



THE PRICE OF FAME

and other stories

KIRSTY ECCLES

THE FESTIVAL EDITION

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(and other short stories)

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Please note that while all these stories are fictional, they are based on some very real facts.

The Price of Fame

ONE

Kirsty, 13

‘I don’t believe you. And no one else will believe you either.’

‘No one will believe you.’

‘You’re a liar.’

I was thirteen and at thirteen you get used to not being believed. Most of the time you’re not telling the truth so it doesn’t matter. This time I was though, so it did. But no one believed me.

I was thirteen when I first met Billy and it changed my life for ever. Billy was one of those stars who are so big they don’t need to tell people their second name. Which given that every second person is called Billy, it pretty big, isn’t it? But back then, and even now, Billy was just known as Billy to everyone. The posh word they’d use on television was ‘ubiquitous’. The rest of us just say ‘he’s a celebrity.’ More than just famous. A living legend. In those days sometimes people would call him ‘Big Bad Bill’ to his face, and punch him on the shoulder and give him knowing winks but usually just Billy was enough. And women swooned. And men were jealous. Yes, Billy is one of those guys the women all fall in love with and the men all want to be. And I met him. Really. When I was thirteen.

We met by chance of course. I didn’t go and stalk him or nothing like that. It was at a pantomime - I’d been a gymnast (though the club had just kicked me out for being too tall) and they were short of dancers so even though I couldn’t dance very well, I could tumble and that was good enough. I was in. I didn’t even know who he was really when I went for the audition. I only went because there was some pop star boy playing what’s called the ‘juvenile lead’ and I was keen on him. It doesn’t matter who *he* was, those Boy Band types are all interchangeable anyway really, aren’t they? They come and go. But Billy. There was only one of him. And he was Sex. On. Legs. Every girls dream come true. I fell for him the minute I saw him. Before he even opened his mouth. Before he even saw me. Love at first sight. Totally smitten. The real thing. Some people think it can’t be the real thing at thirteen, but believe me, when I was thirteen it was the real thing to me. And Billy knew it. I expect he was used to it and he recognised the signs. He probably expected it really. I mean, who didn’t love Billy?

I remember going back to school on the Monday morning and telling my friend Amy that I’d met Billy, and that I was going to be in a pantomime with him. And she said, predictably ‘I don’t believe you. And no one else will believe you either.’

Girls are a bit like that at thirteen. Not much sense but plenty of cattiness. *Be the same as us or be out of the group.* And I was quite often in danger of being out of the group because whatever I did, I just didn’t seem to be able to carry off that ‘normal’ thing which is what we were all aiming for. I think if you have to try to be normal you’ve probably already lost. It didn’t seem to matter whether

your crime was having out of fashion shoes or not big enough breasts, or too big breasts, or having met someone famous – anything that showed you up as being different or individual was enough to have you sent to Coventry in my school. I expect it's the same everywhere because I think girls are pretty much the same everywhere. At thirteen. So I was sent to Coventry. I didn't care. They'd all see the truth. If they went to the Panto.

I had two months after school to get used to the idea and then an eight week run at the large local theatre in our town that puts on a pantomime every winter. I didn't even like pantomime, I mean, I'd never been to one since I was about eight. But I loved this pantomime. Because I got to be near Billy. My part, small as it was, was to do this massive tumble, right across the stage, ending in a massive splits and then Billy picks me up in the splits position and carries me around the stage and sort of chucks me out like the rubbish. The tumble got people gasping and the chucking got them laughing and that's the two things you want to do in a panto, it seems to me. I didn't care. All I knew was that I got picked up by Billy. Every night. Well, early in the rehearsals he didn't tend to be there and there was some other bloke being a 'stand in' but he didn't have to actually pick me up because of health and safety or whatever, so it came to the first day, quite near to the first performance, where Billy actually 'graced us' with his presence (as the director said) and saw what it was he had to do.

