

The dad who started the whole 'boy' nickname in the first place?

Yep.

Wow.

Yep.

The officer tells us to sit down in the waiting area so we manoeuvre the buggy over to some cheap plastic chairs against a wall. There is a noticeboard with a bunch of leaflets pinned up warning against the danger of knives and encouraging us to report signs of domestic abuse. There's another which asks in big purple letters: ARE YOU THE VICTIM OF A FORCED MARRIAGE? with a photograph of a girl in a hijab looking down at her own clenched fists. There is the name of a charity and a telephone number. I check my bag for a pen but no luck. A camera, though. My old Diana Mini. I wipe the lens with the hem of my t-shirt and take a photograph of the poster, hoping that there's enough light in the dingy waiting room to make the picture come out alright.

Keris and I wait, the back of my thighs sticking to the plastic of my chair. Outside, the sky is grey, but the air still shimmers with heat wave. This summer has been the worst for a long time. There is a small television mounted onto the magnolia wall in the waiting room and it is switched to the lunchtime news. The newscaster is talking about the Lunar Prospector, the moon mapping spacecraft that NASA launched last year. I remember being late for school so I could watch the launch of the Prospector on *BBC Breakfast*. Now, on the screen, the picture is a grainy one of the craft on the moon's surface. I watch the subtitles pop up beneath the newsreader.

What's happened? Keris asks me, noticing that I am watching.

They crashed it.

Crashed what? The spaceship? She narrows her eyes at the screen, trying to make out exactly what it is she's looking at.

It's not really a spaceship, I say, but yeah, they crashed it.

Wow. Idiots. You'd think that working at NASA they would know how to drive a spaceship, Keris laughs.

Not a spaceship. And they crashed it deliberately.

Why would they do that?

They think there's frozen water on the moon. That's what Lunar Prospector was built for: to detect water on the moon.

And they found some?

Yeah. Ice deposits. And NASA crashed the Prospector because they thought the impact would dislodge the ice and send a plume of water vapour into the atmosphere, and then they would know for sure.

There's water on the moon? Mad.

Well, no. They didn't see any cloud formation. So, they still don't know.

Keris is quiet for a moment, watching the interview on the telly with a NASA scientist. He looks like he's going to cry.

All that for nothing, she says.

Yep. Total waste of time.

The police officer at the reception desk slides open his glass window which I suppose is meant to protect him from rowdy criminals and shouts at us that visiting hours have started so we can go through now.

Big solar eclipse soon, I tell Keris.

Really? Cool. How do you know all this space stuff?

Keris, do you mind if I wait out here with Zack? It will be easier for you to talk to Boy if Zack's not there. Also, I don't know whether we should let him go into a jail. I'm not sure it's a good life experience for a little kid, you know?

He has supervised visits with Joel all the time at Pentonville, Keris responds, and her tone is spiky. And what Zack said earlier about visiting his dad suddenly makes sense.

Oh. Well, obviously. Sorry.

If you don't want to come in, you can stay out here with Zack, I don't mind.

Okay, I wasn't thinking.

It's fine, Bess. I know you're not used to these things. This kind of life.

The way she says it sounds like an accusation and I feel ashamed of myself. But she changes her mind and says, that was harsh of me.

It's fine, just go. Go! I say, jokingly shooing her away. She heads through the heavy door that is being held open for her by an officer, waving back to Zack before it closes with a dull clang. I feel like all my nerves are twisted into knots. I watch the news, and the picture is of the Lunar Prospector drifting into the moon's surface, as though it's no more significant than a paper bag being shunted by the wind breeze. The picture shows the Prospector from above, grinding across the terrain to a stop next to a pockmarked crater. Even from the blurred, black-and-white image, it's easy to see that there is no cloud of water vapour, no plume of dislodged ice. Just quiet and blackness.

Keris arrives back in the reception area forty-five minutes later.

Let's go.

That was quick, I say as I pack up Zack's toys into Keris's travel bag. We've been doing building blocks on the floor of the waiting room. We took turns building a tower and knocking it down. I did the building and Zack did the destroying.

Keris doesn't respond to my comment. We traipse out of the station and down the road to the car park. Keris straps Zack in and within moments we're back on the road.

I ask her what happened because I can see that she is gripping the steering wheel so tight her knuckles have turned yellow.

He, she says, is infuriating.

God.

Infuriating. I almost got arrested myself. I had to restrain myself from throttling him across the table.

You alright?

Not really. Shall we take Zack to the park? I don't feel like going home yet. It smells bad in there. Boy usually takes the bins out because it makes me gag. Shall we go to the park, Zacky?

Zack screams delightedly.

I say, Sure, whatever you want.

We drive to Littleton Rec and let Zack run around in the park gleefully, taking it in turns to push him on the swing.

Then Keris says, what's going on with you, Bess?

I told you. He basically dumped me. Not that we were even going out. But yeah, he dumped me. He ghosted me out of existence.

No, I mean, what's going on with *you*?

I don't answer, and fiddle with the drawstring on my shorts while Keris lifts Zack out of the swing seat and sets him down.

I feel like I want to tell her. For the last few weeks I have had this horrible feeling in my bones like they are all about to splinter and my skin will melt into a puddle on the floor, and the foetus will leak out of me like the yolk from a cracked egg.

But if I tell Keris, Keris will tell Boy, and then God knows what will happen.

I wonder if he'll bail. I mean, he's in prison, so he can't run anywhere. But I bet he bails.

I look back at Keris and she is fussing over Zack, and she glances at me and smiles and I remember what I liked about Keris in the first place, that she is one hundred per cent good. She's like a very big and bright sky. But the moment's passed, so I tuck everything back in and try to forget about it.

When Zack gets tired and grizzly and we're ready to leave I ask her to drop me at Eshal's house. I jump out of the car and wave goodbye to both of them and Keris gives me the same look Mum sometimes gives me when I say something stupid. I go up to Eshal's door. There are no cars in the driveway, which is good, because it means that she might be home alone. I knock using the brass handle, but no response. I peer through the frosted glass window but all I can see is the fading light from the kitchen window. I sit down on the doorstep and wait. It's forty-five minutes before Eshal's brother Anwar pulls into the driveway on his bashed up moped with a wonky green 'P' plate slapped onto the bonnet.

What do you want, Bess? He asks me after he has pulled his head out of his helmet and switched off the ignition.

Anwar, so good to see you! How have you been? How's university? Managed to get that stick out your arse yet?

What do you want?

Where's Eshal?

She's gone to our uncle's house in Bangladesh and he's going to introduce her to some men. No one's forcing her to do anything, before you say it.

I look at him and realise how strongly I hate him, and I hate his mother, and his dad, and what they're doing to Eshal.

Anwar, you know how sick that is, right? She's sixteen years old. She's still a kid. She's going to be a vet. She doesn't need to be in Bangladesh picking out her husband!

Bess, don't get involved in things you don't understand.

He steps past me and unlocks the front door.

Well, when is she going to be back? I ask him, aware of the shrill tone my voice has taken on.

I don't know. Next week? The week after? Ask my mum. And get off my porch.

I throw my arms up in exasperation just as he slams the door into my face. The noise ricochets through my body.

I shout at the door, YOU MAKE ME SICK and then GO FUCK YOURSELF ANWAR BHANDARI YOU PIECE OF SHIT. When he doesn't open the door I give up and walk into the road.

The light is almost gone, now. I think about Esh, in Dhaka with her dad, getting looked at on the street by men much older than her, not being allowed to make eye contact, not being able to answer back, and in my head it's just like a fucking cartoon or an abstract oil painting or something because I can't even begin to imagine it, because my whole world goes as far north as Boy's house and as far east as the M3 as it passes by the Pits and as far west as the sodding tire swing on the river. I sit down on the curb, my hands flush against the warm

pavement, and think of her all alone, and me all alone here and in a way we're all alone together even though we're so far apart.

Chapter 19

It's my sixteenth birthday today, and for one glorious moment when I open my eyes in the morning I forget about everything: that Esh is gone, that I'm pregnant and getting pregnant-er by the second, that Boy is in jail and hates me and doesn't know about my being pregnant. And for that moment I feel weightless. But then I remember everything and I look up at the dots on the ceiling and while I'm counting the faces I concentrate on feeling sorry for myself. I've never been so miserable in my life, and there, again, is that gnawing, aching peach stone in the pit of my stomach that won't go away. I drag myself out of bed and into the hall, dial Esh's number on the phone, and even though I know she's on the other side of the world and she'll never pick up, I'm still hopeful. When no one answers the Bhandaris' phone I dial again, and again, and again. Each time imagining that Esh will pick up and it will all have been a bad dream, a joke that went too far. It's not, though, and I'm alone.

When I drag myself out of bed and come downstairs Mum has laid out a pile of gifts on the living room table. More than what I usually get for a birthday or Christmas.

You're up early, Rory says to me. He is drinking coffee standing up in the kitchen.

It's eleven forty-five, I tell him.

There's a message for you on the answering machine.

I go over to the windowsill and pick up the phone. The message is from Henry, my social worker, wishing me a happy birthday. Then he says that as I am now sixteen my case has been transferred to a new social worker on the 'Leaving Care' team.

That's a bit cold, isn't it? Rory asks me, overhearing.

It's exactly what I expected, I say.

I put the phone down. I should have known that Henry wouldn't be my social worker for more than five minutes. Now I have to start all over again with someone new.

My skin is still raw. Clarissa is watching Saturday morning TV. A cooking programme; they're making duck in sticky plum sauce with thick mashed potato. My mouth is suddenly wet with too much saliva.

Clarissa wishes me a happy birthday.

Thanks, I say, and as I say it, I vomit all over Mum's canary yellow rug that she got from her brother Jason's trip to Amsterdam. Rory comes into the living room to see what's going on, coffee mug still in his hand.

Fuck, says Clarissa, surprising us all, including herself. Her hand flies to her mouth and she looks at Rory, her big milk saucer eyes sheepish.

Rory tells Clarissa to get the carpet spray and some old towels and a wet j-cloth.

I'm sorry.

Don't be, Rory says, this rug is crap. I've been waiting for a reason to get her to throw it out.

She's going to be so mad.

No, she won't. She's at work until twelve, there was an emergency appointment this morning. The funeral directors in the High Street need a replica pair of glasses. They accidentally broke a pair. Open casket, as well.

Awkward.

So, we've got some time to sort this out, alright?

Clarissa comes back with all the things Rory asked for and they work together to get all of my sick out of the rug.

This rug is basically the colour of sick, anyway, Clarissa says.

Rory scoops my chun all up in a towel and hands the towel to Clarissa who drops it into a plastic carrier bag while pinching her nose. I sit down on the sofa, waves of nausea still rolling through me.

Good thing you haven't had breakfast yet, Clarissa says and I nod weakly, my eyes closed. Then it would be much worse, she continues, chunks and everything.

Yeah, thanks for the imagery, Riss.

Oh... you're still feeling sick?

Yeah.

Oh.

After it's all cleared up and disposed of, Rory rolls the Amsterdam rug up and props it against the fence in the back garden. Then I go upstairs and shower because I feel like the smell of it is clinging to me and embedding itself into my pores. I put on a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a cardigan, ultimate comfort clothes. As I'm combing my wet hair the sickening feeling starts to disintegrate, and by the time I'm done it's almost completely gone.

I hear the front door open and close and Mum's voice filling up the hallway. I wander downstairs barefoot and she catches sight of me.

Happy birthday, she says.

Thanks.

Rory has poured himself another coffee and is perched on the arm of the sofa.

Are we going to get these presents opened, then? He says.

Where's my rug gone? Mum says, staring at the empty bit of carpet where it's supposed to be.

There was an accident, I tell her. Rory shakes his head at me.

What kind of accident?

I was sick.

Mum pauses, looking at me, deliberating. I point out the window to the rug where it is propped up the garden.

For crying out loud, Bess.

I'm sorry, alright? It wasn't my fault.

Never your fault, always sorry. Can we not have you ruin every single thing in this house? I bet you were stuffing your face in your bedroom until god-knows what time last night. With food from my cupboards. No wonder you were sick. What is *wrong* with you?

It wasn't my fault. I think... well, I think I'm getting morning sickness.

Bess, I had *terrible* morning sickness with Clarissa and I never *once* threw up anywhere except in the toilet. Can you not control yourself? Jesus!

I want to hit her in the face. Make her nose bleed. Make her eyeballs bulge out of her skull. Make little bits of her skull splinter off into her wispy blonde hair.

Lisa, leave it, for Christ's sakes, Rory says. And even Clarissa, who has made herself very small in the corner chair pipes up, yeah, Mum, it's Bess's birthday, isn't it? Everyone needs to be nice to her. Birthday privileges.

Mum looks from Rory to Riss and back again, her lips very thin.

Fine, she says. Fine. Fine. Open your presents then, Bess.

She pulls out a chair for me at the dining table. I take a seat and it feels like I've been sent to the headmaster's office for a bollocking.

Not that you deserve any of it, she says quietly, only to me, and I stand up and say, fuck this, I'm going. And I leave the dining room and her stupid smug-turning-shocked face and I walk out the front door in my trackies and my cardie with no shoes on. And I walk down the road towards the kiddie park in the shadow of Stage H and squeeze my bum into one of the swings and I kick my legs and swing so high, imagining that I could go all the way over and wrap the swing around the top support beam until I'm all coiled up in it like a bug in a spider's web.

I swing for a while, fuming. After about half an hour Billy from next door drifts past on his scooter, his head wound all the way round like a wind-up toy so he can watch me. His eyes are black and shiny, and I can see from all the way over here that he is staring at me. I make a wanking sign at him and he makes one back at me. He shouts over to me from the other side of the park fence:

Did you just have a bust-up? I heard it through the wall. Why did you put that rug in the back garden?

I shout back: because I threw up on it.

What were you arguing about?

Wind your neck back in, you nosy shit.

He drops his scooter where he's standing and pushes the gate open, making it squeal on its hinges. He takes the swing next to mine, planting his feet in the baby seat and throwing his body weight backwards so that his legs kick out from underneath him.

What were you arguing with your parents about?

Billy, if you don't fuck off, I swear on my life I'll –

Nah, you won't. Got any baccie?

I shake my head no.

What happened to your arms? He points at the back of my right bicep, which is still red and raw from the bathtub. The skin is beginning to flake off. I wake up in the middle of the night and feel as though I'm sleeping in a sandpit. The skin comes off in drifts. Sometimes I forget that it looks like that until someone points it out.

You want some spliff? Billy asks me, untucking a half-smoked joint from behind his ear.

Billy, you're like, twelve.

So?

What're you doing smoking weed? Don't you have a mother who loves you?

Billy shrugs. I found a needle down the alley at the back of the woods last week.

What, a knitting needle? I respond, smiling at my own joke.

Whatever. So, do you want some?

I take the blunt from his offered hand, remembering in passing that I'm pregnant but not caring. We sit there and smoke together, passing the joint between us, until we see a couple of mums coming into the park with buggies. Billy recognises one of his mum's friends, panics, stubs out his joint, hops out of the swing and picks up his scooter from the pavement.

I still hate you, I shout at him. He waves at me and sticks his tongue out as he scoots off. He looks like a cartoon character.

I get off my swing for the mums and their toddlers and move over to a bench at the edge of the playground. One of the mothers gives me a dirty look. I stretch out across the bench like a cat and watch the kids trying to push each other on the roundabout but not managing because it's far too heavy for them. I vaguely realise that I spend way too much time hanging out in kids' parks. From one of the back gardens parallel to the park, I can make out the sound of a child crying, the kind of crying you hear when a kid is about to throw a

tantrum. Moments later, the voice of the mother is soothing him. I look across the Studios Estate, all golden in its summer-ness, with its redbrick terraces with brown roof tiles and white window frames and its neat rows of front gardens and sprinklers. I wonder how many of these houses are just cages for mums looking after their kids, how many of them are trapped here, whether I'm about to be trapped too.

I think about Keris, and how every single thing about her is secondary to what Zack wants and needs and feels. And Eshal, and my neck feels too heavy to carry my head when I think about what she has ahead of her, what things she'll never be able to do now, she who doesn't have a choice at all. I realise how selfish I am compared to everyone else.

When the sun is at its highest point in the sky I shuffle home, my bare feet cooking against the hot concrete. The front door is on the latch, so I let myself in and tiptoe up to my bedroom. Mum is in the garden messing about with the hanging baskets but I can't see the others. In my bedroom, I push the window open as wide as it can go and step out on the porch roof. From where I'm sitting I can see the park and the two mums playing with their kids. I make up stories about them in my head.

After a while there's a small knock on my door and Clarissa comes in, holding the presents from downstairs in her arms and balancing them in place with her chin.

I thought you might want these.

Come here, then, I tell her, and I make room for her out on the porch roof. She brings the presents with her and makes a little pile for them near my feet. There are seven all together. I pick each one up and shake them and let her guess what it might be before I open it. She guesses: CDs, slippers, a portable radio, an ice cream maker, a pair of earrings and chocolate. There's a card from Henry with a ten-pound voucher for W H Smith's, and the usual card I get from my real grandmother, with a babyish Barbie design on the front which is way too young for me, and a crisp fifty-pound-note inside. I lean back through the window and tuck it into the envelope in my desk drawer, where all her other fifties are. I remember that Boy

hasn't paid me back the money I lent him, and there is a familiar pang in my stomach when I think of him. I suddenly feel as though not seeing him at the Police Station was the wrong thing to do. Maybe if I had seen him, and he looked into my face, he would remember how he feels about me. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he knew I was pregnant after all.

The first gift in the pile is from Mum and it's small and squishy. Clarissa changes her slippers guess to a scarf or a woolly hat. I open it up, balling the paper and launching it off the porch roof into the road, aiming for next door's wheelie bin. I miss. It's not a woolly hat or a scarf, it's a set of three pale white baby-grows, the kinds with little popper buttons on the crotch and the shoulders. Little yellow embroidered ducks on the chest.

Are you going to puke again? Clarissa asks me, looking at my face.

The next thing is a big box with sharp corners, wrapped in pink. The one Clarissa thought was an ice cream machine. I open it. The picture on the box is a machine with a suction thing at one end that looks like something you would use to unblock a toilet.

What is it? Clarissa asks.

I turn the box around, looking for some writing. Then I find it.

It's a breast pump, I say.

A what.

A breast pump. It sucks the milk out of your –

Yeah, I know what it does. I'm not stupid.

Well... you were half right. You could say that both an ice cream machine and a breast pump make a dairy product.

You're disgusting.

Next one?

None of these presents are for you really, are they?

I shake my head and suddenly feel like giving her a hug.

By the way, only cattle make dairy, she says, her face triumphant.

She hands me a smaller box-shaped item wrapped in glittery blue paper.

This one's from me, she says, I picked it out of the Argos catalogue and Dad went and got it for me. And then I wrapped it up.

I go to shake it but she stops me. So, I peel the paper back carefully and peek inside. I see the writing on the box and the corner of the logo and know immediately what is.

As if! I shout.

I knew you'd like it.

I scramble to rip off the rest of the paper and fling it off the porch into the front garden. I examine the box. Yes: it really is. A Canon MV-1. One of the smallest and lightest digital camcorders in the world. With progressive scan technology and digital display. I've been wanting one of these cameras since it came out last year.

How did you know about this? I ask her, half-suspicious, half-awed.

Clarissa shrugs. I just assumed. You like cameras but you don't have a digital one yet. I thought you might want one. And my friend Jessica at school whose dad works at the Studios said that this is the best one you can get.

Your friend Jessica is right, I tell her.

Good. I'm glad you like it.

Now I *really* don't want to open the rest of this baby stuff, I say, looking at all the unopened gifts

Then don't. You can do it later when we come back.

Come back from where?

The Twynersh. Mum's booked a table. Birthday dinner. She booked it ages ago.

I groan loudly, she should've known we'd have a barny on my birthday.

Clarissa shrugs and opens one of the other presents that I haven't touched yet. It's a hold-all type bag, yellow with little daisies printed onto it. It's quite nice.

I suppose that's to put baby stuff in, I say.

Whatever, you can put your trainers in it instead. That way when you go out in heels you've got comfy shoes to change into, and a nice bag to hide them in.

Clarissa, why are you being so nice to me? I'm always such a cow to you.

Clarissa thinks for a moment and says, well, we're sisters, aren't we?

But we're not. Not really, anyway.

It feels like we are.

I agree with her because I don't want to hurt her feelings.

And Mum can be a real B-I-T-C-H sometimes.

That I can agree with.

We've got to stick together.

Guess so.

In the evening, we all get into the car and drive to the Twynersh in Chertsey, which has a huge pub garden so we sit outside on a bench under one of the umbrellas.

I half-listen to Rory talk about the way they cook the steak here and how much better it is than the way they do it at the Boat House in Chertsey, but really, I'm watching Mum and

the way she is fiddling with the corner of the menu, digging it right under her fingernail so far that it looks painful, her lips thin and tight.

She looks up and spots me watching her. She says, you're wearing the same jumper I got you for your fifteenth birthday.

I look down and she's right. It's a thin dark blue sweater with three horizontal white stripes on the chest. It's one of my favourites.

I'm surprised it still fits you, she says, and I can't work out whether she's saying that I've gotten fatter or that I should have a pregnancy belly by now, or just that I've changed since I was fifteen.

Rory says, they season the meat with paprika salt and then they leave them to marinate for forty-eight hours.

Mum says, shut up about the steaks, please, Rory.

I feel like I'm getting too old for this.

The waiter comes and takes our orders. Unbelievably, Rory asks for more details about the steak. Clarissa gets macaroni cheese. Mum orders a Caesar salad and I order a steak like Rory because he's kind of convinced me.

We sit in silence, except Clarissa who chirps about any old nonsense – school, her friends, her new favourite pop group – completely oblivious to the atmosphere, until the food gets here. As soon as the waiter sets the plate down in front of me I realise that I have made a terrible mistake. I asked for my steak to be cooked medium-rare, and I can see the oily blood dribbling out of it and settling around it, muddy against the white china. I poke it with my knife and more blood comes out. It smells metallic even though they've tried to smother the scent with garlic and butter.

As the others start eating I realise that it's not just my steak. Everything has a terrible smell. I push my plate away from me, feeling my mouth fill up with saliva.

It takes me ten minutes to find the bathroom and then the ladies' is out of order so I have to shove into the disabled loo, which has a faulty lock. The restaurant's air conditioning is broken, and the heat increases the smell of disinfectant and urine. I retch into the toilet basin and a miserable dribble of sick comes out on a long thin string of spit. My stomach contracts, trying to expel food that isn't there.

I come back to the table and no one says a word for a full five minutes.

I take it you're not going to eat that, Mum says. I shake my head no. She doesn't argue. Maybe the look on my face tells her something. Rory takes my plate and scoops the contents onto his own empty one. Mum calls the waiter over and asks for a glass of milk. When he comes back with it she directs him to set it down in front of me. I look at it.

Mum, why do I want a glass of milk?

Trust me, she says, when I was having Clarissa it did wonders for me. Settled my stomach completely.

But I'm not you, I say, I don't think dairy is going to settle my stomach.

I'm now thinking about the breast pump, and when I glance at Clarissa it looks like she is too. She's giving the milk a look.

Just drink it, Bess.

I look at her and say, I'm really sorry. I can't.

Silence settles over us again. I don't know what to do with my hands.

Maybe I could have a Coke, I say.

Yeah, right.

What, no Coke?

You know what kind of damage that's going to do to the baby?

She whispers the word 'baby'. I think about damage and all the extra cigarettes I've been smoking since I left the hospital.

I say to Mum, I mean, if it can survive a litre of gin –

Shut your mouth.

She shakes her head.

We are silent for a few moments and then Rory is asking what I'm doing about college.

I tell him: I missed most of the application deadlines but I reckon I'll still get an interview in a few places. They might let me start late, or maybe defer a year but guarantee my place for next September. I heard that London Film School runs courses during term time.

Mum interrupts. You can't be serious. Of course you're not going to London Film School.

Yes. I am. If I can get in.

And how exactly are you going to raise a child and be a film student at the same time? Have you thought through anything at all? Do you *ever* think?

The milk is turning yellow in the evening sunshine.

You said you would help me through college, with the baby. That's what you said. In the hospital. I could study part time, or something.

I can hear how pathetic I sound as I say this, like a whiny kid. But I don't care.

Henry heard you say it, as well.

Now, she looks at me like I'm mental.

Bess, you *really thought* you could go to college and be a mother with a newborn baby at the same time? Are you thick? Being a mother is a full-time job. Believe you me. We only

said those things in the hospital to appease that stupid woman, Dr Jacobs. She insisted we gave you options.

I can't deal with this, I say, trying to keep my voice level, aware of all the people on the other benches, food on forks halfway to their mouths, trying not to stare too hard.

It's a shame you weren't thinking about college when you had your knickers round your ankles, Mum spits back.

I scrape my chair across the patio and stride out of the beer garden, towards the road. For once, she follows me. I get through the car park, to the edge of the dual carriageway. The cars shoot past at sixty miles per hour. The roaring sound they leave behind fills up my head. I want to press my forehead against the ground and feel the coolness of the concrete in the shade against my skull.

She shouts to me, from her spot further down the road, I know what you're planning.

What am I planning? I shout back.

I won't let you kill a baby just so you can do what you want and have an easy life.

Life is not easy, I yell at her, and I feel tears escaping my eyes and sliding down my face.

You can't be selfish when you're a mother.

But I'm *not* a mother.

You have a child!

It's not a child. It's a cluster of cells.

She is almost level with me now, saying, if you do this, if you *get rid* of the baby, I can't have you in my house. I can't stand by and let you make this mistake. I won't be able to forgive you.

I look up to the road and feel tempted to step out in front of one of the cars. I say, well, that's your prerogative.

Suddenly, nausea overwhelms me.

I touch her shoulder involuntarily and tell her I'm going to be sick.

Go, go, go.

Like she's my coach and I'm an athlete on the starting block and the gun has just gone off.

I half jog, half run across the car park. The pebbles are paler than they were before.

I don't make it. Bile rises in my throat and I vomit violently by a purple Renault Clio.

She follows me. I'm panting, hands on my knees, vomit in a neat pile next to me.

I can't do this, I tell her.

Nor can I.

My sweater sticks to my back. She squeezes my shoulder with something that feels like concern. I spit out the leftover bile. I can feel her shuddering next me, both of us crouched in the car park over my sick, and I know she's crying. Her fingernails dig into my shoulder as she holds onto me, tries to steady her breath. But I can't bring myself to look at her.

Chapter 20

Still no sign of Eshal. I cycle to Fujifilm and pick up my developed photographs. I found the key to my bike lock in the stationary drawer in the dining room. The photographs came out well. I have one set of pictures from the Asahi Pentax and the other set came from my Diana camera. One of the photographs from the Diana set is of the poster in the waiting room at the police station. It's dark but I can still make out the telephone number for the forced marriage hotline. I tuck that photo into the back pocket of my jean shorts, folded in half, and the rest go into my backpack. Then I pedal back to Shepperton along the A308, past Tesco where Boy works – used to work – and my Walkman is on and Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' is blasting full volume, making my ear drums ache because the wind against my face as I cycle hurts too, and for a moment it's as if nothing ever happened and I'm still Bess, un-pregnant. Just a normal kid.

And then a car honks at me, right next to me, so loud that my bike wobbles and I have to stop, putting my feet down to prevent myself from toppling over, and my headphones fall out and Aretha's voice is no more, and the guy who just honked at me from a rusty Mini Metro yells at me to watch the road. I make a wanking sign at him and he revs the engine hard as he accelerates away, leaving me to inhale the exhaust fumes. And all my momentary euphoria is gone, and I remember who I am and what is happening to me and I feel like I want to die.

So, I keep cycling to Eshal's, because falling into traffic isn't the romantic death I have planned for myself.

I follow the dual carriageway into Shepperton and turn onto Gaston Bridge Road, which is Eshal's road. Her driveway has no cars in it. And it hits me all over again that Esh is gone. And I feel all of the air come out of me, and I'm deflating like a sad balloon, and I get off my bike and lie down on the pavement, face down, let the warm concrete touch my cheek, smell that dirt-rain-cement smell, breathe it in all sunshine-baked, stare at the tiny stones

scattered in front of my face, splay my hands and arms wide open like an angel, feel my throat get hot and dry and tight but still don't cry. I don't know if I'm ever going to see her again. I want to die.

I leave my bike and knock once. Nothing. I glance up at Esh's bedroom window, which is the left-hand window on the first floor, and see that the purple chiffonesque curtains are drawn. There is a dream catcher hanging from the ceiling. I clamber onto the Bhandaris' recycling bin, and from there hoist myself onto the bay window. It juts out slightly from the flat façade of the house, and has its own little roof on it, so I can easily find my footing with just enough height to reach the slim outer windowsill of Esh's bedroom. I take the photograph out of my back pocket, and slide it into the space between the window and the frame. The tiny gap where the seal should be is enough to shove the photograph through. I watch as it drops to Eshal's bedroom floor, next to her empty laundry basket, folded in half with just the plain white back of the photo paper showing. I kiss the window, leaving an ugly smudge on it. As I lower myself back onto the driveway I notice that there is a woman standing in the door of the house opposite Eshal's. She is holding a watering can and watching me.

Morning, I call over to her, because this seems less suspicious than saying nothing. I pick up my bike from the ground and swing one leg over it.

If I see you here again I'm calling the police, she says loudly, and a man emerges from the dark of the house to stand next to her, probably her husband.

I'm a friend of Eshal's, I say, struggling to keep my voice level.

A friend of whose?

Eshal's.

Whose?

ESHAL.

Oh. Paki name, is it?

I stand there for a moment, propped on my bike, stunned, then I say: they're Bangladeshi, you fucking small-brained *toad*.

And she says, what did you just say to me, young lady?

And I shout eat shit, and then I cycle away before she can get a good look at my face or shout something back or her husband can come over and beat me up or whatever. And as I'm cycling away I remember something about Eshal that I never quite understood and now suddenly I get it. She always does this thing after she's had a meal at home where she scrubs her hands, her knuckles, underneath her fingernails, for ages and ages. Almost compulsively. And I always ask her why she's doing it and she says to get the smell of haldi out of her hands. And I never really thought about why she wanted to get the smell out of her hands until now.

Later the same week, I get to meet my new social worker. Henry brings her to the house. I watch them getting out of Henry's car from my bedroom window, hear Mum open the door for them, their voices filling the hallway. Her voice – the new social worker – is gruff, almost like a man's. Her name is Shelly. I wait for a while, hear Rory go into the kitchen and boil the kettle, hear Mum talking to them in a hushed yet somehow still shrill voice. I wander downstairs and into the living room and they all look up at me, stopped talking, and I feel I'm on display. Shelly shakes my hand, all formal. Up close I can see that her pores are really, really big. I catch Henry watching me, picking at his fingernails. He looks like he has some makeup on his ear, just in front of his tragus. I *have* to find out whether he really is a drag queen.

Shelly is asking about what's been going on.

Mum says, well it's been an effort. A real effort. Her neck scarlet and she is fiddling with her wedding ring, spinning it round and round and round.

Rory comes in with cups of tea for everyone, holding two mugs in each hand.

Have you had any more thoughts about your pregnancy, Bess? Shelly asks, looking straight at me.

I shrug. Look at Mum, who is looking at me.

How many weeks gone are you now?

I tell her eleven.

So, there *is* still time to decide. I spoke briefly with Dr Jacobs –

You *spoke* to the doctor? I interrupt her.

Well. Yes. It's my job to get all the background, you see.

No shit, I say, and Mum goes *Bess* because I swore.

Anyway. Dr Jacobs is quite happy that you're aware of all the options open to you. What I would like to know is whether you're feeling pressured in any way. Do you feel as though you're free to make a choice? Are you being influenced by your partner, by Lisa and Rory, anyone else?

I look at her and realise she's deadly serious. This is not what I expected at all. Every time I see Henry he *literally* had a checklist of questions on a piece of paper which he ticks off as I answer. The questions are things like: Are you healthy? Are you attending school regularly? When was your last dental check-up? Have you been arrested since the last time we spoke? Have you taken any mind-altering substances since the last time we spoke? Are you being bullied? And so on.

Bess? Shelly asks, still waiting for me to answer.

I look up at Mum who is staring out of the window pointedly.

No. I'm not being influenced by anyone, I tell her.

And have you spoken to the father yet? Is he in the picture at all?

He's... not around.

She won't even tell us his name, Mum says.

He's not around, I say again. It's totally irrelevant.

Fine. That's your decision, Bess. No one needs to know except you. Right?

I say right but I realise she was actually looking at Mum and Rory. Mum nods, her eyes watery, her neck all red. Every one of these meetings I've ever had involves Mum listing off all the things I've done wrong and my flavour-of-the-month social worker scolding me half-assedly while munching on a plate of shortbreads and drinking tea from one of the fancy mugs. Makes me want to bang my head against the wall. Sometimes I do. But this time it's like Mum's the one getting the telling off. I decide that I like Shelly.

Next, she asks me about college and my applications and I tell her about my late submissions. I haven't heard back from any of the colleges I wrote to yet. Only acknowledgement letters telling me they will take six to eight weeks to review my application.

Shelly says, I read on your case report that you're keen on filmmaking.

I say yes, stunned again that she's bothered to read my files.

I looked into the Film School you're interested in, in London. But they only do postgraduate courses, I'm afraid.

Mum says, too eagerly I think, for God's sakes, Bess, you should have known that already before Shelly went to the effort. Didn't you do your research?

Well, it's my job, says Shelly, waving a hand.

She says, well, don't despair *just* yet. Because I've found another one. It's in North London. It's called Basquiat – I *think* that's how you pronounce it – the Basquiat School of Arts. It does all sorts. It runs a vocational programme in filmmaking. It does the works – you know, editing, directing, sound design, casting – all of it. It sounds perfect for you, Bess.

She rummages in her handbag and hands me a prospectus with some paper inserts. On the cover there's a beautiful old terraced Victorian house, four floors and a basement, with tall windows and stairs leading up the front door. Next to the door there's a sign that says Basquiat School of Arts in cursive script. And then in little insets there are pictures of kids my age working at canvases, listening on headphones in front of state-of-the-art sound desks and, best of all, standing behind professional cameras.

It's perfect. I open the prospectus up and flick through the pages, drinking in all of the pictures – green screens, the latest Mac computers in dimly lit editing studios. The school does music and drama too. It has its very own professional theatre in a building on the same road in Crouch End.

I look back up at Shelly, who is watching me.

I want to go here, I say.

Well, why don't we go and have a look at it first? You know, talk to some of the teachers? See if it's right?

I nod eagerly, and turn my attention back to the pages. Then I see a page that says 'Finance'. I scan through the table of prices and feel my mouth go dry. Tuition on its own for my course is four thousand pounds per year, and it's a three-year programme. Then there's equipment costs. Five hundred pounds per term. Accommodation, textbooks. Field trips. And more.

Shelly can see where I'm looking and says, don't worry about that now, all right? Let's just go and look at the place and then we'll cross the funding bridge when we come to it.

I agree but I feel deflated. It's been snatched away from me. I don't see how I'll ever be able to get that kind of money unless I rob a bank. Even my little stash of Grandma Emelie's birthday and Christmas money wouldn't even cover the first term.

Mum is asking how I could go to a boarding school when I need to be raising a baby and Shelly is saying it's a residential college not a boarding school and let's just keep her options open, let's just... you know. All right? And Mum says nothing, her lips a thin line like she does when she's mad at me and I feel like I'm going to get it later just because of Shelly and suddenly they're halfway out the door, Henry exchanging pleasantries with Mum, Mum thanking him for everything he's done and blah blah blah and I sidle up to Henry because it's probably the last time I'll ever see him and I say, just tell me this one thing. Are you a drag queen or not?

