A dark silhouette of a person's head and shoulders is centered against a blurred background of a hallway. The hallway is lit with warm, yellowish lights that create a bokeh effect, with light spots and streaks visible on the walls and ceiling. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

**Your  
Number  
One  
Fan**

**And Other Stories**

**Claire McGowan**



Your Number One Fan

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## **Archaeology**

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When the spade touches bone, you know it. You feel it all the way up your arm, an echo in your own bone. I always loved that moment. Always had a feel for it. Ever since my first dig, summer I was eighteen, just cash-in-hand heavy lifting, local lads with time lying heavy on our shoulders. The smell of the turf on my skin, the thunk as my spade finds an answer in the earth. Bone man, they call me. Because I always find the bodies; it's like I have a sense for it. My spade seems to go to them like one of those metal detector yokes. I tapped again, lifting my shoulders as a sign to Murto. 'Here.' With my arm I wiped the sweat off my face. The sun was splitting the stones, so hot you felt every breath sucked back out of you before you'd even halfway done with it.

Bone feels hollow when you hit it, like when you break a pot. It's funny because sometimes pots are even made of bone – Colin had explained it to me on the first day. That's why they call it bone china. I'd nodded like I never heard that. No one would expect thick Johnny, the Bone Man, never been out of Ballyterrin in his life let alone to university, to know about things like Ming and Dresden, so I kept quiet and let his words tell through my mind like rosary beads.

Colin was running over now, sandals scuttering in the dry soil, shirt flapping. 'We've got something? I knew it was there!' We'd been looking on this hillside for days. They hoped to find another of the brown bog bodies for their museum, curled up like leather babies, hair turned to roots, fingernails to stones. Bodies in bogs are special, you know. They do not crumble to dust.

You see the bog holds them down safe with fingers of brown water, choking them, filling up the lungs until they sleep. It's a cradle for a wean, down in the sponge and roots of the earth. Colin was after telling me no one knows why they're there – sacrifice, some say. Sometimes they have jewellery put on them. Sometimes the hair is cut on one side or the guts pulled out through the skin. An offering, Colin says, to the old gods. Letting them sleep tight there.

Colin was grabbing the spade right out of my hands, not even looking at me. I let him. Thick Johnny, that's me, only does the grunt work. 'Quick, a trowel. We need to get it covered, I don't like the look of those clouds...'

I wanted for them to see what I'd already felt up my arm.

'Oh,' said Colin, feeling it too. 'But this is bone, so...that can't be right.' They would not have expected me to know this, but bones don't survive long in bogs. It steals into you, dissolves you from the inside, leaving your skin, your face. It eats you from the inside.

'It's a new one,' said Murto, in his quiet way. 'Can't have been here long enough to mummify.'

'Bollocks. Bollocks bollocks bollocks. Do we need to ring the police, the what are they called now?'

'The PSNI.' Murto, who was from out Ballymena way, gave me a quick look. *The English*. They know nothing. 'Aye, better ring them. We're supposed to report any bones that show up.'

Colin was looking down into the hole, to the end of my spade which he'd grabbed from me. Old bodies, the long dead, they floated his boat. Crumbly bones and iced-up cavemen and

unravelling mummies. But this was not a dig now, it was a grave, and showing through the sticky brown turf was the white of what used to be a leg.

‘How old?’ He looked at Murto and me, though he was the one with all the letters after his name. ‘How old do we think it is?’

I knew it was sometimes hard to tell if a body was recent or old. Things stop being a crime after enough time has buried them. I’d always thought that was funny, that if you just wait long enough something goes from a murder scene to archaeology.

Murto stooped down with his hand trowel, and gently turned over a sod which had curled up like an ice-cream scoop. You could see more of the leg bone now, and then Murto had uncovered another thing– it looked like fish scales. Green, shiny-sparkly. Murto squinted at it in the glare of the sun. ‘What manner of thing....?’

‘It’s clothes,’ said Colin nervously. ‘I think it’s clothes.’

‘It’s her skirt,’ said Murto, looking down.

There was silence but for the slow rise of a breeze in the trees. I didn’t say a thing, I just stood there. There was sweat on Colin’s face, and the rich smell of the bog opening itself up, showing its insides. I can’t get enough of that smell. When I die I hope it will be with that in my lungs.

‘There’s something else,’ said Murto, down on his hunkers. His hand in the big coarse glove pulled it out of the earth, pink and white.

‘Could it be one of the Disappeared?’ Colin asked us. As if we’d know. ‘You know those people you hear about, didn’t the IRA kill them and hide them out here and...’ He said it like the

English always said IRA, handling it like a lit firework. Round here no one calls them that. Just the Ra, or the Provos, or the Stickies. Too much power to give them their real name.

‘Could be,’ said Murto. ‘But I don’t know that they’re missing a young girl. Look, she wasn’t hardly more than a wean.’

We looked at the driving licence, stained with bog water. She’d held it on her chest all this time like a funeral tablet, an Egyptian princess. ‘Laura Maginn,’ Colin read, saying her name like reading from the book of the dead. Like Nefertiti. Cleopatra. When he said it a roll of thunder sounded overhead.

Murto looked up, blinked. ‘Ach, I know the name. Was she not local, did she not go missing years back?’ Looking at me, the token culchie from round these parts.

‘She did,’ I said and my own voice sounded strange after theirs. I didn’t speak much usually.

‘Bloody bollocksing hell,’ said Colin. ‘It’s going to be a crime scene now. They’ll be walking all over it, destroying the lines. If there is a bog body we’ll not get it out for weeks now....’

‘A girl is dead,’ grunted Murto. ‘We’ve been walking on her grave all this time. She’s dead. Call the feckin’ police.’

‘Yes, yes. Let me call the PNSI, the PSNI, whatever they’re called. I’ll do it.’

But he waited, as if he didn’t really know how to do what he’d said. Only Murto seemed able to act. ‘We can’t leave her like this. Cover her up. Get the tarpaulin from the van. The

rain'll be on any minute.' And you could feel it coming from the west, a greasy tang to the air so you almost couldn't wait for it to break.

'Yes. Yes. Good idea. What ---'

Murto looked at me again, anger in his eyes at this Englishman who was the boss but no more use than a jack rabbit, and then he was tramping across the bog, his big feet getting sucked into it. Colin stayed for a minute. This man who spent his life finding bodies, finding bones, he liked them in museums, under glass and grave wrappings, in crypts and painted coffins. Not the near dead, crammed in the spaces of the earth, their bones cracked in pain, their nails clawing at the ground to let them go. 'Bollocks,' he said, one more time, then followed Murto, scuffing in the soil. I waited with her. For a moment I closed my eyes, tasting the first sting of rain on my face. I wondered if she could feel it too, opened up to us as she was.

'Did you know her? She was from here, they said.'

I looked up to see a girl had come over. One of the archaeology students from the university in Dublin. There's always a gaggle of them on digs.

I found my voice. 'Aye. Only to see.'

'Is that her *leg*?'

Laura had lovely legs. She was known for it. Laura 'the legs' Maginn, and her hair the colour of ash bark. It would be brown now, as if she'd dyed it.

The girl looked up at me, waiting for someone to tell her how to feel. I half-expected she'd hoke out some mobile phone and snap a picture. Murto had told the young ones off for

this the first day, taking photos of the pots and flints they turned up, posting them on the Facebook.

‘We should say something,’ said the girl. Her name on her badge was something pretty, Melinda or Miranda or something like the trill of a bird in a cage. I couldn’t read it in the sudden gloom of the sky. Maybe I needed glasses. The other students ignored me, all loud English and Southern accents, laughs like breaking crockery, jags and cracks. But she’d smiled, on that first day. ‘Hello,’ she’d said. ‘You must be Johnny. The Bone Man.’

Her glasses were misted in rain and behind them her eyes looked the same colour, a grey and a blue. Her hair, I knew, was long and polished like wood. I’d seen it down once when she hadn’t tied it back. Now it was in a plait, coiled round her head like a chieftain’s daughter.

‘Laura,’ she said uncertainly, to something between the sky and the land. ‘Please look after her, if she’s somewhere – I hope she’s at peace.’

I watched her. ‘You’re a believer?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I just think there must be something, you know. You can’t just die and that’s it. Nothing. I wonder sometimes what it’s like. What you feel when you....go.’

I wondered what she was really asking. I saw she was wearing long sleeves, even though the sun had been beating down and the other girls were in their tiny vests and shorts, flaunting themselves. One hand clutched the thin wrist of the other.

The rain picked up all of a sudden, a burst of it, and the girl and myself turned our faces up to it, as people do. Veils of it sweeping in from the sea, tasting our mouths with salt and loss. The ground around us sucked it up, like it would tears and sweat and even blood. Taking it back

into the earth. The soil that crumbled off my boots each night so mammy gave out to me, that had been fed from Laura's body, and the flowers and bees and birds and rabbits too. I knew she would have liked that. She liked animals. She'd petted my dog that day, when I'd seen her walking back from the disco in her shiny-sparkly skirt. Oh isn't he a dote. Staggering on her heels, and me walking Blackie in the dawn, not sleeping again, never used to sleep back then, and her saying she'd missed her bus and she'd had to walk all the way and her mammy was going to clean her when she got home and did she know me from somewhere? The black on her cheeks like she'd been crying maybe, and the smell of her, cigs and body spray, and some fella she'd let paw at her. Yes I said, it's me Johnny, you've been at school with me since we were wee.

Oh, she said, sorry. I didn't know you in the dark.

'You go and shelter,' I told the girl. 'I'll stay with her.'

'Do you want a coat or something?'

'I'll be grand. Grizzled ould fella like me.'

I'm not so very old of course, getting on for forty-three, but to their eyes I'm ancient as the Old Folk.

I could have told the girl here, this Melinda or whatever her pretty name was, exactly how it is when you go. How the light in the eyes goes out, how they struggle then go limp like a strangled hare, how the bog is like a soft bed for them, keeping them alive, part of the earth. I squinted up. The tree was twenty paces off, as I'd thought. That meant one of the others was nearby, under it. The American tourist with the sheet of pale hair maybe, and the red anorak.

Or the runaway with only a denim jacket, shivering, scrappy red hair pulled back. All of them still asleep, not disturbed. At least if I worked the digs I could be there to see them wake. I began to turn over the sods with my spade, coving Laura up again, warm and dry. She looked so cold like that. But I would have liked to see her face all the same, just one more time.

I watched the girl pick her way over the turf, delicate, just a wee thing like a sparrow. Now that I thought of it, she had a look of Laura about her.

### May Contain Nuts

'Maybe we shouldn't go after all. It's so cold still.'

'There's plenty to do inside...'

She tried not to shiver too obviously.

'...I mean there's a spa and things. I thought that's what you wanted.'

'Oh. I suppose.' No point in pretending she didn't like spas, after all her hints about hot stone massages. It was snowing again as they started out, lightly. 'We'll have to have the roof up,' she sighed. Couldn't he get anything right?

'Would you like the radio on, or a CD?'

'Don't care.'

He turned to Classic FM and she sighed again. Imagine the rest of your life, just listening to Mozart. Could anyone put up with that?

Snowy fields streaked by the windows as the car purred down the motorway. He glanced at her. 'You alright? You seem quiet.'

'Fine.' She crossed her arms. 'How long will it take?'

'Two hours, maybe, with traffic.'

Why couldn't he have picked somewhere closer? She glanced back at the cramped back seat, where he'd placed his neat overnight bag. The small box was in there, squatting on top of

his washbag; she'd seen it there while he was shaving, and she'd had to sit down on the bed for a few minutes to recover.

He'd called out from the bathroom, 'Did you pack a dress? I've got a nice meal booked.'

She had scrambled up, closing the bag. 'Oh...yes. A dress. Yes.'

The car was filled with comforting white noise, the sound of wind over the side and the clear dropping notes of the piano piece. The noise of getting there, uninterrupted by arrival. She hoped it never ended. He was tapping his fingers lightly in time to the falling notes. She reached out and jabbed a button and loud rap filled the car instead. 'Sorry. It was making me gloomy.'

'Alright.' He always let her change the station if she wanted. It was so annoying.

The man on the front desk looked up as they shivered in from the cold. She stared at him; he had eyes like twin cups of melting hot chocolate. 'I can 'elp you?'

She stopped dead in the doorway of the country hotel. 'You're French?' she blurted.

The receptionist shrugged as he cleaned his nails on the signing-in book. He didn't offer to help with the bags. As they humped the luggage upstairs, she stared back behind her, goggling all the while at the French man. It was her dream, move to Paris, meet a French man with dark eyes. She started to make a list in her head of all the things she'd never do, thanks to that little box in the bag. Move to France. Drive round the Eiffel Tower in a sports car. Eat cheese off a man's stomach. Would that even be nice? Well. She'd never know now.