I was really nervous before I started my tumble, not because all eyes were on me, but because Billy's eyes were on me – those beautiful blue eyes – *and* he was going to touch me. That made me terrified. In a good way though. It was my big moment. And the first time it happened, it was amazing. I did a perfect tumble, and a perfect splits finish and there I was on the floor, smiling my big smile with my arms in the air and Billy bent down to pick me up. Which he did, so gently and so carefully but all the time I felt his strength and felt comfortable as he held me aloft and paraded round the stage with me, all the time singing his song. There was a bit of a kerffuffle when he tried to throw me – he didn't want to hurt me and he wasn't sure how it would work – and somehow I kind of slipped and there I was, wrapped in his arms, right close to his beautiful face and he winked at me.

'Sorry, kid,' he said. 'Didn't mean to drop you.'

'That's okay,' I managed to say. I couldn't believe he was talking to me. Never mind apologising to me.

'It's my fault,' I said. Even though of course it wasn't. It wasn't anybody's fault. It's just one of those difficult moves that you have to practice a lot to get right.

So we practiced. Billy was most insistent on that. That it would all look right for the opening night. We stayed behind even when the others had gone, making sure we got it right.

I tumbled till I thought my arms would come out of their sockets. But I didn't care. Because I knew at the end of it, every time, Billy would pick me up and walk around, parading me. And whispering cheeky, silly little things in my ear to try and make me laugh. Which we both knew I shouldn't do.

When we'd finally finished, Billy gave me a huge hug and told me I'd done really well.

'You're a star, kid,' he whispered and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

I was speechless and completely overwhelmed. It was like all my dreams come true on that one day. And this would happen every night for the next eight weeks. Twice on Saturdays and sometimes on Wednesday afternoons as well. As long as something awful didn't happen, like I twisted my ankle or anything. Which I didn't. I made sure of it.

I think a lot of people were quite jealous of me and Billy. He used to ruffle my hair, and call me 'kid' and he used to call me over there to him sometimes when someone was boring him and he wanted to escape.

'This is my wee treasure,' he'd say and get me to do the splits for them to show them my skill. And I was always happy to oblige. I just loved spending time with him.

I didn't want to think that it would all be over in eight weeks, and didn't want to think about what would happen next, I was just living for the times I saw Billy and when Billy talked to me and when he held me, and when he would kiss me sometimes at the side of the stage if I'd done it particularly well. Everyone says that all good things come to an end but I was determined that this good thing wasn't going to. I just didn't know how I could keep it going. But my gran always says *if there's a will there's a way* and I had more than enough will so I was sure I'd find my way.

Finally when it came to the closing night and there was a big party for the whole cast, and my mum said I could go, even though I was only thirteen – as long as I was home by eleven – I had this mixture of happiness and sadness because I had to face up to the fact that maybe I was going to lose Billy now. I'd made him this card to say thank you and good luck and at the last minute I decided to put my mobile number in there (I got a mobile for Christmas and I was really glad I did) in the hopes that he would keep in touch.

I gave him the card.

'I hope you don't think I'm cheeky,' I said, 'but I've put my number in, so we could maybe, you know, text from time to time, or, you know, keep in touch?'

It was brave of me to say all that but I needn't have worried because he said, 'Quick thinking, batman,' and he tore the front page off the card and wrote his own mobile number on it and handed it back to me. 'Keep in touch, Kirsty,' he said, 'let me know how you're going.'

And I wanted to reach up and kiss him and tell him I loved him, but I thought it wouldn't be the right thing to do and anyway there were lots of other people all trying to get his attention, what with him being the star of the show, and so I didn't.

But when it came to half past ten and I had to leave, I went back up to him and pulled his sleeve and said, 'I've got to go now. Thanks for everything.'

'D'you want a lift somewhere?' he asked, which was really nice of him because he didn't have to leave the party then, but my mum was picking me up so I had to say 'no, thanks' when I wanted to say 'yes,' because the thought of being alone with him in the car was really exciting.

‘Ah well, another time then,’ he said and ruffled my hair like he used to do. And then he bent down and gave me a kiss, right on the lips and said ‘Be lucky, kid.’ And I had to leave the party.

As I was just in the corridor by the stage door, ready to go out for my mum to pick me up, someone grabbed me from behind. And it was Billy. It was dark but I wasn’t frightened, just amazed and excited.