And Henry is like *what?* But luckily no one else heard so he is left staring at me, and I can't tell whether his expression is bewildered or afraid and Shelly says Bess I'll call you and we'll sort out a date to go up to that college and that's it, they're gone. And the house is dark.

Upstairs in the evening, when I'm alone and bored of drawing out faces on the ceiling with my mind's eye, I open my bedside drawer and pull out all of the cards from Emelie, all stored together in one envelope. I wonder whether I *could* cover some of the Basquiat tuition with her money. At least for a little while until I sort a job out or something. I pull the cards out of the large manila envelope and grope around inside for the second envelope with the money stash in it – all the cash from the birthdays and Christmases. All I feel is the smooth brown paper. I tip the envelope upside down and empty all of the papers out, sorting through them in a crescent on my bed. I check the rest of the drawer, pulling out makeup compacts and old dried up nail polishes and half-finished notepads and exploded gel pens. I pull the whole drawer out of the unit and empty it, upside down, onto my bed too. But there's no envelope. No money, I spread everything across the floor and discard each item one by one. The money is gone.

And on Saturday night when we are eating our fish and chips dinner in front of *Blind Date* the phone rings and Rory answers it, listens for a moment and says, please do not call this number

again. And I've never seen him look so angry, like he's trying to stop himself from throwing something against a wall. And me, Mum and Clarissa all look at him but he's not saying anything. So later, when everyone is asleep I think of my grandmother and how someone has stolen from her, and my stomach is curdling, and I one-four-seven-one the number and it rings four times before someone picks up and then I hear the voice.

And he doesn't even say hello he just says Bess? like his life depends on me being on the other end of the phone.

And I say, yes, it's me. And in that there are all the things I've been thinking and feeling and everything for the past few weeks. And I change my mind about him again, there's *no* way he would take that money, just listen to him now, just note the way I'm feeling at the sound of his voice, the way my whole body aches before I go to sleep because I wish so badly that he would sneak into my bedroom and just *be there*, that he would even want to. Wondering whether he's been thinking about me. Trying to transmit my thoughts to him, where are you where are you do you still want me do you miss me do you feel pain like me. Waiting for him to send his thoughts back to me but never hearing a single thing. How strange it is that he feels just as intensely as I do and he experiences things in just as much Technicolor and his thoughts are just as complex as mine, and there's another six billion people who are the same but also entirely different. How strange is that.

Where are you? I ask him, trying to control the tremor in my voice.

I'm at home, I got bailed. I have a court date next month.

Oh my God.

It's fine.

Are you okay?

It's fine. Really.

It's all so scary.

No. I'm just glad I'm out. It'll be over soon. I doubt they'll give me anything worse than a slap on the wrist and some community service. First offence and all that.

Are you sure?

Bess... When am I going to see you?

Whenever, I say, too quickly. Whenever you want.

How about now?

Now? I ask, glancing at the clock, thinking of Mum and Rory asleep upstairs.

Yes, now. Why not? I'll come and pick you up.

Fine, just give me ten minutes to get changed.

Okay. Bess?

Yes?

I... love you.

I am dumb because this was the last thing I was expecting tonight, and I was so ready to be furious about him stealing the money, but surely he couldn't have. I'm afraid to ask. And at the same time, in spite of everything, all my bones are singing and my eyes are watering and *he said he loves me* and I want to open my mouth and scream with the brilliance of it but I can't so I just whisper at him, I'll see you soon.

And I'm hanging up the phone and tiptoe-running up the stairs and throwing on a dress, a short one, a jumper, smearing my eyes with kohl, pulling a brush through my hair and realising it's too greasy to have down so trying to twist it up into a scruffy bun but failing at that too and then I hear the quiet growl of the car engine as it pulls up outside and I'm closing my bedroom door I can sense someone behind me and it's Mum in her dressing gown and I just stand frozen, staring at her.

She says, where the *bloody hell* do you think you're going?

And I say, nowhere, because I can't think of a lie quick enough, even though it's stupid because it's beyond obvious that I've just been caught.

Get back in your room, Mum says.

And I am almost about to do it and then I think *Boy*, and I say no, Mum. I push past her to the stairwell.

She says, think about what you're doing, Bess.

I don't respond.

She says, it's him, isn't it? The Father.

I stop because I haven't heard anyone call him *the father* out loud and I also forgot about being pregnant for a second. It's so easy to pretend like everything is normal sometimes. Maybe it's *Boy*.

I say to her, he *loves* me, Mum. He loves me.

She says, I can guarantee you he doesn't love a single person except himself.

And I turn around and walk down the rest of the stairs and I am out the door in his car, looking at his face which hasn't changed a bit, and everything that just happened evaporates because the only thing that matters is him.

We drive for a while in silence. Not to his house, just around. Shepperton. It's dead. The streetlamps cast everything orange and the roads are empty. We go around the roundabout at the end of the High Street three times. We drive on the wrong side of the road. I watch him. His hands on the steering wheel, how he lifts one to brush something invisible off his cheek. The way his forehead wrinkles when he's concentrating. The fine hairs on his forearms. The curve of his collarbone. Eventually we arrive at his house and he comes around to the passenger side to open the door for me, and I laugh because it's so unlike him to be

chivalrous, it makes me feel awkward. When we're inside he makes me sit at the kitchen table while he finds music to put on the stereo – softly, because Zack and Keris are asleep – and then he pulls me onto my feet and into him and I'm like, what are you doing, and he manipulates my arms and puts a hand on my waist and I realise we are dancing. The music is 'You and Me' by Penny and the Quarters and we sway from side to side, around the kitchen table, clumsy, stepping on each other's feet, bumping into the countertops, knocking one of the chairs over. And I keep trying to laugh but he puts his hand over my mouth, his eyes wide and playful, saying, shhh, shhhh. And I bite his hand. And he kisses me hard and then twirls me around underneath his arm like a ballerina. And I try to twirl him but he's too tall and won't fit under my arm.

And then he changes and every time he moves it becomes more pronounced, has more intention behind it and I know that this is going where it has always gone before, and I look up to him, try to make a joke, I say, prison has changed you, in a voice like an old woman, and he says come on, Bess, I've missed you so much. And I can't help but think of the baby and maybe I should tell him but if I told him he wouldn't be touching me like this, he *shouldn't* be, he might break up with me, but we're not even together. And meekly in a voice like a child I say, I don't think we should, but that doesn't stop his hands or his mouth. And I say it again, louder this time, Boy, I don't think we should, pushing against him, not hard because I don't want him to be offended, but he doesn't stop. He'll throw me out at the very least, if I told him, he'll call me a liar. So, I let him keep going even though I feel suddenly awful, even though a giggle is bubbling through my lips like I'm fucking *enjoying* it. I keep thinking to myself he is just as complex a person as I am, with all the same nuances of thought and feeling. I let my body go limp and he's going, Bess, Bess, Bess, I love you, I love you, I love you, saying it into my hair, my neck, my belly, and he's pushing/pulling me into his bedroom and he sits me down on the bed. All of these thoughts are raging inside me but I'm so afraid that if I articulate any of them he will hate me and while he undresses, the moonlight from the window turning him into a ghost, I think to myself, I wish we were still dancing, I wish

we were still fucking dancing. And he climbs on top of me and I try not to cry through the whole of it and in my head, we are still in the kitchen dancing to Penny and the Quarters and it is magical.

Chapter 21

I leave his house in the morning before he wakes up. I can't trust myself to look at him. He looks so normal when he's asleep. I walk into the hallway of his house, still wearing my slutty black dress, my hair scraped back into a ponytail that I had to do without a mirror so it's probably lopsided, eyes crusty with sleep. Keris is in the kitchen on the phone to someone, with Zack sitting at the table eating banana slices out of a bowl with one hand and making a fire engine drive across the terrain of the placemat with the other. I make eye contact with Keris and she doesn't smile back at me. I let myself out, clicking the door shut quietly behind me. The sun is too bright. The cars drive by too quickly, too loudly. The thistles poking through the fences that line the farmers' fields are brown and dead; leaving long, thin scratches on the skin of my calves. The air smells like something rotten. Today is Total Eclipse day. I wonder if the world is going to end.

When I let myself into the house it's dead quiet and the car is missing from the garage. I have a cool shower, standing under the faucet for what seems like an age, letting the water wash over me. I pull the cabinet door open so I can examine my body in the mirror. Under the water, my burns look purple and bumpy. I realise that I haven't seen Boy since the day I got them. He didn't ask about them last night when I was naked in his bedroom. Maybe he didn't see them. In the mirror, my belly looks bigger still. I brush my teeth vigorously, in the shower, let the foam run down my chin and over my body, make my gums bleed, let the peppermint tingle of the mouthwash sting the corners of my mouth, vomit into the plughole, sit down, let the water pool around me. My own little oasis. My fingernails are bitten to the cuticles, vibrating.

And after the shower, I get into my bed and wrap myself up in the duvet, which feels nice, but after a few minutes it gets too hot and I start sweating, so I unwrap myself and put on a pair of shorts and a vest with spaghetti straps. I pick up the landline from the living room and dial Eshal's number, my hopes not high at all, but she picks up. She picks up.

Esh? I shout down the phone.

Bess? That you?

Of course it is, you numpty.

And then she's crying.

Where have you been?

I was staying with my uncle. It's happening Bess, I'm engaged. I'm going to get married. I'm marrying this guy called Mehdi. He's a fucking idiot. He's so *spotty* it's unreal. Like, his whole face is seeping out puss. I'm not even exaggerating. He's thick as pigshit, as well. An absolute dinlow.

We have to do something, I tell her.

What are we going to do? Run away? There's *nothing*. It's all set. I'm going to Dhaka on the twelfth of September and it all kicks off on the thirteenth.

That's a month away. We've got a month to do something. Look. Are you home alone?

Dad's at work, Mum's visiting my aunties in Ealing and Anwar's out with some of his school friends before he goes back to uni.

I'm coming over.

No, don't. I'll meet you somewhere.

Pits?

I'll meet you there in twenty minutes.

I hang up and sprint up the stairs two at a time, pick up my camera and put on my trainers. Then I go into Mum's desk in the dining room and find the key for my bike lock. I take my bike out of the shed and pedal down to the Pits. I get there before Esh, and I lean my bike against one of the trees at the edge of the lake and sit down in the shade. It's almost ten thirty,

and the place is super crowded, with families all set up with deck chairs and picnic blankets on the banks of the water. Some of them are wearing these weird-looking cardboard sunglasses.

When Esh turns up she's a mess. She's wearing some dramatic big sunglasses. She sits down next to me under the tree I picked and puts her head onto my shoulder. I put my arm around her, feeling her silky hair underneath my palm.

What are all these losers doing here, she says between sniffs, gesturing at all of the families and their picnic blankets.

Eclipse, isn't it? It's supposed to start soon.

These people need jobs.

What's going on? How can I help? I ask her. I take out my camera, the nice digital one that Riss got me for my birthday, and take some shots of the people on the bridge.

She says, I got the thing you put through my window. The helpline thing.

Oh, yeah? Should we call them?

I already did. But I can only do it when no one's in the house. I have to schedule times with them.

What did they say?

Well, the woman I spoke to. She said they can put me in temporary accommodation, away from my family. But I don't know, Bess...

That sounds great. You should do it!

What, ditch my whole family? That's big. They're all I've got. You know? They'll full-on disown me if I bail on this marriage. I don't know what I'll do if that happens.

Erm, how about you'll go to vet school like you always wanted and, I don't know, *never get married like you always wanted*.

You don't understand this stuff, Bess you're like –

I'm like an orphan, right? I don't get family stuff, I say, annoyed.

I was actually going to say you're like white, she says. And we both laugh.

Sorry about that, I say, your neighbours are massive racists, by the way.

Everyone in Shepperton is a massive racist, she says. See that woman over there? She points to a lady in her mid-forties with two toddlers, on a bright orange blanket with sunglasses quite like Eshal's and a straw hat on her blonde hair.

Esh goes, I was in Summerfields a couple of months ago buying sweets and I pointed out to her that she'd pushed in the queue and she told me I can either go back to Paki-land and be at the front of the queue or stay here and let the people who were born here go first. I was like, *you mug*, my birth certificate says Ashford Hospital.

Wow.

I just don't understand how people can be that fucking ignorant and not be, like, brain-dead from lack of cognitive function.

She asks me what's going on with Boy and being pregnant.

Well... I'm still pregnant.

You're keeping it, then?

I don't know. Who fucking knows. Not me.

You realise there's like an expiry date on this, yeah? What about Boy? Have you told him?

I explain to her about Boy being arrested and going to visit him and changing my mind and finally about what happened last night. I feel sick while I'm talking.

Bess, you know what he did right?

Yeah... he crashed a stolen car into a church. That's why he got arrested.

No, thicko, I mean last night. What he did to you.

She looks at me meaningfully, her eyes wide, like I'm missing something obvious, and I know what she's getting at, but I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to.

You know what it was, she says.

Esh, you don't know what you're talking about. You've had it in for him ever since –

How about we don't talk about it, alright? She says, pulling me back into a hug, this time my head on her shoulder. We don't talk about it until you want to talk about it.

I say fine by me, and we sit there like that for a while, and then all the people on the field start whooping and applauding and I say I guess this is it. The end of the world. And we look up even though we don't have the special glasses on and Esh is like is that it? Some fucking eclipse, this is shit. And then suddenly the whole world is black like it's the middle of the night, and I swear I can *feel* the temperature drop. And we keep watching and it's like the sun is a halo in the middle of all the darkness. And Esh takes my hand and we look up up up until a handful of seconds later it's all over and we're still alive, the world didn't end, and suddenly all the birds are really loud.

I say to Esh, congrats on surviving the end of the world and she says, you too sis and we high five and that's that.

After a while she has to go because her mum's going to be back soon and she's supposed to be grounded and before she goes she says, oh, by the way I got into that vet school in Basingstoke, and I hug her and tell her I'm proud of her like I had something to do

with it. But all the time I am thinking about Basquiat and how that's never going to happen. I'm so selfish. I film her walking away through the trees with all the other people who came for the eclipse and then I'm all alone and I put my hand on my belly and think what kind of mother am I going to be and I think about Lisa, my 'Mum' and what kind of mother she is, and then I know what I need to do next.

Basically, when I was twelve, I asked my social worker for my file.

She wouldn't let me have it, but instead she gave me a sealed envelope with my biological mother's address on a piece of paper inside.

My mother's name is Amanda and she lives in Stanwell. From the pictures I've seen she looks like a skinny, ginger version of me. With blue eyes, instead of brown. We have the same smile. Maybe the same constellation of freckles on our backs.

Amanda lives on a road of little awkward-shaped maisonettes with brown-bricked walls and white plastic framed windows. Number 42. I haven't seen her since I was four years old.

And I'm here now.

I wait for something to happen. Because surely something ought to happen, now. But nothing does. The wind softly threads itself through the grass. Cars drive by, the pitch of their engines doing the Doppler effect as they reach the edge of the green opposite the house and carry on past. The world hasn't stopped turning. The sky behind the squat brown houses is blue and wide and light. Outside the Best One down the road some kids in Kappa tracksuits are kicking a football around, playing chicken in the road, their bikes propped against the shop front. I watch them for a while until one of them notices me and sticks a finger up at me. And then, before I know that my feet are moving, I'm walking towards the house, my trainers scuffing at the kerb, my hands fists in the pockets of my shorts and I'm thinking she's probably

not home though right? She's probably not home. I mean, it's the middle of the afternoon on a Tuesday. I realise I should have put some makeup on. Made more of an effort. Picked out some decent clothes. Brushed my hair. Popped the whitehead on my lip.

It's no different to the houses either side of it. Amanda's house, I mean. My mother's house. A stubby ground-floor maisonette with dirty mottled brown brickwork and thin windows with old-fashioned net curtains. A scrubby little front garden with a simple concrete pathway leading to the front door. On the lamppost directly outside there is a sign that warns me this is a Neighbourhood Watch area. There's no car in her driveway. All the lights are off. It doesn't look like anyone's home but I wonder whether I should knock anyway to find out for certain. But, what if I knock, and someone *is* home? What if she's home? What would I say to her? What would I do? What if she doesn't even live here anymore?

My throat is burning-dry. I breathe manually to calm myself down.

I cycle up her driveway and lean my bike against the wall.

I walk to the door and tap the brass knocker three times.

And the noise of the knocker resonates somewhere in the back of my mind. That noise. I've heard it a thousand times before. In dreams. In another life. And the noise is opening a box in my head, one that I closed a long time ago in therapy with a woman called Bridie who smelled like humbugs. I packed all these little things into a box and I tucked them away somewhere I would never have to think about them ever again. Somewhere they couldn't hurt me. Somewhere they couldn't make me hurt myself.

Nothing happens for a minute.

Then, the net curtain in the bay window moves.

A moment later I see a shadow behind the glass. The door opens, the seal unsticking from the frame. Amanda, who is my mother, opens the door and stops. She's a lot skinnier than I imagined. I was hoping she would be fat like me. Her eyes are yellow and watery, with

blood vessels wriggling through them. She's wearing a blue smock dress with little flowers dotted all over it, like one of Lisa's. She looks older than what I remember. Although I suppose it's been over ten years, so I don't know why I was expecting her to look exactly like her photographs.

She's not ginger anymore. There's so much silver streaked through her hair that it looks almost pink. Her face is sagging and blotchy but I can see a few freckles underneath the age. The same freckles as me.

She's still on the doorstep, staring at me.

I'm like, Hi Amanda, in my head but it doesn't come out of my mouth. I squint at her through the sun and she squints right back at me, pushing her glasses up her nose with a spindly index finger.

(I can't bring myself to call her Mum.)

She says, you'd better come in then, hadn't you?

I step into the house, feeling like I'm about to walk into the plot of a horror movie. *Jeepers Creepers* or *The Amityville Horror* or *Carrie*. And I notice that the carpets are immaculate. I go to pull off my muddy boots by the door.

There's no need for that, she says, watching me, too close.

I follow her into the living room and sit down on the sofa, which is covered in that plastic cellophane shit that people deliver sofas in.

I ask her is this a new sofa. It's the first thing I've said to her in ten years.

She says, no, I've had this sofa for a long time.

The cellophane crackles under my bum. I can already feel my skin clamming up and my thighs sticking to the plastic. If I get up now there will be a slither of sweat left behind.

Amanda is standing by the door. I stare at her openly and she doesn't meet my eyes, self-conscious. I realise she's nervous. She keeps fiddling with the little gold cross around her neck. She asks me if I want a cup of tea.

Did I live here? I ask her, because there are things I remember.

Like how if I walk down the hall and turn right there'll be a bedroom with a weird old fashioned fireplace in it. And in the kitchen there's a glass sliding door which opens onto a little scrub of patio. And the tiles in that kitchen are beige and it's all coming back now because the box is opening, wider and wider and wider. And I'm remembering other things like how the bathroom is just past the bedroom and how there's a spot of black mould in the corner of the ceiling above the taps. And there's a little frosted window above the loo that's always dark because it opens directly onto the wall of the house next door. And the way she's looking is familiar now, too, and the box is still opening, wider still.

She doesn't answer my question. She jerks into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

I get up and look at the pictures on the mantelpiece. None of them are pictures of humans. They're all trees. I look around the rest of the room. There are two landscape watercolours on the magnolia walls.

Do you like trees? I shout to Amanda. And my voice is level and I think wow, I'm managing better than she is but then I look down at my fingers and they're still trembling like how they have been for the past ten weeks. And I bring my hand to my neck and look up the mirror and for a moment it's Lisa staring back at me.

Again, she doesn't respond. She carries a tray of tea back into the living room. There are two teacups and saucers, a bowl of sugar lumps and a little jug of milk as well as a teapot. Amanda sets the tray on the coffee table and begins to pour. It's the fanciest tea I've ever seen.

I pluck a sugar cube out of the bowl and pop it in my mouth. Once she's done pouring, Amanda sets herself on the armchair opposite me on the sofa.

Does Meg know you're here? she asks me.

I've had four social workers since Meg was my social worker.

Does your social worker know you're here, then?

No.

What about Lisa?

I don't answer, picturing Mum's face as I pushed past her to get into Boy's car last night.

I say, yeah, she knows.

And she's okay with it?

While she's talking things are slotting into place in my brain. There is a scuff mark on the flowery wallpaper that I've seen before. The wallpaper, too. It's familiar. Patterns on the ceiling. The tremor in her hands. The way she holds things.

I say, I'm sixteen now. I do what I want.

We don't talk for a moment while she fusses over her tea.

Well, then, how have you been, Isabelle?

I say, no one calls me Isabelle any more.

She watches me closely as she sips, her eyes small.

I remember, she says. One of your social workers told me you go by Bess now.

I say nothing.

Well, if you don't mind, she says. I'll call you Isabelle. It's the name on your birth certificate. It's the name I gave you.

Her fingers go back to the crucifix on her throat and I have this urge to rip it away from her and run.

I look out the window, trying to control my breathing. This was a terrible mistake. There is a bird house on Amanda's lawn. A squirrel is busy trying to get a brown apple from the cage dangling in the centre of the roof.

I think, you have no right to call me anything.

I say, I'm pregnant.

Amanda stops tapping. She stares at me for a moment, her eyes waterier now.

Oh my goodness, she says.

I know.

What are you going to do?

I don't know.

Do you want money? I don't have any.

I splutter. Of course not! How can you even ask that?

Why are you here, then?

I don't know. I don't know.

What do you expect me to do? I can't... I'm technically not meant to be within a hundred feet of you.

She looks like she's going to cry.

I go to the mantelpiece and look at the trees in the photo frames.

Don't you have any photographs of me?

Yes. They're in the loft.

I say, I lived here, didn't I?

She is quiet. The clock chimes.

I say, I remember this house. I remember it.

And I've never been more angry in my life.

And I take my cup and pour the tea inside deliberately onto the carpet.

And Amanda is saying, I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.

And I'm saying, it was a mistake to come here.

She says, no, no it wasn't.

How? I hate you.

I think we both knew this but saying it out loud feels blasphemous.

Her big stupid doe eyes spill over and tears slide down her blotchy old face.

I say, I know why I had to go into care. They told me.

She says, you're old enough to know.

I just want to know why you did it. Are you mentally ill? Why didn't you go to prison?

Amanda says, breathing loudly, I was very ill, but I'm better now.

You don't look better to me. Your whole house is covered in fucking plastic.

I had post-natal depression.

People with post-natal depression don't want to kill their children.

Sometimes they do.

You know I remember some of it?

She has her hands in her hair now, pulling at it too hard. She says, I was afraid you would.

I want to use the bathroom.

Amanda's face jerks up. Her pink hair is all mussed up and fuzzy from where she's been running her hands through it.

I don't think that's a good idea, Isabelle.

I don't give a shit what you think. And my name isn't Isabelle any more.

I stand up and muscle memory tells me already where I need to go. I traipse up the stairs and swing round the banister at the top. The movement feels familiar to me, like I've done it a million times before. At the top of the stairs on the landing there is a very old photograph of her, a formal one, in front of a blueish photographer's backdrop. It's the woman I remember, climbing out of the box in my head, alive, in my mind. The edges of her face are blurry. The bathroom is at the end of the hall with the door closed. I stop before it and look up at the ceiling. The paint is all puckered, same as mine. The little dots spell out a thousand happy faces. I push the door open.

Inside, the tiles on the wall haven't changed. Blue with cartoon fish swimming through them. Two fish to a tile. Interspersed with ordinary white tiles. The flooring is new. The shower head is new. I picture being underwater in the bath and staring up at a different shower head, trying to reach for it.

I step into the bath and sit down on the cold porcelain. I lean back and watch the tiles with their dancing cartoon fish.

I think about the thing that is growing in my belly. I imagine it as a new-born baby. I imagine it as a toddler. I imagine it as a little girl.

I imagine running this bath to the brim and holding the girl under the water while fish dance around us.

I stare up at the ceiling and begin to cry.

Chapter 22

I stay there in the bath, my neck pressed against the white-enamelled metal of the tub, the tap dripping cold water onto my feet, soaking through the sock until they're freezing and damp, until she comes up and tells me to get out. She's crying and her hair is crazy and she's screaming at me get out get out get out. Pushing me out the door with forceful hands even though I'm already going, already putting distance between the two of us, she doesn't need to push me. The places she touches on my body cringe away from her. The house smells of bleach. And I'm in the hallway with eyes stinging until they water and it feels as though there is thick fog clogging up my throat. She slams the white plasticky door behind me.

Peddling my bike home feels like peddling through custard. As I round the corner onto the main street I see that she's watching me from the living room window. And I wonder whether I'll look like that when I'm old, or more like my biological father, who I know nothing about but I assume he was fat.

I stop at the top of the bridge and breathe in the traffic fumes. I wonder what Boy is doing. He scratched his initials into the frame of my bike when he stole it. They're still there.

I cycle past the church. The clergy has installed conspicuous floodlights. They illuminate the statue of Mary at the South end of the church. She's opening her hands out to me. I spit on the ground and wonder if she hated God for the immaculate conception. Maybe later she hated Jesus as he was fertilising away in her womb. She didn't even have a choice.

I think of Carrie – the movie version, I mean – and her crazy mum. The bit where she's talking about being pregnant. She says, *I should've killed myself when he put it in me*. She says, to Carrie, *I should've given you to God when you were born, but I was weak and backsliding, and now the devil has come*.

I slip my key into the lock and heave the front door open. The living room light goes on. Someone's awake.

Mum comes into the hallway in her slippers and dressing gown. She's got a cup of tea and I think, I should pour that one on the floor too.

I look at Mum.

I say, I'm sorry.

She says, I know, I am too.

I go to sit in the living room. The television is on mute. It's the news and they are showing more footage of the eclipse. People looking up at the sun.

Mum sits down next to me. She's been crying.

She says, a long time ago, before Riss, before you, before Rory even. When I was seventeen.

Mum says, my Mum had just died. Did I ever tell you about how she died? When we lived in Wimbledon? At the time, I was pregnant.

She says, back then. It wasn't a question of choice. They didn't have the sort of medicine you get nowadays. And anyway. It was the nineteen fifties. There was no such thing as the sexual revolution. I mean, there was barely such a thing as feminism.

I wonder if the baby (my baby) can hear what she's saying. Wonder whether it knows what's coming.

I wonder if God can hear me.

Mum says, the boy – the dad – wasn't worth the dirt on the bottom of my shoe, you know? But Bess, I *worshipped* him. I followed him everywhere. I tried to get him to notice me *constantly*. There was about a year of my life when I was your age, when my whole world revolved around him.

And then, when he found out I was pregnant, he bolted. Obviously. Everyone in the world told me that's exactly what he would do. And that's what he did. It was like something out of *EastEnders*.

Uncle Jason and I were organising Mum's funeral. Going from meetings with the coroner to meetings with the florist. Picking out the photograph for the newspaper notice and finding a reasonably priced electrician to mend the light fixture in the bathroom because when her neck snapped the force of it pulled the wiring out. Trying to get rid of the smell. She wasn't there for long but there was a *smell*. I'm so sure of it. Meanwhile Dad was drinking himself to death down the working men's club and Jason was going through his own stuff because he never told Mum he was gay, having some sort of crisis, and while all that was going on, in the middle of all of it, I lost the baby.

Mum says, it was the day before the funeral. I lost the baby.

She is crying. I don't know what to do. I'm usually the one crying, not her.

She says, I wasn't thrilled about the idea of being pregnant, you know? I was in the same situation as you. Bright academic future, I suppose. Accepted into some great universities. Could've been a jeweller's apprentice if I didn't fancy doing more school. The job was all set up. Being pregnant ruined all of it, of course. It was a different situation for women back then. Young women, especially, who got pregnant. But you know, I'd sort of *resigned* myself to it. I was even excited about it. I knew I could get by with my savings and Jason helping me, and the welfare system and so on. And then when Mum died and my fiancé had buggered off god-knows-where, I thought to myself, thank God for this baby. Thank God because without it I would have no one and nothing. And then next thing I know I'm in the chip shop picking up dinner and then I'm coming around from passing out and someone has pulled my tights off and I see the blood all garbled up in the nylon, and then all on my legs too, and my tights had a diamond pattern on them, you see? And all up my legs the blood had been

impressed into my skin in pretty diamonds, and blood all over my dress. And I knew right away, because I felt the emptiness inside me. This big gaping hole.

She sobs in big broken gasps like she's been holding the air in for twenty years.

I can't think of anything to say, so I ask if Rory knows.

Mum says yes.

I don't know why this makes a difference but it does.

Rory's a good guy, really. I know I give him shit.

That's the understatement of the century.

I laugh and Mum laughs through her snot.

A car drives by the house and illuminates us briefly, the white light bouncing off the polished windowsill onto our faces.

We sit quietly for a long time while Mum calms herself down and I watch her, her narrow shoulders all shivery, and I still can't think of a single thing to say to her except I'm sorry and I'm so sorry and I'm trying to be a better person.

She says, I know you are. I can tell.

I'm scared.

So am I. But we have so many people around us to help us. Henry and Shelly both said that social services are happy to help us out financially, and Rory and I can look after the baby sometimes too. You could do a part-time course locally and still get a degree. Or do a study-at-home degree.

I nod. Yes, I could do that.

We're all here to help you, Bess. You are so loved. And this baby will be loved too. I know it doesn't feel like it sometimes. But it's true.

I know, I say. I know.

She smiles deeply and puts her left palm flat against my stomach. I want to squirm away but I resist. She looks up at me and giggles, her eyes all shiny, still leaking leftover tears. I can feel a sudden influx of bile rising hot up my oesophagus. It's unexpected and in my surprise I swallow it down.

Just think, Mum says. A baby. Here.

I smile back at her. I remember Mary the Virgin at the church and wonder at all the women I know who are playing at being mothers.

I say, Mum, I think I'm going to be sick.

She lets me run into the downstairs loo and throw up. *Now the devil has come.* She gets me a glass of water from the kitchen and sits down on the bathroom floor with me as I take small sips. I look up at the sink and think of Amanda's bath, and how I was sitting in it a few hours ago imagining drowning my baby.

Mum asks me if I've thought of names yet. I shake my head, vomit hair stuck to my cheek. She doesn't seem to mind the smell. She's staring at my quivering hands.

Early days yet, she says.

Early days, I agree.

Rory's woken up and he comes downstairs into the bathroom. He sits on the floor next to Mum.

I take it you two've made up, then?

I nod.

Rory's face creases into a smile. You know you two are my best girls, right?

Mum says, and Clarissa.

And Clarissa, he agrees.

Yeah, we know.

Good. I can't take a house full of shouting. So no more. We're going to sort this out between the three of us. We're going to manage.

I nod again.

Rory picks me up off the floor by the armpits like he used to when I was little. He sets me on my feet and looks at me and Mum, who is still on the floor staring up at us.

You'll do, he says.

And Mum puts me to bed like I'm a little kid again. Everyone is being so careful with me.

My room feels smaller than it did yesterday.

We'll have to get rid of some of your stuff to fit a cot in here, Mum says.

I don't answer her.

She gives me a hug, but we're not a hugging sort of family. Social services guidance advises against hugs between foster carers and their foster children. We don't tell each other 'I love you'. That's a foster care thing, too, but I'm not sure we would even if we had the choice.

We'll be okay, Mum says.

I nod, almost robotic now.

She tucks me in. I want to cringe and say something spiteful but it's nice. My bed feels warmer and more comfortable like it used to when I was little and Mum tucked me in every night.

She goes to bed and I look up at the ceiling, imitating me from three hours ago, watching invisible fish dance around the stagnant black air in my bedroom. I check the clock on my bedside table. It's nearly 1 a.m.

I slide out of bed and creep out onto the landing. I take the phone off the hook and take it into my room, dialling Boy's number as I do so. The thought of hearing his voice again makes my innards curl up all ugly and painful and delicious.

Keris picks up on the third ring.

Hi, it's Bess, I say.

Bess. How're you doing?

She sounds tired. I probably woke her up.

Is Boy in, Keris?

I'll check for you.

I hear her put the phone down and walk away slowly. There are muffled voices. Keris's slightly raised and shrill, and Boy's pissed off and distracted.

Keris picks up the phone.

I'm sorry, Bess, he's not in right now.

I pause.

I say, Keris, not to be rude, but are you fucking kidding me? I heard the whole conversation you just had with him.

Keris is silent, caught in the act. I know what this means but I don't want to.

I say, Keris, and my voice trembles. I can feel the hysteria rising in my throat like bile, and I swallow it down like I did earlier.

I say, I don't know whether you've guessed this yet, Keris, and I strongly suspect that you have, but I am FUCKING pregnant with your FUCKING brother's child. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?

She says nothing.

I add, so can you please put him on the sodding phone?

Keris is silent, and I imagine Boy staring at her from the door of his bedroom, monitoring her every word and movement. Shaking his head, his eyes wild.

Then she says, Sorry, Bess, and hangs up.

I slam the phone into the mirror on the back of my door and the glass splinters around my knuckles.

I wake up late. Mum and Rory are out. I open the window because it's hot and overnight I've gotten all twisted up in my bed sheets and there are little lines impressed all over my body. I climb out onto the porch roof and watch the dogwalkers in the park by Stage H. I can hear parakeets, and children playing in gardens. Their little voices make me feel sick. And then I realise it's more than just a feeling and I dash to the bathroom, knocking my foot against the windowsill as I climb back in. And I'm sick in the toilet. As I flush it I look down at my foot and see that a pool of blood has formed around it on the tiles, and there is a deep gash across the top, and that's when it starts hurting. I dab the wound with tissue and wipe up the blood from the floor. I go into the cupboard on the landing and get the first aid kit out. Clarissa comes out of her bedroom

You've got blood on the carpet, she says, bored.

I look down and see that there are little dots of brown blood soaking into the floor between the bathroom and the cupboard. I swear.

Let me wrap it up for you, Clarissa says, and I let her do it, and her hands are small and soft as she winds gauze around my foot. I say thank you, and wonder aloud whether it's worth trying to bleach the blood out of the carpet before Mum gets home.

I think you're as far up the creek as you're ever going to be, Clarissa says, there's not really anything else you can do. Might as well leave it.

I put the first aid kit away.

Are you having the baby, then? Riss asks me.

Looks like it.

What do you mean, *looks* like it?

Well. It's been decided, hasn't it?

Bess... why are leaving it up to someone else to decide? That's so, so stupid.

You don't understand.

Of course I do. I know I'm younger than you, but I'm clever, aren't I? I know what's going on here. You're having the baby because that's what Mum wants, not you.

And what exactly would you do in my situation? I spit back at her.

Well – not that it would ever happen to me – but I wouldn't let her tell me what to do.

I look at her and wonder what it would be like to be her, to be the *real* daughter. The one who always gets asked first about how she is and what she's up to. Who, when she gets new clothes or school stuff, doesn't have to save the receipts so 'we can claim it back later'. Who doesn't have to have her every move audited by an army of adults who don't know anything about her. Who isn't a commodity to anyone.

I say to her, you do realise that there's a massive imbalance between you and me, right?

No... what are you on about? I don't know why she looks so guilty. It's not her fault that she was born into one set of circumstances and I was born into another. We can't choose these things. I feel suddenly horrible for thinking nasty things about her. Being jealous. It's not like she chose to be the favourite.

She looks down at my foot, where the blood is slowly soaking into the bandage. It looks like there is a carnation blooming on my foot.

Maybe you should go to the doctor's, she says.

We hear the door go, meaning Mum and Rory have come back from wherever they went. Riss goes downstairs but I don't feel like facing them. Then, at the bottom of the stairs I hear her shout to me, Bess, come and look at this stuff.

So, I come downstairs and stand behind her in the hallway, and we watch as Mum and Rory bring in a flat-pack piece of furniture, wrapped in clear cellophane, through the door. I see the long wooden bars and I know that it's a baby's cot. Rory props it against the wall as Mum goes back to the car and retrieves several bulging Mothercare bags from the boot.