That's what she wanted. Louche, European men who didn't carry your bags. Not ones who packed paper in their shoes for one night away.

'You don't like it?'

It was the best suite. She had a moment's panic when she saw the flowers and champagne – would it be now? But he just went in and hung up his jacket in the wardrobe.

'It's OK.' When would he do it? The suspense was murderous.

'Just OK?' He was unpacking.

'What? Oh, yes. It's nice.'

'What would you like to do? There's a spa. Or we could have tea.'

She tried to think of the least romantic thing. 'Let's go to the lake.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'It's very cold.'

Of course it was cold. It was February, snow on the ground. It was Valentine's Day. Of course it was.

She'd thought the suggestion of rowing a boat was clever, because it would seem like she wanted to be romantic, but it would be so cold that any *actual* romance would shrivel and wilt.

'Won't you be chilly?' He looked doubtfully at the damp boat.

'It's fine.' The wood creaked under her Ugg boot as she stepped in. 'Come on, it'll be lovely. Rowing on the lake!'

'You know, you're right,' he said, after a while. 'It is nice. Peaceful.' His face was beaming and ruddy with the effort of pulling them round the murky pond.

'I s-suppose.'

'Are your teeth chattering?'

'N-no.'

'Poor you. Let me warm you up.' He shifted over, making the boat rock.

She panicked suddenly, darting away. What if it was now? 'No, don't...'

'Darling, if you move too we'll...'

Too late.

'You have to get those wet things off.' He led her briskly up the stairs.

'I'm fu-fu-fine.' Her mouth couldn't form the words. She'd lost all feeling in her hands.

'I'm so sorry – who'd have thought you'd go in and I wouldn't! Poor you.'

The chocolate eyes of the receptionist seemed to mock her as she squelched up the stairs.

'Come on, let's get you into a hot bath.'

Spotting another romance side-blow in nakedness and hot steam, she shouted, 'No! I need, er, I need a pee.'

'Oh. Well, I won't look.'

'I'll d-do it myself.' Stripping off her pond-weeded clothes, she gave a small sneeze, and her heart sank. Why was it all so complicated? She just needed to buy some time. Time. Finding

the box, being nosy. It had bought her that at least. Time to think about what she might say.

That's all she needed. Why was it so hard?

When she came out from the bath, red all over but frozen through, like a badly-thawed fish finger, he was arranging her boots on the radiator to dry. 'I asked the receptionist to take your clothes to wash.'

'Oh, was it...did the French guy come?'

He looked surprised. 'Hmm? Yes, I think it was him.'

So Jean-Claude or whatever his name was had her muddied socks and passion-killer pants, the ones with holes in the elastic. She sighed. 'I can't go to dinner then. No clean undies.'

'Oh. That's a shame, you'd have liked it.'

'Shame. Yeah.' She climbed into bed; another bullet had been dodged. Surely the romantic meal was where he'd planned to do it.

'I know, let's get room service,' he said, suddenly excited. 'I always wanted to, didn't you? It'll be sort of decadent.'

Oh, God. 'Great,' she said weakly.

'What would you like? Have a look there.'

She scanned the menu card, and her eyes alighted on the small print under the chicken. *May contain nuts.* She sighed. This was turning out to be so much more painful and tiresome than she'd ever imagined. 'I'll order.' She seized the phone. Because he'd always check. He'd never make a mistake like that. It was so annoying.

She waited until he got in the shower, and then hurriedly made the call. Soon there was a knock on the door, and the receptionist stood there chewing gum, food under silver covers. His eyes were like bowls of *café au lait*, Maltesers, Mars bars.

‘Merci,’ she croaked, and he lifted his eyebrow a quarter-inch, sauntering off.

She felt her throat close up just looking at the food. But what could she do? What was the point of all this? It wasn’t his fault. When he came out from the shower she looked at the shift of muscles in his back, the spread settling round his middle. It wasn’t his fault. Because I want to live in Paris, she told herself. Because I don’t want to buy a Volvo and get a dog. Because I want to be kissed by a man with chocolate eyes.

She opened her mouth and swallowed.

‘They should tell people if there’s nuts in the food,’ he said angrily. ‘Look at the state of you.’

‘S’OK.’ She was bent over the sink, wheezing. The nuts had done their work, and her face looked someone had blown it up with a bicycle pump.

‘It’s not OK, don’t they know about food labelling...’

‘Sh’OK. Leave it.’ She couldn’t speak clearly. In the next room she heard him give a long sigh and felt a twinge that was nothing to do with her moderate nut allergy. But she’d started it now. She couldn’t go back. There was too much to lose, or rather to gain, while the small box sat in his bag.

She crawled back into the bedroom.

He was fiddling with the remote. 'Would you like to watch a film?' He'd let her watch what she wanted. He'd never moan and sigh and try to pretend they were only showing *Rocky V*.

'I'll just go to shleep, I think.' She pulled on her extra thick wool pyjamas, just to be sure.

'Really? Oh...OK. But listen, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. In the morning, maybe?'

'Yesh. OK.' If she slept till eleven, they'd have to check out, and she'd be home safe. Yes. It would all be fine. She lowered her eye-mask and screwed in her ear plugs.

The next morning she felt him try to wake her a few times. She sneaked peeks at the clock until it was late enough. At eleven she felt him gently shake her foot. 'We have to check out soon.'

'Oh, really?' She stretched. 'It must have been the reaction, made me sleepy.'

'Yeah.' He sighed. 'I'll get packed up.'

Over! It was over! She was putting her wet clothes away with a light heart when he pulled his neat bag towards him and something fell out. The box landed lightly on the thick carpet. Her heart turned over.

'Oh yes. I nearly forgot to show you.' Before she could even move he'd opened the box and was lunging it at her.

She stumbled back. 'Wait, I...Oh.' She blinked. 'That's...oh.' She stared at the box. 'Cufflinks?'

'A leaving gift, from work. That's what I wanted to tell you. They're transferring me.'

'Oh.'

He shut the box on the metal and jade set – a nice pair – and said, 'I was going to ask you to come. But I suppose...you haven't seemed very happy this weekend. I suppose you'd say no.'

'Where?' She said it even though she knew what his answer would be. 'Where are they sending you?' New York. Hong Kong. Anywhere but...

'Paris,' he said. He put the box in his bag. 'I know you wanted to go there. I thought...maybe you'd want to come. But...no. I suppose you don't. I'll go and settle up.'

Outside she heard the louche whistle of the receptionist, come to take the bags down, at last.

'But I do,' she said to the empty air. 'I do.'

### **Those Must-Have Items**

Frank had been watching her for a while. It wasn't always the scraggy mums, the ones with hoop earrings and smoker's coughs. Sometimes it was the ones like her, with a nice wool coat and diamonds flashing on her hand.

He ambled down Aisle Four (Crisps and Snacks), peering round a display of Ryvita. She'd been up and down Toiletries four times, and that was one of the signs. The way she kept looking up at the camera, that was another. Frank took a stroll down to Health and Beauty, no hurry, keys jingling, whistling some pop song his eldest had been playing that morning. This time of night, the graveyard shift, all he could think about was getting home and away from the chill freezer-air. Times were he'd even wish for a bit of excitement, a chance to actually secure something.

The most important thing was not to scare them. Else they'd bolt, and be back another time. You couldn't stop them either until they went out the door, not even if you'd seen them with your own two eyes shoving a pack of Smirnoff Ice down their Puffa jacket. He remembered all this from his course.

She was in the baby aisle now. Nappies, bottles, that sort of thing. Lots of them did it in the baby aisle, but usually not ones like her, with the nice coat. He did feel sorry sometimes for the scraggy ones, four snot-nosed kids in tow, prime for a belting when Mum got stopped with the nicked Silk Cut up her jumper.

He walked down the aisle past her, whistling his tune. She scurried behind a display of rusks. That was another sign. And the way she was picking up all the different boxes and putting them down, hardly looking, that was one too.

Four billion, they'd said at his course on Shrinkage Avoidance. Four billion pounds in goods nicked every year in the UK. Frank had scribbled down 'four' on his blotter, then added zeros after it until his biro had slipped off the page and hit the table. He couldn't keep an amount like that in his head. That was nearly £70 for every man, woman, and child in the country, said the staring-eyed ex-Army captain who ran the course. And since, Frank assumed, most people were like himself, never stolen so much as a penny chew, the rest, the scum, they had to be getting away with great big bags of the stuff, hadn't they?

Frank slipped out of sight behind the Feminine Hygiene Aisle and right on cue he watched her shuffle back to Baby Care. She kept looking round her – all but the best ones did that, couldn't help their nerves. As Frank peered through boxes of tampons, she stuffed a pack of nappies into the big bag she carried. Baby wipes. Talc. Then she began to walk, stiff and formal, to the sliding doors that gave in puffs of cold night air.

It wasn't what Frank had expected, when his police job went and he'd no choice but to wear this stupid green uniform and frisk up kids with cans of lager in their pants. But after the session on Shrinkage, he'd realised there was a war going on here, too. And people like Frank were the last defence against that four billion pounds being carried out the door. It was typical of the modern world. Everyone wanted hospitals and schools and policemen and fifty types of pasta; nobody wanted to pay for it.

She was nearly at the door now. The keys on his belt began to jingle faster.

Dom's first month at work wasn't turning out how he'd hoped. Assistant Retail Manager had sounded so good, especially when Kelly announced she wasn't going back to the hairdressers once the baby came. But so far it was all invoices and redundancy and working out which staff were pinching from the tills and which just couldn't add up. So many ways to steal, it shocked him. Not just taking things, but switching price tags, changing the packaging, fake returns. Shocking. So when Frank the security guard called up with another shoplifter, Dom's heart sank. They were usually rough teenagers or worn-out women with perms, shouting abuse at him and, one time, gobbing a bit of spit right across the desk and onto his Burton tie.

But this one was different. He was rubbish at clothes but her coat looked nice. Her skin seemed nicer too; must be a non-smoker. Dom had been trying to quit for the baby coming, but the job was stressful with cuts and shrinkage and the fallout from inaccurately labelled buy-one-get-one-free promotions.

'There's been some mistake.' She sounded posh too.

'Please do sit down, Miss, er, Mrs...'

She sat like a queen. 'Mrs Forbes, please. I'd like to know what this is about.'

Frank shifted on his feet. 'I have reason to believe the lady was exiting the store with some items what may not have been paid for.'

Dom hated this. 'Would you mind if we just...' He peered into her bag and there were the items, some kind of baby things. What were they even for? He'd have to learn soon.

'Obviously, I intended to pay for them,' she said haughtily. He saw she was twisting her hands together so that her large rings cut into the skin. Were those real diamonds?

'I'm sorry, madam, but it does look as if we have to...er...'

She leaned forward and put her pale hands on his desk. 'Let me be honest, Mr Nokes. Dominic.' She was reading from the plaque on his desk, a gift from Kelly. 'My husband lost his job – the recession. We had a large mortgage, and with the baby...I'm not working. I just didn't know what else to do.' Her eyes seemed to tremble with tears. 'I was just...desperate.'

Frank coughed and muttered.

'Frank?'

'We prosecute all shoplifters, Mr Nokes. It does say.'

Dom looked back at the woman, tears standing in her dark eyes. 'But if it's just a mistake....And she does have a baby.'

'I need things for her. I'm sorry.' Her voice was a whisper. 'It was a moment of madness. Things have been so difficult.'

He made a decision. He was Assistant Retail Manager, after all. 'If Mrs Forbes will pay for the items we'll say no more about it. Would you like me to call someone to get you, madam? Your husband?'

The man who came to pick her up drove a Beemer. Frank watched his boss as it drove up, but Dominic Nokes just looked confused. Well, he was young. He'd learn to see through their sob stories: I've ten kids, my husband's on benefits, I've got a month to live... He'd learn – soon enough.

The man was tall and he also had a good coat, thick wool. Frank wouldn't have minded one like that himself. The man looked between the two store employees and spoke to the one in the suit. 'I'm terribly sorry,' he said to Dom. 'I'll pay, of course. Thank you for not...well.'

Dom smiled like a junior manager. 'Don't worry, sir. Your wife explained it to us the, er, special circumstances.'

'She did?' The man looked at his wife for the first time. 'Perhaps you'll see then why it must be kept quiet.'

'It's all smoothed over. Not a problem.' Dom held out his hand; Frank snorted quietly. Always the posh ones who got away with it.

'Please...for the goods.' The man slapped some notes into Dom's outstretched hand.

Dom frowned. 'This is too much, sir...'