He pulled me round till I was facing him and said, ‘Don’t forget to keep in touch, Kirsty.’ And kissed me again. With tongues. Like a real grown up.

And I knew I would keep in touch, however hard it was. And I knew at that moment that no one would believe me and I didn’t want to tell them anyway, because me and Billy were a secret and our relationship was special and more important than any of their petty nonsense about ‘what happened?’ and ‘why did he do that?’ and ‘I don’t believe you.’ Which was all that I’d get from my pals at school. And my mum would probably just say it was ‘inappropriate’ or something because she thought I was too young to be in love.

And the secret love in my heart was pumping and pounding and making me feel really good and loved and that was a feeling I’d never had before and I just knew it was real love, even if I was only thirteen. And somehow I knew that now I’d found Billy I wasn’t going to let him go. Even if I was thirteen and he was thirty and even if he was married and I was still at school. And even if he was famous and I was a nobody. None of that mattered because I knew that I loved Billy and I knew he liked me a lot and maybe one day would even love me too. The future seems far away when you’re thirteen but I somehow just knew that night that Billy would be a part of my life forever.

Kirsty, 14

I'd tried to keep in touch with Billy and he'd tried to keep in touch with me and I did meet up with him a couple of times after school when I told my mum I was going to Amy's, but Amy wouldn't speak to me any more because she said I was 'full of it' after the pantomime. I didn't even care. I didn't want to bother with all the '*we fancy this boy*' and '*what do you think about that boy*' stuff when I knew I was in love with a real man. But it wasn't very often, only maybe once every few months that I could meet up with him, because he had a really busy schedule. But once or twice we met up in the park and one time he gave me a lift home. He drove this really amazing car, a Bentley I think it is, and I told him he'd better park away from my drive because all the neighbours would look and I didn't know how I'd explain it to my mum. So we parked a bit away and he gave me a kiss, like usual. And he put my hand on his trousers and said 'It's there for you kid, when you want it.' And that was kind of weird and I didn't know how to respond so I just said 'I've got to go, my mum will be looking out for me.'

And it didn't seem to bother him, but he didn't call me for a month or so after that. But you know, it wasn't just me chasing him. He did call me, and text me too. And one day he texted me and told me about this audition. For a new show he was going to be on. A big drama series and they needed kids to play the kids. He was going to play some kind of uncle type who comes into the family and causes trouble because the family is really square and he gets on well with the kids and shows up the parents. He said it was written as a 'vehicle' for him and he really wanted me to play his niece. And he gave me all the information. It was called '*Uncle knows best.*'

So I told my mum about it. I mean, I didn't tell her Billy told me about it, I just told her I'd heard from the director of the pantomime and that everyone was saying that I was this great wee actress and I should really give it a go. And my mum, because she was fed up of me going on about it, agreed that I could go to the audition at least.

'But I think you'll find you're not what they're looking for,' she said. 'So don't get your hopes up.'

I knew she was wrong. But I was well nervous all the same.

So I went to the audition. I hoped Billy would be there, but he wasn't. But he *was* the star of the show and I just knew I had to get a part. Even though it would mean moving from my home town to the town where the studio was because it was going to be studio work.

It wasn't going to be easy though. Because I didn't fit some of their 'criteria.' The first thing was they told me I had to be 5ft 4 (or under). I was 5ft 6. I knew that because it was when I got to 5ft 6 that they kicked me out of the gymnastics club. They said I would be wasting coaches time because I was going to be too big to be a really good gymnast. I didn't care really because they were a load of bullies the coaches there. They didn't care how much you hurt yourself when you were practising, not like Billy who was always most careful when he worked with me. So. It was my first hurdle. I lied. I said I was 5ft 4. And they sort of raised their eyebrows but I was quite thin so I could make myself look quite small. They measured me, just to be on the safe side. I managed to retract my neck (a

determined fourteen year old is difficult to beat) and I came in as 5ft 4. I was 'well developed' so I had to agree to have my breasts taped for the first season as I was meant to be eleven. I could pass for eleven. I could pass for anything if it meant I would spend all day everyday with Billy.