What is this? I say.

Well, we need the gear, don't we? Mum says, beaming, and then: oh my God what have you done to your foot?

I look back down at it, having forgotten for a moment about it. The bandage is soaked all the way through now.

I say, I was just about to go down the doctor's and see if I can get an appointment.

I'll give you a lift, Rory says, so I put some flip flops on and wait in the car while they unload the rest of the stuff. I try not to look too hard at the plastic bags. I still haven't showered. I'm in my pyjama shorts and a little vest. My legs are stubbly. No one notices these things. Rory's left his mobile phone in the car – a new Nokia, he just got it – and I pick it up and dial

Eshal's house, thinking please please please let it be Esh that picks up. And sometimes I think there might actually be a God because she does.

Rory drives me to the high street, where the Health Centre is, and we don't say a single word to each other the whole way. I feel like it should be uncomfortable but it's not. I look down at my hands and see that they're ever-so-slightly trembling again.

He pulls up in the car park and asks me if I want him to go in with me and I shake my head no quickly, slamming the door to the car before he has time to argue about it. After a moment he pulls away, and as he does I spot Eshal rounding the corner by the motorway bridge and I wave to her.

What do you want? She yells at me.

Shut up and come in with me, I shout back, and I wait for her to catch up to me, her platforms thumping against the pavement as she runs lopsidedly, her ankles almost-but-not-quite buckling. She is wearing her big Audrey Hepburn sunglasses and she has a Fab ice lolly.

Got one for you, she says. She pulls a second out of the back pocket of her shorts.

Oh my god, you had it next to your bum?

Just bloody eat it, Bess, you div. Next time I won't bother.

I unwrap the Fab and quickly lick up all the runny bits.

Why are you in your PJ's? Esh asks. *Are you not wearing a bra?*

I don't bother answering. She follows me through the automatic doors into the clinic. The waiting room looks empty. I walk up to the kiosk and knock on the glass. The woman behind it, who I recognise as one of the locals at the Three Horseshoes, slides the window up and says, please don't knock on the glass, and then slides it back down.

I look at Esh like *what the hell* and she shrugs back at me and takes a bite out of her Fab. We sit down on the two stained chairs in the corridor and wait. Ten minutes later the receptionist slides the window up and says in a too-sweet voice, can I help you girls?

I shuffle back over to the window and ask her if she's got any emergency appointments available.

What's it regarding? She asks me.

You can't ask me that! It's personal.

I can if it's an emergency appointment, love. You've got to prove it's an emergency.

I give her a look and lift my flip-flopped foot onto the counter top, my white thigh wobbling, almost doing the splits to make it. Esh snorts loudly behind me. The receptionist looks mortified.

I've got an issue with this, I tell her. It won't stop bleeding.

She considers me for a moment. Fine, she says. Sit down and I'll see what we can do.

She takes my details and Esh and I go into the empty waiting room.

Not being funny, Bess, she says, your foot looks one hundred per cent gammy but I'm not sure what role I have to play in all of this. You want me to hold your hand while they stitch you up or something?

I pick up a magazine and flip through the first few pages. All slim tanned white women with whiter smiles and sparkly eyes staring back at me.

What's going on with your *situation*? I ask her, not wanting to talk about mine. She stiffens next to me, only slightly but I notice it.

They're sorting out protective accommodation, she whispers.

What?!

Yep. Next week. It could be any time, they said. Someone's going to show up at my house and I must have an overnight bag ready to go. And that's it. They're busting me out.

Oh my God. Esh. What the fuck.

It's only temporary, the woman said. Until we can resolve stuff, like me and my parents, and if not, they're going to put me up in a council flat or something. It's social services doing it. I rang that advocacy service, you know, the ones you told me about? And they've made a referral. So I'm officially *on the books*.

Oh my god, I say again.

And before you ask, no, I don't know where I'm going. And I don't know what else is happening. I'm supposed to start vet school in like four weeks. I've got an induction on the thirty-first. Fuck knows what'll happen about that, though. I'm shit-scared, Bess. Every time I look at my mum I think about how I'm completely betraying her and everything she believes in and everything I believe in, to be honest, and how much this is going to fuck her up. It's horrible.

You just have to think, I tell her, like, what's the alternative? You're gonna go to Bangladesh and marry this Mehdi bloke and pop out eight of his babies and spend the rest of your life cleaning someone else's piss off the toilet seat and never getting to be a vet? Does that sound like the person you want to become?

Well... yeah, exactly. It's not me.

Think about that stuff, Esh. They will forgive you, they *will*, I promise.

Like how your parents are going to forgive you for getting pregnant at fifteen? Yeah, right.

It's different. They're not my family. They're not obligated to forgive me.

Why are we here, Bess? Eshal asks me, but before I have time to respond to her the door to the clinic opens and a nurse calls my name. She shows us into an office, and there's a doctor sitting at a desk. Me and Eshal sit down opposite him.

The GP introduces himself as Dr James. I shake his hand tentatively. He glances at what I assume are my notes on his desk.

So, Isabelle, he says slowly, shall we take a look at your foot?

No, I say. That's just a ploy.

A ploy?

Eshal looks at me and understands what I'm doing and I think she almost smiles a little bit too, and that spurs me on.

Like, my foot will need looking at too, I tell him.

Dr James takes his glasses off and cleans them with his tie.

What else are you here for?

I blink, trying to steady my breathing. Eshal takes one of my trembling hands in her own and squeezes in gently and I can feel every single bone in her skinny fingers even though we're not really touching because of the atoms between us. But it bloody well feels like we are, like there's no space at all between me and Esh, and even when she goes off to Basingstoke for vet school or to escape her marriage or whatever, we're always going to be like this, like both of us holding onto each other for dear life because we're the only thing that anchors the other to the planet, otherwise we would just be floating up there somewhere with nowhere to go like paper lanterns, like astronauts without spaceships, until we disintegrate.

And I say to him – the doctor, I mean – I think it's about time I had an abortion.

Chapter 23

Now, I'm sitting at the dinner table with them. And Mum asks me if everything is alright? And I look up at her and I say yes, everything is fine. And I try not to dig my cutlery into the table.

She doesn't know that in four days' time I'm going to take the train to a clinic in Brixton and they will give me a tablet, and then the day after that I will go back and they will give me another tablet and then I won't be pregnant anymore. Mum keeps asking me to clear space in my bedroom so Rory can set up the cot. Maybe I can throw out some of my books, she says. Maybe some CDs and the cabinet. Maybe that hideous hi-fi sound system, which I got from the charity shop and balanced on the handlebars of my bike the whole two-mile cycle home. Babies don't like loud music. And while I'm at it maybe I should take those posters down. Uma Thurman with a cigarette in one hand and a gun in the other is hardly appropriate for a baby's room.

Esh is still at home for now, with her stuff packed into a bin liner and stashed under her bed. She doesn't sleep in case they come to get her at night, even though her support worker said that wouldn't happen: it'll be between ten and five. Shelly, my new social worker, has called twice to see when I'm free to go and look around Basquiat School of Arts. I tell her I can't go there. I can't afford it. She says it doesn't matter, we should still go and look at it. I refuse and she asks me why, and I say, realising how ridiculous I sound as I do, that it is going to break my heart.

Me and Esh talk on the phone in whispers in the middle of the night because she is still forbidden from talking to me and I don't want Mum and Rory to overhear what I'm planning to do. I say to her, I'm so afraid that you'll move really far away and I won't be able to see you.

She says, I'm afraid you'll have an abortion and die. Or you'll have an abortion and your mother kills you. Either way you are going to die.

We're all going to die.

I go through everything in my head over and over. I am going to get the train from Shepperton station on Tuesday at eleven twenty, and then I'll get the Northern line from London Waterloo at twelve thirty-five. I'll arrive in Brixton at twelve fifty (at the latest), and then it is a fifteen-minute walk (at the most) to the Marie Stopes clinic I've been referred to. And the next day I'll do the whole thing again except an hour later and that will be it.

Except, I tell Eshal, this thing it says in the leaflet the doctor gave me.

Which is? She asks, and she's whispering because her parents are asleep in the next room.

Which is that I'm not supposed to get the train home on the second day, I say. Because of sides effects from the tablet and stuff, right? Like, I might be vomming and stuff.

Well... what are you going to do, then?

I don't know, just chance it on the train. How else am I supposed to get home?

I'm telling Esh this to gage her reaction, and her reaction will tell me how good / bad an idea it is. It's a bad idea.

Are you loopy? You want to be sicking up all over the tube? You're deluded, Bess. Seriously. Aren't you going to be, like gushing blood from your foo foo as well?

Well... yeah.

No fucking way. You're dumb sometimes. You know that?

Yeah. I know.

What are we going to do? I haven't got any money for a hotel. Have you?

The way Eshal uses 'we' makes me feel warm.

I could ask Keris, I say after a few seconds. The thought has actually crossed my mind several times.

Esh thinks about it. It's not a bad idea, she says, but didn't you mouth off at her about Boy? Is she going to be interested in doing you a favour?

She's doing Boy a favour as well.

That's a bit dark.

True though, innit? And anyway, I'm pretty sure Boy robbed my grandmother's money out of my bedroom.

What?

Yep. So it's not like I can even dip into that and get a taxi or anything.

Bess, that's so fucked up. What a shit head. He *stole* from you?

Yep. I've got no proof. But, you know, it's Boy. His track record isn't exactly squeaky clean, is it?

Yeah...

We sit in silence for a little longer until Eshal whispers, I think that's my dad going for a wee, and hangs up. And I listen to the dial tone for a little while, and then I hang up too.

The next morning is three days until the abortion. Eshal's parents are both at work, and so are mine; we're both free to sneak out, so we meet at the end of my road by the church. It's windy and Esh is wearing her Audrey Hepburn sunnies and a huge wide-brimmed black hat, movie-star-style, and she has to grip the edges to stop it blowing away.

We walk to Charlton Village on the road next to all of the farmland. The road is dusty and in the farmer's fields there are big piles of gravel and dirt that look like they have been lifted straight out of the ground with a JCB.

What are they building here? I wonder aloud.

Probably flats, Esh says, and as we walk we watch a pigeon fly out in front of a car coming towards us, and it smacks hard against the car's windscreen and the car squeals to stillness. The driver gets out and looks at the pigeon all smooshed up against the window. He goes into the back of his car and takes out an empty plastic bag. He peels the pigeon off the windscreen with the plastic bag covering his hand, all its guts hanging from it, its little beak half open mid-screech, its eyes wide and black. Underneath the spot where the pigeon was, on the glass, there is a long, curved crack. The driver spots it and swears loudly. He flings the dead bird into the weeds at the side of the pavement and then humps back into the car, turning on his window wipers before pulling away.

It takes us just under an hour to make it all the way to School Road. As we get to Boy and Keris's house Esh takes my hand. She knocks for me. Keris opens the door. She takes in me and Eshal on the doorstep, hand in hand, her eyes big like Riss's when she's watching me and Mum having a fight, and then steps aside to let us in, breathing out an exaggerated sigh.

Let's go in the garden, she says, Boy is in bed.

Good, I say.

You wanted to talk to him? She asks me. I assume that's why you're here.

No. We want to talk to you, Eshal says.

Keris shrugs and leads us through the open door in the kitchen into the garden. Zack is on the lawn going in circles on a little tricycle, and when he spots Esh and I he shouts MUM BESS AND ESH ARE HERE and Keris goes yeah I know mate, say hello and he shouts hello at us and we shout it back. We pull up the dirty plastic furniture on the patio. I can feel my hands trembling so I light a cigarette.

You think you should be doing that? Keris asks.

I raise my eyebrows at her because I don't know how else to answer.

Keris goes back into the kitchen and brings out a carton of orange juice and a carton of apple juice, both Tesco Value. She pours us measures into plastic beakers.

So, what's going on? She asks.

I take another puff on my cigarette, nervous. Keris waits. Eshal looks at me.

Eventually I say, I'm scheduled to go to a clinic on Thursday.

Zack falls off his trike and starts screeching and we wait while Keris goes to sort him out.

Once she's done, I say, It's at 2pm.

Is that what you want?

Yes, it is.

Keris takes my fag from me and inhales on it deeply. She hands it back.

Fair enough, she says.

Are you going to tell Boy?

I suppose so. But I won't tell him until after it's done. You know. Stops him interfering. He knows about the – pregnancy – by the way, I told him after you rang me.

Yeah... sorry about that.

Don't worry. Forget about it. I'm to blame for all this, too.

What? What do you mean?

Keris hesitates, takes another drag on my cigarette, exhales slowly, not looking at me. She says, I knew what was going on between you two. I'm not stupid. I knew you were getting up to in his bedroom. I wasn't born yesterday.

Eshal and I glance at each other nervously. I'm struck by how much like my mum Keris sounds.

I knew that he would end up losing interest and mess you about. Dad used to do the same. Younger girls as well. It's none of my business. Boy's an adult, technically speaking. But I just... you know... you're only just *sixteen*, Bess. You're a kid, really. I should've done *more*. And Boy should know better. You're a nice girl. I don't know.

You kind of *did* do more, though, I say.

Not hard enough, clearly, she says.

I smile weakly at her and she returns my expression, her eyes sad. All three of us plus Zack are quiet for a moment, all looking out into the garden, into the sky which is overcast but there are still aeroplane lines, like slug trails, streaking through the pale clouds. A parakeet lands on a fence post at the end of the garden and cleans its feathers.

You're doing the right thing, Keris says quietly.

How can you say that? You had Zack, didn't you?

Keris lowers her voice and says, when I found out I was pregnant I was too far gone to have the option to... you know. I didn't have a choice same as you. If I'd found out earlier... well, things might have been really different, you know? I can't rely on Zack's dad for anything. He's even more of a loser than Boy is.

I wonder whether any of what Keris has said has registered in Zack's little brain. It doesn't look like it. He's back to making aggressive engine noises on his trike.

Has Boy said anything to you about it? About me?

Not really. When I told him that night he just shut himself up in his bedroom. I haven't really seen him since. He spends his whole life out of the house God-knows-where doing God-knows-what or asleep. His court date's coming up in a couple of weeks. I think he might be bricking it. He might end up doing time.

What are you going to do if that happens?

Fuck knows. Sign on? Go into one of those women's shelters? We can't afford the rent without Boy's job. All of my benefits goes on Zack's nursery and food and stuff.

I'm really sorry, Keris.

Don't worry. S'not your fault, is it? Boy's fault for nicking that car in the first place. His fault for knocking you up as well, isn't it?

Eshal picks up the carton of apple juice to refill her drink. I'm about to say something about being old enough to look after myself when Keris's face changes, and I turn around and Boy is standing there. And he has the same expression on his face as Keris, maybe because they have the same genetics and the same facial expressions, or maybe because they've both just been caught in the act. I don't know what the 'act' is, though, just that they've been caught. And before anyone has time to say a single thing Boy has turned around and is back in the house, and then we hear keys jangle as though they've just been picked up off a table or taken off a hook and Eshal goes, oh no you bloody don't, and she stands up and runs into the house, which is difficult for her because she is wearing four-inch platform boots and the arch of her foot can't bend in them. She follows him into the house, and then me and Keris get up and do the same. And I don't know what Esh is planning to do, and whatever she does I don't know what I'm going to do to stop her. And I'm thinking about when I just saw him in the door looking at me like I just grew an extra head for a moment and I was mid-thought about how I saw *Ten Things I Hate About You* this summer and it made me realise that the golden age of teen romance movies is over, John Hughes doesn't even make films any more, Heath Ledger isn't remotely convincing as a teenage heartthrob and it's not worth watching unless it's got Molly Ringwald in it. It always had to end some time. And for a moment there I forgot that I'm supposed to be in love with him and I didn't care that he's probably fucking someone else and it's all quite liberating.

And now we're in the front driveway of the house and Boy is unlocking the car but the key is a bit stuck so he's struggling and Esh is shouting at him saying things like YOU DIRTY

SCUM OF THE EARTH SKEEZY FUCKING KNOB JOCKEY BOY YOU'RE THE BIGGEST COWARD I EVER KNEW CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE RUNNING AWAY YOU LITTLE SHIT YOU DISGUST ME and so forth. And Boy hasn't said anything back to her yet but he has managed to get the door open on the Sierra and now he's in the driver's seat trying to get it started and Eshal, who is still holding the apple juice carton in her hand, lifts it high over her head and throws it at the windscreen, and it explodes apple juice all over the place and he turns on the windscreen wipers and they squeak against the glass and now he's having trouble getting the car into reverse and Eshal is still shouting and Keris goes, oi, that's my car, talking about the apple juice and I say, sorry Keris, and she watches for a few seconds and then she shrugs and goes back into the house, and Boy's still not gotten into reverse yet, and before I know it Keris is back out here, and now she's got another carton from the fridge, milk I think and she leans into the driver's side window and pours most of onto Boy's lap, making him go, WHAT THE FUCK KERIS and Esh starts laughing and the whole thing is pretty funny so I start laughing too, and Keris throws the rest of the carton onto the windscreen and milk dribbles all over it, obscuring Boy's face, and he's finally backing out of the driveway onto the road and slamming on the accelerator so violently that he stalls which makes us laugh harder. And then he gets the ignition on again, and there's a car behind him honking, and then it's all over and he's gone.

I spend the evening in my bedroom re-reading my abortion literature. Pamphlets and website print-outs. On Tuesday, I'm going to be given a tablet called mifepristone which blocks a certain hormone from reaching my uterus, and that causes the lining of my uterus to degenerate and the egg can't stay embedded in it. Then, the next day, I get another tablet called misoprostol, which makes my uterus contract and *expels the foetus*. And then I have a really, *really* heavy period and that's that. Side effects: cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, heavy bleeding, risk of infection. No plane journeys for six weeks in case of deep vein thrombosis. No swimming for six to eight weeks in case of infection. No sex until my next

period. The thought of having sex makes me feel like my uterus is already contracting (from disgust).

Mum comes into my bedroom and sits on the end of my bed. All of the leaflets are stashed under my pillow. The window is open and the breeze is pushing the blind away from the wall before it falls back, clattering against the window frame. Outside there are noises like car engines and parakeets and the big oak trees on the green shifting around in the breeze. Mum says, you really need to clear some room in here for that cot.

You're getting a bit ahead of yourself with all this, I tell her.

Those parakeets never shut up, she says, watching them roosting in the oak branches. Making the leaves impossibly green, voluminous. They clean each other's feathers.

Why don't you go out with Eshal tonight? Mum says. And I look at her, eyebrows raised.

What happened to you today? Did Rory put something in your Ovaltine?

What?

Since when did you *encourage* me to go out with Esh?

Well. I don't know. You need a break. You're not going to have many opportunities to go out soon, are you? You might as well make the most of it.

I shrug and feel guilty because Mum doesn't know how I've been sneaking out of the house pretty much every night after midnight and every day when she and Rory are at work. I'm surprised she's never noticed it: it's not like I'm subtle. Or like I don't have it in me.

So, I take the bus to the High Street because they won't let me cycle anywhere anymore. And when I get to Esh's house I see that there are still no cars in the driveway, which means we are safe. I knock and Esh comes out and I say, let's do one more night just us two. And she looks at me. She's wearing glittery mascara which makes her eyes twinkle more than usual. And she says yes, okay, where to?

And we sit on the bench on the train platform thinking about it. None of our ideas are right. We don't want to do what we always do – sit by the river or got to the Pits and smoke blunts with Manor Park Jesus – because that's what we *always* do. And this is our last night together for who knows how long. *Our last hurrah*. It can't be an ordinary night. It has to be special.

I bet there are no good clubs wherever I'm going, Esh says, kicking an old Dr Pepper can onto the railway tracks.

I doubt your social worker will know, I say, snorting.

Esh says whatever happened to your other social worker? That camp one? With the blue nail polish?

Henry? He moved offices, or quit, or something. I don't know.

I'm so sure he was a drag queen.

Me too.

The announcer comes onto the overhead speakers and tells us that the train now approaching the platform is the nineteen-fourteen South West Trains service to London Waterloo.

Esh nudges me, her eyes glittering. Let's go and find him, she says.

What?

Let's find him. You know. Gay bars. Drag queens. Soho. It's Saturday night, isn't it? If he's really a drag queen I bet he'll be in one of those bars.

Yeah, right, mate. You know how many gay bars there are in London?

Well, there's no harm in looking is there? Look, I've got twenty squid on me. How much have you got?

I take my old Hello Kitty coin purse out of my rucksack and count out the pounds and pences. Fourteen fifty.

That's enough for a few drinks in London. That's more than enough. Bess... let's do it. Don't be a pussy.

I thought you didn't like using that word.

Yeah, but I make exceptions for when someone is *actually* being a pussy. Like right now.

I don't think you should be allowed to pick and choose your ethics like that, Esh.

Who's stopping me? Come *on*, you silly bint.

She pulls me by the arm onto the train, which has just come to a stop at the platform, the carriage doors grinding open in front of us. We sit down in the bike section, giggling because it's all so stupid. Eshal lights a cigarette and the only other person on the train, a man in his fifties wearing a beige coat even though it's way too warm for a coat, glares at us and we switch carriages. The train takes fifty minutes to get to Waterloo and when we arrive we go to the off license across the road and buy a 330ml bottle of vodka and a bottle of coke and we sit at the bus stop and mix it up, pouring a quarter of the coke down a drain. Then we go back into the station and look at the underground map.

There's no station for Soho, says Esh.

I squint at the map and realise she's right.

How the fuck are we supposed to know how to get there, then?

We look at another map on the wall, this one a road map, and find the bit labelled SOHO.

Leicester Square, I say, jabbing the station with my index finger. We need to go to Leicester Square.

So, we get on the escalator and walk through the turnstiles, and down another escalator, onto the Northern Line, and get lost in the tunnels for ten minutes before realising we're on a Bakerloo platform, and then eventually we are on the tube to Leicester Square, taking it in turns to swig from the plastic coke bottle. Each of us gargling it to make the other laugh. And I read the tube map on the side of the train above the window and see that Archway station is on this line and that's the station I would need to get off at to go to Basquiat School in Crouch End and then I don't feel quite so fizzy.

But anyway, we get off the train into Leicester Square and it's all huge luminous billboards, glowing shop windows, street performers with saxophones and electric guitars, dancers doing backflips to a stereo playing NWA. And the food: chicken chow mein, pizza, hot doughnuts, roasted cashews from street vendors sitting under umbrellas along the edges of the square. I want to stop and take in every sight and smell, but Eshal is pulling me away, through the Square and out the other side, onto a wide road lined by tall terraced Victorian houses – they look like Basquiat School – with glass shop fronts and black taxis and buses crawling along, honking each other out of the way, and even more music, this time steel drummers, six of them, dancing and playing at the same time. But we don't stop for them either. We walk brusquely down smaller roads and across public gardens, following the signs to Soho and we get there and we're in another square, much smaller than Leicester Square, but still teeming with people on the move – these ones wearing sparkly dresses, feather boas, crazy glasses and wigs, in high heels that would break my ankles if I tried to walk in them. Eshal lets us stop for five minutes.

Do you really think any of these bars are going to let us in? I ask her, looking at the buildings further along the road, many of which have people spilling out of them.

She shrugs. Just act like you belong here.

We sit down on a brick wall and finish our vodka-coke and as we stand up I think to myself I definitely feel a bit drunk now, and I put my hand to my belly thinking, Oh My God, the

baby, how could I be so thick, of course I can't be drinking. And then I remember that no, I'm having an abortion, and on Tuesday the baby will be gone.

On Tuesday, the baby will be gone, I say out loud to Eshal. She was about to head in the direction of one of the busier-looking bars but pauses and turns back to look at me.

That's the decision you've made, she says.

I look down at my hands.

Bess?

For a moment, I feel like I'm going to cry, especially when Eshal comes back to where I'm standing and snakes her left arm through my right one.

But then she says, aren't we here to rumble your social worker? Come on.

I nod but then I think about it and say, I don't know. It seemed like it would be fun but it's kind of invasive, right? Like, let's just let him live his life.

Eshal shrugs and says, suits me, but I am still planning on drinking in one of these bars so are you coming, or what?

I roll my shoulders and grip her arm more convincingly, and we walk.

The first two doormen we encounter both turn us away, barely looking at us as they do so. We turn onto a quieter street, this one with more late-night cafes than actual nightclub-style bars, and we easily walk into one with big lead-lined windows, no bouncer, and candles with three wicks in jars at each square wooden table. There are black and white photographs of old jazz musicians on the yellow walls. Behind the bar is a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf full of bottles of different kinds of drink. And there is a four-piece band near the back of the smoke-filled room playing acoustic versions of Stevie Wonder songs and me and Esh sit down at one of the candlelit tables and pretend we're on a date, and I take her hand across the table and stroke each one of her long delicate fingers from the knuckle to the tip of her fingernail. A

waiter comes over with a drinks menu and we are asking him to bring the cheapest bottle of white wine and two glasses without looking at the list, and we giggle at ourselves because it all feels so grown up.

Jolly good, spiffing, top drawer, Esh says taking a piece of her hair and draping it across her upper lip so it looks like she's got a long, wispy moustache. I make a Posh Man face and she laughs.

After a couple more songs the band finishes and starts packing up and Eshal pouts because she was enjoying it, but then Tears for Fears comes on the overhead speakers – 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World' – which is one of our favourites, so we get up and dance, and soon the other people in the bar are up too and we're all dancing with one another and it's beautiful, it's beautiful, and for a moment I forget that I'm pregnant and sometimes I'm too scared to move a single muscle, in my bed, at night, staring at the ceiling trying to find all the faces in the puckered up bits of paint, listening to parakeets, my fingers all clawed up, rigid, and it feels as though the slightest movement might make the house fall down all around me, and that is exactly how it feels. And then the bit where Roland Orzabel and Curt Smith go *I can't stand this indecision / married with a lack of vision* happens and me and Eshal look at each other and basically scream EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD at each other and I'm not thinking about being too afraid to move now because we are here, in this moment, alive, with all our fingers and toes and our minds and each other and really, that's all that matters.

Chapter 24

I am lying on a trolley bed with plasticated upholstery the colour of the ocean. The walls are yellow: they always seem to be, in places like this, unless they're white. Esh isn't here. She's gone. They picked her up from her house yesterday morning and her mum cried when the social worker took her away in a bashed-up Honda Civic. She took one bin bag of clothes and some makeup, and her special purple blanket that she's had since she was a baby, and one suitcase filled up with all her veterinary books, and her Oxford edition of the Qur'an, and that's it. She called me on a mobile phone that the social worker gave her in case of emergencies. She is in a Travel Lodge in Farnborough. She says there are lots of other women there. Mostly Muslim girls, but a few Hindus too. They are all her age or younger. She made friends with another Bangladeshi girl called Aanika and they prayed together, even though she hasn't prayed voluntarily for like, four years.

The nurse comes back into the room with another trolley – a table on wheels – with a monitor on it, and tells me to pull down my denim skirt and knickers a bit, so that the waistband is in line with my pelvic bone. Then she tucks scratchy white papers towels into the waistband to protect my clothes, and squirts the cold gel stuff onto my belly like they do on *Casualty* and *Holby*. She does the same thing they did in the hospital the first time. The scan.

It feels weird to have this quiet stranger touching me like this, the feeling of her hands on me, the texture of the pads of her fingers. The nurse doesn't say anything; when she's done she just takes her hand away, leaving the paper towels on my belly. There is something printing out of the machine on the trolley. I see that it is a reel of photographs of the scans of my womb. They look exactly like the ones Mum showed me when she was pregnant with Clarissa. Black, with wisps of grey cloud. Nothing decipherable, really, but Mum rubbed her lips with the hem of her sleeve and giggles at the pictures. She thought she would never have kids. She traced my finger around the mass of cloud that she said was a baby, her chest heaving itself up and down like she was drowning.

I look away from my own photograph scans quickly, scared that I'm going to see the baby in the wilderness. Some kind of kidney bean-shaped blob. An alien like the gooey toy ones in plastic eggs, nestled into green jelly, whose heads explode when you put them in the fridge. If I see, it will become a real thing. I might change my mind. The thought scares me and makes me look away but there's also part of me that wants to catch a glimpse of it, the little human being that is not quite yet human and not yet, even, a being. The thing that is half my DNA and half Boy's, all mixed up together to make a new person. It's like losing a part of myself, this. But I don't know whether I'm losing a non-vital part like a limb or something that is essential to survival. A vital organ. Briefly, I think about whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Baby names. George for a boy and Lucy for a girl. I marvel at how readily the names came to me. It's because I already had them saved up, I think, in some quiet corner of my brain. I think of soft, bright-white baby clothes that smell like talc and the washing detergent Mum uses. The cot that is still boxed, propped against the wall in my bedroom.

The nurse tells me she'll be back in a minute, and exits the room, using the door I came in through. I finish wiping the gel on my belly with the paper towels and pull up my skirt. I pull my Loony Toons t-shirt down to cover my belly, and realise that I must look like a child, wonder whether I'll be able to wear these clothes again without thinking of today. I look around for a bin in the examination room but there is none, just an empty plain dark-wooden desk and two chairs with a computer. The nurse comes back into the room and I ball the paper towels up in my hand, feeling the wet gel seep out of the fibres and between my fingers.

The nurse invites me to sit down at the desk with her. She has a manila folder and from it she takes a stack of forms. She asks me my name, date of birth, address, contact telephone number, GP name, address, and so on. She fills out each of my answers in careful capital-letter black ink on the form. Finally on the last page, she folds the papers and places them back in the folder, takes out a second form.

Now, she says. Isabelle.

Bess.

Bess, the reason I popped out just now was to see the consultant. I thought the foetus may be too large to opt for a medical termination, and instead we would have to perform a surgical one.

I nod and say okay like none of this, like the shape and size and colour of the room is not making me want to vomit.

The nurse gives me a sympathetic look. Maybe my face has betrayed me, or maybe this is what she is trained to do. Maybe this is the look she gives to every girl that comes into this room and sits on this chair.

She says, the good news is that the foetus is *just* enough on the small side that we can continue with the medical termination as originally planned.

I nod and say thank you, realising as I say it that 'thank you' is the wrong sentiment. I should say 'sorry' instead.

The nurse explains to me what the medical abortion involves. I will be given a tablet today before I leave the clinic, and then I will be required to come back tomorrow afternoon to take two more tablets, which I don't swallow. I hold them in the corners of my mouth until they dissolve completely. Then the nurse tells me about all the stuff I have already read in my leaflets. About how my uterus will begin to contract, the lining of my womb will break down meaning that there is no choice for the foetus but to be expelled from my body. There will be lots of bleeding. I will feel faint and nauseous. I should bring a friend, partner or family member to support me through the experience.

Do you have someone to accompany you tomorrow, Bess?

I tell her yes.

The nurse then reads questions to me from the second form. These questions are different. They ask me about my state of mind. Whether I have ever had suicidal thoughts.

Whether I have a history of drug and alcohol abuse. Whether I have self-harmed. I say no to all of them, and she raises her eyebrows but doesn't contradict me.

Eventually the nurse asks me, and why exactly are you seeking a termination, Bess?

I knew this was coming. I have read about it on the pages Eshal printed out from the abortion websites at the library, before one of the nosy librarians peered over her shoulder, realised what she was looking at and told her to leave.

I glance at the papers on the desk in front of her. I read her name upside-down, printed in block capitals at the top of the form under the title of 'Examiner'. The word reminds me of doing GCSEs in the netball hall at school last year. The sunshine, in shafts, coming through the caged windows above us. The smell of sawdust and gym shoes and the river. My own name is next to 'Patient'. The nurse's name is Trudy Bartholomew.

I start telling her about being in care. About wanting to be a filmmaker. All the things that stop me from going to sleep, instead spending hours mentally joining the dots on the ceiling, and all of these dreams I have for myself. How I'll never be able to leave Shepperton, leave *care* as a mother. Trudy nods and takes notes. I watch her fingers move and think about being held down in the bathtub, being drowned, my own fingers battling to find grip along the smooth edges of the tub. Above me, the shower head and a face hanging over me, distorted by the ripples of water. I don't know what made her stop, what made her let go of me.

I am thinking about all of this as Trudy Bartholomew writes and it takes me a moment to realise that I'm crying, quite loudly. Trudy doesn't seem fazed by this either, and she deftly pats me on the hand while simultaneously saying now, now and reaching into the top drawer of the desk for a box of Kleenex. Trudy says to me, it's very common to feel emotional at this stage. You've made a big decision. You've been very brave.

I nod and blow my nose noisily into a tissue she has offered me, while still holding the jellied paper towels in one hand. The scrunched-up napkins seem to have bonded themselves to the pads of my left palm. Trudy says stuff about how I'm doing the right thing for myself,

and that no one is judging me, but if I were to change my mind it's not too late and no one would be upset with me for it. I tell her that I'm not changing my mind. She pats my hand one more time.

She says, take as much time as you need to cry it all out. We'll continue with the questions when you're ready.

She thinks I am crying because of the baby. I'm not.

Here's what happened to Eshal. Her social worker called her the night before last and told her she was coming to get her the next day. Eshal already had all her things packed up: the stuff she needed, anyway. She didn't sleep. Instead she watched the birds in her garden, in the big tree that leans against the fence.

The next day, yesterday, at eight in the morning, Eshal's social worker pulled up and knocked on the door. Eshal's brother Anwar opened it and when the social worker asked for Eshal he wanted to know what this weird, fluffy-headed white woman wanted with his sister. By this point Esh was already hauling her bin bag and her suitcase down the stairs. Eshal's mum was in the kitchen and came to the door too to see what was going on. The social worker asked Eshal if she wanted to explain and Esh said no. So, the social worker told Mrs Bhandari and Anwar that Eshal had agreed to be housed in temporary accommodation because of her being made to move to Bangladesh and participate in a marriage that she does not consent to. Mrs Bhandari got angry and asked the social worker to leave. The social worker said she was not leaving. She was still standing on the doorstep because no one had invited her in. Then Mr Bhandari, Eshal's dad, who is six foot three, came downstairs in his dressing gown and wanted to know what was going on. So Anwar told him what the social worker had said. Mrs Bhandari started crying. Mr Bhandari got angry and asked the social worker, again, to leave. Mrs Bhandari told him to keep his voice down because the neighbours will talk and Anwar said, for crying out loud, Mum, the neighbours don't care about us.

Mr Bhandari told Esh she wasn't going. He even picked up her bin bag and tried to take it back upstairs but it was Anwar who stopped him, who told him to put it down, shouted at him, actually, and Mr Bhandari was so stunned that he'd been told what to do that he did it. Then Anwar made everyone come into the living room and sit down and made some tea. Mr Bhandari shouted for a long time about family and reputation and what is right for a girl to do and not do. How what Esh was trying to do was shameful. Mrs Bhandari cried more. Anwar tried to get Mr Bhandari to sit down but he wouldn't until Eshal's mum shouted at him, too, to sit down and shut up. And he did.

And then Anwar asked Eshal if this was what she really wanted and Eshal, who had been quiet this whole time, said of course I don't want to do this. Of course I don't want to dishonour my family, I don't want to leave my home and my friends. But if this is what it takes to live my life how I want to – without marrying someone I barely know and having children that I don't want – then yes, I'm going to do it. And Anwar nodded and Mrs Bhandari stopped crying and in a weird, scary kind of way almost looked triumphant. Mr Bhandari said nothing. He just held his head in his hands and his shoulders shuddered violently up and down and Eshal thought he might be trying to stop himself from crying.

And when Eshal put all her stuff in the car, the social worker helping her, and Anwar asked if he and Esh's mum could follow in the car behind, and Eshal said yes that would be alright. And they drove to the hotel, and Anwar helped her unpack her things from the car but the social worker said they couldn't come inside. So Eshal said goodbye to her mum and her brother in the Travel Lodge car park, with the cars on the A325 roaring past so loud that they all had to shout to be heard. Eshal kept saying sorry over and over again and Anwar said what for and Mrs Bhandari said we will fix this I promise you, and you'll come home. And Eshal nodded and she felt homesick but at the same time she felt like she never ever wanted to go home again.