'Well, perhaps you have a charity box, or...' The husband was backing away. 'We must go. Thank you.'

She stepped gracefully into the car. Dom stood there with the wad of notes in his hand.

Frank cleared his throat. 'Reckon you needn't worry about that baby, sir.'

As they drove away, they said nothing for a long time. On her lap she held the baby things she'd taken – the young manager had even put them in a bag for her. After a while her husband said, 'That's another supermarket off the list.'

She looked ahead at the lights of home, coming out of the dark night.

'At least it wasn't Waitrose this time.' He pressed the button for their automatic gates and when the car stopped he turned to her. 'This has to stop, you know. You must get help.'

She stepped out of the car onto the gravel drive. He stood at the front door to watch her go up the stairs. She paused. 'Oh, I left the shopping in the car. Can you put it in her room, please?'

He watched her back for a moment. 'Alright,' he said finally. 'If that's what you want.'

She went into her bedroom without a word.

The man locked the car, taking the shopping bag out, and secured the house windows and doors and set the burglar alarm. He turned out the lights, and with a glass of whisky climbed the stairs to his own bedroom. On the way past he opened the door to the little room, quietly, as if there were still someone in there to wake. He placed the nappies and talc and baby wipes in the pile with all the other ones, wondering in passing how much he had paid out in the end for these stolen items. The room stood empty, as it had for six months, the soft yellow blanket washed and folded on the crib. Around the pink walls marched a parade of ducks and rabbits, staring down on nothing.

Your Number One Fan

He touched the mobile of smiling teddy faces and it span gently in the still air.

'Goodnight,' he whispered - silly, he knew, but something he couldn't stop. He went out and softly shut the door.

## Fire in the Dark

Until they heard the screams, everyone thought the fire was part of the show.

Laura was at the back of the park, on a path near a supply hut. She shouldn't have come, she knew. It was silly, really. Mason was too young to know he was looking at fireworks. The noise would frighten him. But Tom was at that conference and she'd been at home with the baby for three days now. A town fireworks show, even that would do, just to get out for a bit.

'Look, Mason,' she said. 'All the pretty lights. You see?'

The baby looked at the fizzing sparklers with his dark eyes, like some ripe heavy fruit. Her mother said he should be talking by now, a few words at least. She'd tried. *Ma-ma. Da-da.* But he was silent. She felt at times he could actually speak, he just had nothing to say yet. Like someone at a party, waiting for their turn.

Someone pushed past them on the path, jostling the buggy. 'Careful!' Bloody Tom. He was never around to help them, to keep them safe. Always off at some work thing or another. 'It's OK,' she said to Mason, though the baby hadn't cried. He was holding his blue knitted horse very tightly, the same way she was gripping the buggy.

The park was too full. She thought it even before anything happened; it was too full, they'd let in too many people. The crowd was already heaving in the dark, surging down towards the ornamental lake where the display would be. Overhead floodlights showed up how

packed it was, so many bodies pushing and shoving. She was very conscious of the buggy and the weight of her swollen stomach. Her breath was streaming out in front of her, her Ugg boots slipping in the mud. Tom would have said to wear sensible shoes.

‘Come on, sweetheart.’ She moved the buggy away from the path, near the park railings to the side of the little hut where the groundskeeper kept his things. It’d be safer there. She bent over her bump with difficulty and undid Mason’s buggy straps, thinking she might pick him up and hold him, maybe, if he cried. That’s when it happened.

Mary saw them before anything happened, the woman and the baby, pushed about by the crowd. Pregnant again, by the looks of her, encumbered, tired. Mary herself was standing by the chip van, snug and trim in her good wool coat. Nothing to weigh her down. Her eyes locked into the struggling woman.

Mary came every year. What else did you get at a fireworks display but children? With sparklers and glow-sticks and candy-floss mouths. She watched which parents let their children wander off, which made them cry by waving sparklers too close. She kept note.

Mary drained her hot chocolate, dropping the paper cup in the mud, crushing it under her leather boot. She had sugar on her lips and bile in her heart when it happened.

The first Laura noticed was that Mason cried – a sharp single cry, like an adult stubbing their toe. Then the noise. That seemed to make no sense, but afterwards it kept coming back to her. The baby had cried *first*. Almost like he knew.

It took her a few seconds to realise the screams weren't of excitement this time. Then you started to see the flash in the dark, the fire that lit up the night sky and showed people's white, shocked faces, and you could smell that smell, like burning petrol. The air singed. Laura felt the crowd turn, and helpless, had a second to panic and wonder whether to protect her unborn baby or the one in the buggy. Then it was too late, anyway.

They were going to crush her. Mary saw the woman was pressed too close to the fence, hemmed in to the hut by the crowd, and couldn't get out. She didn't understand what had happened – a firework gone wrong, and the park's hedge on fire suddenly. Fire racing to where the woman was. The crowd as one was surging to the gate, and the woman was trapped. The buggy rocked, and she saw the woman fall as the crowd pushed past, and a noise came out of Mary's own mouth like a shriek. Then she was running too.

The sound of feet, squelching in the mud. From the ground where she'd slipped, that was all Laura could hear. Her face was in the dirt. Her hand ached. *Mason. Mason.* She'd gone down gripping the buggy handle, but it had been ripped from her by the crowd. Through a gap in the running legs, Laura saw the blue hood of the buggy, mud-stained. The wheels were spinning. She tried to call but the air was all gone out of her. Tried to struggle up – then she heard another bang and saw the flash of fire by the little hut right near – and a cry from the crowd as they surged faster, out towards the gate. No – no! She was slumped in the mud, the dark. They wouldn't see her. Last thing she saw as someone's boot came down on her was the buggy

kicked aside by the crowd, towards the fire. Before she blacked out she saw that the buggy was empty.

Mary was running with everyone, their screams muffled out by the high sharp singing in her heart. She had him. She had him! The baby's padded body was in her arms. This was what they were made for, to hold him against her and clasp his soft-smelling head to her shoulder, safe. He hadn't made a sound. She was running. A man in a yellow coat was shouting *don't panic, stay calm!* The crowd surged out the gate, and Mary's good boots kept their grip on the muddy ground. And the blue of sirens already flashing. She wasn't afraid. She had saved him, plucked him from his buggy out of the path of the crowd, the fire already spreading to the bushes round the hut. She had him.

They were out into the street, where there was space to breathe. A policeman was directing people, bewildered. 'Is anyone hurt? Are you hurt, madam?' She could see he was looking at her, seeing a child in her arms, seeing a mother.

'Madam? Is your child hurt?'

*Your child.* Her mouth was numb for a moment. She could feel the soft pulse in the baby's head. 'He's fine,' she said. 'There's a woman – I saw a woman go down back there.'

Mary set off down the road to her house, the baby held tight in her arms. After a while she shifted his weight; he was heavier than she'd imagined. She'd have to get a buggy.

'It's alright, she said to him. 'You're safe with me.'

The baby looked at her with dark eyes. 'Ma-ma,' he said, as if testing out the word in his mouth.

'It was empty,' Laura insisted. 'I saw it.'

Tom looked at the doctor again. 'But darling...'

'I unstrapped him,' she said. 'Just before...he could have gotten out of the buggy.'

'He couldn't walk!'

She'd have killed him if she had the strength. 'Why are you talking like he's gone? Stop it!'

Tom ran his hands over his face, raking the skin. 'This is hard for me, too.'

She plected up her hospital blanket. 'They didn't find a body, did they? Well?'

'But the fire...the buggy was destroyed.'

'But it was *empty*! Maybe he got out!' They were back to the same place again.

'Then where is he?' Tom's voice cracked. 'Where is he, Laura?'

'Maybe someone took him. Did you ask people? Did you check the cameras?' She looked at the policeman standing in the door.

He dipped his head; he was very young. 'It was dark, ma'am. Nobody saw...they panicked. Some people remembered the buggy catching light. And then with the smoke... it's too dark on the cameras to see anything.'

Laura stared at her hands, still bandaged and raw. She'd been lucky, they kept saying. The police had got to her just as the hut, and the buggy, went up in flames. But when she'd

come to in hospital, and remembered the empty buggy and the boot on her stomach, she hadn't felt lucky. She'd wished to be dead, if Mason was too.

'She needs to rest,' said the doctor, and Tom sighed. Laura shifted as best she could with the livid line of stitches down her stomach. Emergency C-section, they'd said. She hadn't been able to take it in yet.

There was some discussion at the door. 'Should I...'

'Might help....'

The policeman was stooping, coming towards her. 'Ma'am, we found...' He ran out of words. In his hands, a scrap of something covered in dried mud. She knew the blue wool – it was Mason's horse. Her mother had knitted it when he was born.

'We found it...you know.'

Although it was stained and damp, she laid it under her pillow. No one tried to stop her.

Tom brushed lips over her cold head. 'I'll leave you for now. But we need to talk about a memorial. Something, anyway.'

She didn't look up. Why have a memorial when Mason wasn't dead? If he was dead, she'd know it. She felt the new baby was gone, that small light snuffed out. But Mason just felt like he was very far away.

The day after the park stampede Mary made a fire in her garden – it was bonfire night, after all. Into it she put the baby's little jeans and his navy hooded jacket, and the tiny shoes with dogs

on them. He'd cried when she took them off, and she understood – they were lovely, but they had to go. She'd buy him a new pair, fifty new pairs. Everything new for a new life.

She'd driven to the supermarket late the night before and bought nappies, bottles. She'd had to leave him sleeping in the car, bolstered round with cushions, and she didn't like it but they had cameras all round and they wouldn't understand, would they? She'd saved him, so he belonged with her.

Dusting off her hands, she breathed in the air tanged with smoke and sulphur. The windows of her little house glowed warm with light. He was there. She went in to find him sleeping in the little cot she'd bought. His small hand hung down, so trusting. She touched it gently, so as not to wake him.

'Hello, Peter,' she tried. It was her father's name. He'd died in a home, longing for a grandchild. The baby stirred a little in his sleep. Yes, Peter was right.

Tom's words seemed to ring louder in Laura's head even than the slamming door. *If you do this, you're on your own.*

She didn't care. She looked round their cramped terraced house, full to the brim with toys in bright plastic. None of it needed now. She had the phone in her hand and the number of the local paper in front of her on the torn cover of an envelope. They'd promised to get the story in, if she'd tell all about the stampede, her fall, the miscarriage. Losing Mason. Tom didn't understand why. He wanted to hold a memorial. Move on. But how could she move on when

she knew Mason wasn't gone? Someone must have him. She was sure of it. She felt it somewhere below her rib cage. Doing the article might just flush them out, maybe.

Laura bent over her stomach, still aching and empty, and dialled the number.

When she saw the paper Mary knew they were too close. It was time to move on. The young woman's face was burned and bandaged, but her eyes seemed to stare accusingly at Mary from the page. FIND MY BABY, said the headline.

Mary heard two women discussing it at the corner-shop counter. 'I hear the husband's leaving her. He thinks the little one's gone and all, same as the police. But she won't accept it.'

'Very sad.'

Mary had been buying nappies, rusks. She put them carefully back on the shelf and slipped out. Back home she phoned the library and said she needed to hand in her notice.

'This is rather sudden, Mary.' Her boss was surprised; Mary hadn't missed work in years.

'A relative has died,' she said. It was easy to make her voice stunned; she *felt* stunned.

'A young cousin. There's no one to care for her child, you see – just a baby.'

Oh, of course she must go. That story seemed to work, so it was the same she told to her few friends, the book group, the lady in the supermarket. No one to care for the baby, so she'd taken him in. Her father's money meant she didn't have to worry about work. The little clothes she'd burnt weren't good quality – crisps rubbed into the jeans. She would give him a better life.

Mother in the home didn't remember that Mary had no young cousins, didn't even remember Mary. It all fitted so perfectly. She knew it was meant to be. Two days later she had her small Corsa packed and was strapping the baby into the car seat she'd bought. It was difficult to figure out the clasps, and he was mewling in the cold November air. She gave one last look to the shuttered cottage, soon to be on the market, and started the ignition. Out of the county would be far enough, she hoped. She didn't want to go too far from Mother. As she drove away the Christmas lights were on overhead and she saw him watching, his dark eyes full. 'Don't worry, Peter,' she said. 'We'll have Christmas when we get there. To our new house.'

'Cwismas,' he said, and she laughed out loud.

'You're sure you want to do this?' The man Laura had found on the internet was very tall, with thin, sensitive hands. Not what she'd expected; she'd seen a piano when he closed the door to the other room. No office even, he ran the investigations from his small terraced house.

Laura's coat was steaming from the damp night. 'I want you to help me.'

He looked at her. 'You understand all I can do is supplement the police? It may be I can't help any more than them.'