I had to read a piece with someone who was going to be my older brother and then my stage dad. And then a piece with the stand in for Billy, which was funny and I just knew I would do anything to get to be in that scene with him for real. They didn't tell me then and there of course, they said 'we'll let you know' and I was on pins. I texted Billy the day after and he texted back, 'Don't worry kid, you'll get it,' and I just prayed that he was right.

So a week later when the phone call came and my mum picked it up and spoke to the producer, I was just beside myself.

'They've offered you the part,' she said. And I just jumped up and down. But her face didn't look so happy.

'There's a problem,' she said.

I didn't want to hear that. 'You said I could do it mum. You said if I got it you'd support me all the way.'

'I know,' she said. 'But they want you to sign a three year contract. It'll mean leaving school. And moving to the town where the studio is. That means we'll all have to move.'

I couldn't let a few problems get in the way.

'I don't care about school,' I said and I didn't.

'I do,' she said. 'You need an education. And I can't just uproot the whole family...'

'You don't need to,' I said, I can travel every day, or I can find a family to lodge with there and... and they'll have a chaperone to help with homework anyway won't they?' because I knew that's what they did in films, like the kids in Harry Potter. I was not going to let my mum spoil my big chance.

Finally I managed to persuade her to fix up a meeting to 'discuss terms' with the producers. I went upstairs and just danced for joy as I phoned Billy to tell him, even though he said usually it was better to text. I got his answer machine and I didn't leave a message, I texted him and said, 'I've got it. I've just got to convince mum.'

And he texted back not long later and said 'Great news, kid. Can't wait for it.'

And we went to the production office and they managed to convince my mum that I'd still get educated and that it wouldn't be so bad, and I'd still be able to do my exams after the three years was up and then I could go to college. And that they had a flat in the town which I could stay at and she could stay there during the weeknights with me. They understood it was going to mean big changes for my family but they wanted to help out all they could and in the end, she talked to my dad and my brother and they didn't care if they would have to cook their own dinners four nights a week, because

they said they could just 'do the rounds' of the takeaways. And my mum wasn't that happy about it, but in the end we all talked her round and that was it. It was agreed. I was going to be an actress. In a TV drama. With Billy.

'It's just the beginning,' he said to me when we met at the first rehearsal. He ruffled my hair like he always used to do. He offered to give me a lift home, well to the flat, when we'd finished work for the day. I told my mum that she didn't need to come and pick me up every day. We didn't finish till six o'clock usually and the deal was that my mum would find part time work locally – she could just as well work in a supermarket here as back at home and dad said she was 'due a change' anyway, so as long as she was back home for tea at seven she could work proper long shifts four days a week which meant she wasn't losing any money. And of course I was earning. But that was put into a 'fund' to pay me through college or something. I didn't care. I wasn't doing it for the money. Or the fame. I was doing it to be with Billy. Things were really falling into place.

Some days were rubbish of course and sometimes it was boring and hard work. And Billy wasn't there every day because he wasn't in all the scenes. But usually about three days a week I got to be with him. And in between scenes we could sit in his caravan. I couldn't be in there all the time of course and sometimes the annoying boy who was playing my brother was in there too but sometimes we were just there on our own. And of course most days he gave me a lift to the flat at the end of the day as well. These were the special times. The times I learned that there are two lives. One is what you do in public. The one that people know about and see. And the other is private. Special. Just us two. Those were the best times. I lived for those times.

I had to get over a few little problems though. Like about that thing to do with his trousers, and 'being ready for it.' Mostly we just kissed when we were alone, but sometimes, especially when we were in his car he liked me to touch his thing. He used to unbuckle his belt and guide my hand down into his trousers and it always felt like this strange, unreal experience, where I couldn't believe this was him and me. I had to learn to kind of distance my feelings from this because they were all a bit mixed up. I mean, I didn't like it, but I did. I sort of felt I shouldn't be doing it, but Billy, the man I loved, told me it was good and it was what he liked and I wanted to keep him happy and he didn't seem to think I should have a problem with it and I worried that if I didn't keep doing it, he'd think I didn't like him and stop spending time with me. Because he didn't have to. There were plenty of other people for him to spend his time with. I knew that.