And she watched Anwar and Mrs Bhandari get in their car and turn out of the car park onto the dual carriageway and she thought to herself, bloody hell, I've only gone and done it,

haven't I, and that's when she screamed. And it was a loud and long scream, the kind that makes your teeth vibrate and your tongue taste blood. Because she had been saving it up in her throat and her lungs and her diaphragm and her belly for years and years, ever since she was a little girl.

The long and the short of it is this:

When Keris picks me up in the car on Tuesday at midday, Eshal is in the back seat, and I say, how the hell did you manage that, my voice brimming over, and she grins at me and says, I have my ways.

It turns out not to be that mysterious at all: she just got the train from Farnborough this morning, knowing my appointment time and knowing Keris was going to drive me to Brixton, and decided she would tag along. She holds my hand as she tells me, and I'm so grateful and ashamed, my best friend who will do something so big and scary and life changing and then dust herself off to help me do the same.

It's one of the last days of summer. But smells of barbecue and traffic fumes and hot concrete still thicken the air outside of the car as we drive slowly through the South London traffic towards the Marie Stopes clinic on Brixton Hill, and inside the car none of us mentions how strong the smell of sour milk is.

Inside the clinic, my appointment doesn't take more than five minutes. I'm called into a different consultation room to the one I was in yesterday, one that looks much more like a normal doctor's office. There is a big bay window with blooming flower boxes on the ledge. The sun pours in and lights up every corner of the room. Outside, in the car park, I can see Eshal and Keris sitting on the steps sharing a cigarette.

The doctor, a man whose name I don't ask for, checks my forms again and asks me a few more questions about my medical history. Eventually, he takes a paper prescription bag from his desk, with my name printed on a little sticker on the side of it, and from it he hands me a blister pack. He explains that I must hold the tablets in my mouth until they completely dissolve. He gives me a small card with some telephone numbers on it in case I have any questions or something goes wrong. He asks me if I would like to be contacted with information about Marie Stopes' counselling services. I tell him no. He asks me to take the tablets in front of him and then that's it. I'm done.

I leave the consultation room, through the waiting room where the other women are sitting, all waiting patiently to be called forward to collect their abortion. I'm surprised by how many of them have got men with them: husbands or boyfriends, I'm guessing. I wonder how Boy would react to this place. I've got the pill pushed up inside my mouth between the gums of my molars and the inside of my cheek. I can already feel it disintegrating into my saliva.

None of the women look like me. Most of them are much skinnier. Nearly all of them look older. I'm wearing a denim skirt which is a size too small for me. All of the skin around my fingernails has been chewed up and it's hot and raw-red and sore. I have six sanitary towels stuffed into my knickers. I have a sweat mark in the shape of an upside down triangle on the back of my t-shirt.

I step out the front doors of the clinic. It's housed in what looks like a big Victorian mansion from the outside, all white pillars and fancy windowsills. Eshal and Keris are still on the steps waiting for me.

All done?

I nod.

All right?

I nod again and croak out a smile.

We wander through the big iron gates and onto the streets. I try to manoeuvre my feet so that I'm not touching the cracks in the smooth slabs of pavement.

Keris and Eshal keep the mood light. Talking about gigs they've been to at Brixton Academy and the stuff they've bought at the shops around here. The pill is almost totally gone now, grainy and eroded against my teeth. It has been a two-hour car journey for a five minute in-and-out job. Five minutes, two pills, and that's it.

Keris has parked in a little private car park behind a block of flats.

And it feels like someone is stamping on my stomach, trying to push it out through my birth canal and my throat simultaneously. It stuns me and I pause for a moment in our walk. I clutch at my stomach involuntarily. The second pill is gone from the edges of my teeth.

Bess...?

Esh has realised what's happening and turns around.

I look up at them, half-bent against a wall. A dribble of sweat slides down my back.

I'm going to be sick.

Even as I'm saying it the bile is rising through my throat and projectile-ing in a crescent fountain onto the pavement, like some elaborate performance art piece. A woman with four kids hurries her offspring past me, stepping around the puddle I've just spattered all over the floor.

Just been to the clinic? she sneers as she prances delicately over my vom.

Eat shit, Eshal spits back.

I'm gasping for breath as I feel the second wave brewing. I had a tomato and mozzarella panini for lunch. In the delicatessen by the train station. We had some time to kill before the abortion.

My thoughts amalgamate images of mozzarella cheese, the bitchy mum eating actual shit and the trickles of sweat now sliding into my bum crack, and another wave of chunder comes out.

Eshal says, Bess... not being funny, but there's no way we're driving you home like this. My nursing capacity only goes so far.

I look up at Keris.

Keris says, Let's just go and find a bowl or something. She can have that for the journey.

Fine. Let's get a bowl. There's a Tesco up this way.

I tell them, I don't think I can walk.

God, Eshal says, we'll wait here, then. You go, Keris. I'll wait.

And Keris is going. I look down at the chunks of congealed cheese decorating the concrete. There's nothing else for it. I sit on the ground. Then I lie down. And I hear Esh say, And *that*, kids, is why you don't have unprotected sex. Then I close my eyes and pretend to fall asleep.

A different woman walks past (I hear her shoes on the pavement) and asks me if I'm alright. Eshal is quiet, watching me nervously. I tell the woman that I am, opening one eyelid to acknowledge her. There is a man with her who looks angry and impatient, with his hand wrapped around her wrist, which I notice and think is weird, that, like, he is holding her wrist and not her hand, like people do with children. She is very tall. She has to bend all the way over to get her face near to mine, like she is folding herself up. A piece of paper only folds seven times before it can't fold anymore. No matter the size of the paper, it won't ever. I wonder if it's the same with the tall woman. She looks as though she can fold herself up more than seven times. And then I'm asleep and I am dreaming of the man who was holding onto her

wrist, and he is breaking all of her bones – her ribs, her collarbone, her legs – to fold her up and fold and fold and fold until she has all together disappeared.

Keris drives us home and I lie across the entire back seat, wishing that the car didn't smell so bad, that my eyes weren't so heavy, that the pads stuffed into my knickers weren't so uncomfortably damp and the cloying pain in my abdomen didn't exist. We have all the windows down because my whole body is covered in a thin sheen of fever-sweat. Later, I will sit on the toilet and watch between my pale thighs laced with shiny lilac stretch marks, as thick dark clots of blood fall out of me and turn the water pink. In the front of the car, Keris and Eshal say little but every now and again I feel a hand brush against mine, tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, stroke my forehead. The lightest touches.

Chapter 25

TWO YEARS LATER / August 2001

I'm standing in the lobby of one of the banking buildings in Churchill Square, Canary Wharf. The building is twenty or thirty stories high: the lobby itself is pristinely white: white marble walls and floors, with one stylishly backlit all-redwood concierge desk against the far wall, opposite the stationary revolving doors.

There are seven other people in the lobby with me, but none of them work here in this building. One of them is a woman in a crisp black suit jacket and white shirt, who sits behind the desk. She's wearing glasses and has her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She is typing at a computer. I watch her, my hand poised over a huge black dashboard of hundreds of buttons and levers all tiny and crammed in together. I hear the cue and gently pull a lever down on my console. The lights dim. The woman continues typing.

One of my colleagues shouts something and the lift shaft at the far end of the lobby pings. The shiny metal doors slide open slowly, and from it burst two gunmen, both in balaclavas that cover their faces apart from their eyes and mouths so they can see and breathe. They are both wearing military jackets, combat boots and leather fingerless gloves. The one on the left, whose name is Kevin, has a black duffle bag slung over his shoulder. The one on the right is Tanisha. Both are holding .44 Magnum revolver handguns, pointed at the receptionist. She stands up at the sight of them, her eyes and mouth big wide zeros. She holds her hands up. Kevin shouts at her: tells her to open the emergency exit and nobody gets hurt. I don't move: no one else in the room moves. The receptionist, whose name I have forgotten, reaches one hand down into the desk. She slams down on a button, and as she does I press three buttons on my own console at the same time. Instead of the emergency exit on the other side of the lobby swinging open to let the robbers out, a loud wailing noise fills the wide space,

bouncing off the walls, magnifying the volume inside all of the marble. The lights flash red. The receptionist screams back at them in incomprehensible, garbled tones, until eventually Tanisha discharges her weapon three times. Dark blood pools on the receptionist's shirt as she falls.

Then, the two gunmen freeze, mid-scene, and Greg – who is standing twelve feet away from them, against the West-facing wall where a small monitor and headphones have been set up – yells Cut!

Kevin and Tanisha both drop their gun arms, and Kevin walks around the other side of the desk to help the receptionist up from her death position on the floor. Still the alarm screeches and the lights keep flashing red, until Greg shouts can someone turn that bloody racket off? And one of the other interns, Becky, who is standing next to me, nudges me, and I remember where I am and what I'm doing, and I'm the one in charge of the racket. I quickly flick another switch on the console and the wailing stops. The lights go white.

Greg, who is the director, stays at the monitor for a few more seconds, watching something back on the screen. Kevin and Tanisha have pulled their balaclavas up over their faces and are chatting, both of them holding their prop guns loosely. A stylist wanders over to the actress playing the receptionist and re-adjusts her ponytail, which went squiffy when she fell to the ground. The rest of the crew chat among themselves while we wait for Greg's verdict on the scene. Becky has come back from the vending machine outside with two cans of coke. She hands one to me.

I tell her thanks in a stage whisper. She smiles at me. Becky isn't someone I would usually find myself hanging out with, enjoying the company of, but we were both assigned the same placement. She has an attitude that comes off as rude – why I initially avoided her at Basquiat – but really, she's like the most put-together person I know. I've never met anyone who knows exactly what she wants, as though she's *entitled* to it, even. We might never have become friends if we weren't both chosen to shadow on *Criminal Damage* as part of our work

experience for Basquiat – this cop drama miniseries – which Greg is hoping to sell to the BBC next year. Today is one of the last scenes we need to film, and then there might be a few days of re-shoots before Becky and I go back to school.

Greg tells us all to take ten minutes so Becky and I wander out of the lobby onto the manicured plaza, the canal running through the centre several feet below floor level. We sit on the edge of a flower box and share a cigarette. I met Becky on the first day I visited Basquiat, at my interview. I was waiting in the anteroom outside the main interview area and she walked past me straight into the room without even knocking.

And when it was my turn, after Becky had strutted out looking like she'd just won *Mastermind*, they told me that Shelly, my social worker, had to wait outside. The interview wasn't just for a place in the school, it was for the Samo Scholarship which not only waived tuition fees but also provided the winner with a pretty chunky maintenance grant, too. Shelly gave me an encouraging look, her face shiny, her pores pinpricks all over her nose and cheeks, and I went in.

The panellists were three teachers on the filmmaking diploma course. I know them all well now, but at the time they terrified me. They were scary because they were so *normal*. The head interviewer, Graham, wore a leather jacket and had his hair spiked up into a fauxhawk. Jack, the second interviewer, ended up being my personal advisor, something which every Basquiat student was assigned when they enrolled. The third examiner was a tall woman called Ange who had a different ring on every finger of her hands and hair exploding from the colourful wrap at her temples.

I took a seat at the desk opposite them. They welcomed me, offered me a glass of water or a cup of tea. I said no thank you. They asked me if I was ready to show my short film.

It had been difficult. I had my beloved camcorder that Riss gave me but no computer, and the ones at the library weren't even close to supporting video editing software. If I had to make a film for my application it would have to be one take, or so poorly stitched together that

it would be incomprehensible. Shelly saved me, as per. She had been asking me on her visits how my film was coming along, whether I had all footage I needed. I had it: a year's worth of interviews, long panned shots of the reservoir, the Pits, Chubb Tower and Heathrow Airport, the M3 cutting a scar through the farmers' fields.

Shelly pulled up in her car for one of our usual visits: normally she would pick me up and we would drive to a café or go for a walk. Instead of getting in her car, Shelly said, no, we're doing something a bit different today. And she asked me to follow her along the road, past the kids' park, until the neighbourhood stopped and the slopes of the reservoir started, up to the Studios gates, where there was always a guard on watch, and the barriers were closed unless a vehicle had to go through. Shelly knocked on the window of the little metal portacabin where the guard monitored the security cameras, and told the guard that we had an appointment with Angus in Building G. The guard asked us to wait in reception, and when Angus came down ten minutes later to greet us he seemed unsurprised that I was there.

You must be Bess, he said, shaking my hand, his smile showing all the good lines on his face.

Don't look so worried! There's nothing to be nervous about. We followed him out of reception and across the car park.

Angus led us to Building G – one of the big iron warehouses that I'd always thought was empty on the inside – and we followed him up a flight of stairs, along a broad, bright corridor and through a door into what turned out to be an editing suite. I stopped in the doorway, assessing the equipment. The room was large and softly-lit with spotlights bordering the ceiling: bigger than the floorplan of our house, with state-of-the-art Apple Macs lining the walls, each one paired with a wheelie desk chair. On one wall was a window with glass as thick as a tree trunk, and on the other side a soundproofed recording studio, decked out with all kinds of microphones, a drum kit and music stands clustered neatly into one corner.

Do you know we edited *101 Dalmatians* in this room? Angus asked me. I stared at him, too awe-struck to trust myself to speak coherently. I didn't know.

I sat down on one of the wheelie chairs and let it swing slowly from side to side like a pendulum. I placed my hands on the cracked leather armrests and felt the texture of them with my fingertips. Shelly was smiling. She checked again whether I brought my footage with me. I did. It was all on tapes from my camcorder, in a plastic bag, all carefully labeled. I showed Angus.

Angus said, Yeah, these will work.

I asked Shelly what was going on. Angus said I could use the suite for two hours every Monday evening and any time on Sundays as long as I gave advanced notice so he could leave a key for me at reception.

I stared at him, unsure what to say, and then when the quiet was too unbearable – the soundproofed walls pressing the silence into us – I said, too loudly, are you *serious*? And he laughed and said yeah, of course.

Shelly explained that Angus was a video editor – nothing too fancy, just adverts and occasionally some pilot episodes for TV shows – and he was based here at the Studios. They knew each other from uni, she said. Used to be in a band together. Experimental blues rock. Liked to think of themselves as Guildford's answer to Fleetwood Mac. He was the manager of this editing suite, in fact, and when Shelly mentioned that I needed somewhere to edit my Basquiat film he offered to let me use the equipment.

And that was that. Every Monday evening I went to see Angus and he taught me how to use the Mac and the Adobe software– the same stuff Basquiat used in classes on the filmmaking course. He showed me how to feed the tapes into the machine so the footage was copied digitally, and how to import clips into the editing software, adjust sound levels, trim and splice film, cut between clips, add music and make opening and closing credits. It was incredible. And then, when it was ready, Angus put it onto three discs for me – one for me,

one for Eshal and one to go in the post with my Basquiat application. I didn't ever want to leave.

Except for when I was in the interview room and watching the three examiners as they watched my film. I didn't need to watch it too: I'd seen it a thousand times while I was putting it together with Angus, and a thousand more watching it over and over and over on our DVD Player at home. I knew every word of it – all Eshal's words – by heart.

Here's my film: it's Eshal.

Eshal in her bedroom, telling me about all the birds she can name, their English names and their Latin names, and sometimes their Bangla names too, if they have one. Eshal sitting at the table in her dining room, eating spiced food with her hands, like her family does. Eshal in the bathroom, scrubbing the tips of her fingers with a soapy brush until the skin is raw and damaged. Eshal in the park, smoking a spliff, her hair splayed out in an arc, like a star about to go into supernova, the darkest black but also white because the sun is in it too. Eshal having hushed conversations on the phone. Eshal packing her things into a bin bag. Her bird books. Her painted fingernails (sunburst orange), her wardrobe with headscarves folded neatly on the top shelf, her Qur'an there too, on top of them all. Eshal in a hotel room, telling me about how when she was nine she got stuck in a tree at Laleham Park and her father, who had had problems with his back and hips for many years after a life's worth of manual labour, climbing the smooth trunk with bare feet, to come and collect her, covering her eyes so that she wasn't scared when he passed her down to her mother from the lowest hanging branch. Stories of how her mother came to England hoping to become a typist, after being the most accomplished student at her Bangladeshi college, and finding that no white man wanted a Paki working for him. Having children instead because there was so much this country refused her. Eshal explaining how, for such a long time, she was ashamed that she was brown, but guilty when she tried not to be. That she hated her family and her religion because it made her different from everyone else. That she was not one and not the other, not good enough for either of the two. Eshal praying with the other girls in the hotel, their heads covered, their

faces low, their hands flat against the ground. Later, more recently, Eshal moving out of the hotel, her social worker driving her to a new place, which is really just a pokey little council flat near her college in Basingstoke, but it's a college for vets, and there are birds. All the birds she'll ever need.

The DVD finished and the TV screen returned to its fuzzy blue. Ange, the woman with all the rings, took the disc out of the player and handed it back to me. I slid it into its protective clear plastic sleeve. We were silent as we waited for her to return to her seat.

Well, I'm sorry, she said as she sat down, but don't you think that it's all a bit exploitative?

I said, Pardon? Because I must have misheard her.

Then Jack said, oh, come on, Ange. That's a bit harsh, isn't it? And I knew that I had heard her correctly.

Are you serious? This is the epitome of the white lens. Oh look, poor little Muslim girl, forced into poverty because her father arranged her marriage. Aren't they so oppressed? Give me a break.

Jack was shaking his head vigorously. No. No, I think you're missing the point.

I'm not missing the point. You know as well as I that this girl – and she threw a flat hand in my direction – has no bloody clue about what the subject of her documentary has experienced. It's white saviour complex to the extreme. It's so self-indulgent. This is *exactly* what's wrong with Western filmmaking. It makes crap like this and thinks it's doing the world a service.

Graham, his fauxhawk quivering, interrupted, we ought to remember that this is an assessment, Ange. He glanced apologetically at me.

Can I offer an explanation? I asked, my hands fluttering against my knees, my face warm.

You can try, Ange said.

I don't think it's fair to say I have no clue what Esh experienced. She's my best friend of five years. I talk to her every day. I'm more inside her head than she is, most of the time, and vice versa. When all of this was happening – and it *did* happen, by the way – I was there with her. It was *her* idea to do the interviews because she thought it might help someone else. Everything she said and did was *her*. None of it was staged for the camera. She saw many, many versions of this film and had final say on it before I sent it to you. And as for the white lens thing... well, maybe that's true. It's not for me to say. All I know is that I wanted to show what happened to my friend exactly as it happened, without prejudice, because I think it's an important story. And I think it might help someone. That's it, really. Thanks for your time.

Six tense weeks of waiting later, I got a phone call at home from Graham and he told me that after a long deliberation process I had been chosen to receive the scholarship and I was being offered a position on the filmmaking course. I thanked him in a daze.

What's the matter? He asked me. You don't sound as excited as I thought you would.

I'm just a bit confused, I told him. I thought you hated me. Well, Ange hated me, at least.

Graham took a long time to respond. She hated your film because it cements everything we try to combat on our course, about telling nuanced and thoughtful stories without preaching or passing judgement.

So why did you pick me?

Because, Graham said, out of all of the candidates, your film was the only one that incited such a visceral response from the panel. To be a filmographer you need to have guts, and you need to be prepared for criticism, and unafraid to break moulds. You have all those things. You gave us something to think about.

I hung up the phone with a grin plastered across my face. Mum was in the garden digging up weeds. I came out onto the patio and watched as she tried to dislodge a stubborn crawler, roots and all, from the flowerbed at the edge of the back fence. She was wearing yellow gloves and they were covered in dirt. She still didn't like to look me in the face when we spoke to each other. The sky was big and bright and open.

By the time we arrived back home in Keris's car I was fast asleep on the back seat, a dull pain, like an ancient injury, throbbing in my lower abdomen, my clothes soaked in sweat. Keris shook me awake. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the Stage H building looming above us. I felt unsteady on my feet as I got out of the car and Eshal asked quietly if I wanted her to come in with me and I looked up and saw that Lisa was standing at the window watching me.

And I said to her, no, don't worry. And she looked like she was going to argue but Keris said, come on, I'll drive you home. And Eshal got in the car and they waited there to make sure I got the front door open and then they drove away.

She was in the kitchen, her hair falling in waves across her face, a mask, the palms of her hands placed flat against the countertop and I thought to myself that even though she is a tall woman at this moment she looked so small.

And she said to me, what have you done, and I couldn't answer her, mainly because the pain had become more intense as I was standing up, and I didn't know whether I could say the words without choking.

She said, what did you do? And then, you've done it, haven't you? Maybe she could smell it on me, the blood, the lacking, and then the look on my face must have told her what she already knew and I think somewhere, outside, through the open door, in someone's back garden there was a dog barking and I thought I was imagining it because she was screaming and I couldn't quite hear, and I had the sensation that I was spinning around faster and faster

and faster until I couldn't see anything clearly anymore. But with everything blurred around the edges, like I was looking through a camera lens, still I saw the way her face was crumpled, like an old piece of paper, her mouth an upside-down capital D, every line on her face another fold, and she let herself slip to the floor, the wailing, the noise of her hovering around us like death, and I said to her, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Mum, I'm so sorry. But the truth is, I'm not sorry. Not one bit.

Becky and I have finished our cigarettes and one of the lighting assistants has come out onto the patio to tell us that Greg has wrapped it up for the day. We've got two more days of filming in this location and then, I don't know, maybe we're back at school to finish the final year of the diploma, or maybe they'll ask us to come to help with the re-shoots and some post-production stuff. Maybe they'll offer us a more permanent position. We might get to travel. I like the uncertainty of it, though. I've found that I much prefer the editing than the more glorifying work like assisting the director or camera operation. I like looking at the material and manipulating it into something meaningful and beautiful and everlasting. Sometimes I wonder what will be left of me when I die. Now I know. I'm going to make films – not dumb made-for-TV cop dramas, but stuff that will make a difference to people – and the films will live forever.

Becky and I get our coats and rucksacks from the lobby and say goodbye to the crew. We walk along Churchill Square to the tube station entrance and take the Jubilee line and then the Northern line to Archway. We both live in the same building, and have done for the two years we have been studying at Basquiat. It's on the same road as the school, and the house is owned by the same foundation that owns nearly all the buildings on this road. Outside, our townhouse looks narrow and claustrophobic. But inside, there are enough bedrooms to comfortably sleep twelve, and the spaces are big, echoey, airy, bright. All wooden floors and gaping fireplaces. I like it here.

I live on the top floor of the building: an attic room with slanting walls for the roof. It gets cold in the winter but today it's balmy, and the late summer sunlight streams in through my window. I pull the window wide open and sit on the ledge to smoke. Three stories below, one of my housemates is in the garden trying to light a disposable barbecue. His name is Charlie; he's a sound engineering student a year below me, a fresher. He looks up and spots me on the window ledge and waves. I wave back. Next year I will finish my Basquiat course and I'll have to think about university or getting a job. I've seen some undergraduate degrees I like the look of, but most of them are in far-flung places like Wales and East Anglia. I've decided I like London. I like the way the shops mishmash together and how all the houses line up in pretty rows but still manage to look like puzzle pieces that don't make a complete picture. I like how green it is: no one thinks about the greenness of the city, but it's here: you've just got to look for it. I like the tube, all the history of it. The tube stations, each one so completely different, each one like a time capsule. I like to watch the people on their journeys, wonder where they're all going, what kind of life they're living. The colour of their socks. The position they sleep in when they're in bed. How much they love their mother, their children. It took me a long time to realise why it always seemed so quiet in the mornings compared to Shepperton, even though in Shepperton I lived next to the woods and here I live on a busy road. One morning, when I first got here, and when my fingers still ached with something lost, I opened the window and breathed in the dusty sun of the morning. Beyond the back fence was a little patch of greenery where the neighbourhood kids sometimes went to play, with three large oak trees, one in each corner. The silence was complete, even though the noise of the city thrummed through the house. It was so quiet to me because inside those trees there was not a single parakeet.

Chapter 26

Sometimes I wonder to myself whether, two years later, there's ever been a day gone by that I haven't thought about what happened. That I have no sensation, in the middle of some mundane task, of how my life could be different now. In some other universe I am in Shepperton, or maybe somewhere else, a mother. How my child would be walking now, would be starting nursery, would be a boy or a girl. I wanted a girl for so long and then I changed my mind after the abortion (thinking, sometimes, when half asleep, that it had never happened) because a boy would have an easy life in comparison, especially with my history of mothers. Especially with my history as a daughter.

Sometimes there are moments when it catches me off guard. I'm in the editing suite at Basquiat, in a lecture, working a shift at the stationary shop in Crouch End High Street, eating chips on the way home from somewhere on the tube. And I see something that makes me think of it. There are these adverts now asking for people to volunteer to be egg donors to infertile couples. Or the smell of a car exhaust in the afternoon when it's hot in the shade, or how soapy water feels on my dry hands when washing dishes. Sometimes the shape or colour of something. And it hits me like a train: and I forget to breathe for a moment, and when it's over it feels as though I am empty, and my arms have nothing to do except be attached to either side of my body.

And then it subsides and as it's gotten farther away in time it feels farther away in distance too. I can't recall the nuances of my emotions. I don't remember the places I reached inside myself to get it done. I can't imagine ever reaching for those parts of myself again.

I do go back, sometimes. Shepperton hasn't changed much. By the river, no one's bothered to clean the graffiti heart that Esh and I spray-painted on the wall. They're going to knock down The Crossroads and replace it with a retirement home and call it Ballard House. The last time

I went into the Crossroads, a few weeks ago, I saw that the writing on the toilet wall, which says BESS JOHNSON GOT NOCKED UP is still there, faded, but legible. I've thought about trying to get it off with nail polish remover or something but then I think what does it matter. No one here knows who I am anymore. Except Esh and Mum and Rory and Riss and Manor Park Jesus, who I think is back in jail anyway. I like thinking about the toilets being bulldozed, along with the rest of the pub, and the writing on the cubicle door being pulverized by a wood mulcher.

Eshal comes home too, sometimes, to visit her parents. Her dad doesn't look her in the eye in the same way Lisa refuses to look in mine. She pretends that she does. But I can tell. She focuses on the corners of them, or the bridge of my nose.

Clarissa hangs out with us sometimes. She's fourteen now. She's a straight-A student. She'll probably end up going to Oxford or Cambridge. She says, Bess, Jesus, I am so desperate to get out of here. And it makes me want to cry. How right she was all along.

Shelly is still my social worker, miraculously, and when she visits we talk about what I'm going to do next. I have savings. I'm going to try and find a film job in London or maybe apply to Goldsmiths in South East London and rent a flat or a bedsit or a room, whatever I can get. I wonder about the possibility of coming back but then there's the way that when I visit at Christmas if our hands brush while eating at the dinner table, she flinches hers away like I'm burning her skin.

Shelly asked me if I wanted to meet Amanda again, after I first told her what had happened when I turned up at her house. I told her I didn't want to, and I thought she would argue with me. I asked her whether she thought I owed Amanda an apology and she said, coming so close to me that I could see all the pores on her nose, her eyes serious, Bess, you don't owe that woman a single thing. A single thing. I promise you that. And then she told me that the word 'progenitor' is an excellent word for a parent who doesn't deserve the title of 'mum' or 'dad', and she looked so angry about it all that I almost laughed, but in a good way.

One time I'm here in Shepperton because it's Clarissa's birthday: nothing much to it except for a forced meal and a visit from Uncle Jason, who is the only one who truly doesn't look at me any differently. Probably because he doesn't know, to be honest. We have just seen *Fight Club* for the first time and it's all either of us can talk about, so it's easy to pretend that things are okay. Rory picks me up from the train station. We go to eat at the Twynersh and I remember the glass of milk Mum tried to make me drink. The cutlery is the same feeling in my hands. The grain of the wood on the tabletop. I stay overnight in my bedroom, but it doesn't feel like my bedroom any more. They've re-decorated. All my posters are gone. My stereo, everything non-essential that I couldn't take to Crouch End. The same weekend, when I walk to the High Street for cigarettes, I imagine the shape of my feet in the concrete on the pavement, my footsteps fossilized many times over in the paving slabs, and now when I walk I'm imprinting new ones on top of thousands of old ones.

In the corner shop I buy my cigarettes and when I turn around he's standing there, having already spotted me, watching me.

I'm the age now that he was when we first met. Clarissa is nearly the age that I was. That thought makes my stomach curl.

He says, Bess, and I wonder whether I can run away. He is thinner than he was when I saw him last, two years ago. Gaunt, even.

How are you doing? He asks me, his hands linked together so his knuckles stick out white.

Let's go outside, I tell him, looking at the cashier.

We go out onto the pavement on the main road. I let him hug me, compromise with one hand on his shoulder blade, brief, and I don't feel anything.

He asks me how I am again and I tell him, in as little detail as I can manage, about school at Basquiat. Moving to London. He says, yeah, I always figured you'd end up at art

school, and he says it in a way like he's mad about it, and I think to myself since when did you *always think* about anything in relation to me. He says, you know education is bullshit, right? You can learn everything you need to know in life out in the real world. I fix him with a look, not biting. Not sure whether he's baiting me or he's just really fucking stupid. Maybe both. I ask him what he's doing now, just to be polite, and he kind of shrugs and looks away and says oh, you know. Same old. Tesco and that. He doesn't tell me about the suspended sentence he got – two years – which I heard about from Keris because we talk from time to time. That she threw him out after he fucked up another car (stolen). And that he has an ankle bracelet.

He says, well, actually, I've been doing a lot of reading recently.

Really? Reading?

You don't have to sound so surprised. Yeah... mostly self-help stuff, right? Buddhism. That kind of thing.

I nod, not trusting myself to say anything.

It's made me think, actually, about... you know. What happened.

He leans against the brick wall.

I watch him as he says this. He's looking down at his hands. His hair, which is long again, falls over his face. He peeks up at me through it. I don't look away because, I realise, I'm not feeling anything at all. Nothing, except mild distaste for the way his eyes are a little gunky with sleep.

I wait for him to keep talking and when he doesn't, I tell him, you know what, you've clearly got something to say, Boy, so how about you say it.

The road is busy with Saturday traffic. A bus drives past, its exhaust leaving behind thin grey fumes clouding the space between us. I wave them away from my face. Boy says, why don't we go somewhere? The Pits? Pub? This isn't a good place to talk, is it?

He looks nervous. Sheepish. Guilty. Ashamed. His hands now in his pockets. Still not looking at me properly. I turn around and see the car he's pointing to, inviting me into. Another banged up Ford: a Fiesta with dents in the doors and on the bumper. There is a sun-shaped air freshener dangling from the rear-view mirror.

I say to him, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm not going anywhere with you.

But you do, he says quickly. You do mean to be rude.

His skin is milky. His beard stubble patchy, his lips dry. I try to remember how he looked when we met, whether he's all that different now.

I say, I'm sorry if this isn't what you expected, but I can't think of a single thing to say to you. Except maybe... I don't know. I don't blame you, I suppose. You don't have to hold yourself accountable. I absolve you.

You don't *blame* me? *You* don't blame me? You've got some front, Bess. Let's not forget what you did.

I'm about to leave, to walk back towards the church, but I stop and ask him, what exactly did I do?

You know.

No, I don't. Please enlighten me.

You *aborted our child*.

I stop because I have this feeling like someone has just punched me in the stomach, and it's unlike the feeling of abortion, and I remember something I haven't thought about for a long time, which is sitting on the toilet in the upstairs bathroom and feeling, watching blood fall rather than pour out of me. Thick almost-black clots of it. My underwear and the sanitary towels in them saturated with more blood. My wrists bony for the first time in my life. Wondering whether one of those blood clots coming out of me might be the foetus. Sometimes I still dream

about it, I realise, but I wake up not knowing what I've dreamt, just feeling this same sensation of tight, burning injury in my abdomen. And now I know. Now I know.

I say to him, I understand what you're doing. You're trying to see the bad in me to stop yourself from seeing the bad in you. But it's alright, Boy. Because I see the bad, all of it, in you. I see what you did. You were an adult, right? Maybe not in your mind – but you were, trust me – and I was a kid. I was barely fifteen. You got me pregnant. That last night at your house. You *knew* I didn't want to. You knew it. You're not stupid. But you went ahead with it anyway, because you knew I would never tell you to stop. You think I forgot about that? You think I didn't realise, like I *didn't realise* you robbed eight hundred quid out of my bedroom? You know exactly what you were doing, that it wasn't okay. The thing is, it doesn't get to me now. I look at you and, well, I feel sorry for you.

Boy's mouth is opening and closing and opening again. And I feel my veins thrumming with fear and power and I feel my eyes and my heart singing, and my fingertips fizzing like I just missed a step on the stairs. And I'm so desperate to hit him. To call the police. To spit on him. To scratch at his skin until the bone is exposed. But I back away, my arms folded, protecting my body.

Was that everything? I ask him. And when he says nothing, I say, I'm expecting that money back some day, Boy. He just watches me as though he's afraid of me, too, and I realise that yes, he is afraid. Maybe he always was. And I turn away from him, thinking my hair is longer than it used to be, like his, it almost reaches the bottom of my shoulder blades, and across the road the church chimes two o'clock.

That evening Eshal texts me and we meet at the train station, because she is home too. We walk up to Manor Park, the sun almost ready to dip below the trees, and we sit by the river and on the other side the tire swing goes back and forth with the breeze. The river is black, reflecting light in its ripples, and my bones feel soft, and Eshal's bones do too, I can tell, so

we lie in the grass with the daisies and the dandelions. I've got one more year at Basquiat because it's a three-year course but Eshal has just started her first year of her veterinary degree at the RVC in Hertfordshire. She's wearing her hijab again, and sometimes when we are together and she prays, I pray with her too. And I don't know who I'm praying to, really. Maybe it's God. Maybe it's Allah, if he's even a different person, or Buddha or Mother Nature or Mary Magdalene. Sometimes when I'm home and the silence in the house is oppressive, I go to church and pray. I don't know if I believe that anyone is listening but it feels good all the same.

During the holidays, if Clarissa is busy, I go and stay with Esh at her halls of residence at the university, or she comes to Crouch End for a few nights, and we go for walks and cook and watch bad TV, and we are so happy and safe and I know with my whole body that we'll be together forever.

She points the birds out to me on the riverbank; the big white manor house still white even as the light fades. The names of the birds I know and the ones I don't. She is much better at identifying them now, and she was good at it before. They'll be breeding soon, she says. Laying eggs. Having babies. And we lie in the grass and talk about everything in the world and nothing at all, all at once, my hand in hers, a second pair of eyes at the back of our heads, the skin on the palms of our hands calloused but not broken.

End.