To stop him, she put the pile of £20 notes on the folding table. 'Just try.'

He became business-like. 'You have a picture of Mason?'

As she pulled them out, dozens of them, she must have already liked him, for knowing, for remembering the name of her child. Afterwards she would remember that moment.

‘After five years...’ He sighed. ‘We’ll try. Do you remember anything, anyone at the park you thought odd? Anyone watching you?’

All she remembered was her fear, and how Mason had cried out in the dark, and the lights in the sky. The private investigator wrote it all down, even if it was useless. For five years she had closed her eyes and tried to remember everyone who was near her in the crowd. Just a sea of faces in hats and coats, breath streaming. Nothing.

‘I understand a plaque was put up?’

‘My ex,’ she said coldly. That plaque had been the end between them, the final frost that drives the crack wide open. Tom’s new woman was pregnant already, she’d heard, but she didn’t care. Because her own child was still alive. She’d never stopped believing it.

The man nodded. ‘And if I can’t find anything, no trace at all? Will you lay him to rest, Laura?’ He used her first name. ‘It’s just....sometimes, that’s the best I can do for people. Help them let go.’

Laura began to cry, tears running over her face into her lukewarm coffee. Ian the private detective reached for her hand. It was the first time he touched her.

‘What is it, darling?’ Mary put down the nametape she was sewing onto his shorts, all ready for his first Gym lesson.

Peter was crying a bit, his tie askew and hair ruffled. He rarely cried, so, alarmed, she pulled him up beside her on the sofa. Nearly seven, he was too big for her lap.

‘A boy said I had no daddy.’ He snuffled and her heart cracked.

'Your daddy died, darling, you know that.'

'Did I really have a daddy?' He grasped the edge of her cardigan like a little monkey.

'Of course! Everyone does.'

Peter looked doubtful. 'How come we don't have a picture?'

She wanted to say, because you don't need a daddy, you don't need anyone but me. But instead she found herself rummaging through old albums until she found a picture, any picture of a man the right age. 'That's him.'

'My daddy?' Peter leant against her, smelling of chalk and tears. His breath hiccupped. She pointed out the picture of her cousin Bob, who'd been a dark-eyed, handsome young man. Now he was fat and played golf and Mary hadn't seen him in decades, but Peter didn't need to know that, or anything else that might hurt him.

She rubbed his head. 'Anyway, you have me, and I love you ten times as much as any daddy.'

'Really?'

'You know I do. One day I'll tell you just how much I loved you, when you came, and you won't believe it.'

'OK.' Forgetting daddies for now, he went off for his drink of milk.

Now she was walking up to the park again, Laura was no longer sure why she'd come. It was ten years since she'd last been there. Ten years since she'd lost Mason in this park, and she supposed she was coming to say goodbye. She parked the new Clio, Ian's car, as close to the

park as she could, the roads already filled with people walking to the display. Ian understood, she thought, why she had to go.

‘Will it be safe?’ he’d said, running his hands over the round drum of her stomach. Her child, at last. Their child. Laura was trying not to think of the boot on her belly ten years back, Mason’s little brother or sister who never got a chance. ‘I just have to,’ she said.

Ian looked sad, so she put her hand, the one with the wedding ring, to his face, and kissed him. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘You better be.’

Ian didn’t go to conferences; he worked from home. Mostly the music teaching now they were married. Less of the investigating, after he’d failed to find Mason. When he played the piano she crossed her arms over her stomach and felt the music vibrate deep inside her, down to the child taking root inside.

She had never thought she’d have another. Ian had been so patient all those years, and she knew how much he wanted a child, and in the end it happened by a sort of holy accident - gastric flu and carelessness - and she felt it inside her again. A small growing light. Sometimes these things were meant to be.

Her breath was catching in the cold, and a deep fear was blooming up inside, as if the baby was scared. ‘Don’t worry,’ she whispered. ‘It can’t happen again. I’ll keep you safe.’

But she couldn’t, before.

She entered the park and it hit her like a slap, the lights and crowds and the sulphur smell of sparklers. The children. Everywhere. There was the space the hut had been, burned

away, and like the blank in Laura's own heart, nothing would grow there again. Instead, a small wooden plaque for Mason. No mention of the unnamed, the small flicker that went out that night. She bent over with difficulty and placed the woollen horse by the plaque, kept all these years. Wherever he was, Mason didn't need it now.

Mary saw her at once by the plaque, and stumbled back. The same woman, pregnant – could it really be the same? She blinked. As if she would forget that face staring out of the paper. Peter noticed his mother rooted to the spot, so she pretended her feet were stuck. 'So muddy! See, wasn't I right to say don't wear your good trainers?'

'Yes, Mum.'

She hadn't wanted to come back. Ever. But lots of Peter's friends lived in the town, now he was at grammar school, and they all came to the fireworks. Maybe some of them had even been brought as toddlers, that terrible time when the child died in the fire, and the display was cancelled for a few years. But people forgot.

Mary reached for the boy's arm, about to offer hot chocolate, candy floss, all the sweetness her love could muster, but he said, 'What's that, Mum?' And he was walking off towards the plaque, and the woman.

A curious boy. A clever boy, everyone said. She was watching, and the boy was walking over to the pregnant woman. Mary tried to follow but suddenly couldn't, her blood was swimming up to her ears and eyes and for a moment she thought she would faint again, right here in the mud and dark.

Peter was looking at the memorial with his dark eyes, and she waited, but he didn't say anything. He stood some way apart from the woman, and they didn't speak. Mary saw the woman look at the plaque for a long time, then lay down a small knitted horse, ragged. Mary held her breath in the cold. Could he remember that far back? Could he remember that night, and the fire in the dark, the screams and the feet, and how Mary had plucked him from his buggy, out of danger? She stumbled, fireworks shooting off inside her head. *Keep steady, keep steady.* He'd never say, but she knew he'd been frightened at her fainting spells. She'd never tell him what the doctors had said. It wouldn't make any difference either way, so what was the sense in scaring him?

'Mum?' He was back at her elbow. 'You OK, Mum?'

'Yes, darling.' Soon, she knew, he would grow away, be like those rough-edged boys with the loud voices. But for now he was still hers.

'We can go home, if you want.'

Such a thoughtful boy. But she knew he wanted to watch the fireworks. 'In a little while. Why don't we go down nearer the lake? It's so crowded here.'

'OK.' He ploughed off ahead, looking for his friends.

The pregnant woman was standing in the same place. Mary and her son passed right by her, close enough to reach out and touch, but the woman was looking up, at the explosions of light that filled the night sky.

## My Little Eye

I was dying when I came here. Now, I'm not sure. Judging by the pain in my eyes I seem to be alive.

They say being blind heightens your other senses. I always thought this was unscientific tosh, but in a way it's true. The rattle of the tea tray, that's morning. At noon there's a boat zooms down the Thames; coastguard, I assume, and I can hear it in my tenth-floor room. I can smell the bleach the cleaners wipe over the floor; I can feel the nurse's apron rustle as she checks my dressings, but since I've been here all I can see is the dark behind my eyes.

Rachel has been strong, of course, but small things betray her. Today when she organises my pillows I feel a splash on my hand and bring it to my mouth. Salt. 'Tell me what you're feeling, will you?'

Her voice only trembles a little. 'I suppose I'm angry. I went to all those protests – I was against it.' She gulps, gaining possession of herself. 'It's like I've just realised we actually are at war with them.'

I grope for her slender hand, and feel her move it towards me. 'There's this woman who had both her legs blown off. You remember when Jake used to break Chloe's dolls? Just like that.'

The children haven't seen me like this. I don't want them to be frightened, and I'm not sure I could cope, hearing them, knowing I might never see their faces again.

Outside I hear a clatter, and I jump.

'They're renovating,' she says. 'You should see this room, darling, it's so shabby.'

There's a short silence – surprising how often it comes up, the idea of seeing.

I pretend not to notice. 'Damn noisy.'

'This wing hasn't been touched since the war,' she says, blowing her nose. 'What a pity we didn't get BUPA.' Rachel sighs. 'Anyway, I must get back, darling.'

'Is *he* still here then?

'Who?'

'You know who. They brought him here too, didn't they?'

Rachel's voice trembles again. 'I'm so sorry, darling. It's just...he had to go somewhere. It's a civilised country, after all...' She tails off.

'Is it?' I don't want her to go away upset. 'Well, goodbye. Not long now till the bandages come off.' If I sound cheerful perhaps it will be alright.

I found out by accident he was here too. It was on the television. Perhaps the nurses thought I was comatose, or they are so stupid they think the bandages stop sound, too. The so-called 'suicide bomber', who wasn't very good at the suicide bit, but managed to do for five innocent people.

I remember his face –it will possibly be the last thing I ever see. How he pushed down the bus. The rolling eyes. Me thinking: this chap's not ri....And then it was like the blooming of some light-flower, and the world grew and shrank to a pinprick. When I came to my face was wet with blood and the ambulance man was prodding my pulse. *How many fingers?*

'I don't know,' I croaked, when I could speak. 'I can't see.' I tried to make him understand. 'I can't see anything.'

That night I struggle to sleep again. When you can't open your eyes, there's less of a border to slip across. And this place is so damn noisy. I'm woken – I think – by hands shaking my arm. Nothing strange there, the nurses are very rough at times.

The chap's talking at me in some foreign language. Again not strange here, but I recognise some words. German. I think he's German. A patient, a tourist caught up in this mess? Poor bugger. His hands are freezing; perhaps that's why he's gibbering at me.

My mouth is sore from the tubes. 'Can't understand you, sorry.'

The way his hands are fumbling, I wonder if they got his eyes too. '*Helfen Sie mir. Helfen Sie mir.*' The room sounds different - something I would never have noticed when I could see. The echoes are bigger.

I'm tired. My eyes ache. I concur with Rachel's wish that we'd taken out BUPA. 'I'm sorry, I really can't understand you. Do you need help?'

I can feel his cold breath on my face. '*Helfen Sie mir!*' He sounds desperate, but what can I do?

‘Sorry, old chap. Try the call bell.’ I turn away and the cold hands are removed. I think I sleep after that.

The next day I ask Rachel, ‘Did they move that other chap in last night?’

‘What other chap? You’re in a private room, darling.’

‘Definitely heard him. Think he was German, poor chap.’

‘But....there’s a guard outside. No one should be allowed in.’

I don’t want to worry her. ‘Never mind, he was probably lost. How are you, darling?’

She tells me about her day, and I forget my visitor. Until the night, when the lullaby hum of machines soothes us to sleep, the sick. The dying, and the somehow-surviving.

I wake up cold as ice. Bloody nurse must have opened the window again. I grope for my call bell but can’t find it; can’t see it, obviously. ‘Hello?’ My mouth is dry as dust. ‘Hello, anyone there? It’s rather cold!’

The noise is intolerable. It sounds like bombs going off outside. And I know what that sounds like. ‘Can you keep it down, please?’ I croak. It’s so loud the room seems to shake. Why are they renovating at night?

That’s when I hear the German again. It sounds like he’s across the room this time.

*Gabble gabble gabble.* It rises to a scream.

‘For God’s sake! How can I sleep with this? Can’t you help this man, please?’

No answer. Is anyone else there, in this whole hospital? Can anyone hear me? 'Hello! Hello!' My voice is too weak to shout. There's just me, and the poor bloody German shouting away to himself.

I can't stand this any longer. This is intolerable. I feel for the gauze on the side of my head and start to unpeel the bandages. Gently, gently. My eyes ache in my head. Is that a good sign, that I still feel pain? I unpick the layers of gauze and tape and padding and feel the air on my eyelids again. My eyes have been closed for so long it takes me several minutes to unstick them. It would be almost comical, scraping off the dried pus, cracking open my eyes like sealed-up envelopes, but actually it isn't comical at all.

My first thought when I open my eyes is that Rachel has lied to me. Because there are several beds in the room. All are empty except mine, and the one opposite, with doctors standing round it. Why didn't they answer me when I called?

They waver in and out. I blink against the pus. Three figures? Four? I can't tell.

'Hello?' I croak out the words. 'What's going on?' Overhead the light seems to swing, casting crazy shadows round the room. The beds are old-fashioned. Iron. I realise there's no modern equipment.

'Hello? What are you doing there? Can you help me?' Nothing. The doctors are bending over the bed, and then I hear it again – the voice of my German visitor. *Helfen Sie mir! Nein! Helfen Sie mir!*

'What are you doing to him? Are you alright there, old chap?'

The doctors don't turn. I see one has a syringe in his hand. In the flickering light it seems enormous. The man in the bed is pale as his sheets, his fair hair like a gleam of tarnished gold. He's bucking and writhing. Afraid of injections? Or something worse?