So we sort of got into this routine, when I was fourteen. That in his car, and sometimes in his caravan on set, I would make him hard. And sometimes at the end of shooting I'd go to him when I was still in costume and he would unbandage my top, because remember I was supposed to be only eleven. And when he did that sometimes he'd mess around a bit. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I am telling the truth so I suppose I should be grown up about it and not silly. Well, he would play with my tits a bit and sometimes he'd kiss my nipples and get them hard. He used to say he was giving them 'mouth to mouth' after being locked up all day. And it did make me feel good, even though I kind of felt bad for feeling good. But Billy never saw a problem with it, so I didn't like to say.

'What if someone comes in,' I used to say from time to time.

'They'll knock,' he said. And he always sort of seemed to think no one would 'catch us' as long as

we were careful. It worried me, but it didn't worry him and so I tried to stop it looking like it worried me.

'Don't worry,' he said, '~Remember, Uncle knows best.' And then he would do something silly to make me laugh.

And one day, when we were in his car on the way home and he'd parked up in the local park away from streetlights, which is where we used to spend some time on the dark nights in the winter for a half hour or so if my mum was on a late shift and wouldn't know I wasn't back at the flat, he unbuckled his belt as usual but then he said, 'It's waiting for you.'

And I wasn't sure exactly what he meant, but he took my head and sort of guided it between his legs and said, 'Suck it and see,' and there wasn't really anything I could do about it. And that was the first time. When I was fourteen. But I didn't tell anyone. Of course. Things are private between people in love aren't they and you don't tell people. And I thought that I'd get used to it in time. It was all part of becoming a grown up. And I loved Billy and would do whatever it was he wanted, to prove it.

THREE

Kirsty, 15

Promise not to tell. But you probably don't believe me. I'm going to tell you anyway. I spent the night with him. Billy. Not in a hotel. Oh no, of course not. In his city flat. His wife was on holiday in Africa or something. I'd like to think it wasn't just that my number came up, that he really wanted it to be me. But I'm not so sure. It was the first time we had real, full on sex. And I slept next to him in his bed. And in the morning I still loved him. And he told me not to tell. Because I wasn't sixteen. And he could get in trouble. And if he was in trouble I'd be in a lot more trouble. I stopped him right there, 'Billy,' I said, 'I'm not one of those kids who will run crying rape. I love you. I've always loved you. That's what we share. Different to the others, right.'

And when he nodded and agreed I tried to tell myself he meant that he loved me back. That he thought I *was* different from all the others. But then the phone rang and Stacey or Shirley or someone got him laughing and talking suggestive. But I was the one who'd spent the night. They were just on the end of the phone. That day.

I knew I had competition though and I knew there wasn't a lot I could do about it. It's funny because I mean I'd always known that Billy had a wife. And an adorable sweet little pair of twins. And I wasn't jealous of her, his wife. I couldn't do anything about that. But it was the other girls. The ones that other people would think were 'just like me.' But they weren't. What Billy and I had was special. At least to me. Sometimes I thought maybe I wasn't that special to him, but I never liked to say, because I knew he wouldn't want me to be clingy or jealous and I didn't want to stop being with him. So I just had to put up with it. And try to be more for him than those other girls.

The TV drama series didn't get signed up for a second run, because even with Billy as the 'star' it somehow didn't 'capture the public imagination.' And so I had to go back to school. And go back a year so that I could do my Standard Grades and get ready for college. My mum said I'd 'wasted a year' and it just 'showed how fickle the industry is' and that it was now more important than ever that I get a place in college to study something 'proper.' It hadn't been a waste of my life. It was the best year of my life. Especially that night.

But it did make it pretty difficult to repeat it, now that we weren't working together. I spent a lot of time wondering what he was up to when I'd text him and he didn't text back. One time he didn't answer my texts for a whole month and I thought that was it, that he'd had enough of me. It didn't help that when I sort of told it to one of the girls at school – though I didn't tell her it was me of course and I didn't tell her it was Billy – she just said 'he'll have had what he wants out of her (the girl I was pretending had 'done it' with a boy) and he'll be off after another conquest.'