Critical reflection

Representations of care-experienced children in contemporary British fiction

1.0 Introduction

The Hatchling examines the many contradictions of adolescent girlhood and tells a story of the resilience and persistence of female friendship against all odds. At the centre of the creative work is Bess, a girl living in foster care who falls pregnant at age fifteen. The story follows Bess, as she considers whether to abort her pregnancy, and her friend Eshal, who is at odds with her parents over their intention to send her to Bangladesh for an arranged marriage. Both girls are resisting the expectations set out for them by their families. Through the novel, my goal is to offer a story that centres the care experience, using narratives of hope, aspiration and ultimately achievement. In this critical reflection, I will investigate the representation of so-called 'poor outcomes' among care-experienced people (C.E.P.s). I will explore representations of foster care in modern fiction across children's, young adult (Y.A.) and adult readerships, with the aim of understanding how these representations re-enforce or subvert traditional public perceptions of looked-after children.²

It is a fact that children who have spent time in institutional care are more likely to experience 'poor outcomes' in later life. Gibbons *et al.* note the increased likelihood of 'neurobiological impairments and difficulties in regulating behaviour and emotions' in looked-after children 'due to complex developmental trauma' (2019: 414). Children in care tend to have experienced 'multiple chronic traumatic events, often at a very early age and within their personal caregiving environment' (*ibid.*); two-thirds of looked-after children have been exposed to 'negative family circumstances' including domestic violence, parental mental illness and substance abuse. Thus, there are a variety of 'emotional and behavioural problems'

² 'Looked-after' is used to describe children placed into local authority or institutional care, such as kinship care, residential foster care, as well as orphanages and juvenile detention centres.

one would expect that children in ‘public care’ might experience due to exposure to this kind of trauma at a young age (Dregan and Gulliford, 2012: 1517-1518). Dregan and Gulliford measured adult life trajectories based on a series of ‘poor outcomes’, characterised as the following:

Poor emotional outcomes	Poor behavioural outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression • Life dissatisfaction • Low self-efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol abuse • Smoking • Drug abuse • Criminal convictions

Table 1: ‘poor outcomes’ in adult life trajectories among care-experienced people (Dregan and Gulliford, *ibid.*)

Other indicators of ‘poor outcomes’ include such factors as the individual’s level of education, economic security, and presence of symptoms of P.T.S.D. (Rebbe *et al.*, 2017: 109-111). Overwhelmingly, ‘children who experience public care, including fostering and residential care, are at increased risk of impaired adult emotional and behavioural outcomes’ (Dregan and Gulliford, *ibid.*: 1523).

Additional research across the social sciences confirms that children who are placed into public care due to ‘adverse childhood experiences’ such as abuse and neglect (Turney and Wildeman, 2017: 117-129) or ‘high rates of exposure to traumatic events and stressors’ (Rebbe *et al.*, *ibid.*: 109) are significantly more likely to develop ‘poor outcomes’ in adulthood. This is summarised by Carolyn Gaskell in her qualitative study of care leavers’ experiences:

Looked-after children often begin their lives in some of the most disadvantaged families from the most excluded social groups. Family breakdown, parental poverty, low parental support and maltreatment are all linked to adulthood including mental ill health, criminality and homelessness [...] Therefore, it is not the care system alone

that creates poor outcomes for care leavers. Poor outcomes are instead a culmination of childhood difficulties that the care system often fails to address and rectify. Children commonly enter the care system with a history of both damaged and damaging relationships. Children enter the care system following a breakdown in their care; the implications can include damaged attachment patterns and emotional vulnerability. (Gaskell, 2010: 137)

I propose that through fiction, one may examine typical representations of children in care in relation to 'poor outcomes', with the view that these representations are symptomatic of wider public opinion about C.E.P.s. The typecasting of children in care as problematic and destined for 'poor outcomes' begins in the child's early life and continues into adulthood, and is entrenched in the care system itself.³ The question of whether this typecasting is also present in modern fiction will be examined in this thesis.

Through interviews with care leavers, Gaskell identifies 'a real need for the care system to provide the consistency and support of aspiration previously lacking within the family' (*ibid.*: 143). One of her interviewees, reflecting on poor educational outcomes, comments that: 'People need to have higher expectations for kids in care. If I'd had a really strong person

³ The notion that some later-life outcomes are 'poor' and connotationally less desirable than others is also problematic in that it fails to articulate the nuances of the lived reality of many care-experienced people: that some 'poor outcomes' are unavoidable, and CEPs are often subject to 'poor outcomes' that are beyond their control and cannot be held responsible for them.

behind me pushing, pushing, I wouldn't be where I am now' (*ibid.*).⁴ Another respondent comments that local authority support workers 'twist what you're saying. They turn it all round. They make out you're lying, that you're making things up' (*ibid.*: 142). Both responses speak to a lack of trust between looked-after children and local authority figures, and lack of the support that might otherwise enable looked-after children to achieve aspirational goals. The latter comment is particularly troubling because it suggests that the local authority figure described is pre-disposed to distrust a child in care; to label them a liar. Both examples implicitly describe a hegemonic culture of low expectations for care leavers *inside the care system*, proselytised by the professionals whose roles are to support these vulnerable children; and the perception that care leavers are already so damaged that there is no point in supporting them in any aspirational activities, as they will surely fail. The social stigma of looked-after children as difficult, untrustworthy and/or behaviourally problematic begins inside the care system and is perpetuated by care professionals and carers. It is this received wisdom that *The Hatchling* seeks to challenge through the character of Bess. The critical reflection portion of this thesis will examine how some works of modern British fiction across the canon have engaged with the statistical fact of increased 'poor outcomes' in later life among C.E.P.s and the corresponding widespread negative public opinion of, and low expectations for, looked-after children and care leavers.

⁴ In *The Hatchling*, the protagonist and narrator Bess, a care-experienced character, often reflects on attitudes towards her as a C.E.P., noting that she is expected to be 'difficult' and a 'problem child' by the mere fact of her being in care. She describes being sent to 'a group home with a padded 'quiet room' and locks on the fridges, and all the house parents had training on how to restrain a child without being accused of sexual assault' (*The Hatchling*: 123) so her foster parents can go on holiday. Respite care is designed to give foster carers a 'break' from 'difficult children' but often reinforces low expectations of children in care, and the problematic stereotype that *all* are 'difficult' and must live institutionally to 'protect' the public. In May 2019, residents in Stoke on Trent signed a petition opposing the establishing of a new children's home in the local area, stating that '[t]roubled teenagers who will all need a locked bedroom door' living nearby made them 'feel vulnerable to the potential of [...] anti-social behaviour' (Jackson, 2019).

The novel is a work of autoethnographic fiction stemming from my own experiences growing up in foster care. Being brought up institutionally led me to examine the nature of 'care', specifically female-centric care and what is meant by it, in my own work. *The Hatchling* is an examination of the question of care through the lens of the adolescent female experience, and what it means to care for someone. To what extent are relationships between non-biologically related women overlooked in literature in favour of the biological mother-daughter care relationship? Research into how foster children and care-experienced people are represented *in fiction* is limited, with little scholarly work outside of the social sciences on these areas; this thesis is a necessary investigation into how care-experienced identities are constructed and re-constructed in literature, and how they may be altered in the future to improve public perceptions of care-experienced people.

With both the novel and the critical reflection portion of this thesis, I intend to demonstrate that popular culture largely misrepresents care-experienced people, particularly those with complex and non-traditional relationships with their mothers, in harmful and derogatory ways. Overwhelmingly, looked-after children are destined for 'poor outcomes' or are otherwise mythologised as heroes (Dregan and Gulliford, *ibid.*; Sissay, 2016a). These representations are most pervasive in children's and Y.A. fiction but are also present in the adult canon, and are often linked to perceived inadequate maternal care, and the working-class experience. Literary representations are hegemonic. British novelist and memoirist Rachel Cusk describes the issue of motherhood, of 'children and who looks after them' as 'profoundly political' (2002: 5), while Jacqueline Rose notes that 'in so many moments of crisis, focus on mothers is a sure-fire diversionary tactic, not least because it so effectively deflects what might be far more disruptive forms of social critique' (2018: 27). Fiction is frequently political, written to both reflect contemporaneous society and critique it. In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields quotes Ross McElwee as follows: 'the most political thing I can do is try and render people's lives [in] a way that makes other people interested, empathetic, questioning, or even antipathetic to what they're seeing – but that somehow engages them to

look at life as it's really lived and react to it' (2011: 50). I will investigate portrayals of mothers in care-experienced fiction, how they are informed by biological-essentialist approaches to motherhood and the maternal, and how these in turn influence the representation of the care-experienced person – particularly the fictional character who grows up without their biological mother. Imogen Tyler invokes a Kristevan theorisation of the abject – 'ambiguous', 'repulsive' and 'unclean' entities that threaten 'identity, system and order' (Kristeva, 1982: 4) – and applies it to human beings operating inside contemporary neoliberal society: she characterises the socially abject in public consciousness as "wasted humans" [...] transformed into national abjects who are employed to legitimise neoliberal forms of governmentality', made so through media narratives and portrayals in popular culture (Tyler, 2013: 47). Neoliberalism, popularly summarised as being about individuals' 'rights and responsibilities' within society, increases state intervention in children's family life and consequently the 'technical exercise' of parenting (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014: 96). A neoliberal agenda which rewards productive labour, while penalising reproductive labour and other unwaged work through targeted fiscal policy-making, is particularly harmful to mothers and children, and therefore an important contextual ideological structure when investigating how looked-after children – those who exist outside of the neoliberal ideal – are treated within its frameworks (Woodward, 1997: 257). Tyler's theorisation of the socially abject in relation to neoliberal society seems most apposite as a foundational principle with which to investigate the questions posed in this thesis.

1.1 Issues of intended readership

My critical reflection will examine three key contemporary British texts which portray care-experienced characters across modern children's, Y.A. and adult literature in the UK: *The Story of Tracy Beaker* by Jacqueline Wilson (1991); *Solace of the Road* by Siobhan Dowd (2009); and *The Panopticon* by Jenni Fagan (2012). These texts represent a cross-section of modern British fiction dealing explicitly with care-experienced characters. Each example has been chosen for its portrayal of a young, female care-experienced character using such devices as characterisation, motifs, plotting, narrative voice, point of view and setting. These

devices also serve broader thematic links that are of interest to me and relevant to my own creative work, such as the portrayal of the maternal and representations of female friendship and other forms of female-centric care through the lens of the care experience. Through my analysis, and the application of critical literary theory to these novels, I seek to deconstruct representations of the care experience therein. Additionally, I will reflect upon my own work, discovering where my novel has subverted or reinforced expectations with regards to representations of the care experience and the maternal, drawing on creative writing theory and sociological studies on C.E.P.s. The novels discussed in this thesis may be understood collectively as part of an emerging care experience canon, which has previously been overlooked by mainstream publishing, academics and authors.

The level of care experience among the authors of these texts varies, with some authors like Jenni Fagan, author of *The Panopticon*, having grown up in institutional care, while others like Siobhan Dowd having worked with foster children in a professional capacity, while Jacqueline Wilson has had no known lived experience in or adjacent to the care system. Much of *The Hatchling* is informed by my own experience of foster care and the novel may form part of a larger canon that advocates for the necessity of 'Own Voices' narratives in fiction and the publishing industry more broadly.⁵ The issue of writing from experience in order to deliver nuance and veracity to representations of marginalised communities in fiction is one that I will discuss critically over the course of this exegesis.

While all the texts I have chosen for analysis have child or adolescent protagonists at the centres of their stories, the question of whom these novels target in terms of readership is a complicated one, and a tension that is also present in *The Hatchling*. Some of the novelists

⁵ The 'Own Voices' movement in publishing has become more prominent in the 2010s, with recent schemes such as Penguin Random House's WriteNow mentorship programme, launched in 2016, including care-experienced people as an under-represented group in the publishing industry (Wyatt, 2019; Penguin, n.d.).

discussed in the coming chapters, like Jacqueline Wilson and J. K. Rowling, are clearly identifiable as children's authors, while it is not immediately clear whether Siobhan Dowd's *Solace of the Road* or Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* are intended for a Y.A. or adult audience.⁶ Throughout the process of writing *The Hatchling*, the question of intended readership was persistent: while Bess is aged fourteen to sixteen over the course of the novel, the difficult themes of abuse, self-harm, sexual assault, unplanned pregnancy and abortion are arguably better understood by a more sophisticated, adult readership. In addition, the complexity of the language, the stream-of-consciousness narrative voice, the hyperrealist style of prose that tends towards the literary, and the explicit descriptions of sex and abortion, are arguably unsuitable for a Y.A. market in publishing terms. Adjacent to this, my intention in writing the novel was to use it as a means of catharsis and closure in relation to my own adolescent experiences of pregnancy, abortion and self-harm while in foster care. This lends the narrator Bess's voice a certain reflective quality, despite the present-tense narration, that is often lacking in comparable Y.A. works that deal with similar 'mature' issues like sexual assault and pregnancy, such as Non Pratt's *Trouble* (2014) and Louise O'Neill's *Asking for It* (2015). That is not to say that these novels are not 'serious' or commendable to adult readers, it is simply that they are more squarely aimed at a younger audience through a more simplistic and straightforward prose style, and a less probing narrative in terms of the issues addressed, designed to help readers develop a rudimentary morality on these issues rather than to critically interrogate them.

My intention with the novel is for it to be suitable for primarily an adult audience, but also a sophisticated teen or 'new adult' readership, termed as 'crossover fiction' in publishing. I believe it is necessary to examine in this critical reflection examples of all three categories – modern children's, Y.A. and adult fiction – that deal with the care experience. While my own novel arguably straddles the Y.A. and adult markets, representations of the care experience are often most commonplace in children's fiction, and often appear in disguise. It is in

⁶ Dowd's publisher lists the book as suitable for ages 12+ on its website (Penguin, 2015).

children's fiction that many children in foster care will first see themselves represented as young readers, and thus it is necessary to begin with children's fiction, to understand how key texts have shaped public perceptions of disrupted childhoods, starting with the youngest readers.

2.0 'Get rid of the parents': disrupted care in children's narratives

Keren David writes, 'Among the advice handed out to writers of children's books, "First get rid of the parents," is standard. [...] But what of the children whose birth parents are literally absent, for whom "get rid of the parents" was true at an early age?' (2015). Narratives of foster care and adoption are commonplace in children's fiction because they are an easily accessible way to develop tension and conflict among characters quickly. The nuclear family is a structure identifiable by all age groups, and any disruption of it is something that can be understood – often as negative or alien – by children and young adults through fiction. The absence of parents is a common trope, which extends beyond foster care and adoption to include dead parents and institutional care such as boarding schools, orphanages and, less commonly, juvenile detention centres. Removal of parental supervision opens a new world of possibility for fictional child protagonists, as well as inviting the reader into the protagonist's world, '[breaking] open the institution of the family to make a new cultural family, one that potentially includes the reader' (Mauk, 2017: 126). The trope serves as a popular inciting incident across the children's canon, as 'life-changing events [...] often disguised as bad news' (Snyder, 2005: 77). Lemn Sissay argues that the loss or absence of biological parents is such a common trope in fiction and popular culture because it is something that everyone can relate to, no matter their circumstances or social situation (2017). While Sissay sees absent parents as a source of trauma, others argue that, in children's fiction, the absence of parents can be a liberating experience for child protagonists, creating 'narrative situations in which child protagonists have greater agency than that typically experienced by implied readers' (Potter and Parsons, 2011: 119), as well as the author who, without parent characters restricting possibilities, 'has the freedom to let his or her imagination run wild' (Donahue, 2003). Absent parents can enable protagonists to develop an autonomy they would not otherwise have had access to if functioning under authority figures:

The predominance of orphaned heroes, boarding-school settings, and other mechanisms for distancing children from controlling parents all allow child characters

to test their mettle in the world. Protagonists are then available for adventures that require them to orchestrate their own success, enable them to master their own destinies, and give them the scope to move themselves toward greater maturity at the story's closure. (Potter and Parsons, *ibid.*: 119)

Early twentieth century fiction that deals with disrupted parenting is often framed by a call to adventure, as discussed by Potter and Parsons: the absence of parents gives children the liberty to explore. In J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905), the children are prone to constructing fantasy worlds through play; taking imaginative leaps which they would not otherwise be able to do in the controlling and rationalising presence of adults. While absent parents generally serve as a popular inciting incident across fiction, the specific absence of the mother – often in death – is over-represented in children's literature. Maternal absenteeism in children's literature forms part of a larger cultural trend, where 'there appears to be a reflex in mainstream popular visual culture to kill off the mother' (Astrom, 2015: 603). Henneburg argues that the absence or death of the mother in children's stories is significant because it 'undermines the mother figure, suggesting she is an obstacle for both feminist and patriarchal contenders for influence' (2010: 127). In classic European fairy tales, the dead mother is often replaced with the 'evil step-mother' character or even a witch – for example, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Hansel and Gretel*, (all Grimm and Grimm, 1857); and *The Little Mermaid* (Andersen, 1837). The death of the mother 'compels the hero to assume the mantle of maternal independence and responsibility to defend themselves and their community' (Mauk, *ibid.*: 125). The dead mother in fiction can be viewed simultaneously as both traumatic and liberating: her death sanctifies her and serves as an important motivator for the protagonist; it also allows the protagonist to become independent and pursue the adventures that are fundamental to the forward-trajectory of the plot. Thus, as Astrom notes, the mother is 'only important as a negation or as a "meaningful absence"' (Astrom, *ibid.*: 594). The death of Harry Potter's parents leads him to live in kinship care with his abusive aunt and uncle (Rowling, 1997), and ultimately gives him

the freedom he needs to pursue adventure at Hogwarts; but it is his mother who is repeatedly invoked throughout the series as a guiding moral force, a woman from whom Harry supposedly inherits his 'goodness' and by extension his heroism. In *The Bad Beginning* it is a fatal fire that kills their parents which leads the Baudelaire orphans to their abusive relative Count Olaf (Snicket, 1999). Katherine Rundell notes that '[o]rphans exert a gravitational pull on the world: they attract trouble and luck and magic. Without parents to protect you, enforce order and inflict grown-up priorities on a storyline, orphans are free to run wild and live large and daring lives' (2014). In *Northern Lights* (Pullman, 1995), Lyra's institutional care at Oxford University gives her the freedom to explore the city uninterrupted and eventually set off on her own adventure into the Arctic.⁷ While these characters are orphans, or believe themselves to be orphans for much of the stories, there remain several surrogate parents, carers and guardians who serve frequently as antagonistic forces and obstacles to adventure. In each case, the child protagonists' behaviours are 'policed' by adults who see the children's behaviour as problematic or abject. Disrupted childhoods in children's fiction are overwhelmingly represented as symptomatic of disrupted parenting, and the physically or emotionally absent mother (Henneburg, *ibid.*). There is a sense, particularly in relation to children living in foster

⁷ In these narratives, some children are subject to the stigma of expected poor outcomes – for example Harry at the hands of his aunt and uncle – but are rarely subject to them in the same way fictional children who are placed in foster care must endure them. Tracy Beaker, of Jacqueline Wilson's *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991), arguably one of the UK's most famous fictional foster children in contemporary times, is invariably labelled as a liar, troublemaker, and a difficult child by various adults around her: from her foster carer to her social worker and other adults working in her residential placement (see Chapter 3). While middle-class children like Harry Potter, James Trotter (*James and the Giant Peach* [Dahl, 1961]), Sara Crewe (*A Little Princess* [Hodgson Burnett, 1905]), Lyra Belacqua and the Baudelaires are placed in foster care, the term is never used in relation to their living situations. For example, the Baudelaires' various foster carers are invariably described in euphemistic terms as 'guardians'. The stigma attached to the language of foster care is so great that it cannot be associated with middle-class children in non-traditional family situations.

care and kinship care, that those children are destined for 'poor outcomes'; for pre-determined failure in later life.

2.1 Harry Potter, Tom Riddle, and a mother's love

The link between child outcomes and maternal care is of course cemented in centuries-old gender typing developed through the assimilation of patriarchy in western society. That middle-class women would perform the duties associated with raising children and keeping a house, which saw the mother 'located in the home, cooking in the kitchen, going about her daily domestic tasks' (S. Watson, 2000: 103), instead of pursuing education or working for a salary, was understood as a received wisdom up to the middle of the twentieth century in the west. Biological-essentialist approaches to motherhood, and cultural interventions through media and advertising, celebrated a woman's "innate" ability to parent and her "unconditional" love for her husband and children' (Green, 2004: 127). British author J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) is an apt example of how 'poor outcomes' for children in care are contingent upon perceptions of class and mothering. Implicitly, a child's success or failure in adult life is wholly dependent upon the quality of maternal care received. In addition, perceptions of class status are integral to perceptions of disrupted childhood. To Harry's Aunt Marge, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, who are muggles (non-magical people), his mother Lily was "a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here's the result right in front of us" (Rowling, 1999: 26). While in muggle terms, Lily grew up in a comfortably middle-class or upper-class family, her status as a witch and her marriage to a wizard 'wastrel' derogates her in the eyes of her muggle family members. To Vernon, Petunia and Marge, Lily's magical ability is abject, and Lily herself othered from the rest of the muggle family. Thus, Harry's inheritance of Lily's magic, and his direct biological relation to her makes him, too, a 'bad egg'. Conversely, upon arrival at Hogwarts, Harry is roundly celebrated by his magical peers and the school faculty members: he is the son of a well-known magical family, his father a well-liked and skilled sportsman and his mother a gifted witch. Upon entering the wizarding world, Harry learns that he has inherited a fortune from his dead

parents, and 'money immediately earns him status in the first novel, and his expenditures somewhat compensate for his lack of knowledge about Hogwarts, wizards, and family' (Blackford, 2011: 158). To the magical community, the prominent status of Harry's parents and his own affluence counteracts any negative perceptions of Harry as a result of his unconventional upbringing.

Harry shares many qualities with his nemesis Tom Riddle (who later becomes Lord Voldemort): Stojilkov notes that Tom 'began his education and life at Hogwarts much as Harry himself—as a half-blood orphan, deprived of parental love and without any magical upbringing and socialisation whatsoever' (2015: 135). Like Harry, Tom is thrust into the wizarding world having not learned about it in childhood due to the death of his parents. Like Harry, Tom learns that he has magical abilities in early childhood and sometimes uses them on muggles: in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), Harry blows his Aunt Marge up like a balloon in a fit of rage. Tom Riddle also has uncontrolled outbursts, using his magic to steal toys from the other children at his orphanage and compelling them to obey him, as seen in Dumbledore's pensieve in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005). But while Harry's rule-breaking (children must not use magic outside of Hogwarts or in front of muggles) is punished with a light scolding or rationalisations, Dumbledore is far sterner with Tom, intimidating him by setting his wardrobe on fire, and menacingly warning him that:

[you have] been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school [...] the Ministry of Magic [...] will punish lawbreakers [...] severely. (Rowling, 2005: 255-256)

Dumbledore's treatment of Harry is far kinder than his treatment of the student Tom: specifically, when Harry uses magic outside of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) and is called to the Ministry of Magic for a hearing, Dumbledore personally intercedes to prevent Harry being disciplined. Seemingly, 'the very qualities Dumbledore blindly attributes to early deprivations and flaws in Tom Riddle's nature' – a materialistic desire

for objects, magical superiority, rule-breaking and a preoccupation with family lineage – ‘are embedded in the curriculum of Hogwarts’ and celebrated in Harry (Blackford, *ibid.*: 156). The difference between Harry and Tom is that while Harry comes from a prominent, respected middle-class wizarding family and has inherited wealth, Tom is raised in an orphanage, impoverished and abandoned by his mother, a ‘tramp’s daughter’ (Rowling, 2005: 202). Besides this class disparity between the two characters, the love of Harry’s mother – her sacrificial death to save him from Voldemort’s killing curse – is repeatedly cited as the source for Harry’s inherent goodness and his status as the prophesied ‘Chosen One’; the only person who can ultimately destroy Voldemort. While the hero Harry somewhat revels in his newly-acquired status at Hogwarts, the ‘internalisation of the desire for prestige is viewed, in Tom, as evil’ (Blackford, *ibid.*). Meanwhile, Tom’s mother Merope is characterised as a ‘defeated-looking person’ (Rowling, *ibid.*: 194). Mothers are ‘socially constructed as self-sacrificing and selfless’ (Neuman, 1996: 53), and Merope’s perceived ‘giving up’ on the child Tom by abandoning him – ‘she chose death in spite of a son who needed her [...] she never had your mother’s courage’ (Rowling, *ibid.*: 246) – is at odds with social constructions of acceptable motherhood. By comparison, Lily’s ‘ultimate’ sacrifice to save Harry rather than (as is constructed in the case of Merope) herself, sanctifies her as the ultimate representation of the ‘good’ mother.

Similarly, the good/evil binary applies to Harry and Tom: it is no coincidence that the middle-class Harry, with his loving dead mother and wealth is the hero of Rowling’s series while the villainous Tom/Lord Voldemort has been raised in poverty, with a mother he views as having given up on him because ‘she can’t have been magic, or she wouldn’t have died’ (Rowling, *ibid.*: 257). Fundamentally, the *Harry Potter* series is ‘shaped on the Augustinian concept of the spiritual battle between good and evil’ (Stojilkov, *ibid.*: 137). What is clear here is that the two characters, with similar tragic early lives, are assigned a different set of expected outcomes – goodness and evilness – based on their class status and the actions of their mothers. In early life, both characters break rules inside and outside of Hogwarts; both

characters steal from others, have inflated egos, break school rules, are preoccupied with their parents and their lineage, and seek out social prestige. But while these characteristics are celebrated and encouraged in Harry, they are derided and represented by guardian/carer figures such as Dumbledore as early signifiers of Tom's innate evilness: 'Tom Riddle was already highly self-sufficient, secretive and [...] friendless[.] The adult Voldemort is the same' (Rowling, *ibid.*: 259-260). The attempts of caregivers (Dumbledore and other teachers; workers at the orphanage) to present Tom's evilness as innate is perhaps a signifier of attempts by adults to retroactively rationalise inadequate caregiving. It is a received wisdom and widely acknowledged that no child is born 'evil' – that children's later-life outcomes are predicated upon their environments and the quality of care received in early life. As a child without parents or autonomy, Tom is wholly reliant upon the adults around him to guide him and shape his character in early life. Thus, it is the failures of these adults that contribute to his 'evilness' as an adult. It is notable that Dumbledore spends much of his time with Harry in *The Half-Blood Prince* pointing out incidences in Tom's early childhood that speak to his later evil actions. In doing this, Dumbledore can absolve himself of blame by convincing Harry – and himself – that there was nothing to be done to prevent Tom becoming Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore's changed, gentler attitude with Harry can be read as an internal subconscious drive to correct his mistakes in his caregiving to Tom, in order to prevent Harry also becoming 'evil'. This is, of course, helped along by Harry's more favourable class status and more conventionally acceptable dead mother. Nevertheless, it is reinforced throughout Rowling's series – which heavily utilises motifs of prophecy, destiny, and fate – that Harry is destined for greatness while there was never any chance of redemption for the evil Tom.

Research undertaken in the fields of childcare and fostering demonstrates that there is no reason for children who are nurtured and cared for adequately – whether within their biological families or elsewhere – to develop 'poor outcomes'. What needs to change is a public perception which unfairly labels children from foster care or other 'undesirable' parenting backgrounds as 'difficult', writing off children before they have had a chance to

develop. This perception is hegemonic, and filters through popular culture, media and fiction narratives to the very children it describes. It is significant that many care-experienced villains in children's narratives come from working-class backgrounds, while middle-class heroes are rarely associated with foster care through the absence of foster care-centric terminology, and are rather 'hidden in plain sight' (Sissay, 2016b).⁸ Blackford comments that 'the "evil" child is a synecdoche for cultural conditioning' (*ibid.*: 172). It is not surprising that the children affected by this perception then go on to develop the behaviours expected of them. One step towards breaking this harmful hegemonic stereotyping of looked-after children, is to understand the wide-ranging socio-political factors involved in a child developing 'poor outcomes'. It is not a coincidence that most children placed into care in the UK are from marginalised backgrounds and working-class families, and that the many problems faced by children leaving care in the twenty-first century are identical to problems faced by the working classes. One way to encourage change in these harmful perceptions is to make concerted efforts to alter narratives of poor outcomes, to ensure that 'poor outcomes' are no longer the default public popular perception of children from disrupted parenting situations, and for adults working within the care system to take greater responsibility for the care and outcomes of looked-after children, to avoid the looked-after child being 'treated as an individual with pathological tendencies and "instincts"' (Blackford, *ibid.*). Children's fiction should give wider, more inclusive and nuanced

⁸ Lemn Sissay, a British care-experienced writer and public figure, has noted – due to the proliferation of fictional middle-class children in care without being acknowledged as such because 'there is a prejudice against children in care [so] prevalent that those who have been in care spend most of their lives hiding the fact' – that 'the care system should be so good that social workers attend conferences entitled "How to stop middle class parents trying to put their children in care"' (2018). His albeit sarcastic comments speak to a number of concerning areas in institutional care: the fact that *so many* care-experienced children are from deprived backgrounds, that the care system itself is underfunded and inadequate - arguably because these working-class children's lives matter less than middle-class children's - and that fiction capitalises on the rich well of storytelling from the care experience without acknowledging that it is more frequently the lived reality of working-class children, not their middle-class protagonists. Further, authors erase the care experience in their fiction by failing to represent their middle-class protagonists as having been 'looked after' using foster care terminology.

portrayals of these children, and their mothers and their families, to encourage positive change in wider public consciousness.

3.0 Female-centric care narratives in the novels of Jacqueline Wilson

When examining representations of ‘poor outcomes’ and disrupted maternal care through the dimension of the working-class experience in contemporary children’s fiction, there is no body of work more suitable than Jacqueline Wilson’s. A prolific author since the publication of her debut novel in 1971, British children’s writer Wilson has published over a hundred books for children and teenagers, with particular popularity among 8-to-13-year-old girls (Mangan, 2015). Wilson’s breakthrough children’s novel *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991) follows a ten-year-old girl growing up in residential foster care. The novel brought Wilson international acclaim and signified a new era of her writing. After *Tracy Beaker*, Wilson’s books for children dealt increasingly with social problems faced by modern children. The issues explored in Wilson’s children’s books range from mental illness to domestic abuse, neglect, childhood bereavement, bullying, homelessness and divorce. Significantly, Wilson’s characters and the families in her books are very often from working-class backgrounds. Thus, the problems faced by these characters overlap with the contemporary concerns of the working classes in the UK. While generally successful, many commentators have questioned Wilson’s cookie-cutter approach to the working-class experience (Carroll, 2018), and highlighted her cultural responsibility, through her writing, to shape public attitudes towards working-class and care-experienced children – something that some critics believe she has often ignored, and that she has even reinforced harmful perceptions.

With so many of her books centring on female protagonists, it is not surprising that Wilson writes almost exclusively from the perspective of a young girl in the first person.⁹ Wilson occasionally employs post-modernist techniques such as hyper-realism and multiple first-person narratives as in *Double Act* (1995) and *The Worry Website* (2003). The effect is one that brings the reader closer to the protagonist(s), making the narrative more realistic and

⁹ Wilson’s narrators are exclusively female, except for some of her earlier adult fiction and her children’s novels *Cliffhanger* (1995) and its sequel *Buried Alive!* (1998).

meaningful. Significantly, Wilson's characters frequently have troubled relationships with their parents, and much of Wilson's work relies on the familiar trope of the physically or emotionally absent parent(s). In Wilson novels, a problematic parent can broadly be categorised as:

- Emotionally and/or physically abusive fathers
- Emotionally and/or physically absent mothers

As discussed in Chapter 2, absent parents are prevalent across the children's canon and the trope has been frequently characterised by theorists and critics as a shorthand plot device for establishing character (Orr, 2012). Wilson herself admits that '[t]here's a sort of template in my head for writing a novel' (Ferguson, 2016), which may go some way to explaining frequent occurrence of problematic parents in her children's fiction. On the other hand, the trope of the emotionally or physically absent parent can also serve as a powerful literary device that enables adventure and forward movement of the plot. With loving and functional family structures, much of the plot development in Wilson's books would simply fail to occur. For many of Wilson's characters – Tracy Beaker, Lola Rose (*Lola Rose*, 2003), Dolphin and Star Westward (*The Illustrated Mum*, 1999) – a dysfunctional family or absent parents are fundamentally integral to the protagonists and their stories: there is simply no escaping these girls' absent mothers and/or abusive fathers.

This chapter will seek to understand the significance of Wilson's many representations of mother-daughter relationships in her books, focusing on her *Tracy Beaker* series which follows a young care-experienced protagonist through the care system and, most recently, into adulthood and motherhood. It will look closely at Wilson's pre-occupation with biological mothering and its intersection with foster care in female-centric care narratives and examine how these narratives have shaped cultural discourse in the UK in recent years.

3.1 *The Story of Tracy Beaker (1991)*

Arguably one of Wilson's most famous characters, Tracy Beaker is the poster child for 'poor outcomes' in care-experienced children. Tracy is described by herself and the care professionals around her as 'difficult'. She tells 'fairy stories' and has a violent temper, which sometimes lands her in fights with the other children living at her residential children's home. She throws temper tantrums and must be physically removed to the Quiet Room. She steals other children's toys, clothes and makeup. Tracy exhibits many of the symptoms on Dregan and Gulliford's checklist of 'poor outcomes': she has trouble controlling her anger and exhibits criminal behaviour through stealing. It is understood that Tracy's pre-disposition to anti-social behaviour is as a result of her care experience and early childhood trauma, but still most of the children's home staff and Tracy's social worker Elaine reinforce harmful stereotypes about Tracy's life trajectory. For example, when Elaine places an advert for Tracy in the local newspaper:

"How could you *do* this to me, Elaine?" I shrieked when I saw it. "Is that the best thing you can say about me? That I'm *healthy*?[...]"

"I also said you're lively. And chatty."

"Yeah. Well, we all know what that means. Cheeky. Difficult. Bossy."

"You said it, Tracy," Elaine murmured.

"And all this guff about behaviour problems!..."

"Tracy, it's very understandable that you have a few problems –"

"I *don't*! And then how could you ask for someone to handle me *firmly*?"

"And lovingly," said Elaine. "I put loving too."

“Oh yes, they’ll tell me how much they love me as they lay into me with a cane...” (Wilson, 2016: 63)

Tracy is in care because her mother ‘got this Monster Gorilla Boyfriend and I hated him and he hated me back and beat me up’ (*ibid.*: 15). Physical abuse plays a recurring role in Tracy’s young life – both pre-care and with her first foster mother, Aunty Peggy, whose ‘smacks really hurt... right on the back of your leg where it stings most’ (*ibid.*: 26). While this is all the information we as readers are given about the reasons for Tracy being in care, it is clear that there is more to the story than Tracy, a compulsive liar and unreliable narrator, lets on. In *The Dare Game* (2000), a follow-up Tracy Beaker story, when visiting her mother, Carly leaves Tracy alone overnight and brings an unknown man back to the house later on, presumably to have sex with him. Whilst it is clear to the reader – through Carly’s repeated failure to visit Tracy or send any correspondence – that Tracy’s biological mother is not an adequate caregiver to her daughter, Tracy fails to recognise her mother’s behaviours as harmful: ‘I like my mum because she is pretty and funny and she brings me lovely presents’ (Wilson, 2016: 15). That her social worker thinks Tracy’s behaviour problems are ‘understandable’ because she has ‘been in care for a number of years’ (*ibid.*: 62) suggests that rather than her early-life pre-care trauma being the cause of perceived poor outcomes, it is Tracy’s experience within the care system that is to blame for her ‘difficult’ nature. With this assertion, Wilson reinforces the view that caregiving by biological mothers is preferable even if it is traumatic or disruptive, while secondary parenting – in the form of institutional or foster care – will always be traumatic no matter its nature. This theory is postulated in the narrative by a social worker, as demonstrated in the extract above. It again reinforces the idea that even those who are meant to work for the best interests of care-experienced children do not expect them to achieve anything substantial in later life. Astonishingly, when Tracy tells her social worker about being smacked by Aunty Peggy, Elaine replies: ‘Well sometimes, Tracy, you really do ask for it’ (*ibid.*: 26). That a social worker would say this to a child who is in care due to being physically abused by a parent demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of the social worker –

either by Elaine herself (deliberately portrayed by Wilson to be clueless) or by Wilson who fails to recognise the seriousness of such abuse. Elaine's language here is symptomatic of the language of abusers and victim-blamers. At the time the book was published, it is possible that such language may not have been viewed as quite so problematic; with social stigma around the corporal punishment of one's children developing in the new century after the publication of Wilson's novel. But a contemporary reading of the text reveals Wilson's fundamental misunderstanding of the role of the caregiver in a fostering context. Care-experienced children, in the eyes of Wilson and the institutions from whose perspective Wilson writes, are 'asking for it'; are destined to fail no matter their experiences inside or outside of the care system. The simple fact of them having been in care is their own fault and is enough to spoil their chances in their later-life trajectories.