I hear his last cry - *Nein!* - as the needle pierces his skin, and it chills my blood. I can think of no other way to say it. I think of the man on the bus, how his eyes looked before he reached into his jacket and pressed the button, and everything goes dark again, as if the lights have shorted out.

I start shouting. 'Help! Help! Please help!' Oh God, no one can hear me. I can't find the damned call bell. 'Help me! *Please!*'

There's a noise in the corridor, and I hear the padding feet of the nurse. I can tell from the sound it's the fat one, who huffs when she walks. 'What's the matter, eh?' No 'sir' from her.

'The other man.' I point to where I think his bed is. 'I can't see. Why's it so dark?'

'You got bandages on,' she says, like I'm a child.

'But I took them...' I put up my hands. My fingers find the rough gauze. The bandages are still on.

'Isn't there...isn't there someone else? In the bed there?' My finger shakes as I point.

She sighs. 'You in a private room. You wan' some tea?'

I'm shaking. She brings the hot weak tea, and holds it in her strong hand for me to drink, and I'm grateful for her being there.

'You goin' sleep now? Doctor says you goin' home tomorrow.'

'Yes. Yes. Will you....will you leave the light on? Please?'

She sighs, but doesn't say there's no point, since I can't see it. I'm grateful for that, too.

'Well, now. That's a turn-up, isn't it?' The doctor, grey-haired and smooth, is pleased with me. His cool hands palpate my eyelids. 'It's just a little blurry, you say, but otherwise you can see?'

'Yes.' I could see as soon as they took the bandages off. I could see the whole of the room I'm in, which has just one bed, as Rachel said, and is chock-full of machines and gadgets. Even the light is different from oily shadows of the room I found myself in last night.

He's ready to move off, finished with me. 'Doctor? My wife...she said this wing was used in the war?'

He clicks his pen. 'That's right. There's a display in the hall, if you're into that sort of thing. Just there.'

That's where I am when Rachel comes, looking at the display on the history of this hospital. The far end of the corridor, past my room, is roped off and there are paint cans, ladders.

'Darling! You look so well. You can see, then? You see me?'

I find her hand and take it. 'Yes. I was looking at this picture. Can you help me read the text? It's blurry.'

She frowns at it. 'Oh yes, the German whose plane blew up, in the Blitz.'

'What happened to him?'

She peers. 'He died here, it says. No surprise, I suppose. Imagine the force of it.'

But I don't need to imagine. I've felt it myself. I've seen that deadly flower bloom.

As we pass out of the hospital I see the corridor with the press outside, the police. That must be the bomber, protected, kept alive by those he would have murdered in a heartbeat. I think about the airman, and the shadowy figures round his bed. About the help he was asking me for, but I couldn't give.

Rachel sees me looking. 'Do you feel angry? That's he's being cared for?'

Do I? Would I hurt him, this man who hurt me? Would I do as those silent doctors did, to the airman shot down in a country at war?

I take her hand and tuck it into my arm. 'Let's leave him be, shall we?'

We walk out. 'Why were you interested in the German, anyway?'

'Oh. That's who I thought was in my room.' I say it lightly.

Rachel is practical. She only hesitates a moment. 'You must have seen the display and dreamt about him.'

'But...' I was going to say, but I couldn't see when I came in. I haven't been able to see the whole time I've been here. How could I read a display?

I don't say it. We go home, back to our lives.

### The Postman Always Rings Once

The body lay on the kitchen floor, legs curled up, eyes dull and stopped. The removal man prodded it with one large boot. 'Crawl in anywhere out of the cold, they will. Then they get trapped and die and you're smellin' it all year.'

Mary shut her eyes slightly. She was no good at death; could barely cook raw meat. 'Could you move it, please? I can't...'

The man gave her a look she recognised, a *silly-little-girl* look, and picked the dead rat up in his gloved hand, chucked it out the back door. The door led to a bit of uninspiring yard, a plastic chair with rain pooled in the seat, unused paving slabs leaning against the wall. There were no flowers or grass, only a churned-up patch of soil, but all the same Mary was ridiculously pleased to have an outside. Hardly anyone she knew had a garden. So it didn't matter that the flat hadn't been cleaned at all since the last tenant. It didn't matter about the dirt, the dead rat, the faint cheesy smell round the rooms. It was a place she could go and shut the door and not have to breathe the same air as Michael.

She'd barely believed it when she saw the ad on the housing website – cheap, no references needed. Quick rental to quiet female tenant. Over email the landlord had explained the last girl left him in the lurch- could Mary move in soon? Too right she could. By that stage she'd have lived in a tent. He'd left the key under the mat and she'd put cash in his bank account. They'd never even met. She was surprised he hadn't asked for a deposit, though, after the last girl did a flit. Some people were far too trusting.

It was true; the girl had really left a mess. Supermarket herbs died along the windowsill, and in the fridge there was even food rotting away. What was weird was how many things she'd left, shoes under the bed, a kittens calendar on the wall, drawers full of hairbands and pens and odds. Her post was still arriving too, clattering onto the dusty doormat and making Mary jump as she paid off the removal man. He couldn't resist one last bit of advice. 'Get that door blocked up, love. If you see one rat, you can bet your bloody breakfast there's more. Tell your bloke to do it.'

'I don't have a bloke,' said Mary frostily. 'Anyway I can do it myself.'

The door slammed. Mary bent to lift the post, breathing a deep sigh of relief at the aloneness, the quiet. MISS ROSIE HART. A Boden catalogue, a credit card bill, a copy of *Vogue*, which was a bonus. She'd read that later, once she'd cleaned up and scoured away all trace of the untidy Rosie.

It took hours. There were even clothes in the washing machine, unbelievably, damp and stinking. Mary used bleach and rubber gloves and the Hoover and washed all the clothes again (some of them were very nice) and when it was done, glowing with effort and a pleasing sense that she was tidier than the other girl, she felt better than she had since the day six weeks ago when she'd finally cracked and said, *Michael, this isn't working, is it*. Remember when she'd thought being single was the worst possible thing? Well no, it was being single and having to live with your ex, since you'd stupidly bought a flat together, as though love and money and the housing market would always last. Her a freelance designer, him unemployed since his firm downsized, home was like being locked together in a cell that got smaller every day.

She curled up in her sleeping bag- she couldn't bring herself to take any of their bedclothes with her, not the ones they'd shared. New sheets for a new start. She listened to the strange new silence of the flat, a faint rush of traffic from the main road. Was that a noise? It sounded like scrabbling. Mary got up in her pyjamas and padded through to the kitchen, feeling grit under her bare feet. She'd have to brush up. The garden was empty, lit toxic orange by the street light. There was nothing.

On the bedside table was a nearly full bottle of nail varnish – Chanel, bright red. She fell asleep wondering what kind of girl would go away and leave Chanel nail varnish. One who was used to having things, probably.

Saturday. A chance to finish up, make it hers. A trip to the supermarket, new duvet, some scented candles, food for the now-clean fridge. She even bought daffodils, a cheery yellow that made it impossible to feel down. While cramming them into a water glass, she saw a swarm of movement in the fractured bit of soil outside, a thick coiled tail – rat! She banged the window until it scurried off. How disgusting! She'd been planning to take her coffee outside to the postage-stamp of sun that made it over the rooftops, but that put her off.

Around two, when she was relaxing back with the other girl's *Vogue*, the phone rang, making her jump. Michael couldn't have, could he – no, of course, it would still be connected in Rosie's name. She remembered it could take two weeks to change something like that, and Rosie didn't seem the type to have bothered.

'Hello?'

'Rosie?' A woman's voice.

'I'm sorry, she moved out.' Silence. 'I'm sorry, did you – she's not here anymore, I said. I took over her lease.'

'Who are you?'

'Er- Mary.' She shouldn't have said her name, probably, but she didn't know what else to do.

'Yes, but who *are* you? How do you know Rosie?'

'I don't. I just leased the flat, because she moved out in a hurry. She left the place very untidy, too.'

The woman on the other end caught her breath. 'I can call the police, you know.'

'Well I'm sure you can. But why?'

'They'll find out what happened to her. You can't hide it forever.'

'Look, I—'

The phone was banged down. Mary stood holding her end, bemused. Well! Were all Rosie's friends as weird as her? The phone was in a retro style, the kind people paid a fortune for in those little boutiquey shops where a greetings card cost £5. Mary tugged it out of the wall and shut it into a drawer, trailing wires. No one else would be calling now. She turned back to the sofa, where the shiny magazine lay, all skin and hair and smiles. Suddenly she didn't want it, didn't want anything that belonged to the other girl. She took it to the yard and slammed it into the green recycling bin. Another scurry of movement caught her eye – God! Another rat! It was scabbling in the soil near the back wall. Panicking, Mary lifted an empty can of beans from the bin and threw. The rat scammed and she dove back inside, heart hammering.

It could be sorted. It could all be sorted. Cut off the phone, call an exterminator, contact the post office, throw out all Rosie's things, and then it would be her flat, somewhere she was safe and could shut the door and just be. She made a list on the edge of an envelope and then found herself just sitting for an hour, brooding over Michael and the weird phone call and how much she had to do, change addresses and tell everyone they'd broken up and ring banks and offices and the tax people. That was the thing. It was so easy in your head to change your life, but then you did it and you realised all the paperwork involved. Maybe they made it hard on purpose, so people stayed in their jobs and homes and relationships, scared to get out. Well, she wasn't scared. It could all be sorted.

Mary had her head under the sink when the doorbell rang. It was amazing how many layers of life a person could put down. All those things you owned and didn't know it – washing tablets, dusters, bin bags, knives and forks, a packet of kitchen ties. Rosie had left a frightening amount behind. When the bell went Mary sat up, banging her head. She peeled off her pink rubber gloves and cautiously went into the hallway. No one knew she was there, did they? The postman came earlier, so who could it be? Not the Jehovah's Witnesses, she hoped.

The frosted glass was dark. Blocked out by the body of the man who was peering through it. 'Rosie!'

Mary dithered. There was no peephole or security chain – her landlord was so naïve!- so she called through the glass. 'Rosie isn't here, she moved out!'

The man began to rattle the door. 'Open the door, Rose, for God's sake! I'm sorry, OK! I didn't mean it!'

Didn't mean what? Mary backed away. 'Look, I don't know who you are, but Rosie isn't here. She moved out, OK? She left.'

'Open the bloody door!'

'NO!' Mary surprised herself by shouting back. 'It's my flat now, and you can't come in. Just go away! Leave me alone!'

For a second the man's features were flattened against the glass, and she could almost make out his face, distorted and terrible. A small scream escaped her. Then he was gone.

Christ. Christ! What was up with this Rosie girl? Had she really just walked out of her life, not told anyone? The woman on the phone had sounded like her mother. And that man, had he been her boyfriend? What had he done to be so sorry for? Not knowing what to do, Mary took out her mobile and dialled the number she had for the landlord, scribbled on a scrap of newspaper. It rang and rang, eventually going to a generic voicemail. When she spoke she realised she was close to crying. 'Hello? It's Mary here, Mary from the flat. Erm...things have been a bit weird. A man came to the door- he scared me. I think he wanted the girl who used to live her – Rosie? Anyway....could you call me, please? It's Mary.'

She hung up, feeling the silence of the house all around her, tugging on her clothes like little hands. She had to get rid of everything Rosie had owned. That was the only way.

There was a lot. In the bathroom cabinets, odd ends of toiletries and the bath mat and a sliver of soap in a dish. In the bedroom, clothes stuffed into high cupboards and deep under the bed, a few books still in the case and a pile of magazines by the desk, a bedside lamp with a purple shade. It was all good stuff – Rosie was into fashion, clearly – but it had to go. It looked

as if she'd packed half her things, then given up and left. Maybe she'd run from the man at the door? Mary shuddered. She wasn't going to think about that.

The kitchen was the worst, food in the cupboards still and utensils and tea towels in every drawer. Mary swept it all into bin bags and went out the back. She piled the bags round the bin, and as she stood up something caught her eye – not another rat – no! A man was climbing over the back wall. Tall and bulky in a black leather jacket, he had slicked-back dark hair and was struggling with the crumbling bricks in slippery city shoes.

Mary didn't stop to think. She ran back inside, slamming the door and fumbling with the lock. The man raced across the bit of soil, planting his shoes deep into the dirt, and threw himself against the glass. This time she could see him clearly, his cold dark eyes and sharp nose.

'I've called the police!' she lied, shouting. 'Go away, just go away!'

'Look, I want to see Rosie.' On the other side, she could see his chest rise and fall.

His voice came muffled through the glass. 'Who are you – where is she?'