And that thought had me in bits but there was no one I could talk to, was there? And I couldn't really ask Billy. So I stopped texting him for a bit and wondered what I was going to do now. I was really depressed for a while and life just didn't even seem worth living. My mum tried to cheer me up by making me go out to parties but I didn't want to go to parties with the kids in my school – everyone in my year was a year younger because I'd had to go back a year after my 'year out' – and boys are so immature anyway. I just wanted to stay at home and usually I would just sit watching re-runs of the

‘series’ on my personal DVD player, the one Billy gave me when we were in *‘Uncle knows best’* and keep looking at all the scenes Billy and I did together and know all the ‘real’ things that happened when the camera stopped rolling. It was torture in a way, but I had to keep doing it. It was the only way to keep him close to me.

But I decided I’d better not keep pestering him. So he didn’t text me for a month. And I didn’t text him for a month. And then, one day, when I was out hanging washing for my mum, I got this phone call.

‘Hi, kidder, how are you?’

It was Billy. I didn’t know what to say. I mean, I wanted to tell him I loved him and I wanted to ask him why he hadn’t been in touch and I wanted to tell him I’d missed him but I couldn’t think of how to put any of it into words.

‘Not speaking?’ he said.

‘No. Yes. Uh...’ I said.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked me.

‘Hanging the washing,’ I said, because that’s what I was doing and I was so shocked I didn’t have time to think of anything smarter.

‘Good girl for mummy,’ he said and laughed. Then he started to talk dirty, but just for a laugh, you know like asking me what I was wearing and was I hanging my bra up on the line and what cup size was I now, and that sort of thing.

And it was kind of embarrassing but I knew it was just a joke and I was happy he was talking to me. I was so glad to hear his voice again.

‘Let’s meet up,’ he said. ‘If you’re not too busy?’

I thought he was being sarcastic but I was confused because I thought he was the one who had been ignoring me. I let it go. I didn’t care. I just wanted to see him again.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘When? Where?’

And we fixed up to meet after school the next day. But when the next day came he wasn’t there and he texted me to tell me he’d had to go to a meeting, but could we do it the next day. And that went on for about four days. Right over a weekend as well. And I was getting quite pissed off with it really, but mainly I was just desperate to see him, so I stuck it out.

And finally, on the Tuesday afternoon there he was, outside school, a bit down the road in his flipping great Bentley and I ran towards it, looked round quickly to make sure no one saw me, and we drove off to a quiet place in the middle of nowhere.

I said I had to be back by seven and he said that was fine, we had plenty of time.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he said. ‘We both have,’ as he unzipped his trousers.

‘I wish we could spend the night together again,’ he said, after I’d made him come. ‘I think about you all the time. I think about coming inside you.’

‘So do I,’ I said. And I meant it.

‘When’s your birthday?’ he asked. And I forgot for a moment that he probably just wanted to know when I was sixteen and ‘legal’ and convinced myself he really wanted to know so he could buy me a present or something, then I thought again and realised probably he was just wanting to know the first thing and it made me feel a bit sad, but I thought, well, he has to be safe really. And then I wondered if that was why he hadn’t seen me for so long. So I asked him.

‘No, kid,’ he said, ‘I’ve been working in Hollywood. On a film. Big bucks.’

‘Lots of pretty girls,’ I said, trying not to sound jealous.

‘Oh, come on kid,’ he said, ‘what’ve they got that you haven’t eh?’

‘They’re sixteen at least,’ I said.

He took my head in his hands and said, ‘Don’t be silly Kirsty. It doesn’t matter how old you are or how young you are, does it? You’re grown up enough to have these feelings and... it’s private anyway, isn’t it? No one else’s business. This is us. You and me. Real and nothing to do with anyone else.’

‘I thought that’s why you were keeping away from me,’ I said. ‘After, after the night we...’ There was a bit of a pause and he gently wiped away the tear that fell on my cheek.