In *The Hatchling*, it is important for the plot that Bess believes that she too is doomed to fail, despite being a clever, ambitious and emotionally intelligent person. This sense of expected 'poor outcomes' is enforced by Bess's foster mother Lisa, who does not trust her to act independently. Bess notes that if Lisa's biological daughter Clarissa behaved in the same way as her, she would not receive as harsh a punishment: 'She doesn't call anyone when Clarissa is playing up. Because Clarissa doesn't have a social worker' (*The Hatchling*: 52). When Bess falls pregnant, she confirms everything Lisa believes to be true about her: that she is destined to fail. Traditionally, public opinion has a low tolerance for 'damaged' individuals because they threaten social cohesion; mainstream society expects those individuals who have experienced trauma to be 'damaged' by default. Thus, narratives like those of 'poor outcomes' emerge. Stereotypes around children from disrupted parenting situations become self-perpetuating. It is expected – through societal hegemonic discourse exemplified in popular culture and particularly fiction – that these children will develop 'poor outcomes' in adulthood, by nature of their upbringing. Children navigate the care system with the burden of an unfair pre-disposed perception of their characters. This attitude, often perpetrated by adults like Elaine working in the care system, as demonstrated by Gaskell

through her interviews with care-experienced young people, discussed in the Introduction, infiltrates popular culture and consumed media: that children from the care system are 'problem' children. The children themselves understand this to be true, because it is so commonly reinforced in the stories and narratives they read and watch. Thus, the wheel turns. Children in the care system grow up to develop 'poor outcomes': not because their characters are fundamentally flawed or they are 'bad' or 'evil' humans, but because they have been conditioned to think of themselves as doomed; they have not, like other children from more stable family structures, been afforded the chance to fail and try again. With *The Hatchling*, my intention is to combat the overwhelming perception of care-experienced children being pre-disposed to failure. Bess overcomes these harmful stereotypes in the third act of my novel when she is accepted into film school. It is significant that, for Bess to succeed, she first must become physically and emotionally removed from her foster family and the care system, because both bear these negative attitudes towards her and care-experienced children generally.

A trend toward blaming child victims of abuse has continued to play a key role in Wilson's work almost thirty years after the publication of *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, with the release of a new book which follows Tracy as an adult. In *My Mum Tracy Beaker* (2018), Tracy Beaker is a 'single mum fighting to make ends meet' (Ferguson, 2018). Describing Tracy Beaker as an adult, Wilson discusses how Tracy is 'without much education' and 'living in a housing association flat.' Tracy's daughter Jess is 'more of an adult than Tracy is' (*ibid.*). With these assertions about Tracy's later-life trajectory, Wilson reinforces Dregan and Gulliford's research about 'poor outcomes' in care-experience children: Tracy Beaker, in adulthood, is poorly educated, relying on the state welfare system for housing, and emotionally immature so that her daughter is more of an adult than she is. Imogen Tyler notes that 'young unwed working-class mothers have always been a target of social stigma, hatred, and anxiety' (2008: 26), and Tracy fits the bill as a signifier of the socially abject mother: a member of the 'non-respectable working [class]' existing outside the respectable nuclear family unit (Lewis, 2004:

23). Further, Tracy is a care leaver: a status that further marginalises her from the boundaries of ‘respectability’ as defined by Bev Skeggs (2002: 9-22). Wilson acknowledges that the stigma attached to looked-after children has manifested demonstrably in public attitudes to her work and the character of Tracy: ‘It was difficult to sell merchandise and the rights to the books because Beaker was not seen as aspirational, she says. “It was very much felt that she wasn’t pretty, she wasn’t good. But that was then”’ (Ferguson, 2016). But Wilson’s 2018 novel does nothing, it seems, to tackle these pre-conceptions about the ‘goodness’ – or lack thereof – of care-experienced children. By saying ‘But that was then’, Wilson suggests that she believes that public attitudes to care-experienced children have changed since 1990. But nothing suggests that this is the case, and compounding the issue, authors like Wilson continue to write fiction that demonstrates the pervasiveness of the harmful stigmas associated with children in care.

One ‘good’ trait that Tracy Beaker possesses as an adult, Wilson says, is that she is a good mother: ‘I’ve always thought that, even though Tracy had lots of problems in her life and a pretty rubbish mum who was never there for her, Tracy herself would be a good mum, no matter what’ (*ibid.*). This is reflected in the 2018 novel itself: Tracy plays and bakes with her daughter, defends her at school when she is bullied, and by her own admission ‘spoils’ her with clothes and toys despite her poor financial situation. Tracy is attuned to Jess’s emotional needs and is a gentle and forgiving parent – she gives Jess the material and emotional support she wishes she had herself while growing up in care. Objectively, Tracy is a ‘good’ mother, with Wilson commenting that ‘just because Tracy might not have had the best mother in the world, or that just because you had a life in and out of care, it doesn’t mean that you couldn’t be the best parent ever’ (Allardice, 2018). Having Tracy be a ‘good mum’ is one stereotype about care-experienced children that Wilson is bucking with her writing. But by suggesting that Tracy will be a better mother compared to the many extra-maternal mothers she experienced in foster care, and in spite of being in foster care, Wilson continues to perpetuate the idea that biological mothering trumps all other forms of mothering regardless of circumstances. The

idea that biological mothering should be prioritised is further demonstrated in Tracy's idealisation of her chronically absent biological mother in the original *The Story of Tracy Beaker*. To the adult reader and the intuitive child reader, the absence of Tracy's mother is a damning indictment of Carly Beaker's character. Despite this, the narrative reinforces the position of the biological mother as superior to all other forms of mothering:

I wonder where she is. And why she didn't leave a forwarding address at that last place? And how will she ever get to find me here? Yeah, that's the problem. I bet she's been trying and trying to get hold of me, but she doesn't know where to look. Last time I saw her I was at Auntie Peggy's and I bet that silly old smacking-machine wouldn't tell her where I'd gone. So I bet my mum got really mad with her. And if she found out just how many times Auntie Peggy smacked me [...] I bet my mum would really let her have it. (Wilson, 2016: 51)

Tracy's determination to blame adults working within the care system for her mother's failures demonstrates her own blindness to the trauma that can be inflicted by inadequate biological mothering. As a child Tracy cannot be expected to understand the complex nuances of her mother's abandonment, but her determination to sanctify Carly is indicative of wider socio-cultural attitudes towards the biological-maternal.¹⁰ Through this, Wilson shows that culturally, biological parenting is always preferable to secondary parenting, as demonstrated in the narrative anecdote about Tracy's first set of foster parents. Initially Julie and Ted re-assert the sanctified position of the biological mother, which to Tracy (and Wilson) is positive – 'Julie said she didn't want me to call her Mum because I already had a mum. I thought such a lot of Julie

¹⁰ Negative attitudes toward foster care and the extra-maternal continue in another of Wilson's novels, *The Illustrated Mum* (1999). In this novel, Star and Dolphin's mother Marigold suffers from mental health problems, including bipolar disorder, and self-medicates with alcohol. Much of Marigold's behaviour is symptomatic of the 'poor outcomes' described in Dregan and Gulliford's research, and indeed the reader discovers early in the book that Marigold had been in care as a child.

when she said that' (Wilson, *ibid.*: 46). This only becomes problematic for Tracy when Julie falls pregnant and takes on the new role of biological mother herself. In the novel, motherhood is presented as a binary choice between the biological or the extra-maternal: 'you see, now they're having their own baby they feel that they're not really going to be able to cope' (*ibid.*: 48). Tracy believes she can solve this problem by taking on the role of the mother, saying 'I'll be just like a second mum to this baby. I know all what to do. I can give it its bottle... and thump on its back to bring up its wind' (*ibid.*: 50). Tracy believes that by co-opting the role of 'mother', she will save herself from being returned to the 'dumping ground'. As Tracy is a child in care, she is already suspected of being 'bad' and 'other', as demonstrated by her social worker Elaine: 'the point is, Tracy, it makes it plainly clear in your records that you don't always get on well with little children... Julie and Ted still feel they don't want to take any chances' (*ibid.*: 50). Thus, Tracy's attempt to co-opt the role of mother fails, and Tracy is sent back to the 'dumping ground', where she continues to be 'other' even within the context of an entire community of foster children who are collectively othered.

3.2 My Mum Tracy Beaker (2018), *The Beaker Girls* (2019) and other Wilson novels

When biological mothers are present in the works of Jacqueline Wilson, they are almost always treated with deference by their daughters. Conversely, when mothers are not biological, or extra-maternal, Wilson's characters develop problematic relationships with these women, which manifest as 'poor outcomes'. It is worth noting that in almost all cases of absent biological mothers in Wilson's fiction – but particularly *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991), *Dustbin Baby* (2001) and *The Illustrated Mum* (1999) – the absence is due to trauma. Thus, the child narrators in the novels are already pre-disposed to 'poor outcomes'. Tracy Beaker is living in a residential care home due to her mother's neglect; Dolphin and Star are taken into care after their mother – a care leaver herself – suffers a breakdown associated with her bipolar disorder. April, the protagonist of *Dustbin Baby*, lives in care after being abandoned as a baby in a dustbin by her mother. In *The Hatchling*, Bess finds all forms of motherhood that she encounters (besides Keris) to be harmful, demonstrating the necessity for nuanced

thinking around the subject. Bess finds both her biological mother Amanda, and her foster mother Lisa to be inadequate in providing what she understands to be appropriate maternal care. Both mothers are abusive but in different ways: Amanda is physically abusive due to her post-natal depression, and Lisa is emotionally closed-off to Bess, due to her own inability to fully understand her maternal responsibility, and her view of Bess as 'other' when compared with her biological daughter Clarissa. While Bess is obviously a difficult teenager, she is no more difficult or rebellious than her friend Eshal or any other teenage girl featured in the novel. It is her status as a looked-after child with disrupted parenting trauma which magnifies her rebelliousness to Lisa, and therefore presents her to the adults around her as marked: a 'problem child', susceptible to 'poor outcomes'. This hegemonic approach – taken by Lisa, and Bess's various social workers – only serves to re-enforce a sense of inevitability when it comes to Bess's 'potential'. Bess sees that the disrupted maternal care she has been subject to has manifested as a social categorisation, which labels her as fundamentally doomed. This greatly informs her own attitudes to her impending motherhood. She cannot identify a successful mother in her own lived experience and sees inadequate mothering as the overarching cause of her own troubles. Thus, Bess concludes that she too would be an inadequate or unsuccessful mother – a self-fulfilling prophecy – as seen when she imagines drowning her baby as her mother tried to do to her (*The Hatchling*: 241-244). Bess's understanding of motherhood is what ultimately leads her to abort her pregnancy.

Where mothers are emotionally or physically absent in Wilson's novels, other forms of female care structures take their place, and these forms are almost always problematic and/or toxic. In *Double Act* (1995), Ruby and Garnet are sisters who exist in a complicated power struggle between dominant and submissive twins. Similarly, other female friendships in Wilson's fiction are full of hierarchies of control: such as in group settings like in *Sleepovers* (2001) and the *Girls* series, as well as twosomes as in *Vicky Angel* (2000) and *Midnight* (2004). Another such power dynamic in female friendships is explored through the relationship between Mandy and Tanya in *Bad Girls* (1996). The story's protagonist and narrator, Mandy,

becomes friends with Tanya whose frequent shoplifting gets Mandy into trouble. The plot is resolved when Tanya moves away, and Mandy develops a less co-dependent relationship with her mother. Tanya is also dyslexic and in foster care. In *The Hatchling* I wanted to represent Bess and Eshal's friendship as realistically fraught and uncomfortable at times, without the toxicity and competitiveness seen in many contemporary examples of female friendship in fiction. For example, after discussing sex, 'things are weird between us and we can't quite keep a conversation going' (*The Hatchling*: 70), but despite this the relationship between Bess and Eshal is never toxic or dysfunctional with unbalanced power dynamics. I also wanted Bess to have multiple female friendships (for example, with Keris) to disrupt the notion that a girl may only have one close friend, as is often represented in Wilson's friendship novels.

Wilson's pre-occupation with the care experience, especially among young girls from working-class backgrounds, continues throughout her canon, and is evidently still of interest to her, with the recent releases of *My Mum Tracy Beaker* and *The Beaker Girls* (2019). Wilson's representation of the dichotomous relationship between biological mother-daughter relationships and female-centric care structures (namely, foster care) continues to be highly problematic. Almost all representations of care in Wilson's novels – the *Tracy Beaker* series, and others not discussed at length here such as *The Illustrated Mum*, *Dustbin Baby* and *Bad Girls* – are homogenous: they describe young girls in care moving between residential children's homes and unpleasant, sometimes abusive residential placements with foster families. These represent one small aspect of the care experience, yet Wilson chooses to write them time and again, always with the same negative perspective that repeatedly trumps biological mothering over all other kinds, no matter the trauma associated with it. Children from care backgrounds are, without exception, 'bad' and 'other', prone to disruptive and problematic behaviours – not, according to Wilson, due to the early life trauma suffered at the hands of their biological parents, but rather as a result of being institutionalised within the care system. Understandably, many critics from within the care-experienced community have

suggested that Wilson's interpretation of the care experience is particularly narrow and – due to her wide young readership and status as something of a cultural authority on the care experience – damaging and stigmatising when considered within a wider socio-political context about public attitudes to children in care. A number of critics have noted, in response to *My Mum Tracy Beaker*, that there don't *need* to be any more narratives where we see young people in care develop 'poor outcomes' once they are 'released' into the 'real world'. Vicky Carroll, writing for *The Big Issue*, notes that 'care-experienced young people [are] exasperated that the stereotype of an inevitable bleak future [is] being reinforced' (2018).¹¹ Despite Wilson's assertion that writing about Tracy Beaker was particularly difficult because she was a controversial figure – not 'pretty' or 'good' – Wilson has also congratulated herself on her representation of the care experience to a mainstream audience, saying that she has received letters from readers declaring 'it's not fair, I want to live in a children's home' or similar (London Book Fair, 2018; Andalo, 2015). Rebecca Reid points out that '[Tracy Beaker] paints a pretty rosy picture of the care system which is probably why I once announced, aged eight, that I felt I would really like to live in a foster home' (2018). What is clear is that while Wilson's work has arguably raised the profile of the plight of care-experienced children, in some ways it has done more harm than good by offering an exaggerated, parodied portrayal of the care system and the children within it. The idea that readers would want to live in a care home after reading Wilson's stories reinforces the idea that absent parents represent adventure and liberation for child protagonists, but it is at odds with real-life accounts of living in residential care in the UK

¹¹ Wilson's latest Tracy Beaker novel *The Beaker Girls* (2019) explicitly deals with and refutes the harmful stereotypes often associated with care-experienced people. In 2018, following backlash against *My Mum Tracy Beaker*, Wilson met with care leavers in Edinburgh to discuss representation in the *Beaker* books (Livingston, 2018). Several care-experienced people (including myself) also consulted on the specific issue of representation in *The Beaker Girls* prior to the novel's publication, with the opportunity to read and feedback on the manuscript. Following this advocacy work, in the new novel Wilson re-introduces several characters from the children's home in the original *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, and emphasises their successes: one is a headteacher, another is a well-known model. Even Tracy, who in this book becomes a successful antiques dealer, has her characterisation re-configured to emphasise her successes rather than her failures.

– which invariably describe the experience in negative terms, citing loss of freedom, de-humanising rules, and security measures such as chains on doors and spikes on perimeter fences, that would be more suitable for a prison (Andalo, *ibid.*; Nichol, 2018; Tighe, 2016; Gentleman, 2010). That a care home might be ‘aspirational’ for children from non-care-experienced backgrounds reflects the ideas discussed at the beginning of Chapter 2, that the absence of parents is a symbolic ‘call to adventure’ and accessible freedom – again at odds with care-experienced people’s lived experiences of children’s homes as entrapping – rather than liberating.

4.0 Self-identity and the maternal in Siobhan Dowd's *Solace of the Road* (2009)

While Jacqueline Wilson's *Tracy Beaker* series often represents residential care homes as aspirational, with connotations of freedom and adventure, London-born Irish novelist Siobhan Dowd's 2009 young adult novel *Solace of the Road* seeks to lend the care experience and its institutions more nuance. Dowd's novels, like Wilson's, deal with difficult subject matter from a working-class perspective. Her critically acclaimed novel *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006) sees the adolescent protagonist Shell – whose mother has recently died – fall pregnant at fifteen and eventually give birth to a stillborn baby. The more mature themes of sexual exploitation and pregnancy are representative of Dowd's positioning in the Y.A. market, rather than the children's, as is the case with Wilson's *Tracy Beaker* series. *Solace of the Road*, which may be read as a contribution to the emerging care-experienced canon, is a lesser-known posthumous work, though it is aimed squarely at the same audience as *A Swift Pure Cry*. The novel follows fifteen-year-old Holly Hogan, who after spending most of her childhood in a residential care home and failed foster placements, is fostered by a middle-class couple – Ray and Fiona – and taken to live in the South London suburb of Tooting Bec. As Holly begins to recover memories of early childhood abuse, she resolves to run away and reconnect with her biological mother, Bridget, in Ireland. Much of the novel follows Holly as she makes the journey from London to the Irish coast, via hitchhiking on the M4, trains, buses and ferries, all while continuing to recover repressed memories on her journey.

One significant aspect of *Solace of the Road* is its discussion of class; Dowd highlights in her novel the class slippage that exists in conjunction with the care experience. Holly, who is from a working-class background, feels stifled by the over-attention of her foster mother and the sense that she does not fit into the middle-class 'arty-farty' lifestyle of her new foster parents: 'I hate your fucking fancy bread and I hate you too [...] I don't want to be your child' (Dowd, 2015: 27-28). Holly's resentment of Fiona and her lifestyle, besides highlighting the classed nature of the care experience, stems from the same biological-essentialist perspective in Wilson's novels: that biological mothering is superior and preferable to all other kinds. By

'choosing' to be Fiona's child, Holly is somehow negating the existence of her biological mother. While Holly subscribes to this biological 'ideal' in the first two acts of the novel – shown through her behaviour towards Fiona – rejecting the foster placement means returning to a residential care home, representing failure and imprisonment, which to Holly is also not an option. Through Holly's relationships with mothers, *Solace of the Road* explores 'the interactive and constructive nature of self-identity', an issue that is prevalent among care-experienced people (Horrocks and Goddard, 2006: 265). 'Care babes', as they are described by Holly in the novel, begin their young lives 'with adverse experiences, loss and separation from attachment figures', making it difficult to establish a 'coherent autobiographical memory' and therefore 'form a mature psychosocial identity' (Steenbakkens *et al.*, 2016: 2-8). Holly spends much of the novel, and her journey to Ireland, recovering and reifying memories of early childhood trauma, and reconstructing her identity through her bewigged alter-ego Solace, a 'glamour girl' with 'slim-slam hips' (Dowd, *ibid.*: 30). Through her invention of the Solace identity and storytelling to strangers, Holly establishes her own 'coherent autobiographical memory', that (once again) conveniently sanctifies the biological mother figure; this mirrors the practice of 'life story work' that is commonly undertaken by children in care with key workers and social workers to help establish identity outside of the collective family memory. This Chapter will examine how *Solace of the Road* deals with memory, identity construction and storytelling from a care-experienced perspective, and how these things inform the care-experienced character's relationships with maternal figures.

4.1 Recovering life stories

Siobhan Dowd, an Irish author, worked as Deputy Commissioner for Children's Rights in Oxfordshire, and had previously worked in young offenders' institutions and children's services in 'socially deprived areas' (Siobhan Dowd Trust, 2016). *Solace of the Road* was published posthumously in 2009, and there is ample evidence in the plot of the novel to suggest that

Dowd's time working in the care system and children's services informed its writing.¹² The novel describes networks of social workers, key workers, review meetings, residential carers and advocates that ring true with the contemporary care system in the United Kingdom. Significantly, like Bess in *The Hatchling*, Holly does not fully remember the circumstances of being taken into care and is denied access to her care records: documents written by social workers and other care professionals and kept by the local authority as a record of a child's interactions with the care system. Inability to access these records – due to them being 'lost, inaccurately recorded or be subject to bias by the recorder' (D. Watson *et al.*, 2019: 3) – is a reality for many C.E.P.s, especially if they have suffered institutional abuse (Hoyle *et al.*, 2019: 1857). Research has demonstrated that an inability to access care records represents a significant psychological impact on C.E.P.s' sense of self-identity, as well as their own memories in the absence of 'collective family memory' and 'oral and documentary history' (MacNeil *et al.*, 2018: 7). This is evident in the case of Holly, as she spends most of the novel recollecting her early childhood trauma – that is, abuse at the hands of her mother Bridget and Bridget's boyfriend Denny – through a series of flashbacks devised to slowly reveal information about Holly's past to the reader. Dowd uses objects and sounds – like a hot iron and the popular song 'Sweet Dreams' – to catalyse these flashbacks and develop motifs throughout the novel. In an earlier part of the novel, Fiona and Ray have a trivial argument about work while Fiona irons Ray's shirt:

Fiona slammed the iron down and stalked out. Only she didn't put the iron down properly and it fell off the board and crashed to the floor and nearly landed on Ray's

¹² Due to her death, there is little literature available from Dowd herself about her motivations and choices concerning the novel. Despite this, parallels can be drawn between *Solace of the Road* and Dowd's own life: the route Holly takes from Oxford to Ireland links the places of Dowd's birth and death. The wig Holly wears to become Solace is a 'glamorous, sexualised memento mori' of Fiona's chemotherapy, while Dowd herself died from breast cancer in 2007 (Boyce, 2009).

foot. A drawer in my brain slid open. I froze. [...] I slammed the drawer shut. [...] The iron was a sign. (Dowd, *ibid.*: 53-54)

The incident is the first instance in the novel of a 'drawer' being opened, which in turn is symbolic of memories of early childhood trauma resurfacing in Holly's conscious mind. Upon a close reading of the text, this scene serves as a subliminal inciting incident, the 'sign' which catalyses Holly's decision to run away, although at this stage of the plot the significance of the iron is ambiguous. There is further indication of the significance of the iron when Holly sees it later in the kitchen in the same scene, and describes how 'a blanket went over my brain', using the physical metaphor of a blanket smothering something to describe a thought or memory being repressed (Dowd, *ibid.*: 57). The violence of the iron being dropped in this early scene mirrors a scene in the latter part of the novel in which Holly remembers her mother attacking her with an iron, and 'drawers slid open, spilling what was inside' (*ibid.*: 235). It has the effect of re-traumatising Holly, who is reminded of her past abuse, with the object of the iron behaving as the specific stressor for this (Van der Kolk, 2005: 403). The later scene featuring the iron – Holly's memory of the initial trauma – is the moment of climax, bookending the narrative structure of the novel by mirroring the earlier appearance of the hot iron. It is here that Holly realises she was abandoned: that Bridget 'ran away to try to catch Denny, not escape him. The person she'd been running from wasn't him, but me' (Dowd, *ibid.*: 242).

In the same way that Dowd uses the recurring image of the hot iron and the song 'Sweet Dreams' to foreshadow the final revelation of abuse in Holly's narrative, I used motifs of water, drowning and bathing in *The Hatchling* to foreshadow the revelation of Bess's abuse at the hands of her mother. *The Hatchling* comprises widespread references to water, bathing and drowning; an early working title for the novel was 'Bodies of Water' in reference to its use of settings like the River Thames, the Pits, the reservoirs and the seaside:

I think about all the water contained in separate concrete cradles across all of the Pits, the reservoir by my house hovering fifty feet above my head while I'm sleeping. If the reservoir broke its banks now we'd be at the epicentre of the flood, like when stars implode and cave in on themselves. (*The Hatchling*: 13)

Bess, as narrator, frequently invokes sensations of death in conjunction with water and bathing, and often conflates water with feelings of entrapment and oppression, for example when viewing the 'calm blackish water of the Pits' and feeling like 'I'm becoming embedded into this place' (*ibid.*: 125). More specifically in reference to water, in earlier sections of the novel, Bess describes being 'too scared to let Lisa wash me in the bath in case she drowned me' as a child (*ibid.*: 142). When Eshal and Bess attempt to abort her pregnancy in Eshal's bathroom, Bess predicts that 'I am going to die in this bathtub. I know it; I can feel it' (*ibid.*: 153). This motif comes to its climactic moment when Bess visits Amanda and fully remembers how her mother tried to drown her in the bathtub. In this scene Bess pictures 'being underwater [and] staring up at a [...] shower head' (*ibid.*: 241), a memory of the abuse that mirrors her attempted abortion, where she narrates 'looking up at the shower head and [wanting] to scream' (*ibid.*: 151). In both Dowd's text and *The Hatchling*, the recurring motifs of the hot iron, and the bathtub and shower head, and their occurrence in key scenes in the second and fourth acts of both novels (when the texts are viewed as five-act structures), are demonstrative of the 'story's aspiration for symmetry', lending them additional significance in terms of plot and structure (Yorke, 2013: 105).

Recovered memories are significant in both *The Hatchling* and *Solace of the Road*; so, too, are the formation of identity in relation to these recovered memories, and their adjacency to storytelling. Both Bess and Holly reconfigure their identities by changing their given names (Isabelle to Bess and Holly to Solace), in an attempt to distance themselves from their lived realities; while Bess is trying to reject her past by abandoning the name given to her by Amanda, Holly is attempting to feel closer to her mother by choosing a name that has

significance to Bridget. Holly goes further than this and changes her appearance using clothes and a wig to appear older. In Jacqueline Wilson's *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, Tracy is accused of 'telling fairy stories', or lying, and this thread is also drawn through *Solace of the Road*. On her travels, Holly makes up stories and tells them to the strangers she meets, reconfiguring elements of the truth and manipulating them to serve her new identity and to generate sympathy. In one example, Denny the abusive stepfather becomes Solace's dead brother who 'was knocked down by a lorry, aged five. Then I came along right after and Mam said I was what was left when all else failed' (Dowd, *ibid.*: 204). In another example, Holly fakes a phone call to her mum to demonstrate to her travelling companion Phil, deceptively, that Bridget has dumped Denny and Solace is on the way for a 'Girls' night out' (*ibid.*: 161). In both cases, Holly casts Solace as her mother's saviour, rescuing her from the physical and emotional trauma associated with Denny. Through storytelling, Holly uses elements of the practice of life story work to develop a preferable identity for herself: one that allows her to perform the role of rescuer, one where her mother is waiting for her return, and additionally distances her from her care experience. Life story work, in a children's social care context, is:

underpinned by theories of attachment and loss [and] aims to help children to understand their journey through the care system, supporting them to fill gaps in memory and understanding. (D. Watson *et al.*, *ibid.*: 2)

Because Holly doesn't remember what happened to her, she invents new experiences, relationships and circumstances – a new life story – to help establish and reassert her identity, albeit a false one. On the phone to ChildLine, Holly makes up a boyfriend for herself, Drew, and imagines him 'cradling my head in his hands and stroking my hair' (Dowd, *ibid.*: 127-128). Similarly, in *The Hatchling*, Bess yearns for physical affection from Boy, 'I'll pretend to wake up and kiss him long and hard and he'll fall in love with me again' (*The Hatchling*: 15), despite his volatile behaviour towards her, and later, clear romantic disinterest in her. Both Holly's characterisation of imagined people like Drew and her mother, and her rejection of Fiona's

caregiving, exemplify a pathological need to be looked after outside of the care system, and are symptomatic of an insecure-ambivalent style attachment disorder, where sufferers 'seek attention but reject it when it is offered' (Gibbons *et al.*, 2019: 415).¹³ Holly's 'storytelling' fits into this style of attachment disorder, especially as although she lies to garner their attention and sympathy, when she feels she has given too much information to strangers – for example Gayle on the phone call to ChildLine; Phil the truck driver – she then breaks contact by running away, hiding or hanging up the phone. Holly's 'storytelling' also re-asserts the commonly held perception that care-experienced children are more prone to lying, or even are pathological liars, a view that is frequently internalised by care-experienced children themselves. As noted in the Introduction, Gaskell's qualitative study of C.E.P.s' experience of the care system reinforces this view, with one interviewee asserting that social work professionals 'twist what you're saying. They turn it all round. They make out you're lying, that you're making things up' (Gaskell, 2010: 142). Both Tracy Beaker and Holly Hogan are unreliable narrators: Tracy because she, by her own admission, tells 'fairy stories', and Holly because of her tendency to embellish her memory with exaggerated narratives that mythologise her mother and diminish her experiences of abuse. In this way, both texts reinforce a 'reciprocal relationship of mistrust' between service users and social work professionals and carers working within the service (*ibid.*: 143). While Bess is not an unreliable narrator, she is repeatedly accused of lying by her foster mother Lisa, who asserts that 'I can tell when you're lying to me' (*The Hatchling*: 89), telling Bess 'I wish you wouldn't lie to me' (*ibid.*: 94). Bess internalises this view when debating whether to reveal her pregnancy to Boy: 'He'll throw me out at the very least, if I told him, he'll call me a liar' (*ibid.*: 227). Through constructing their care-experienced protagonists as unreliable narrators – as liars – Dowd and Wilson reinforce a harmful view of care-experienced

¹³ Attachment disorders are common among care-experienced people due to the frequency of disrupted early relationships in childhood in this group. Reactive Attachment Disorder is 'a condition affecting social relationships that has the potential to impair a child's social, cognitive and emotional development. [...] It is thought to develop into peer relationship difficulties and disruptive behavioural disorders in middle childhood and adolescence' (Millward *et al.*, 2007: 273).

children that is perpetuated by social work professionals, as demonstrated by Gaskell. In her conviction that Bess is a liar, Lisa too is subscribing to this stigma; this has a material effect on Bess who later chooses not to confide in Boy for fear of being further accused. In this way, *The Hatchling* highlights first that care-experienced protagonists are not necessarily unreliable narrators or pathological liars, and secondly argues that the continued typecasting of C.E.P.s as such has a hegemonic detrimental impact on the emotional wellbeing of the individual concerned, from the perspective of both care-experienced characters and care-experienced readers.

4.2 Searching for the mother

The absence of the biological mother, as is the case in Jacqueline Wilson's work, is again notable in Dowd's *Solace of the Road*, because any 'poor outcomes' in a child or adolescent protagonist are seen as a result of a mother's 'failure' to appropriately care for her children, as biological essentialists would argue is in her 'nature' to do so (Woodward, 1997: 258). Institutional motherhood 'revives and renews all other institutions' (Rich, 1995: 45) – it is in the interests of patriarchy to idealise the status of the mother while ensuring women are not afforded any aspirations. Adrienne Rich does also note that 'Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other – beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival – a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, proverbial: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other' (*ibid.*: 220). While motherhood is sanctified in one way to reinforce cultural norms within patriarchy, there is also a sense among many feminist theorists that mothers and daughters share a biological bond that transcends institution, that is sensual, intangible, and yet meaningful. Rich's cis-centric, hetero-normative assertion of a biological bond negates extra-maternal relationships, or mother-daughter relationships that exist outside of the biological-essentialist 'ideal'. Wilson deals with many examples of the extra-maternal in her work, but she also falls into the same problematic thinking as Rich: that the biologically-related mother and daughter share a spiritual

or mythological duality that is somehow developed through biological pregnancy – the ‘two alike bodies, one of which had spent nine months inside the other’, and thus cannot be replicated in a non-biological mother-daughter relationship. Wilson’s work is often preoccupied with the body of the mother, when the mother character in the story is biological and not extra-maternal.

Dowd’s protagonist Holly is also preoccupied with storying her biological mother, placing her in a position of sanctification, before – through recovered memories of abuse – ultimately rejecting her in a way that Tracy Beaker fails to do with her own biological mother despite Carly Beaker’s myriad shortcomings. Having been taken into care aged five, Holly has had no contact with her mother and therefore uses elements of life story work, as described above, to mythologise her. Despite evidence to the contrary, Holly (like Tracy Beaker) is convinced that her mother is waiting for her: ‘She’d had to leave England in a hurry and meant to send for me, but before she could, the social services came and took me away, and she didn’t know where to find me’ (Dowd, *ibid.*: 40). Again, as with Tracy Beaker, here is demonstrated a false binary between the role of social services and the role of the mother in the looked-after child’s life. In the cases of both Holly Hogan and Tracy Beaker, the biological mother is a heavenly, sanctified figure while social services professionals are represented as the invading party, whose goal is to disrupt that mythologised bond between mother and daughter. Holly collects objects that she associates with her mother, like an amber ring and a photograph that is destroyed by a foster brother in another placement. Other objects are reconfigured by Holly as gifts from Bridget – ostensibly evidence of Bridget’s love for her – like a lizard-skin bag that she tells a stranger giving her a lift is a gift by her mother (*ibid.*: 204). Holly imbibes these objects with significance, and uses them as props in her stories about her mother, performing the ‘Story Work’ stage of life story work as described by Richard Rose (2012), where items are used to ‘[give] the child an opportunity to tell their story’, and they are ‘not challenged on inaccuracies, poor memory recollection or confusion’ (D. Watson *et al.*, *ibid.*: 3). Through telling these stories to strangers, Holly is not questioned on their veracity

and therefore her version of events is legitimised, with the risk of them being ‘internalised as the “truth” and accepted by the listener as valid’ (*ibid.*). There is evidence of Holly resisting this internalisation – for example, when she admits to herself (and the reader) that the lizard-skin bag ‘wasn’t from Harrods, like I told Sian, and it wasn’t from Mam. It was a gift from Fiona’ (Dowd, *ibid.*: 210). Despite this, the choice to frame the gift as from her own biological mother rather than her foster mother reinforces Holly’s need to reject care from an extra-maternal figure – and indeed to reject her own identity as a ‘care babe’ – and re-assert her biological mother’s sanctified position in the narrative. The admission of the lizard-skin bag’s true giver comes in the fourth act of the novel, when Holly has already recovered some memories of her mother’s abuse and is beginning to question her perception of her mother; it is indicative of a changing attitude towards motherhood more broadly in Holly, who eventually returns to Fiona having abandoned her search for Bridget. Once again, as Wilson does in her novels, Dowd relies on biological-essentialist thinking around motherhood and the maternal to elevate Bridget from Holly’s first-person perspective, and reject Fiona, despite Fiona performing the role and emotional labour of the traditional maternal figure throughout the novel, though this is ultimately subverted.

The mythologisation of the fictional mother-daughter relationship, as shown through Holly’s perception of Bridget, is something I wanted to subvert with Bess and Amanda in *The Hatchling*. Bess is more abstractly curious about her birth mother than strongly desirous of tracing her – ‘I wonder whether she has the same constellation on her own body’ (*The Hatchling*: 7). Bess’s focus on her mother’s body, here and elsewhere in the text, indicates her interest is more about a sense of inheritance, invoking the ‘nature versus nurture’ argument, especially in regard to the genetic inheritance of mental ill health as demonstrated when Bess imagines ‘drowning my baby’ as Amanda tried to do to her (*ibid.*: 247). Unlike the characters of Wilson’s novels, and the plot of *Solace of the Road* which centres wholly on Holly’s goal to reunite with her mother, the reunion between Bess and Amanda has no mythical or spiritual quality to it: ‘I wait for something to happen [...] But nothing does’ (*ibid.*: 234).