'She's not here, I told you! I live here now – you have to go! You're trespassing!' Mary looked round wildly. Where had she set her phone after ringing the landlord? Oh God. She dashed back into the living room, hunting round the surfaces. From the kitchen came the sounds of slamming – he was trying to break in. Oh God, Oh God, where was her phone?

Another sound – a key in a lock. She spun round to see another man coming in the front door. Pale, pudgy, any age between thirty and fifty. 'Mary?' he said, in a voice thick with phlegm. 'I got your message.'

‘Oh thank God, thank God – the man’s here! He’s in the back! Please, you have to help me!’

The landlord licked his tongue over dry lips. He wore cream combat trousers, a green jumper with food crusting on the front. ‘He’s here?’

‘Yes! Please, stop him! We have to ring the police, but my phone, I can’t find it, I don’t know what to do!’

Then it was too late. There was a splintering noise, muffled cursing, and the man in black burst into the room. ‘What the fuck have you done with her?’ He was speaking to the landlord.

‘She left,’ the landlord said, licking his lips again. ‘She just left.’

‘You’re a fucking liar.’ Then the man lunged for the landlord. Mary shrieked and dived, spotting her phone on the cushion of the sofa. As the men grappled, she scooped it up and ran past to the kitchen, out into the yard. Scrabbling over the soil, she tried to dial 999 with shaking hands. She tripped, stumbled down, and caught her foot on something in the ground. Oh God. Oh God. Mary looked to see what had her ankle. The soil was disturbed from the man’s climb over the wall, and there in the middle of it, there was a flash of something white, like a swollen grub brought to the light. Ignoring the smashes and shouts from inside, she dug it out with her bare hands, the soil cold and clinging. Within five seconds she could see the red nail polish that still flaked from the dead stiff fingers.

Then Mary was up, running back into the flat, everything tilting and whirling. The man had the landlord round his plump neck and was squeezing. 'It's her!' she shouted. 'It's Rosie, she's in the ground, she's dead! He's killed her!'

Both men looked round, the man in black relaxing his hold on the landlord's neck for just a shocked second. Then a flash of something in the landlord's hands - a blade. A long carving knife produced from his combat trousers, rust-red stains on the steel.

'Look out!' Mary shouted, and the man in black swung, and his fist connected with the landlord's face. The landlord stumbled back, the knife skittering across the floor towards Mary's soil-stained feet – she jumped as the blade slid to a halt.

Panting, the man in black looked round at her. 'You really shouldn't let strangers into your house,' he said.

Mary slumped down, curling her knees into her chest, a thin wail leaking from her. As she listened to the heavy breathing of the man in black, the bubbling bloody wheeze of the fallen landlord, and her own scratching sobs, she found herself wondering what Michael was doing.

## Apples and Strawberries

Jenny's been to the Farmers' Market when she sees the bleeding boy.

The outside door to the flats has been propped open again. She's thinking about leaving a polite note, she's already wording it in her head. *If you wouldn't mind, it might be safer if...* But she's tying her bike up outside when she smells it – a shimmer of fear and blood. She opens the door wide and drops the cloth bag in shock. Her purchases roll out - ripe autumn apples, a squash of Camembert, full scarlet strawberries. 'Oh my God! Are you all right?'

The boy is wedged into the small hallway. He's slumped against the wall in a smear of red, like the spatter of berries now seeping out of her bag.

'Oh God.' She's on her knees, fumbling with his grey tracksuit. The wound is at the back, a clotted gash through his hoody. She can see right in to his dark skin and the pink meat of flesh. Her head starts to swim. 'Oh God. Stay – oh, wait, I'll call...I'll ring for an ambulance....'

His breath is wet and heavy. Eyes still open but the whites rolling. A layer of sweat boils on his forehead. The smell of him is overwhelming – stale smoke, unwashed clothes, blood. How old is he? So small, but a fuzz of moustache on his lip. Thirteen, perhaps; fourteen?

She's fumbling for her iPhone when she realises he's trying to get up. 'You mustn't move! I'll get help.'

'Naw....naw....' He pants. 'Don't, man....naw....' He jerks his head to the door and she understands - he is afraid. He's crawled in here to hide. There's a gang problem in this area, or

so she's read in the papers. Sometimes there are sirens, and the next day yellow police tape fluttering on the street. 'But you're badly hurt – I can't just leave you!'

He's shaking his head frantically, trying to get up. He crawls to his knees and collapses, a hand pressed to his back. A noise comes out of him and she can't stand it.

There is nothing for it. She hauls him into the lift, his thin body shaking under the baggy tracksuit. He leaves small drops of blood all the way into the lift and down the corridor to her flat, like a trail of dull coins. She lowers him onto her sofa. It's cream hessian and she wonders vaguely how she'll get the blood off it. But his wound, she has to deal with his wound. Doesn't she have gauze still, from Paul's accident last year? In the middle of her panic she's remembering it, the smell of snow and pine how he'd lost control of his skis, a laugh sliced off into pain. Nothing serious. Sprained ankle. Why is she thinking of this now? Move, move.

Her flat hums with light, and smells of the lilies she bought yesterday. An impulse in the tube stop, thinking even if there's no one to see it she can still make things nice. Now the boy's stink overpowers the flowers. 'Let's sit you down.' He half-falls onto the hessian. 'I'll – I'll get a cloth.'

She doesn't know what to do first. Clean the wound, yes. A basin, the one she uses to mop the floor, a clean tea towel printed with London buses. 'Can I...?' she approaches the boy. His eyes are half-closed. 'Can I look at it - is that OK?'

He shifts on the sofa and she takes that as encouragement to roll up his filthy sweatshirt. The wound makes her vomit into her mouth – a reaction of the body, something

she can't control. She swallows it down and her voice is thick. 'Can you tell me your name, do you think?' She hears the tremor in her own voice. 'I'm Jenny. That's my name.'

He mutters something she can barely make out. His accent is difficult.

'Idriss? That's a lovely name. I need to clean this for you, Idriss, and I'll put a bandage on it. Then maybe we can get you home.'

He tenses under her hands at the word. She applies the wet cloth to his flesh, where the blood has dried darker than his skin. 'I'm sorry if it hurts.' Red stains the fabric. 'Where is home, Idriss? I can call your mum if you like – she must be worried.'

He says something that sounds like *foster*. Oh.

Jenny can tell from looking at the wound it's beyond her. The lips of skin too pink, too raw. Her hands begin to shake. 'Idriss – I - now don't worry, it's OK, but I need to look this up. I'm not sure how...'

Can he even hear her? 'Just hold tight, OK?' What a ridiculous thing to say. She may as well tell his blood to stop pulsing out, black and sticky. Jenny fumbles for her laptop, open and ready on the desk. She moves aside her latest translating job – a Spanish accounting textbook – and types in *wound dressing*. Her breathing slows as the internet gives answers; diagrams, black and white. She has to place the gauze over the wound and somehow get him to hospital. But first to stem the slow dark ooze of blood.

The boy has closed his eyes again and is breathing so slowly she's afraid he's stopped. *Uuuh* – silence. *Uuuuh* – silence.

'It's OK, Idriss. It's all fine. I'll just get the bandages.' She makes herself walk to the bathroom in an orderly fashion. He isn't dying. No need to run. Now she's calmer she knows the gauze is under the sink, at the back of the cupboard. No need to panic. Her fingers touch the soft cloth and she jumps; her phone has given out a shrill noise. It's still in her jeans pocket and she fishes it out, mostly to stop the noise. 'Hello?' Why has she answered? It's like being drunk, the after-effects of shock. She has the sense that she is swaying as she moves back into the main room.

'Jen? Are you OK, hon?' Mags.

'Of course I am, why?' With her other hand Jenny unrolls the gauze on the living-room table, giving the boy an encouraging smile, though his eyes are closed.

'I just saw on Sky there's been a riot in your street!'

'A riot?' She gets up to find scissors – there are some in her knitting bag, on the desk. She snicks the bright blades to test them and goes back to cut the gauze.

'Well, sort of a riot. A policeman got attacked, they said. It was some kind of gang thing, they said, fighting with knives. The kids all ran off, little shits. Sorry, hon. It just makes me sick, after all that trouble last summer.'

Idriss has rolled up his hoody for her, she sees, so he must be conscious. Balancing the phone, she places the gauze over his injury and tapes it there, like she saw on the internet. 'I haven't heard a thing here.'

'Thank God. Well sit tight, and if you see anything, call the police, OK? I know what you're like with your do-gooding, but it isn't safe.'

'OK.' She isn't listening. Blood is already blossoming through the white bandage – how will she get him to hospital? He's shivering hard and she remembers she still has Paul's jumper, which she slept in every night after he left. She thinks of blood drying on the soft grey cashmere.

Mags is still talking. 'Got to run, I have to get Chloe from ballet, but stay safe, darling, OK? Bye....' She rings off. The flat is silent. Jenny looks at the boy, and for a second he opens his eyes. Dark, bloodshot, like the eyes of someone thirty years older.

'I'll just...'

She gets up abruptly and takes the gauze back the bathroom. There is blood ingrained in her nails but she just stands there and looks at it. The thought comes: *I should have worn gloves.*

Outside she hears the boy cough and move. The phone is in her pocket. 999 is easy to dial. Isn't it?

She lets water run over her numb, bloody hands. The front door slams. Jenny waits ten, fifteen seconds before she leaves the bathroom. The boy is gone - so is the laptop. Her papers are scattered onto the pale carpet. All that's left is a thick spreading stain on the sofa, and by the door, one dropped strawberry, trodden into pulp.

## The Wife's Tale

You will know my name, I think, although we have never met.

You will have seen it in the papers, seen me on television with all those flashes going off, my head down. Maybe you said: but she must have known. She must have.

But ask yourself, what does it mean to know something? Does it mean you know it like you know your own name? I will tell you, it can happen that you wake up one day and your name has changed. So if you ask me did I know I will say no. But yes. And no. Just please remember, it was me who saved those girls in the end. If not for me, they would have died in there.

I knew my name when I was first brought to this country. Quickly I learned I was like a dishwasher or a pair of shoes that your order and they come to your door. I was a parcel, he had ordered me. I was to cook and clean and learn to be a wife. I knew this soon like I knew my name. But names are not solid like a steel door. Did you know this? A name can melt like an ice cube in your mouth. And so he called me by other sounds. They had the sound of your country, like the whoosh of traffic on the road and the sirens that went at night. I can't pronounce it, he said, and the old name was gone, melted like rain in the heat of my country.

This country is so cold. The first winter I stayed inside, wrapped up by the window caked with whiteness - snow! My first time seeing it. My breath made the cold glass mist, and when he came home he'd say, you didn't go to Tesco's? I was afraid. It was so big in the supermarket you

could lose yourself there between the washing powder and carrots. I couldn't read the packets, and the food was all wrapped up, so I could not see what it was. Veiled, like I was.

The next winter he made me go. Once a week, and then I stayed at home, washing the clothes, pushing the Hoover machine. You can watch TV, you know, he said, wondering what to do with this wife he had ordered. He could not switch me off like the television, to wait for him. So I watched the black box, and that's how I learned your language. I was surprised to see that the people on your TV, they don't speak it very well. They say *you know what I mean yeah* and *I'm not being funny but*, like they are all one word.

It was on TV I first heard about the missing girls. This would have been years ago, the girl with the blonde hair. You know which one I mean? The one whose parents were always on, crying to have her back? But they never did of course. Then the year after, the one who had a baby. I cried at that, into my ironing, sizzling the drops away. To have a child and be forced to leave it! I kept hoping each month, but the blood still rose up, regular as fresh streams after rain. He had started to ask by then. Is anything wrong? Did you know something was wrong with you? To him it must be me. Even the hospital he made me go to, cold and grey as the metal sliding into me. I sat, bowed with my shame, while the doctor talked to him, man to man. He never told me what the doctor said, but his face was white when he came back, and after that the trying was less. He went away more, and I washed his shirts and packed his little case for him.

Yes, of course there were stains on his clothes. Men work hard. Of course there would be stains. So I washed them, and said nothing.

Then there was the day I saw them on the table, the stack of manuals, the screws and pieces of wood and bolts. In summer he often stayed at home, working on the house or garden. Why did I go over? I think it made me remember my father. He was the carpenter where I came from, you see. Always screws spilling out of his pockets, and how it made my mother cross! But when I went over I saw the pictures on the front and I wondered. A shed, he was building, on the back of the house. But why did this shed need an expensive air-conditioning system? A security door? And why had he bought this – a thing for feeding dogs on a timer, if you went away? On the cover of one book he had written four numbers. I recognised them – they were the same as the code he gave me for the supermarket, to pay with the plastic card. Why had he written them here?