‘I wouldn’t tell anyone,’ I said. ‘Never. I love you.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Now, we’d better get you home.’

And on the way home I told him I would be sixteen in April and he winked at me and said, ‘we’ll have to plan something special for that then won’t we?’ And I wished it wasn’t October and we had a whole more winter to go through. But wishing doesn’t make things come true does it?

And it was eight weeks before I heard from him again after that. But I knew it was just because he was busy. At fifteen you’re old enough to wait for things aren’t you? Especially when you think you know what you’re waiting for. And I would have waited for ever to spend another night with Billy.

As it was, we met up about four times between that time and April and every time it was in his car and I gave him a blow job and he stuck his hand up my blouse and did this trick he could undo-ing my bra with one hand and I had to sort of rustle around to get myself back into it before I went back home. And once he sort of got his fingers down my pants, but he stopped himself. Sometimes I felt

that he was only really interested in what *he* was feeling, not me, but I don't really understand sex that well and I felt guilty for hearing that girl's voice in my head saying '*he's only in it for what he can get*' when I knew that he could be 'getting it' from anyone and he'd chosen me. So I decided to stop being so paranoid and needy. And even when I didn't really enjoy it that much, because he pushed his cock in my mouth a bit far till I gagged, or when he twisted my nipples so hard that he really hurt them, I didn't let on, because I didn't want to miss that chance that I knew might come when I was sixteen. That we would spend the night together again. I was living for that day. And no one could say or do anything about it then, because I'd be legal.

Though he pointed out that he was still a married man and we'd have to keep it to ourselves because of the press and all the problems they could make. And I told him again I'd never tell anyone, I just wanted to be able to *be* with him. And I did.

FOUR

Kirsty, 16

So, of course April came around and I had my birthday. But I hadn't heard from Billy for a while so I wasn't that happy and my mum got really pissed off when she'd organised a party for me and I just didn't feel 'in the mood.'

'Moody is what you are,' my brother said but my dad told him to lay off me.

And I guess I was pretty moody, but it was because being sixteen was such a big deal to me, and I thought it would be for Billy. I mean, I knew that he was still married and he still wouldn't be able to do anything in public or anything, but I still thought he'd remember my birthday and I was sad that he didn't.

A week after though, everything changed. He called me. It was on a Friday as I was walking home from school. Totally out of the blue. I was thinking about my maths homework.

'Hi, kid,' he said, and I just melted. However pissed off I felt when I didn't hear from him, the moment I heard his voice, or even if he just texted, it completely changed my mood.

'Hi,' I said.

'Get your glad rags on,' he said, 'be at the corner by seven.'

'What?' I said, because I couldn't work out what he was talking about. For a moment I even wondered if he knew who he was calling, because he was constantly on his mobile phone with girls and people, talking to them.

'It's Kirsty,' I said, 'what do you mean?'

'I mean I'm taking you out for your birthday,' he said. 'Be there at seven.'

'But, what will I tell my mum?' I asked.

'Come on Kirst,' he said, 'You're all grown up now, sixteen, surely you can think of something?'

'Should I tell her I'm going out with you?'

'If you like,' he said. 'D'you want me to come to the house and pick you up, sort it with your folks?'

I paused at that one. I just didn't know what to say.

'We're family after all,' he said, and laughed.

'Uh, okay, if you're sure,' I said.

‘Sorted then,’ he said. ‘Get your best dress on and we’ll go out on the town.’

And that was it. He put the phone down. Leaving me with quite a dilemma. I mean I was over the moon but I was all over the place too. I couldn’t believe that he was actually going to come and tell my mum and dad he was taking me out. In my mind that was never going to happen. It was like him telling the world he loved me, though I knew he wouldn’t say that to them. And then I wondered what my mum would say. And what my dad would say. Would they even let me? And I realised I was going to have to come up with something of a story. A story they would believe.

Well, of course it was so important to me that I’d managed to work out my story by the time I got home. I’m not saying I skipped home all the way, because I was too deep in thought for that, but my heart was pure singing inside. This was it. This was the night Billy would tell me he loved me back. And we could start planning. For our future. However that would be.