Through this meeting between Bess and her mother, *The Hatchling* seeks to disrupt biological-essentialist narratives of a necessary spiritual or mythological affinity between biological mothers and daughters. *Solace of the Road* is a quintessential hero's journey narrative, one in which 'the protagonist's superficial wants remain unsated; they're rejected in favour of the more profound unconscious hunger inside' (Yorke, *ibid.*: 14). The superficial goal of Holly's journey (as Solace) is to find her birth mother, but the journey itself surfaces the repressed memories of Holly's early years, revealing to both the reader and the protagonist the abuse she suffered at the hands of Bridget and Denny. In the same way that Bess remembers her abuse once she has visited Amanda in her childhood home, Holly's revelation comes when she sets foot on Irish soil – a place she too views as her childhood home, and a place she has heavily mythologised because of its association with Bridget. In both cases, the recovered memory of abuse catalyses significant character decisions which change the course of the novel. In the case of Bess, this decision is to have an abortion, and in the case of Holly it is to abandon her search for her biological mother and return to her foster parents, ultimately accepting Fiona's extra-maternal love. In different ways, both characters are choosing to reject biological-essentialist thinking around motherhood and maternal relationships, and instead assert their autonomy and independence in a style that is typical of the contemporary female bildungsroman, their 'desires, concerns, actions, aesthetic, and communicatory realms authenticated as valuable' (Jones, 2011: 441). Through the plot resolution of *Solace of the Road*, in which Holly decides to accept Fiona as her mother figure, Dowd is also subverting the typical sanctification of the biological mother by suggesting that healthy, normative maternal relationships can be established in non-biological families.

Nevertheless, it is significant that Fiona cannot physically have biological children, and this is a recurring theme in fiction that deals with residential foster care placements. By making Fiona infertile, Dowd is ensuring that no other child will usurp Holly and become the superior object of Fiona's affection. This topic is also explored in different ways in Jacqueline Wilson's *Tracy Beaker* series through the characters of Julie, a foster carer who sends Tracy back to

the Dumping Ground after she falls pregnant (see p325 of this thesis), and Tracy's eventual long-term foster mother Cam, who as a single lesbian woman – although not infertile like Fiona – faces a range of barriers to having biological children. In *The Hatchling*, Bess struggles to accept that Lisa's relationship with her biological daughter Clarissa – 'the sparkling, legitimate, blood-related daughter of the family' – will always be fundamentally different (and in Bess's view superior) to her relationship with her foster daughter, the 'Other Child' (*The Hatchling*: 18). In writing *The Hatchling*, I felt it was important to address the tensions between foster children and biological children co-existing in a nuclear family unit, because it is so rarely addressed in any detail in existing examples of care-experienced fiction and invites a range of issues around relationship dynamics and feelings of inadequacy, identity and unbelonging. I propose that it is more *convenient* for the purposes of plotting and story structure – and the satisfying resolutions to stories – to avoid biological child characters living in foster families all together, as is the case in recent examples of adult fiction featuring care-experienced people such as *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (Honeyman, 2017) and *My Name is Leon* (de Waal, 2016), as well as the examples discussed in this thesis.¹⁴

Finally, in the epilogue of *Solace of the Road*, after Holly's reunion with Fiona, the protagonist discovers, through accessing her care file, what happened to her as a child that caused her to be taken into care by social services. Holly notes that 'It was my right to see my file and I wanted to have my right' (Dowd, *ibid.*: 258), and her words invoke ongoing efforts within care-experienced communities to drive for easier file access for people who have been in local authority care. Accessing her file is another element of life story work for Holly, this stage being described by Rose (2012) as 'Life History Work', 'advocated by those who argue

¹⁴ Converse to her other representations of the care experience – which shy away from foster care terminology and represent outcomes as contingent upon class status (see Chapter 2) – J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is particularly successful at demonstrating this tension. Rowling addresses favouritism through the representation of a stark contrast between Harry's upbringing in the Dursley household when compared to the Dursleys' biological son Dudley, who is favoured and spoiled by the Dursleys despite his characterisation as a selfish bully who is prone to tantrums.

that it is important for the child to have the “facts” of their life, to enable them to make sense of who they are’ (D. Watson *et al.*, *ibid.*: 3). The file confirms to Holly that her memories of abuse were accurate, and that her mother was a drug user alongside being an alcoholic and sex worker (which had already been indicated in the subtext of Holly’s narrative). When Holly reveals her recovered memories to Fiona, Fiona replies ‘Oh Holly... you do remember’ (Dowd, *ibid.*), suggesting to the reader that Fiona had prior knowledge of Holly’s childhood trauma and the physical abuse she experienced. It is not uncommon for foster carers to be party to information concerning a looked-after child’s past – especially if it requires special arrangements within the foster placement – but it is problematic nonetheless that Fiona, and presumably Ray, as Holly’s foster carers, had information concerning events in her life that Holly herself did not remember. Significantly, having known about Holly’s abuse, Fiona failed to realise that Holly’s erratic behaviour and running away might be as a result of re-traumatisation from the incident with the hot iron. None of this is addressed in the final chapter of *Solace of the Road*, which is when Holly gets to see her files; there is also no recognition of the fact that Fiona and Ray kept this information from Holly. It is suggested, even, through Fiona’s exclamation of ‘you do remember’, that had Holly never recovered these memories, she might never have accessed those records and learned the facts of her early childhood. *Solace of the Road* can be read, therefore, as an allegory for the importance of sustained and consistent life story work for young people in care, to avoid the various crises of identity, memory and re-traumatisation that Holly faces over the course of the novel.

5.0 Entrapment and liberation in Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012)

While writing *The Hatchling*, I used the physical setting of Shepperton to describe the protagonist's sense of being trapped by both her foster family and the care system more broadly. Bess's liberation comes in the coda of the novel when she 'leaves care', disengages from her foster family, and moves to North London to pursue cinematography. In the earlier parts of the novel, Bess consistently alludes to feeling trapped through her language and internal monologue: 'I think, I need to get out of here. Not just the Pits. Not just Shepperton. Like, I need to be *rid* of this place and everything about it. I don't just need to be out, I need to be *away*' (*The Hatchling*: 139). For Bess, the 'place' she needs to be rid of is not just physical: it is her position or 'place' as a child in care; her perception of the physical space of Shepperton interacts with her self-identity as a foster child.¹⁵ Under the surveillance of the care system, Bess and her behaviours become objectively scrutinised by the state, and her actions imbued with meaning in a way that children living outside of care do not experience. This is reinforced by the presence of social services in the conventional domestic disputes of the family, such as when Lisa invokes Bess's social worker Henry as a threat against bad behaviour: 'She doesn't call anyone when Clarissa is playing up. Because Clarissa doesn't have a social worker' (*ibid.*: 52). In this way, Bess is rendered impotent in her efforts to disarticulate her family life from her institutionalisation as a care-experienced person.

Bess often sees faces in the ceiling of her bedroom;¹⁶ a sensation of being watched also permeates the prose of Jenni Fagan's 2012 novel *The Panopticon*, which follows fifteen-

¹⁵ The landscape of Shepperton, where Bess lives in her foster placement, is entangled with her identity as a looked-after child. In the text, I blend elements of the urban and industrial landscape – such as the M3 motorway, Heathrow airport, train stations and London – with the pastoral, such as the woodland, parakeets, the River Thames and farmland, to articulate the atmospheric tension in an oppressive and invasive environment. Bess is preoccupied with elements of her landscape that signify travel and therefore methods of escape: motorways, trains and airports. But these are also the things that limit her ability to move, because they represent physical barriers that block her routes out of Shepperton. By leaving Shepperton, Bess is also attempting to forsake her identity as a care-experienced person.

¹⁶ 'It's like the faces are watching me, waiting for me to pick them out.' (*The Hatchling*: 15)

year-old Anais Hendricks. Anais, who has been in foster care since birth, is taken to the eponymous institution – which replicates Jeremy Bentham’s prison concept of the eighteenth century (Bentham, 2010) – a reclaimed Midlothian Victorian prison redesigned to house ‘difficult’ care-experienced children in a ‘maximum security’-style environment. Like Bess, Anais hallucinates faces watching her, though in Fagan’s novel these faces take the uncanny form of ‘two men, black wide-rimmed hats, empty spaces where their noses should be’ (Fagan, 2013: 272). These are ‘the experiment’, who are waiting for an opportunity to ‘get’ Anais, and can be understood as an articulation of Anais’s sense of being surveilled by the state. As is the case in both Siobhan Dowd’s *Solace of the Road* and Jacqueline Wilson’s *Tracy Beaker* series, this begins the construction of a binary tension between the state, or social services, and the young protagonist’s lived experience within the care system, particularly their disrupted relationships with their biological mothers, as is explored extensively in Anais’s narrative. Fagan’s novel uses the gothic physical space of the Panopticon, with its watchtower and automatic-locking doors, in the same way as the faceless men, to demonstrate that ‘being in care is being caged’ (Ellmann, 2012). While Bess struggles to disentangle state interventions from her lived reality in the family, Anais’s experience of normative, nuclear family is non-existent, because she was born into care in a literal institution – a psychiatric hospital – and thus fears that she has no family, and rather was grown ‘from a pinprick, an infinitesimal scrap of bacterium’ (Fagan, *ibid.*: 71). In these ways, the prison-like atmosphere of the Panopticon and the omniscient presence of the ‘experiment’ liken the care experience to being both imprisoned and experimented upon by a powerful state entity. As with Bess, Anais’s physical environment is a key component in ‘shaping the consciousness’ of the character, a ‘partly spatial configuring of identity’ (Tew, 2014): it takes on the physical characteristics of how these protagonists relate and respond to their status as institutionalised people. Significantly, through the ‘experiment’ as a material manifestation of social services, the Panopticon, and the various social worker characters in the novel, Fagan reinforces widespread popular expectations of ‘poor outcomes’ among care-experienced people. But the coda of the novel, as in *The Hatchling*, offers a narrative of hope and liberation, with the

opportunity for Anais to establish an identity outside of the care system by extracting herself from the Panopticon and escaping to France.¹⁷

5.1 *Aspiration and class mobility*

As a child in care with a criminal history, Anais is othered as an institutionalised individual without a family. She has 147 criminal charges, with a long history of drug abuse and violence, is a victim of sexual violence, and has little knowledge of her biological mother. Taken to the Panopticon after being suspected of putting a police officer into a coma, Anais fantasises about escaping to Paris and reinventing herself as an artist. Like Bess, Anais believes that escape lies in aspiration and the cultural prestige of the arts. While Bess wants to ‘make films [...] make *the* films [...] I’m going to be the name that you think of when someone says think of a film director, *any film director*’ (*The Hatchling*: 92), Anais wants to live in Paris and ‘go to the galleries, and read everything in their libraries [...] I’ll write poetry in the back of dark bars’ (Fagan, *ibid.*: 323), because ‘knowledge is power, and what fucking other power do I have?’ (*ibid.*: 84). As Bentham’s Panopticon evolved into Foucault’s nineteenth-century theorisation of the surveillance of the many by the few (1975), the Panopticon of Fagan’s novel additionally represents an Orwellian neoliberal state, and Anais herself an abject entity to be contained within it. Further, Fagan’s care-experienced characters embody a popular perception of the so-called ‘undeserving poor’ working classes, as theorised by Skeggs: ‘irresponsible, ungovernable [...] represented as a drain on the nation and a blockage to the development of cosmopolitan modernity of others’ (2011: 502). Thus, Fagan’s novel, more than any other discussed thus far in this exegesis, comments on the institutionalisation of young people within the care system as a form of social abjection, and further, a specifically classed problem.

¹⁷ It is significant that, in the texts discussed, narratives of hope and re-birth exist outside the main body of the text and instead occur in a coda or epilogue format in the final chapters of each novel. While this approach offers a compelling resolution in terms of plot, it also is demonstrative of how the characters’ aspirational goals must occur outside of the care system which is synonymous with the main narrative thrust of the story.

Neoliberal forms of governing in the United Kingdom, especially under Thatcherism, have consistently advocated for the marginalisation of a social ‘underclass’ that cannot contribute to the accumulation of capital on neither a domestic nor a societal plane (Hall, 1983). This marginalisation is encouraged by an ideological shift under neoliberalism, which perceives ‘structural conditions of deep social, political and economic crises’ as symptoms of ‘individual behaviours’ rather than structural inequality (Dowling and Harvie, 2014: 872). The same perception could be applied to children in care. As wards of the state, Anais, Holly, Tracy and Bess are ‘kept’, in financial terms, by the taxpayer, and could easily be categorised, under neoliberalism, as this kind of non-contributing social underclass. This external classification is evident in Fagan’s text through Anais’s own understanding of how those outside the care system – particularly the middle classes – view her and her peers, for example when the residents of the Panopticon are taken on a day trip to a nearby loch:

It’s the minibus that does it [...] It has *Midlothian Social Work Department* emblazoned across it. It’s that and the young-offenders aura. The children-in-care aura. A we’llfuckyouandyerweepetsrightup kindae aura. [...] One of [the onlookers] eyes up John as they climb into a fancy four-wheel drive. (Fagan, *ibid.*: 193)

Anais’s comparison of the group minibus with the ‘fancy four-wheel drive’ highlights her own explicit understanding of the class disparity between herself as a looked-after child, and the ‘normal’, middle-class people with whom she interacts. The auras she describes – that she imagines her social abjection as something that can be sensed by others – is further evidence that she has internalised the identity foisted upon her by the neoliberal authorities in charge of her care. The fact that the minibus literally signposts the children’s institutionalisation is a further point of difference between Anais and the other children at the loch, and is symptomatic of the many ways in which looked-after children are reified as a social other through the ‘discursive hegemony and conditioning of the care system’ (McCulloch, 2015: 120). Anais is excluded from participating in the commonplace experiences of the middle-class family by being forced into the subject position of the criminalised other.

All this is not to say that Anais (and Bess) do not resist and combat the identity of abject other, that is enforced upon her by the nature of her being in care. Drawing on Dickens' representation of the Victorian institutionalised poor in his fiction, Fiona McCulloch notes that through Anais, Jenni Fagan shows how children in care are 'shaped by society into a suitable scapegoat, thus allowing it to turn a blind eye and feel to superior to its disposable monstrous element' (*ibid.*). The disposability of children in care is a theme that runs through the plot of the novel, especially through the character of Tash, a sex worker living at the Panopticon who one night disappears while with a client. Anais is disturbed by the lack of concern among the social workers at the Panopticon and the wider community, noting how no one has noticed a 'Missing' poster of Tash: 'all the commuters are just walking by. People dinnae want to look. They dinnae want tae see. Nobody will ask' (Fagan, *ibid.*: 264). The incident is significant in demonstrating to Anais that society doesn't care about looked-after children, that 'people in care are always disappearing. Nobody finds out where they go' (*ibid.*: 124). It reinforces to Anais her desire not to 'disappear', or to succumb to the 'experiment', and drives her to more aggressively pursue her ambitions to move to France. Social visibility, in the case of Anais, is interpolated with the protagonist's ability to be socially mobile. Drawing on the politics of respectability as theorised by Skeggs (1997), Anais resists what she describes as the 'uniform' of foster care: 'no hair extensions, no tracksuits, no gold jewellery' (Fagan, *ibid.*: 185) – all signifiers of the much-parodied working-class 'chav' trope common in early 2000s British media (Tyler, 2008). Instead, Anais wears vintage clothes – sailor shorts and pillbox hats – that set her apart from the other residents of the Panopticon, make her more 'visible', and signify her more closely as 'the much derided figure of the middle-class urban hipster' (Tyler, 2015: 506). Bess searches for social visibility through cultural significance, seeing it as a means of escaping the stigma of care experience and telling her social worker, 'I'm going to be the name that you think of when someone says think of a film director, *any film director*. That's what I'm going to be' (*The Hatchling*: 93). Anais's choice of clothes alongside a middle-class pursuit of the arts (film, photography, poetry, literature), demonstrates that she is arguably aspiring to a middle-class lifestyle that ostensibly negates the classed nature of

her care experience, and instead manifests ‘an urgency to seek alternative ways to respond to the neoliberal malaise of contemporary British society’ (McCulloch, *ibid.*: 113). Tracy Beaker, too, who in childhood aspires to be an actress, seeks the kind of visibility that is associated with a cosmopolitan, urbane and cultured identity – all signifiers of a performative middle-classness. In each case, the arts are entangled with the protagonists’ shared desire to escape the care system. At the end of *The Panopticon*, Anais has literally reinvented herself, having changed her name to Frances – noted to mean ‘freedom’ – and developed a new identity as she boards a train to Paris to begin her new life. Notably, instances of phonetically-spelled words indicating Anais’s strong Edinburgh accent, which are present throughout the novel’s prose, are significantly reduced in the final chapter – indicating that Anais has also attempted to minimise her regional accent in favour of a received pronunciation more commonly associated with the middle classes. Through this, Fagan demonstrates that the only way for Anais to be truly free of the state – and, indeed, socially mobile – is to shed her entire identity and ‘begin today’ (Fagan, *ibid.*: 324). Like Anais, Bess also ‘escapes’ care by leaving the physical space with which her care experience is associated: she moves away from Shepperton and joins a prestigious arts school in the North London suburb of Crouch End. In the same way that Anais views Paris as bohemian and artistic, and a vehicle for her to shed her class identity as well as her care identity, Bess associates London with cosmopolitan progressivism and the arts.¹⁸ For both characters, the urban space signifies liberation. Bess romanticises her new home – ‘I like the way the shops mishmash together and how all the houses line up in pretty rows but still manage to look like puzzle pieces that don’t make a complete picture. I like how green it is [...] I like the tube, all the history of it’ (*The Hatchling*:

¹⁸ This is also demonstrated in an earlier scene when Bess visits London’s cosmopolitan Soho neighbourhood with Eshal in search of her social worker, whom she suspects to be a drag queen. Significantly, once away from Shepperton, Bess and Eshal jokingly parody the middle classes: ‘Jolly good, spiffing, top drawer, Esh says taking a piece of her hair and draping it across her upper lip so it looks like she’s got a long, wispy moustache. I make a Posh Man face and she laughs’ (*The Hatchling*: 270).

292). However, it is significant that Bess has essentially moved from one commuter suburb to another on the other side of London: thus, while she feels closer to the metropolitan heart of the city (aided by access to the tube network rather than a mainline railway in Shepperton) she is nevertheless still existing on its fringes. Basquiat School itself takes its name from the American street artist of the same name, whose work was 'largely responsible for elevating graffiti artists into the realm of the New York gallery scene' (artnet.com, n.d.). This is significant in that Bess too wants to 'elevate' herself to a middle-class 'respectable' lifestyle through the arts and closer proximity to the city. Similarly, Anais's choice of Paris as her final destination is imbued with connotations of cosmopolitanism, cultural prestige, and the bohemian. While Fagan's novel ends with an element of mystery, as the reader never gets to know whether Anais made it to France and was able to develop the romantic lifestyle that she imagined, *The Hatchling's* conclusion is more absolute, showing that Bess is beginning to build a sustainable life for herself in Crouch End: attending school, undertaking internships (a middle-class pursuit often reserved for those who can afford to work for little or no pay) and developing her creative passion for filmmaking. While Anais's goal is to shed her identity in totality – demonstrated through changing her name and accent, for Bess, her identity as a care leaver, as demonstrated in the coda of the novel when she returns to Shepperton and reflects on her abortion, is codified in the narrative. Bess is able to thrive in spite of her care experience, rather than erasing it all together as is the case with Anais.

5.2 *Poor outcomes*

Much of Anais's narrative commentary on the care experience revolves around the internalised expectation that she will fail, or rather experience 'poor outcomes' as theorised in the Introduction. She calls herself a 'lifer'; this language choice reinforces motifs of imprisonment and entrapment, suggesting that she expects to become institutionalised within the care system, which is often represented as interchangeable with the criminal prosecution system. This expectation is reinforced by the social services professionals in the novel, whose job, ostensibly, is to protect and care for Anais and her peers in the Panopticon, though they

consistently fail to do this. It is clear, through Anais's narrative, that her own self-identity as someone who is destined to fail – destined for prison, even – has evolved from a sustained narrative proselytised by state representatives, which she has come to internalise. One symptom of her perceived pre-disposition to fail is Anais's perception of herself as a monstrous, inhuman experiment as described above. The novel offers examples of how Anais has been treated by social services professionals over the course of her life in care, and this treatment consistently reinforces expectations of 'poor outcomes':

It is my opinion, Miss Hendricks, that you are going to reoffend. Once you have done so, you will go into a secure unit. And when you get released from there, you will offend again and you will go on – to spend your adult life in prison, which is exactly where you belong, because you, Miss Hendricks, present a considerable danger to yourself and to *all of society*. (Fagan, *ibid.*: 176).

At a panel hearing for Anais's alleged involvement in an assault on a police officer, the Chairwoman, quoted above, reinforces a wider socially and culturally driven conception of care-experienced people as destined for 'poor outcomes'. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, children in care are more likely to experience 'poor outcomes' such as substance abuse, criminalisation, poor mental health and poor education. The causes of this higher likelihood for 'poor outcomes' are debated among theorists, but it is clear that early-life trauma plays a role in the continued wellbeing and mental wellness of children taken into care and creates downward social mobility. Rebbe *et al.* propose that 'clearer characterisation of the adversity histories that emancipating youth bring to their transition into adulthood' aids social work professionals in 'disrupting trajectories of continued stress exposure in adulthood and maladaptation' (2017: 109). Rebbe *et al.*'s proposition goes beyond the scope of life story work, discussed in Chapter 4, where looked-after children may access (in mediated forms) their care files and work with social workers to understand personal histories. It further suggests that personal histories of trauma and abuse should be a mitigating factor in institutions' treatment of looked-after children transitioning out of the care system. In the case

above, the Chairwoman does the opposite by deliberately disregarding Anais's unique circumstances as a child in care who has experienced adverse childhood trauma; instead, she participates in what McCulloch describes as a 'systematic demonisation and dehumanisation [of] vulnerable children in care' (*ibid.*: 113). It is also notable that children in care are overwhelmingly from working-class backgrounds, where parents and family members have also been victim of these various 'poor outcomes', which are additionally associated with the working-class experience (Capes, 2017: 99-100). The Chairwoman's perception of Anais as a criminal who will certainly re-offend is despite the lack of evidence (beyond the circumstantial) that Anais was involved in the assault. Anais's traumatic past and disrupted childhood – fifty-plus foster placements, exposure to abuse in early life, and the fact that she witnessed the murder of her adoptive mother – do not factor into the Chairwoman's assessment of Anais's potential. In this scene, the Chairwoman is emblematic of both the state authority and popular cultural discourses around looked-after children; Anais is not only a drain on state resources and unable to contribute meaningfully to society in terms of production and capital, she is also an abject entity existing outside the acceptable ideal of the nuclear family. This systemic relationship of mistrust between the state and the abject looked-after child contributes to Anais's belief that 'Authority figures are broken, and they're always bullies as well' (Fagan, *ibid.*: 101). Thus, 'brutalised by the very system that is supposed to care for [her]' (Shone, 2013), Anais is characterised by the state as a social ill, and rather than offering empathy and rehabilitation, 'state responsibility for this minor only concerns her removal from polite circles' (McCulloch, *ibid.*: 119). Once again, these 'polite circles' are more accurately identified as the respectable middle classes, such as the suburban neighbourhoods adjacent to the Panopticon itself, where '[t]hey've got a campaign down the village tae get this place shut already. They're worried we'll fuck their children. Contaminate the bloodline' (Fagan, *ibid.*: 63).

Fortunately, Anais's internalisation of her abjection is not absolute, though throughout the novel she struggles with the notion that 'I'm rotten. There's something wrong with me'

(*ibid.*: 71). While much of the novel deals with Anais's perception of herself as a monstrous other, her small acts of resistance (her choice of clothes, her pursuit of knowledge and education, her arguments with social work professionals where she seeks to expose the injustices of the system) are the things that embolden Anais to eventually escape the Panopticon. The narrator's choice not to name the Chairwoman outside of her job title subverts the typical de-humanisation of the care-experienced child, instead employing synecdoche to embody the problems of the state-run care system in this nameless character, as it does with the faceless men who stalk Anais. In this way, and through her escape to Paris, Anais becomes 'actively writerly rather than passively readerly regarding the narrative shaping her life' (McCulloch, *ibid.*: 128). *The Panopticon*, thus, is ultimately a narrative of resistance against neoliberal abjections of the care-experienced person. In its writing, Jenni Fagan (a care-experienced woman herself) commits a political act of resistance too, by indicting the care system as dehumanising; centring the surveilled abject entity rather than the surveilling state in the context of care experience, and offering an alternative representation to popular narratives of the looked-after child as other, doomed to fail, necessarily criminal and monstrous.

6.0 Synthesis: *The Hatchling* as a contribution to the emerging care-experienced canon

The core texts discussed thus far in this exegesis – *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *Solace of the Road* and *The Panopticon* – are representative of an emerging canon of British care-experienced fiction since the 1990s, where protagonists within the foster care system in the UK overcome obstacles that are implicit symptoms of their care experience: ‘poor outcomes’ and perceived pre-determined ‘poor outcomes’; loss of family connections and collective family memory resulting in attachment disorders; social stigma and institutionalisation. Drawing on cultural norms perpetuated in media and other modes of fiction that represent care-experienced children as the abject other, these novels explore themes of entrapment and liberation, often centring the biological mother and other kinds of motherhood in their plots, and often utilising the hero’s journey narrative to indicate personal growth and self-actualisation in the face of state oppression (Booker, 2004). In each case, issues of class are introduced in different ways to reinforce a representation of downward social mobility among care-experienced characters. In many ways, each novel addresses the problems inherent within the British care system which result in lack of self-identity, class slippage, attachment problems and rootlessness/unbelonging. Ultimately, each novel re-asserts the expectation of ‘poor outcomes’ among care-experienced people as a pre-determined certainty, rather than something that ought to be challenged and subverted. While both Tracy and Holly remain in the care system at the conclusion of Wilson’s and Dowd’s novels, Anais may escape the various oppressions of her care experience, but only by reinventing herself, leaving the country and establishing a new identity. While Fagan’s novel is perhaps the most hopeful in this regard (despite dealing with the darkest themes of the three novels), it is significant that Anais is only able to overcome her care experience by denying its existence entirely. Meanwhile, the conclusion of *Solace of the Road* sees Holly returning to her foster family and embracing the nuclear family ideal, while the novel also suggests that – due to the family’s middle-class status – overcoming the care experience is achievable through upward social mobility, which cannot happen unless children are fostered into middle-class families. Finally, while Tracy Beaker’s

care experience dogs her for the rest of her life and throughout the entire *Tracy Beaker* series, the character's continued idealisation of biological motherhood over other forms of maternal care is consistently reiterated in the prose, demonstrating that the care system is fundamentally flawed because, it is insinuated, children cannot succeed without their biological mothers.

The Hatchling looks to subvert a number of these recurring tropes while nevertheless reinforcing through the prose the various unique social problems faced by children with care experience. While acknowledging the statistical fact of increased likelihood of 'poor outcomes' among care-experienced people in later life, *The Hatchling* sees the care-experienced protagonist Bess overcome these tropes and achieve academic success and creative fulfilment through her acceptance into film school, and without rejecting her identity as a C.E.P. as is done in *The Panopticon*. In addition, Bess rejects biological-essentialist attitudes to the maternal through the rejection of her biological mother, 'I don't give a shit what you think. And my name isn't Isabelle any more' (*The Hatchling*: 241), and additionally rejects the nuclear family ideal by leaving her foster family and choosing to live independently. The novel uses the suburban setting of Shepperton to reinforce an atmosphere of entrapment, isolation and alienation – feelings which are common among care-experienced people – but also, through the characterisation of Bess and her story arc, shows that aspiration and ultimately success are not unattainable for care-experienced people, something that is often reinforced in pre-existing texts dealing with care-experienced characters.

As discussed in the introduction to this critical reflection, there is some tension around the question of the intended audience for *The Hatchling*: whether it is a young adult (Y.A.) novel or an adult novel. It is my contention that while the young age of the protagonist, and the themes of teenage pregnancy, coming-of-age and first love are all appealing to a Y.A. market, the style of prose and the hyper-realist interrogation of these difficult themes ultimately

places the novel in an adult literary/upmarket space.¹⁹ Through Bess's destructive relationship with Boy, *The Hatchling* also deliberately subverts the conventional romance narrative trope that is prevalent in issues-based Y.A. fiction (especially when it is marketed to adolescent girls or features female protagonists), such as in *Trouble* (Pratt, 2014), *Junk* (Burgess, 1997) and *Clean* (Dawson, 2018), because as an author I am interested in prioritising the tenets of self-love and female friendship over hetero-normative romance as a coping mechanism through the many varied challenges of adolescence. As Bess says, '[t]he thing about Boy is it's not a love story' (*The Hatchling*: 24), but there are nevertheless narratives of love present in the text: they are the examples of platonic, extra-maternal love between women, such as the friendship between Bess and Eshal, and the way Bess learns to love herself, and how this love ultimately supersedes any romantic love she feels for Boy.

6.1 Shepperton as a character; classed, raced and gendered suburbia

J. G. Ballard invokes the 'drowned suburban town' of Shepperton in his 1979 science fiction surrealist novel *The Unlimited Dream Company* (2014: 31). Having grown up in Shepperton myself, and knowing the area well, this town – situated between Junction 13 of the M25 and the south western London Borough of Hounslow, with both the Thames and the M3 bisecting it – makes a suitable setting to tell Bess's story of adolescent ennui, isolation and coming-of-age in the British suburbs. Invoking the juxtaposition of the urban with the suburban, Bess uses the physical space of Shepperton to manifest the tension in her own character around the question of her destiny – whether it is pre-determined or malleable. Once Bess falls pregnant, her decision regarding whether to abort the pregnancy or give birth is intertwined with her conception of Shepperton and her status as a child in foster care:

¹⁹ Since writing, *The Hatchling* has been accepted for publication by a publisher of adult literary and commercial fiction, which reinforces this view.

I start telling her about being in care. About wanting to be a filmmaker. [...] How I'll never be able to leave Shepperton, leave *care* as a mother (*The Hatchling*: 274).

For the purposes of the plot's forward-trajectory, these three things – Bess's pregnancy, her care status and the physical space of Shepperton – are the things that require resolution by the end of the novel to deliver a satisfying conclusion. By linking the obstacles in Bess's narrative, I may deliver this: Bess aborts her pregnancy, leaves care and finally leaves Shepperton, moving to London to undertake her film studies degree.

It is early in Ballard's novel that the protagonist Blake realises 'that Shepperton had trapped me' (Ballard, *ibid.*: 29). I drew on Ballard's visualisation of Shepperton as an alien yet familiar space, its bodies of water behaving as barriers, in my own work. Ballard describes this aspect of Shepperton thus:

On all sides Shepperton was surrounded by water – gravel lakes and reservoirs, the settling beds, canals and conduits of the local water authority, the divided arms of the river fed by a maze of creeks and streams. The high embankments of the reservoirs formed a series of raised horizons, and I realised I was wandering through a marine world [...] Unbeknownst to themselves, these modest suburbanites were exotic marine creatures (*ibid.*: 30).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the sense of being trapped by water – invoking drowning and immobility – are also features of *The Hatchling*, where Bess feels as trapped as Blake, although not in the surreal way that Blake physically cannot leave the town. Ballard's preoccupation with the suburban – and the blending of the metropolitan with the rural – is evident in his visualisation of Shepperton, which he describes as 'the England of the M25 [...] bus parks and executive housing, CCTV cameras, airports' (*ibid.*: 199). In this way Shepperton, like many other 'England of the M25' suburban towns, is defined by the transport links that may be used to leave it and travel to other places, such as London and Heathrow Airport. The setting holds particular psycho-geographical significance for this reason in both

The Hatchling and *The Unlimited Dream Company*. For Bess, Shepperton with its reservoirs and waterlogged gravel pits, Heathrow Airport just on the horizon, London only a train ride away, exacerbates her feelings of being stifled by the space – she rejects the ‘spatial reconfiguring of identity’ (Tew, 2014) enforced by the idealised suburban utopia of Shepperton: ‘the commuter wage-earner father, a stay-at-home mother, two children, a dog, and a station wagon,’ that is ‘firmly etched in the [western] mind as a symbol of white, middle-class life’ (Leavitt and Welch, 1989: 35). Movement from one geographical space to another, particularly between urban and suburban/rural locales, and how this links to the care experience, is also significant in the other texts discussed in previous chapters. In *Solace of the Road*, Holly moves from the urban space of London through rural towns to reach her literal ‘motherland’, Ireland, where she hopes to reunite with her biological mother. In *The Panopticon*, Anais reflects on the institution’s relationship with the local village, where ‘there’s petitions to close this place down already; there’ll be people from the village writing letters tae their MPs’ (Fagan, 2013: 6), and when running away chooses to abandon rural Scotland entirely and travels to the bohemian city of Paris. In both cases, and in the case of Bess, the spaces in which these protagonists are placed by local authorities or social services (South London, the Panopticon, Shepperton) are representative of stasis and institutionalisation, contingent upon their care experience. In order to develop identities outside of their care experience, these girls must abandon these places and move to new, psycho-geographically significant areas in order to achieve their aspirational goals (Ireland, Paris, London).

Through Bess’s narrative voice, the suburban ideal is disrupted. She introduces Manor Park Jesus, a nomadic/homeless drug dealer; Mary Beth a welfare-dependent young single mother; and ‘the locals in the Crossroads who drink so much that all their teeth have fallen out’ (*The Hatchling*: 31). As a care-experienced person, Bess is representative of social ill and the abject other, and thus is an outsider in Shepperton. Nevertheless, she passes judgement upon these people despite herself living a working-class, marginalised life in a primarily middle-class neighbourhood, exacerbated by her status as a looked-after child. Through these

characters and her own narrative which centres her care experience and marginalised identity, Bess 'offers the reader an alternative outlook that re-centres those ordinarily rendered invisible in society' (McCulloch, 2015: 114). Through Bess's observations of marginalised characters living in Shepperton and the surrounding areas, she disrupts the mid-twentieth-century narrative of the suburbs as a 'space that the white middle-class family could [...] claim as its own' (Spigel, 2001: 107). Instead the narrative – through its portrayal of unstable, insecure and precarious lives – suggests that 'the things that we have comfortably associated with suburbia – stability, safety, respectability and whiteness – no longer epitomise [the] suburb' (Huq, 2007: 36). This is further demonstrated through the character of Eshal, who is marginalised in Shepperton 'because she's brown' (*The Hatchling*: 21), and despite coming from a respectable middle-class family, her presence disrupts suburban whiteness and perceived respectability, further demonstrating the changing landscape of suburbia in the late twentieth century:

I was in Summerfields a couple of months ago buying sweets and I pointed out to [a woman] that she'd pushed in the queue and she told me I can either go back to Pakiland and be at the front of the queue or stay here and let the people who were born here go first. I was like, *you mug*, my birth certificate says Ashford Hospital. (*ibid.*: 232)

Feminist geographers have demonstrated a correlation between the space of the city, and its suburbs as highly gendered and classed spaces (Massey, 1983; S. Watson, 2000; Greed, 2006a, 2006b; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). Suburban spaces have historically been perceived as a 'stronghold' for the nuclear family, and the nuclear family itself is highly gendered and classed in its formation (Greed, 2006b: 267-280). Understanding the role geography plays in marginalising mothers, particularly the differences between city and suburb, which over time are 'less and less located in simple binaries of public and private and home and work' (S. Watson, *ibid.*: 104), further exposes the entrenchment of patriarchal norms and their purveyance in popular culture. The mundanity of British suburban life is thus used in *The Hatchling* to enhance the feeling of being trapped by a pre-determined destiny that is

configured around the nuclear family unit and a universalised prescriptivism that girls ought to become mothers. By articulating her struggles as a working-class, care-experienced girl in the context of her pregnancy, and observing the difficulties faced by Eshal as a non-white Muslim girl, the novel subscribes to the notion that ‘the social formations of race, gender and class are dialectically related social phenomena and cannot be disarticulated from one another’ (Mojab and Carpenter, 2017: 74). Bess notices this in her first-person stream-of-consciousness narrative: after falling pregnant she pays attention to how the suburban ‘ideal’ manifests in Shepperton. Her view is drawn from a 1950s vision of suburbia as a centre of homogeneity and respectability:

I look across the Studios Estate, all golden in its summer-ness, with its redbrick terraces with brown roof tiles and white window frames and its neat rows of front gardens and sprinklers. I wonder how many of these houses are just cages for mums looking after their kids, how many of them are trapped here, whether I’m about to be trapped too. (*The Hatchling*: 208)

Bess’s view of Shepperton contrasts significantly with Eshal’s. While Bess’s perception of the suburbs is steadfastly entangled with her perception of motherhood and the family as something that will trap her and keep her from fulfilling her aspirational goals, Eshal seeks to disrupt public perceptions of marginalised communities embodied by the racist and classed language of Shepperton’s residents. This is exemplified in the two extracts from the novel above: in the first, spoken by Eshal, the character is attempting to re-assert her legitimacy in the social strata of Shepperton – her right to participate in social life – especially through her invocation of the suburban mundanity of the local supermarket and hospital. Meanwhile, in the second example, Bess sees herself being forced to participate in something that she rejects – suburban motherhood – and as a result feels trapped inside this system rather than existing on the outside waiting to be let in, as is the case with Eshal.