He came in then and I stacked the books neatly, as if I was cleaning. He came up close and took them out of my hands. I could smell in his sweat he was nervous. You must never go in my shed, he said. You understand? You must never disturb it. You must never clean it. He came closer, and his smell smothered me. I'll know if you do.

I nodded. My head was bowed, like a good wife.

He looked at me for a long time, holding the books in his hands, like he was deciding.

You would like me to clear the path when you go away next time? I talked to his bare hairy feet.

No. His face changed and he smiled. You do too much. You must rest.

That night he was out late. I woke up alone in my room when his headlights slid over the wall. I heard the gate clang, and outside a new sound. It was like a *beep beep beep* of a lorry reversing but not that. I heard him cough, and curse, and make the noise again. Then there was a sound like something dragging, and a bang, and it was quiet. A long time later I heard him on the stairs, breathing hard. The orange street light came in my window. I made my breathing even, slow. He stood in the hall for a long time, looking at me, but then he passed on.

It was not long after this that I saw the paper. I remember exactly what I was doing when I heard about the girls. Two gone this time, so much more news, the teenage friends. The hair fell over their faces like sheets of shining water. I was in the TV room, cleaning his shoes, and I saw it in the paper I had put down. I counted back in my head. A week ago, they had gone. When he'd stood outside my room that night. But of course it didn't mean anything.

He came in and saw me looking at the paper. What's this?

I said I was looking at the pictures. He didn't know that I had learned to read, you see. He didn't know I could understand the marks, that they made words in my head now. That was why I was able to do it, you see.

Well, don't look, he said. I need my shoes to pack.

He looked at me hard then, so after that I was careful not to see or hear. Veiled, even if I wore nothing. There are other ways to veil yourself, you know.

Building supplies. Of course it was building supplies he'd put in his shed. That was what it was for, and the security door to keep them safe. There were so many thieves about now. When he went away a few days later I drifted about the house again. Like a ghost, I sometimes felt, behind my lace curtains, watching the street. I cleaned everything over and over, but I didn't go near the shed. When I weeded the garden I kept my eyes from the bushes he'd planted round the metal door. I did not look, but I knew exactly how it winked at me, that blank metal eye.

Of course the missing girls were still all over the news. I tuned in like everyone else, breathless. Had they been found? No. They had not. It was like a clock ticking down, each day they were away. No one wanted to say it but everyone knew. It was like the time my sister went to hospital in the city far away, after her baby came too soon. We had no way to know what happened until a letter made it to our village, so we all smiled, we pretended she would come home safe on the next bus. Of course we all knew she was dead. But until someone said it, it would not be true. When I watched about those girls, their parents on TV, I cried into my scarf and I was glad he wasn't there to see.

At night I lay in bed and the lights of cars moved over the wall. I was used by then to the noises of the house, the gurgling of pipes and creaking of floors. For years it had kept me awake, my ears aching for the sounds of crickets, the heavy night rain. But was this a new noise?

For a long time I wasn't sure. Short, short, short. Long, long, long. Short, short, short. I lay and listened. Over and over. Short-short-short. Long-long-long. Short-short-short. Was it the pipes? The hum of the fridge? I listened for hours and my fists were clenched tight. It sounded

like a banging of metal. I thought of the door, the blank door-eye, and I put my hands over my ears.

The next night, and the next. The next and the next I listened. The sound came off and on. It carried on for an hour, then grew faint and stopped. It was as if the sound grew tired, and slept. As days went on it seemed to grow less. I found I was lying all night waiting for it. I was not sure if I wanted to hear it or if I hoped it would stop.

Short short short. Long long long. Short short short.

Finally I heard nothing. I lay all night with the orange sweep of lights and the whoosh of engines, sirens splitting the night. I heard the fridge, and the clank of the heating, and the rustle of wind over the garden. I did not hear that sound. I held my breath and listened. Nothing. Nothing.

The light was growing pale and weak. Morning was coming and I was sure I had not slept. There had been no sound. Outside an early bird sang, making me jump. I got out of bed and stood there. It was cold on my bare feet, my thin cotton nightdress. I listened, but there was no sound.

I crept down through the quiet house. He would be home today, he had said on the telephone. He had said, is everything OK with the shed? You didn't touch it?

No, I said. I did not touch it.

He would be home today. I went out to the garden in the grey morning light. It was very early. My feet were chilled on the stone path. A shiver of wind ran through the bushes, and there was the door. The eye that watched me. Like his eye, taking me in, so that I had to hide behind my veils, my stupidity.

I stood in front of the door for a long time, staring at its smooth metal. The keypad by its side had a red light, angry and blinking. Could it see me? Was there some way, with his gadgets and his secrets, that he could see me standing here, disobeying him? You must never touch my shed, he had said, and here I was, stretching up my cold hands to the keypad.

I thought of the numbers for the supermarket card, written on the manual for this metal door here, when he had installed it. Would he make it as easy as that? When I was here in the house all the time? But he thought I could not read. He thought I could not hear, or see. He thought I was a ghost too, that the air passes through. That was why I was able to do it. I listened hard, pressing my air against the door's cold surface. I could hear nothing. It drowned out all sound. The garden was quiet too, the rustle of leaves and that faraway morning bird.

I can see you think you know me, although you don't even know my real name. You think I must have known. But when I stood in front of that door, I will tell you I didn't know at all. I didn't know what I would find. I knew nothing. So what was it made me stretch up my hand and put in those four numbers? To tell you the truth I do not know. I think it was to show myself I was not a ghost. I was not a parcel sent to him from across the sea. I was not another prisoner, locked in the house not by a steel door, but by fear. I wanted to show myself I could do something with

Your Number One Fan

my hands, my eyes, my feet. And so I put up my arm, my icy fingers, and I touched the keypad. I put in the numbers one by one, and the red angry light turned green as cool water.

And after that – well, I am sure you know the rest.

## Your Number One Fan

She recognised him at once when she went to the door. Through the frosted glass that rounded body, the flash of anorak. Her first thought wasn't even fear. It was guilt, because she still hadn't read the bloody book.

The doorbell went, a long shrill like an angry bird. Sarah sighed and opened it. At first she didn't understand what she was looking at – a camera? Then she saw his finger slip on the trigger, and she understood.

It was because he remembered about the chocolate bars that she let it start. At that signing, the one in the freezing bookshop in Slough, and she had that streaming cold, fingers stiff from scribbling her own name. This was after the second book came out, when it was selling on word of mouth, and they were just starting to realise they had something here.

He'd produced the Secret bars from the pocket of his beige jacket. 'These were the ones you said about, in your interview? The ones you miss, that're gone out of stock, like?' Where had he even found them? 'Will you sign my book, Sarah?' His name was Barry. He looked like a Barry.

She'd signed the second book and also the first, although Poppy had said Absolutely Under No Circumstances. When the agent pulled her up on it after, when it was just them and the floor stamped over with muddy feet, Sarah showed her the bars.

And Poppy – twenty-five, sleek as steel – said something Sarah was to remember when she saw him at the door. ‘It’s a fine line between sweet and stalker.’ And then, when Sarah laughed: ‘You’ve no idea how big these books are going to be, have you?’

She hadn’t. Not until later, when she held all three top spots on the bestseller list at once, and people camped out all night for the fourth book. Not until they held conventions, dressed as the characters. Not until her fifth sold out in two hours and there were people in costumes punching each other in Waterstones. When her bank accounts began showing up seven figures, she started to get the idea. But by then James had moved out, saying it wasn’t the writing he minded, but it was like living with Princess Diana or someone and he couldn’t take it anymore.

It was then she first let Barry get in touch with her. Could anyone blame her? There was all this money and fame and people changing their names by deed-poll to those of her characters. But there was also still her at her desk, and nothing in the house ever moving unless she picked it up herself. And of course there was the book she really wanted to write, the scribbled sheets in the bottom drawer, locked.

Barry was quite sweet, she thought. When her publishers wanted to sue him for the rights to [fansofsarahmiller.com](http://fansofsarahmiller.com), she’d stopped them, and even sent him a message. Barry emailed back in less than three minutes, signing off: *your number one fan*. Harmless, she’d thought, and rather nice after the divorce came through and Dad died and she fell out with her sister for leaking the family secrets to the *Mirror*. Sarah didn’t feel that what happened to their mum had anything to do with her writing or her ‘dark’ imagination.

Years went by, books were sold in millions, then the films and the toys and talk of a theme-park ride. In the middle of it all herself, hands moving over the keys, feeding the cat. Dropping Barry a line from time to time. He wrote this blog about how he was almost stalking her, and it was quite funny, she thought. *Saw you at the Hay*, he'd write. *Your talk was tops!* Sometimes snaps of her she didn't remember being taken. Every newspaper mention, every interview, up it went. Long reviews of all her books, some of them rather insightful.

All quite flattering, she'd thought. Until today, and the gun.

'I had to do it, you see? Left me no choice, did you.'

She sat very still on her writing chair. Her hands, pale and cold, lay on the table like beached fish. The gun was stuck through the belt of his high-waisted slacks.

'Where is it? You just chucked it out, didn't you?'

She tried to speak. 'No – no. I have been reading it. Honestly.'

'It's been six months!'

'It's a long book.'

'Oh, *Sarah*.' He put the same emphasis on it that her sister used to. When they were still speaking. 'You're on all the prize panels – don't tell me it takes you six months to read a book.'

'No... I mean, not usually.'

His face sagged. 'I just wanted to follow in your footsteps. I'd never have thought of writing, not me, Barry from Birmingham. But you inspired me.' He put his hand up to wipe away sweat and she saw he was holding the gun again.

'Barry, I... I did read some of it.'

'Some? You stopped?'

'I... was busy.'

'Oh, Sarah. Between friends, please. You didn't like it.'

'It's not that, I...'

'Sarah.' The gun swung round. Sarah counted her heartbeats – tick-tock, tick-tock.

Outside she heard a bird caw. There was no one for miles; it was why she lived there. She started to calculate how long it would be before anyone found her.

The first time she'd felt uneasy about Barry was when he began to talk of writing. *Inspired by you*, he'd emailed, *I've tried my hand at a bit of a saga – 300,000 words! You are so kind, I know you'll find the time to take a look.*

Oh no, she'd thought. Not you too, Barry. This was maybe the thousandth time someone had tried to give her a manuscript – fans, old schoolmates; even her dentist had penned an epic about, what else, a dentist who solves crimes. Sarah still shuddered when she thought about *The Whole Tooth*.

So, feeling awful, she'd ignored Barry's email. And the next. And the whole manuscript thudding down on her doormat, almost tearing off the letterbox. It was annoying, and yes it was a bit odd he'd found out her address, but nothing to worry about. Surely.

She didn't tell Poppy. She didn't tell anyone. They would just say she'd been stupid, to let him get in touch in the first place. They'd make her get the police, and everything would

come out in the papers again, her mother, and all the things that had happened. She couldn't face it. Anyway, he was harmless. Wasn't he?

The emails came still – *Sarah, why are you ignoring me? Have you read The Moons of Saruman yet?*

One day, guilty and sick with nerves over her next book, afraid both that no one would like it and also that they'd love it so much she'd never be able to stop this series and write what she really wanted, she'd actually started to read Barry's book. The first line was: *Zurg the Fourth, overlord, was the last king of the star planet Saruman...*

She'd stopped. Put down the huge manuscript, taken a deep breath. She'd tried, she really had, but after six months she still hadn't made it past page twenty, a long and impenetrable account of mining wars on Zurg's planet. It was maybe the worst thing she'd ever read.

Why had she ever let Barry in? She had millions of fans, thousands who emailed her and wrote fan fiction and sent her begging letters about their gangrenous legs and ailing mothers and leaking roofs. Why Barry? Maybe because he was the only one who seemed to care about her, Sarah, and not just the characters in her head.

Barry paced, swinging the gun, 'I don't know why you can't tell me the truth. I've had my fill of flatterers. Yes, Mr Rudge, you're a genius, give us ten grand to publish. I need to know, Sarah. That's all I want. I just need to know! Is it any good - at all?'

The muzzle of the gun was like the eye of a camera, noting, taking score. Outside she heard a faraway car pass, and leave.

She could tell him it was excellent. She could say she loved Zurg and all his friends on Saruman. Soothe him, get him out, until she could call the police. But she couldn't.

For a moment she didn't understand why, and then she did. It was because she'd already done it. Even if he killed her right there, she'd still be the lucky one. Because she'd done it – that impossible task, being a writer. Published, *read*. Heard. All those thousands of people spilling millions of unread words, and she'd done it.

Barry was watching her, sweaty finger slipping on the trigger.

She closed her eyes. 'No,' she said at last. 'I'm afraid it isn't, Barry.'