6.2 Plotting the novel

The first pieces of fiction I wrote for *The Hatchling* were a series of short stories in 2014. Two of these stories – a short story about a couple visiting Brighton and night-swimming in the sea, and a story about a group of adolescent girls taking their pregnant friend to a clinic to obtain a medical abortion – eventually became scenes in the final manuscript of the novel. Consequently, *The Hatchling* was not written in a linear fashion, but was initially a collection of scenes that required cohesive and logical structural plotting. In order to plot the novel, I initially relied on Blake Snyder's beat sheet from *Save the Cat!* (2005), which was originally devised for screenwriting, and John Gardner's plotting theory, specifically the Fichtean curve, from *The Art of Fiction* (1983). Using Blake Snyder's beat sheet, I devised critical points in the novel to correspond to story beats, for example:

- **Catalyst:** Bess meets Boy after he crashes the car into the church (Chapter 3).
- **Break into Two:** Bess finds out she is pregnant, and Act Two begins, centring her decision-making process (Chapter 11).
- **Dark Night of the Soul:** Bess visits her biological mother Amanda and re-lives her childhood abuse (Chapter 21).
- **Break into Three:** Bess goes through with the abortion, signifying the climactic moment of the novel and the start of Act Three (Chapter 24).
- **Final image:** Bess returns to Shepperton to spend time with Eshal and Clarissa, signifying the triumph of female friendship and love against the odds (Chapter 26).

As I developed the story's plot in the writing process, these story beats became less tightly bound to the story structure laid out by Snyder in *Save the Cat!* and evolved into scenes and beats that worked for the story, rather than conforming strictly to Snyder's theoretical framework. In this way, I propose that the story remains surprising because it does not adhere to well-known and expected story conventions as strictly as initially expected. Nevertheless, the plot of *The Hatchling* remains a series of story beats that follow one another with escalating

tension (the revelation of Bess’s pregnancy; the abortion attempt; Boy’s arrest; conflict between Bess and Lisa; Bess’s rape; Eshal’s escape from her arranged marriage; Bess’s visit to her biological mother), leading to an ultimate point of climax (Bess’s abortion) and a third act resolution and de-escalation of conflict (Bess moving away from Shepperton), as such conforming uniformly to Gardner’s Fichtean curve. The figure below demonstrates an early draft of plot points corresponding to the Fichtean curve (many of the plot points, and some characters’ names, were altered in subsequent drafts):

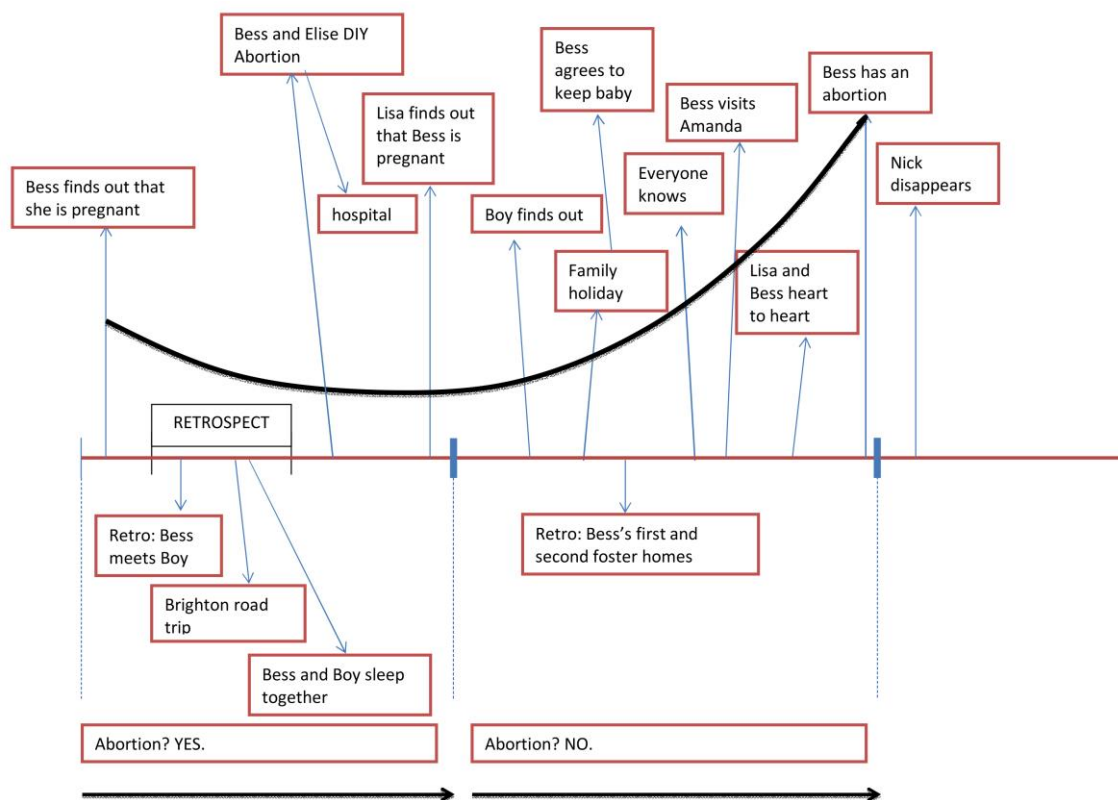


Figure 1: Early plotting of the novel demonstrated using John Gardner’s Fichtean curve (author’s own)

Initially, when writing the novel chronologically, I was concerned that the early scenes – Bess’s meeting Boy and the establishment of key relationships in Bess’s life – were not gripping enough to maintain a reader’s interest over the course of 85,000 words. Despite this I felt that the development of Bess and Boy’s relationship on the page was critical to characterising Bess, and enhanced the thematic motif of care that is present throughout the novel. Thus, with these scenes deemed necessary to the story, I employed an adjusted form of the *in media res*

narrative technique, or '[started] "in the middle of things"', using a moment of high tension in the novel (the revelation of Bess's pregnancy) to develop an opening scene 'that both pushes the story forward and fills in backstory' (Buchanan, 2019). This allowed me to develop the 'backstory' of Bess and Boy's relationship over Chapters 3 to 10, while the first two chapters – the pregnancy revelation – are dedicated to a chronological 'future' event, in addition to behaving as the 'Break into Two' moment that signifies the beginning of Act 2 as well as the 'Opening Image', as laid out by Snyder, representative of the main conflict of the novel and the protagonist's core problem. This use of *in media res* serves the purpose of keeping readers interested throughout the important developmental narrative moments in the following backstory chapters, using Bess's pregnancy as the narrative hook. Knowing that Bess will fall pregnant heightens the reader's investment in Boy and Bess's relationship, and the backstory itself provides important context to Bess's actions after finding out she is pregnant from Chapter 11 onwards, as well as her characterisation as a young girl who is desperate to be loved and believes that Boy is the source of such love, as demonstrated in Chapter 2 when Bess imagines that

[...] he'll drive us to St Anne's Hill and let me put my head in his lap and pretend to sleep and he'll stroke my hair and then I'll pretend to wake up and kiss him long and hard and he'll fall in love with me again. (*The Hatchling*: 15)

The introduction of Boy in the opening chapter, without the reader having yet met him in the story's prose, serves to heighten interest in the character, signifying him as someone important to the narrative and one who will reoccur in later chapters. The clues Bess drops about his character – Bess thinking of 'Boy's dick poking into my back' (*ibid.*: 12), and 'wondering whether Boy has been fucking someone else' (*ibid.*: 17) – offset against the intimate romantic passages of Bess's internal monologue, as quoted above, are significant in reinforcing his characterisation as a sexually violent and volatile person, which is fulfilled later in the novel when Boy rapes Bess and abandons his romantic interest in her.

6.3 Characterisation and fictionalising the self

When writing *The Hatchling*, I was keen for the work to be intersectional and gave the character of Eshal prominence both in terms of the plot of the novel and her significance in the character arc of the protagonist Bess. Discussion of identity and belonging in the prose extends to Eshal's character, who struggles as a second-generation British-Bangladeshi immigrant to wed her British identity with her Bangladeshi-Muslim identity: 'it's like I'm not good enough for here or good enough for there. So where is it that I will be good enough?' (*The Hatchling*: 71). These difficulties are exacerbated by Eshal's parents who push her to fulfil a more traditionally religious role within the family:

My parents want me to be this good little Bengali girl who behaves like she's supposed to and respects her parents and reads the Qur'an, does salat every day. But I'm not like them. They were raised in Dhaka and I was raised in Middlesex. That stuff... it's not me. But then, here isn't me either. So, who am I? (*ibid.*: 116)

In the same way Eshal invokes her birthplace of Ashford Hospital to assert her 'place' in the supermarket queue, a sense of place is conclusively tied to her self-identity and belonging. Issues of identity and belonging are present among a number of other main characters in *The Hatchling* in different ways, and these themes are frequently played out in other examples of fiction featuring care-experienced characters, such as *Solace of the Road* and *The Panopticon*, in which the teenaged-girl protagonists Holly and Anais 're-invent' themselves with new names, and sometimes entire new identities and backstories, over the course of the novel. In addition, both Holly and Anais are wedded to aspects of their identity that invoke their maternal heritage, for example Holly's pride in her Irish heritage 'where mammy was and where the grass was green' (Dowd, 2015: 31), and Anais's delight in learning that her mother was a 'cigarillo-smoking Outcast Queen' (Fagan, *ibid.*: 245), again demonstrating a mythologisation of biological mothers in these texts. The re-configuring of identity is a trend that the protagonist Bess follows in some ways, though the changing of her name is indicative

of her rejection of her biological mother's influence, thus disassociating herself from past trauma at the hands of Amanda: 'Every time she says 'Isabelle' it's like someone has just dragged their nails across a blackboard' (*The Hatchling*: 159). While Bess uses her new name to reject her biological parentage, Boy's nickname is used as an external oppression – co-opted by Boy himself – to reinforce that he is trapped by his biological parentage. Like public perceptions of care-experienced people, there is some sense that Boy, as a working-class man, is also destined to 'poor outcomes' in later life, lacking in ambition or aspiration, repeating a cycle of poverty perpetuated by his father:

And how is the boy? He asks. Still stacking shelves?

Nothing new to report, David, Boy says. Just like you.

Just like your father, David agrees, but the way he says it is loaded, like it's not a good thing for Boy to be like David, and it's not a good thing for David to have Boy be like him. (*ibid.*: 81)

The suggestion that 'their Dad forgot Boy's name when he was a baby and it's been too long to politely ask someone to repeat it' (*ibid.*: 80) is even more significant because Boy shares his birth name with his father, and the nickname 'Boy' was given originally by the elder David. Gormley draws attention to characters 'whose identities are profoundly coloured by what they are called, and whose effort towards forging a sense of self are undermined by negatively charged names' in American author Jerry Spinelli's novels (Gormley, 2006: 14). While Boy's name is certainly 'negatively charged' by its associations with his father and their difficult relationship, Bess voluntarily sheds her own 'negatively charged' name in favour of one she has chosen for herself, thus establishing an identity outside of her biological mother's influence. In the conclusion of the novel, the influence of names corresponds to the outcomes of both characters: Bess – who chose her new name – is able to escape Shepperton and attain her goals, while Boy – whose name is a common noun, imbued with inherited working-

class trauma and paternal rejection – remains in Shepperton and, at the conclusion of the novel, has not grown or changed as a character.

While Boy's name serves to make him more invisible and everyman, Bess's attempts to appear more visible are present throughout the text. The sense of being watched, for Bess, connotes both a sense of institutionalisation, as discussed in Chapter 5; but it is also indicative of a desire to be looked at, paid attention, and loved. Frequently, this desire is intertwined with Bess's fixation on Boy. While Bess is not an autobiographical character, many of her experiences and corresponding behaviours are derived from my own experiences growing up in the care system. The experience of accessing my care records, visits with social workers, being sent on 'respite care', review meetings, life story work, 'contact', therapy, and myriad other activities imbued with the terminology of social work, all inform Bess's treatment of and reaction to these things. In recent years, a movement of care-experienced communities have worked to bring attention to the lack of love in the care system, which instead prioritises:

too frequent placement moves; institutional care with unnecessary rules; carers that are afraid to show love and affection; failure to prioritise consistent relationships; and services organised as they have always been done rather than to meet children's needs. (McCreadie, 2019)

With *The Hatchling* my intention is to highlight the problematic realities of the care system as it is today, reiterating the work of Dowd and Fagan in their novels through their emphases on identity, aspiration and belonging, and combating some of the harmful tropes about the care system laid out in these texts around 'poor outcomes', biological-essentialist views of motherhood and failure. Thus, *The Hatchling* discusses a range of issues highlighted by McCreadie above. For example, inconsistent relationships in the care system are shown through Bess's various social workers who she describes as 'flavour-of-the-month' (*The Hatchling*: 221); and 'too frequent placement moves', through the character of Jonathan who 'was moved around loads of different foster placements before they just gave up trying to

settle him' (*ibid.*: 123). As discussed in Chapter 4, C.E.P.s who have experienced early-life trauma at the hands of their biological families frequently develop attachment disorders, thus struggling to form normative relationship dynamics with others. Issues with relationships are exacerbated when looked-after children are moved between placements and change social workers frequently. It is significant that Bess, who achieves success in spite of pre-supposed 'poor outcomes', has lived in the same foster placement with the same carers for many years; while Jonathan, described as having 'challenges' and 'problematic behaviour' (*ibid.*: 124), struggles with 'poor outcomes' (fighting and arson), though later settles down – again bucking conditioned stereotypes about care leavers being doomed to fail. The higher frequency of attachment disorders among C.E.P.s is something Bess alludes to herself in the narrative – 'One of Mum's attachment theory books suggests that it's because I can't form meaningful attachments with other humans due to being deprived of basic nurturing during my key developmental phases as a baby' (*ibid.*: 27) – noting that the fact that she struggles with eye contact might be a symptom of an attachment disorder. Bess's obsessive behaviour towards Boy, her second-guessing of social signalling, and hyper-sensitivity to his attention could be indicators of an insecure-ambivalent style attachment disorder (where attention is sought out but rejected when offered) (Gibbons *et al.*, 2019: 415):

I don't want to turn around and check what he's looking at because that might seem offensive, like I'm suggesting he should be looking at me. (*The Hatchling*: 132)

Alternatively, these characteristics in Bess could also be observed in any adolescent teenaged girl with a crush. To invoke attachment theory in the narrative is to highlight the institutionalisation of young care-experienced people as they move through the system. As institutionalised people, looked-after children are scrutinised by government bodies and local authorities in ways that non-C.E.P. children do not have to endure. Here, as discussed in Chapter 5, is where Bess's sensation of being watched – by faces in the ceiling and people on the other sides of mirrors – becomes significant. Bess is successful in spite of her institutionalisation, bucking myriad stereotypes of care-experienced people that permeate

popular culture and media. Nevertheless, Bess's character must face the many difficulties that are associated with the care experience by the fact of increased statistical probability: she struggles with attachment disorder, mental health issues, teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse and social marginalisation. While Bess's characterisation is therefore subverting traditional stereotypes of looked-after children, it does not negate the lived experience of many care-experienced people; thus, it is arguably a far more nuanced and balanced portrayal compared to many popular representations.

6.4 Aesthetics and point of view

The Hatchling is set in 1999 for several reasons, but it is primarily due to the lack of technology, mobile phones, internet and social media available to the characters. By disallowing characters' easy access to digital communication channels, the obstacles Bess and Eshal face – their goals to obtain an abortion and to escape an arranged marriage – become logistically more difficult, because they are relying on family house telephones and internet computers in libraries to achieve these things. The fact that Bess is not able to easily communicate with Boy, text him or look at his social media profiles enhances her obsessive feelings towards him through lack of contact, and a broader sense of loneliness and isolation that permeates the novel:²⁰

I try to underplay the enormity of my desperation. The countless times I picked up the house phone and dialled his number, the times when I was halfway to his house on my bike before forcing myself to turn around. (*ibid.*: 132)

²⁰ That lack of quotation marks around dialogue is also a stylistic choice used to emulate Bess's feelings of isolation and loneliness, in the style of Junot Diaz who uses the same technique in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Besides this, the usage indicates that the conversations Bess has might be imagined, which they sometimes are (in the case of Boy), and that she is disconnected from reality and struggling to deal with the reality of her pregnancy. Feelings of isolation and disconnectedness are especially relevant in the case of Bess's relationship with Lisa, observing that 'when she talks to me it's like she's at the other end of a swimming pool' (*The Hatchling*: 60).

Use of communal technology also allows for some significant moments of tension in the novel, such as when Rory answers the phone to Boy in Chapter 20 and tells him ‘please do not call this number again’ (*ibid.*: 223). In addition to this, the 1999 time frame enhances a sense of impending doom in the novel – articulated by Bess on several occasions, who is constantly afraid that ‘something terrible is going to happen’ (*ibid.*: 130) – overshadowed by the imminent millennium, which brings with it concerns about the end of the world and the millennium bug. These concerns are used again to heighten tension in the novel, invoking a sensation of time running out or racing against the clock, which is married to Bess’s decision about her pregnancy being time-sensitive, and Eshal’s need to organise her escape before she goes to Bangladesh for her marriage. In addition to this, the impending Total Eclipse – which took place in the summer of 1999 – is also a source of anxiety for Bess in the specific context of the millennium:

The lunchtime news is on the TV. The picture is showing a crudely put-together diagram of how exactly the Total Eclipse is going to happen. And how soon, NASA’s going to land the *Lunar Prospector* on the moon and find water. Guaranteed.

Let’s hope we all survive the millennium. (*ibid.*: 16)

Here, the 1999 time frame serves to enhance an atmosphere of isolation, loneliness, and a sense of impending doom. These are of course supported by the application of other literary devices, such as a hyper-realist, stream-of-consciousness, first-person present-tense narrative voice, which has the effect of enhancing immediacy in the prose and bringing readers closer to the character, in the same way that Wilson uses the technique in the *Tracy Beaker* series.

Another theme of the novel is that of aspiration in the face of adversity, and this is particularly significant because, as shown in the examples of care-experienced fiction in this reflective essay, aspirational narratives in care-experienced fiction are frequently absent. To have the care-experienced protagonist Bess be motivated to achieve aspirational and

academic goals is to subvert tropes of care-experienced fiction where characters might only aspire to low-paid and/or unskilled work, as is the case with Tracy Beaker who, as an adult, becomes a shop assistant (Wilson, 2019) despite aspiring to become a famous actress in childhood. Holly in Dowd's *Solace of the Road* does not discuss any aspirational goals besides that of locating her biological mother, while Anais in Fagan's *The Panopticon* removes herself from the care system in order to pursue an artist's life in Paris. While Fagan goes some way toward subverting the trend towards 'poor outcomes' in care-experienced fiction, *The Hatchling* works instead to demonstrate that looked-after children may achieve success in their chosen field *in conjunction with* their care experience rather than *instead of* it. Thus, it is necessary for Bess's aspirational goals to be reinforced throughout the text; this is articulated through space and astrology imagery, and the use of film aesthetics demonstrating Bess's love of film and her desire to emulate her favourite filmmakers. Bess's preoccupation with the Total Eclipse of 1999 and the voyage of the Lunar Prospector to the moon are both symptomatic of her interest in space, as well as indicative of a desire to escape. But, as Boy tells Bess, 'you'll never be an astronaut. You'll never make it out of here' (*The Hatchling*: 84), and thus the space metaphor is also conversely symbolic of Bess's entrapment in Shepperton, serving as a reminder that she is limited by place as well as motivated by it. This is exemplified by the crash-landing of the Lunar Prospector, another real-life event that took place in July 1999 (NASA, 2007):

NASA crashed the Prospector because they thought the impact would dislodge the ice and send a plume of water vapour into the atmosphere, and then they would know for sure. [...] They didn't see any cloud formation. So, they still don't know.

[...]

All that for nothing, she says.

Yep. Total waste of time. (*The Hatchling*: 196)

The crash-landing of the Prospector is symbolic of Bess's own trajectory: in order to achieve her aspirational goals, she must venture into the unknown at great personal risk with no way of anticipating the outcome. Where the Prospector fails, Bess succeeds.

In terms of aesthetics, in writing *The Hatchling* I drew inspiration from a number of film and television works that deal with the working-class experience in the United Kingdom and representations of teenage pregnancy and female friendship.²¹ Bess's character is reflected in her own filmic references throughout the narrative prose: her pre-occupation with the 1980s romantic comedy director John Hughes is symptomatic of her tendency towards the romantic and her desire for romantic love, for example likening Boy to John Cusack's character Lloyd Dobler in the Hughes film *Say Anything* (1989) (*The Hatchling*: 24; 114). Bess's references to horror films, such as *Carrie* (1976) are emblematic of her articulation of her own self as abject (as Anais does in *The Panopticon* through imagining The Experiment), reifying identities of otherness that are perpetuated by other characters in the novel and internalised by Bess herself, especially in terms of negotiating the maternal:

I think of Carrie – the movie version, I mean – and her crazy mum. The bit where she's talking about being pregnant. She says, *I should've killed myself when he put it in me.* She says, to Carrie, *I should've given you to God when you were born, but I was weak and backsliding, and now the devil has come.* (*The Hatchling*: 243)

The choice of quote from *Carrie* is significant as it articulates Bess's worries about inherited maternal abuse and her indecision around her pregnancy, having been abused herself as a young child; it also alludes to a biblical obligation to have children, which is explored lightly in *The Hatchling* through Bess's observations of the Christian figure of the Virgin Mary in the

²¹ Key influences from film and television on the visualisation of the world of *The Hatchling* were the *This is England* series (2007-2015) and *Fish Tank* (2009).

church.²² In the same scene Bess thinks of the film *Carrie*, she thinks of ‘Mary the Virgin at the church and wonder[s] at all the women I know who are playing at being mothers’ (*ibid.*: 247). The films Bess dwells upon in her internal monologue hold significance to the wider thematic issues explored in the text. Supporting further filmic elements, many scenes in the novel are framed by Bess as shots from films. For example, in her first meeting with Boy during the car crash, Bess observes that ‘the whole thing would look incredible on film [...] I am setting up the shots for a film noir in my head’ (*ibid.*: 26). As a key catalytic scene in the plot, the gravitas of filmic framing of Bess’s narrative lends the moment additional significance.

Film is again used to tell the B-story of Eshal’s escape from her family home in Chapter 25 in a palimpsestic fashion, through Bess’s submission to Basquiat School. On this occasion, the use of the filmic view in the narrative not only lends additional weight to Eshal’s story, it also functions as an indicator of Bess moving towards becoming ‘actively writerly rather than passively readerly’ (McCulloch, *ibid.*: 128) regarding her filmmaking career. Now, rather than consuming the medium – as she does throughout the novel, demonstrated through myriad references to films, directors and actors – Bess is contributing to it in very much the same fashion that this thesis examines existing work in the emerging care-experienced canon, and contributes to through the novel. In this way, my creative aspiration in writing *The Hatchling* mirrors that of Bess’s film on Eshal’s escape: both works move the marginalised figure – of the working-class care-experienced girl and the British-Bangladeshi Muslim girl respectively – from the subject position of the socially abject other, to the object position that centres these narratives and demands that readers (or watchers) pay attention to their stories.

²² The text uses the figures of both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene to allude to the dichotomous Freudian mother/whore trope. The usage of these figures suggests that Bess vacillates between the two but must ultimately become one or the other – the mother or the whore – and her observations of both figures contribute to her indecision around the pregnancy, and the question of reproductive choice in the context of the Christian faith: ‘[The Virgin Mary statue is] opening her hands out to me. I spit on the ground and wonder if she hated God for the immaculate conception. Maybe later she hated Jesus as he was fertilising away in her womb. She didn’t even have a choice’ (*The Hatchling*: 243).

7.0 Concluding remarks: 'misery memoirs' and further representations of care

The Hatchling is in many ways a political work, and through its characters, settings, and plot it reflects my own beliefs concerning motherhood and foster care. The novel operates as a hypothesis for two key ideas that I then go on to explore in the critical reflective portion of the thesis: first, that culturally we are pre-occupied with biological-essentialist ideals around the institution of motherhood, and that these ideals are often harmful and should be challenged. Secondly, the work proposes that common tropes in fiction around care-experienced people are harmful and pejorative, and ought to be challenged. While fiction is inherently political, it is also hegemonic: it behaves as a reflection of society but also a cultural benchmark regarding how the author incites public audiences to think and feel about certain topics, political ideas, and social issues. As a result, *The Hatchling* may be read as a political work which seeks to address the specific issues of care and the maternal from a post-feminist perspective.

The Hatchling is also, in my opinion, a necessary contribution to fictional discourse around the care experience in the UK. As discussed in Chapter 3 of the critical reflection, many British readers' only explicit interaction with foster care in fiction is through Wilson's popular *Tracy Beaker* series, which has been the dominant fictional representation of a care-experienced girl (and later, woman) in the UK for almost thirty years. While other representations of care-experienced people exist in popular culture – such as comic-book heroes and boarding school stories – the language of these examples centre the characters' identities as orphans or students rather than care-experienced people. Thus, examples like Tracy Beaker – whose portrayal as a care-experienced person, as discussed, is deeply problematic and harmful – dominate public consciousness and skew audiences' bias in opposition to care-experienced people. To resolve this, it is necessary to centre stories of the care experience *by* care-experienced people – for example *The Panopticon* by Jenni Fagan, who has had extensive personal experience of the care system. While Jacqueline Wilson experienced her own hardships as a child, she was never taken into any kind of institutional or even kinship care. Thus, the narrative of the *Tracy Beaker* series is one based purely on

Wilson's own perception of the care system and the children within it, as an 'outsider' looking in. While arguably Wilson's research and interviews with care-experienced people might have qualified her to write on the subject, her use of a highly intimate first-person narrator with a background in care lends an authority to the *Tracy Beaker* narrative that is wholly unwarranted.

In other areas of publishing, the trend of using care-experienced people's stories for shock value and/or personal gain continues. A troubling genre in the UK and North American markets is the so-called 'misery memoir' or 'trauma porn', wherein authors who primarily have a background in foster care as either carers or social workers write memoir-style accounts of the abuse suffered by the children in their care. These books are marketed as non-fiction and often detail horrific accounts of child abuse from the perspective of the author/carer. They follow the popularity of such memoirs as American author Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'* (1995), which is an autobiographical account of his own mother's abuse towards him, and later his experience of foster care. Extremely popular at its time of publication, Pelzer's memoir went into intimate, disturbing details about the abuse he suffered, including being stabbed in the stomach by his mother, made to eat faeces from a nappy, and having his arm held over an open flame until his skin burnt. While similar literary accounts came before Pelzer's, the success of *A Child Called 'It'* is widely regarded as being the catalyst for an influx of similar stories being published in the twenty-first century in the West (Kellaway, 2004). Problematically, many of the authors of these stories are foster carers, who are so prolific that it is not clear whether the children featured in the narratives were able to give informed consent or have say over the contents of the books. In a 2007 'memoir' entitled *Damaged*, author Cathy Glass (who uses a pseudonym to 'protect' the children she writes about) described 'Jodie' as 'the most disturbed and abused child I had ever looked after, and her behaviour was so difficult that she ha[d] seen off five carers in four months', describing in the memoir's synopsis how Jodie 'soiled herself, and then wiped it on her face, grinning wickedly' (Glass, 2007). Glass has published over twenty 'true fostering stories' with HarperCollins, similar to *Damaged* in tone – detailing the shocking and abject behaviours of the severely traumatised children she

fosters before going on to explain how her own intervention as a foster carer helps these children undergo psychological recovery and eventually live socially normative, fulfilled lives. Glass also relies on common assumptions of care-experienced children as ‘difficult’, with ‘bad behaviour’ and an innate ‘evilness’ – reflected in her characterisation of Jodie as ‘wicked’ which has strong biblical connotations of evil and Satan – at odds with her own children’s ‘goodness’. In the synopsis for *Girl Alone*, she describes another foster child, ‘Joss’, thus:

Joss smoked cannabis, drank alcohol, went missing overnight and was in trouble with the police and at school. I worried about the effect her behaviour was having on my teenage children, especially when I wasn’t able to make a difference and her behaviour continued to deteriorate. (Glass, 2015).

Glass’s characterisation of Joss, Jodie, and many of the other children in her books, is reminiscent of care professionals’ perceptions of care-experienced children’s expected ‘poor outcomes’ discussed in the Introduction – assumptions that care-experienced children who have endured trauma are ‘beyond help’, ‘doomed to fail’ or even innately evil. When progress is made with the children in Glass’s stories, it is to demonstrate her own success as a foster carer, rather than the child’s ability to overcome trauma. In addition, questions have been raised around the veracity of Glass’s memoirs, a prolific author having published over thirty books since 2007, many of which are billed as ‘true stories’ about foster children, or otherwise based on true stories. As Glass is publicly anonymous, it is impossible to verify the truth of the accounts she publishes, or indeed, if the accounts are biographical, ascertain whether appropriate consent was obtained from the children featured. Glass is not the only author writing in this area whose work has raised questions of veracity and safeguarding. Author Casey Watson, according to her Amazon author’s biography (2019) has been fostering for six years. Some of the young children she has written about – for example nine-year-old Sam in *A Dark Secret* (C. Watson, 2019), whose respite carers ‘with two young children of their own [now] find themselves unable to hold on to the little boy as he is bullying them relentlessly’ – would not have aged out of the care system within the six years she has been fostering,

meaning that if Watson's accounts are true, she is potentially writing about children who are still under 16 and arguably unable to give informed consent to having their personal histories memoirised and published to sometimes millions-strong audiences.

While these 'misery memoirs' have been a commonplace fixture in the publishing industry for at least the past twenty-five years, it is pertinent to raise them here as an offshoot of the fiction discussed in the thesis dealing with care-experienced people. As I have discussed previously, it is necessary for care-experienced stories – fiction and non-fiction – to involve care-experienced people themselves, to ensure accurate and nuanced representations of this multi-faceted and diverse community. The 'Own Voices' movement in publishing has become more prominent in the 2010s, with recent schemes such as Penguin Random House's WriteNow mentorship programme, launched in 2016, including care-experienced people as a group under-represented in the publishing industry (Wyatt, 2019; Penguin, n.d.). While it is not necessary for all stories about care-experienced people to be written by care-experienced people, it is paramount that members of this community play a key role in shaping and informing fiction published into the mass market that includes care-experienced characters. With mainstream portrayals consisting of the likes of Tracy Beaker and the subjects of misery memoirs, these portrayals are reinforcing the harmful negative stereotypes discussed in Chapter 1, of care-experienced people, particularly from working-class backgrounds, being abject, evil and/or 'doomed to fail'. When thinking of the arguments in my thesis, I believe that the interrogation of misery memoirs and their impact on public perceptions of looked-after children is a natural next step in terms of how my research might develop. There are, of course, a number of successful works published in recent years not written by care-experienced people but widely well-received by care-experienced readers: for example *Solace of the Road* by Siobhan Dowd who worked in children's services prior to writing the novel, as discussed in Chapter 4, and *My Name is Leon* by Kit de Waal, a British author who grew up with foster children because her mother was a foster carer. It is important to emphasise that I am not suggesting that no non-care-experienced person should write care-

experienced characters. Rather, to avoid appropriating or exploiting the care experience, as is arguably done in the 'misery memoirs' noted above, writers should work closely with care-experienced people to develop sensitive and nuanced accounts of the care experience in their fiction. In addition to this, it is essential that care-experienced writers *are* able to access the publishing industry in order to bring 'Own Voices' care-experienced characters and stories to the mass market, diversify the contemporary canon, and disrupt narratives of 'poor outcomes' and failure that consistently dominate popular culture.

Adjacent to the necessity for more nuanced representation of care-experienced people in literature, is the need for different and more varied portrayals of female-centric care and the extra-maternal. This idea is at the core of the creative work and is explored through the protagonist Bess's relationships with the other women in her life: her biological mother Amanda, her foster mother Lisa, and her best friend Eshal. Bess's troubled relationships with her mother(s) disrupt the hegemonic practice of elevating the biological mother above all others. For Bess, the most fruitful, stable and positive female-centric care relationship in her life is with her friend Eshal, and the two girls often perform the extra-maternal care role for one another when their own mothers are insufficient. *The Hatchling* demonstrates how female friendships may perform an extra-maternal role when biological mothers are emotionally or physically absent. While much scholarship focuses on the maternal in exclusively biological terms, it is necessary to delineate the many varied roles non-biological or extra-maternal mothers perform – specifically in literature – and what this says about the nature of female-centric care and the relationships between women and girls that are frequently marginalised, overlooked or dismissed as culturally insignificant. Roxane Gay is critical of typical portrayals of female friendship in literature, calling female friendships that are necessarily 'bitchy, toxic, or competitive' a 'cultural myth', and suggesting that writers must stop 'mythologising female friendships as curious, fragile relationships that are always intensely fraught' (2014: 53). The trope can be both damaging and uplifting, and while it is preferable for writers to bring attention to female-centric care relationships in their fiction, it is unhelpful when these relationships are

almost exclusively portrayed as harmful and mutually destructive. The idea that female friendship is fundamentally toxic and combative is challenged in my novel through the characters of Bess, Eshal and Keris. My novel proposes that tropes of toxic and combative relationship dynamics are not the hallmarks of female friendship, and that it is necessary for novels about female friends to show healthy, nurturing and supportive relationships between women and girls.

Fundamentally, the novel and the critical reflection examine the nature of ‘care’ between women: what it means to be in care, what is expected of someone in care, and how one might find care among women in unexpected or unconventional spaces. The novel also challenges the idea of mythologised biological maternity and argues that motherhood is not the pre-determined outcome of all women – especially all care-experienced women. As a care-experienced person myself, I wanted to use this thesis to demonstrate the necessity for aspirational stories about care-experienced girls, without dismissing the lived reality of the care experience; it is a statistical fact that care-experienced people are far more prone to the ‘poor outcomes’ discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.²³ But these ‘poor outcomes’ are self-perpetuating, because children taken into care are not expected to achieve at the same level as non-care-experienced children. In the same vein, working-class girls are frequently marginalised and assigned the same expected ‘poor outcomes’ as care-experienced girls, and there is a significant overlap between the problems of care-experienced people and problems faced by the working classes. This too is reflected in the fiction discussed. As a result, fiction and other popular culture re-construct harmful stereotypes around ‘poor outcomes’, and understandably care-experienced readers configure their identities around these expectations. Fundamentally, it is necessary for care-experienced people to see themselves represented positively in the literature that they consume.

²³ In addition, care-experienced women are three times more likely to ‘become teenage mothers’ (Slawson, 2016).

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