He sagged. The gun dropped out of his flabby hands and hit the floorboards. She jumped, heart hammering.

Barry came up close to her. A knife? Would he hit her? Her mind was a clear window.

Barry took her hand in his. Clammy. 'Oh, Sarah,' he said. She saw tears in his red eyes. 'Thank you. You read it. I knew you'd read it. I knew you'd tell me the truth.'

He looked round the room. 'You've got a fire, don't you? Saw the chimney when I was checking out the place.' So, he'd been there before. Try not to think about that. He picked up the gun and flicked the trigger and her heart failed and then she saw what it was - a novelty cigarette lighter.

'Best thing for rubbish, ain't it?' The flame sprang up, yellow and sure. Sarah held her breath.

It must have been three years ago she first brought up the idea of the other book. Not fiction.

About what really happened.

Poppy's makeup was like a smooth mask. 'I don't think.... I think the world would be sad without their next instalment. You're performing a public service, Sarah.'

Sarah wondered when it was that Poppy and the publishers and the distributors and the public had started to see her as some kind of prize cow, to be fed and watered and stroked and above all kept producing. 'But this is what I need to say,' she tried again.

Poppy, who hadn't eaten in about five years, smiled and pushed the biscuits closer. 'I just don't think the brand could stand it. People want stories, excitement – all the thrill of your books.'

But she wasn't a brand. She was Sarah. Chocolate clogged up her mouth.

*The Moons of Saruman*, all 2,000 pages of it, made excellent kindling for the blaze Barry lit in Sarah's cold hearth. 'Don't know what you're playing at, sitting here in the cold. You'll catch your death.'

Sarah didn't dwell on the irony that it was the man with the gun who said this. The fake gun, that was. 'Got a mate collects 'em. Course he'd like a real one and all – I always say to him, Rog, it's a good job we don't live in the States, or I'd be seeing you on *News at Ten* one day.' He knelt back, dusting cinders off his slacks. 'Better?'

'You shouldn't brandish a replica either,' she felt able to say at last. 'It's very frightening.' Her breath was coming short and fast.

Barry chuckled. 'Brandish, now there's a good word. That's why you're the writer and I work in Asda.' He lumbered up. 'Truth is, Sarah, I thought you might like the gesture. Sort of dramatic, like. Who was it said that thing, if gun goes off, you gotta see it in the first scene?'

'You know that?' She tried to hide her surprise. 'Er...it was Chekhov.'

'That's the fella. Well, you needn't fret, it don't go off, this one.' He flicked at the trigger again, making her heart turn over all the same.

'Please, Barry! Will you put that down? You've scared me half to death.'

He slumped. 'Oh, *Sarah*. Thought you'd know it weren't real.'

'Why did you come, Barry?'

'Honest? You know I'm your number one fan. I been trying for years to write like you. But what've I got to write about, Barry Rudge, checkout operative? I just got sorta... desperate, I suppose. Been writing five years, every morning before my shift. Sent it off to this fella and that, but you gotta know people, don't you? Go to Oxbridge and all that. Not like me. Feel like I'm banging me head off the wall.' He rubbed his balding scalp.

'Well.' She indicated the cold room. 'I don't have a lot to write about, either. You don't need to, to make things up.'

'Well...I'm not being funny, Sarah, but I been thinking, your books – don't get me wrong, they're top – but there's not much *feeling*, is there? I don't mean all that hero and sacrifice stuff. I mean things what are sad in real life. Like your mum and all that.'

It was this shocked her more than the gun – her own feeling when he said this. ‘You was just a kid, right, and you come home and there she is, dead? And they never caught the fella?’

She paused. ‘I don’t write about that.’

‘Oh, I know! If you don’t mind me saying, Sarah, I always thought you was trying too hard *not* to. Sort of creeps in, don’t it. Life experience, see.’

She leaned forward to warm her shaking hands on Zurg, catching the phrase *space-time continuum* as the paper flickered and charred. ‘Barry.’ She laughed rustily. ‘You’ve broken into my house at gunpoint. Don’t you think that’s enough life experience for now?’

Barry stared at her for a moment, then sighed deeply. ‘Oh, Sarah, I am a plonker, aren’t I. Scared you half to death for nothing. All that time, and the book was crap anyway, pardon my French. Suppose I knew it was, really.’ He looked at her earnestly. ‘What can I do to get better? You know how to do it – can you teach me?’

Sarah thought about how she wrote, the juggling act of words, the fragile magic and how much she feared one day stopping, and dropping. How this fear had stopped her writing the other book, the one in her head. The one that wasn’t fiction, but was the story of what happened when she was fifteen and came home from school and for a moment she thought, why has mum spilled paint on the floor, but it wasn’t paint, was it? Sarah hadn’t spoken about that day in twenty-five years but every morning when she woke up she was thinking, maybe today. Maybe today’ll be the day I wake up and it never happened.

Barry was teary again. ‘It’s that bad? You don’t think you could teach me?’

It was so bad, his book. And he'd come to her house, waving a gun. Sarah thought for a moment. 'That blog you write, that's funny, isn't it? Sort of self-deprecating...er, I mean, you sort of make fun of yourself for being...for liking my books so much. Like the time you came to my reading dressed as a dragon?'

'Calling meself a stalker and all that, you mean?'

'Well, yes. And things like today...'

'Turning up at your house with a gun? A fake gun, and all. You mean like tell everyone I'm a plonker?'

'I mean....well, yes, that, I suppose. You're sending yourself up. Have you thought of trying to write like that?'

'That's just scribbles, silly stuff. Not proper writing.'

She tried to say it tactfully. 'People do buy silly stuff. Not everyone even likes fiction.'

She saw Barry think about this, rearranging the thoughts in his head like someone tidying out their tool box.

'Come on.' She rubbed life back into her hands. 'You really must go now, Barry.'

'Suppose you'll call the boys in blue.' He sighed.

'You know I have to. But I'll show you what I mean. About the writing.' She paused. 'And maybe...maybe you can show me what you mean, too.'

'Yes...yes....no, I'm fine. Honestly. I don't need to get a cleaner, I'm fine. I'm not lonely.' Sarah held the phone away, rolling her eyes. It was good to be back talking to her sister, but she'd

forgotten how much hassle was involved. ‘Yes, I promise I’ll lock the doors. Anyway, it’s been a year. No sign of him. I must go – there’s the post. Yes, bye, love you too.’

The quiet of her house was a relief after the long call. The grate was cold, the cat brushing her legs. The house was empty but for the clack of her keys. But on the table beside her lay the paper, open at the bestseller list. She was used by now to seeing her own name on there, of course. But this time it was a little different. This time number one on the list for non-fiction was *The Red Room: A Memoir*, by Sarah Miller.

Sarah got up and went to the frosted door, where something had thumped onto the mat. She knew what it would be without even looking. The first proof of *The Bumbling Stalker’s Handbook*, by Barry Kenneth Rudge.

**Also by Claire McGowan:**

**The Paula Maguire series**

[The Lost](#)

[The Dead Ground](#)

[The Silent Dead](#)

[A Savage Hunger](#)

[Blood Tide](#)

[The Killing House](#)

[Controlled Explosions](#) (novella)

**Standalone Thrillers**

[The Fall](#)

[What You Did](#) (coming summer 2019)

[The Other Wife](#) (coming soon)

**Women's Fiction/Romcoms – As Eva Woods**

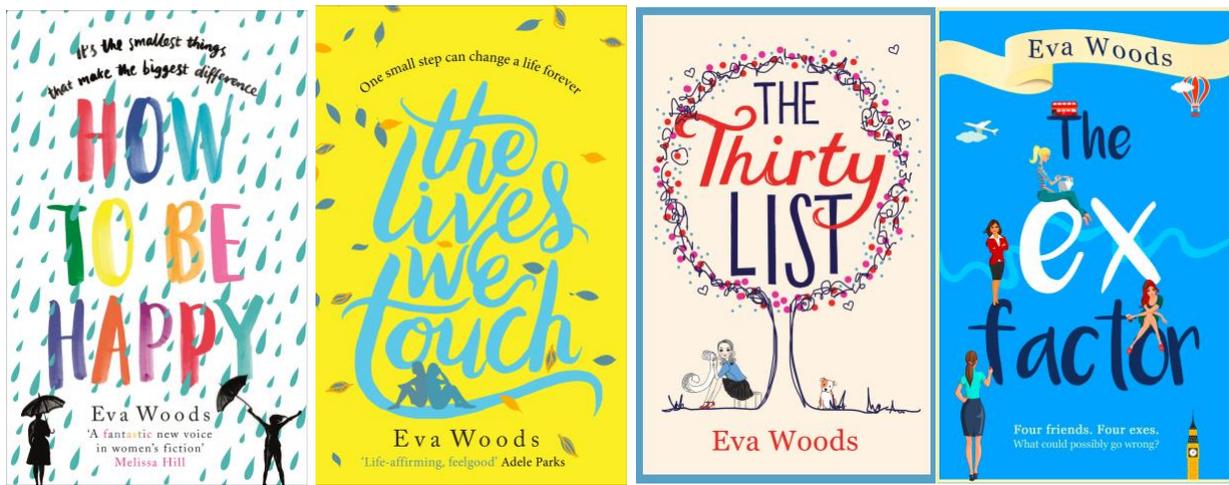
[The Thirty List](#)

[The Ex Factor](#)

[How To Be Happy](#)

[The Lives We Touch](#)

[The Man I Can't Forget](#) (coming 2019)



PRAISE FOR CLAIRE MCGOWAN:

'A knockout new talent you should read immediately.'

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'Hitting the rare sweet spot between a satisfying read and a real page turner, this brilliantly written book deserves to fly high.'

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'McGowan writes utterly convincingly in three very different voices and she knows how to tell a cracking story. She will go far.'

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'Funny and perfectly paced . . . chills to the bone.'

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‘Plenty of intrigue makes this a must read.’

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‘A brilliantly executed thriller with a haunting and atmospheric setting. Spine tingling.’

—*Sunday Mirror*

‘A complex, disturbing, resonant novel that remains light on its feet and immensely entertaining.’

—*Irish Times*

‘Page-turning.’

—*Guardian*

‘Highly satisfying and intelligent.’

—*The Bookseller*

‘Creepy and oh-so-clever.’

—*Fabulous*

‘A fantastic and intense book that grips you right from the very first line.’

—*We Love This Book*

‘McGowan’s pacy, direct style ensures that the twists come thick and fast.’

—*The Irish Times*

‘A riveting police thriller.’

—*Woman pick of the week*

‘Taut plotting and assured writing.’

—*Good Housekeeping*

‘A gripping yarn you will be unable to put down.’

### PRAISE FOR EVA WOODS

'So likeable, smart and wise. A bittersweet read about love, life and friendship that makes you stop and think long after you've finished reading the last page.' - bestselling author Tasmina Perry

'Entertaining, funny and full of wisdom, I loved this book.' - bestselling author Katie Fforde

'I read this recently and loved it SO much. I cried buckets, but it's ultimately a really positive, uplifting book about making every day count.' - bestselling author Clare Mackintosh

'You'll laugh and cry . . . heartwarming' - *Best*

'Uplifting' - *Independent*

'Will make you laugh while it tugs at your heart strings' - *The People*

'Uplifting, humourous, and touching' —*Publishers' Weekly*

### About Me

I'm the author of crime/thriller novels, as Claire McGowan, and romcom/women's fiction/uplit novels as Eva Woods. *The Lives We Touch* was shortlisted for the Romantic Novelists Association Romance Novel of the Year award, and *The Silent Dead* was chosen by *Metro* and *The Times* as a Crime Novel of the Year pick.

I write other things too – I have a short story in the anthology *Belfast Noir*, as well as one broadcast on BBC Radio 4. I also wrote a ten-part crime series for Radio 4, called *Blackwater* and broadcast in 2019. I have written many scripts and was the 2018 Nickelodeon International

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Writing Fellow, as well as being a finalist in the Sundance Episodic Lab, and the BBC Writersroom.

I'm also a very experienced writing teacher and mentor – I set up and ran the MA in Crime Writing at City University, London, for five years, and have helped many other authors get published, as well as teaching for Arvon, Guardian Masterclasses, Skyros, and many other organisations.

Most of these short stories were written before I got published, and it was a real pleasure to dig them out and realise they weren't so bad after all (I think so, anyway...) I hope you enjoy them and might feel inspired to read my longer books. I always write back to everyone who contacts me – you can find me on Twitter (@inkstainsclaire) or Facebook, or Instagram (@evawoodsakaclairemccgowan), and on my website [www.ink-stains.co.uk](http://www.ink-stains.co.uk)

Love,

Claire/Eva x