I came out with it as soon as I got in and my mum was standing peeling potatoes for Friday chips.

‘I won’t need any, mum,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘I’m going out.’

‘First I’ve heard of it,’ she replied.

‘You forgot mum, I told you months ago. Billy’s coming to pick me up.’

And my mum put the potato peeler down and looked hard at me.

‘You never told me about this,’ she said. ‘Who’s Billy?’

‘From *‘Uncle knows best,’* mum. Remember?’ I lied.

She didn’t look like she believed me. I had to embellish. Teenagers are good at that of course, we get plenty of practice.

‘I did tell you mum,’ I said, putting on what she’d call an exasperated tone. ‘Everyone from the cast is having a reunion. In a fancy hotel in town. I’ve got to get proper dressed up and everything. And Billy said he’ll come and pick me up. At seven.’

Then I went all sweet and said, ‘Is it okay?’

And she looked a bit pissed off but said something like, ‘sounds like a fait accompli’ or something.

So I went off upstairs to get changed.

I think my mum was a bit chuffed that Billy was coming to our house, to be honest. I bet she fancied him too. Every girl did and every woman. He was ‘charismatic’ my dad said. And I think he was

probably proud that I knew Billy too, if it comes to it. Only my brother didn't like him. 'Why's he perving on you?' he asked, but it was just because he was jealous like brothers are.

My dad raised his eye a bit when I came downstairs in my little black dress and full make up on and hair up and everything. He was about to say something. My brother got in there first.

'You look like a hooker,' he said. My dad looked like he was going to explode. And I didn't know if it was me or Paul he was mad at.

My mum stepped in before either of them could make it worse. I guess she'd been sixteen herself once too.

'She's grown up now,' mum said. 'You'll have to get used to it.'

'Well, at least I suppose she's safe enough with Billy and all the 'family'' my dad said, though he didn't sound entirely convinced.

'What time will you be home?' he asked.

'Dad...' I said. 'I don't know. Billy will bring me back, I'll be fine. Don't wait up.'

And my parents exchanged glances which sort of said – we've got to let her go – like it was a moment they'd been waiting for ever since they were teenagers and first got together. And dad said, 'Okay, as long as Billy looks after you. You're still my little girl you know,'

And the bell rang.

'Fine dad,' I said. 'Just don't embarrass me, right?'

And Billy stood there, large as life on the doorstep. My mum went all gooey and asked him in. He came in. I couldn't believe it. There he was, standing in our sitting room larger than life and twice as handsome. It was awesome.

'Take care of her and don't let her do anything stupid,' my dad said. 'Sixteen year olds...'

'Don't worry Frank,' Billy said, because my dad's name is Frank. 'We're family remember, I'll keep a close eye on her all night and I'll bring her back safe and sound.'

'And what time does the party end?' mum said, though you could tell she was so in awe of him that she was finding it hard to say anything at all.

'Not sure about that Pauline,' Billy said and then he touched her on the shoulder and she all but fainted, 'but I'll take full responsibility. Nothing to worry about. I'll bring her home, however late it is.'

'Well, okay, it is the weekend after all,' my mum said.

‘Don’t wait up,’ I said as we left the house and Billy made a big deal about holding open the door of the Bentley like I was a real lady, and you could see the curtains twitching all along the road. And I thought, so this is what it’s like to be a celebrity. And I liked it.

So I should tell you the rest of the night was like a dream, but I promised myself this would be the truth, so I’ve got to tell it right. It’s not the way I’d have wanted it either but that’s life really, isn’t it?

It started off really well. We chatted away in the car as Billy drove us into town. He said it was a surprise where we were going.

‘Am I dressed all right?’ I asked.

‘You’ll do,’ he said and winked at me. ‘Though I prefer you with your clothes off.’

I just went red at that one. And sort of excited about what might come later.

And we went to this sort of bar place, at the bottom of a fancy hotel and some of his pals were there from the show he was working on. There were a few raised eyebrows when we first went in, I can tell you. But he was a perfect gentleman.

‘This is my niece, Kirsty,’ he said and a guy slapped him on the shoulders and said, ‘oh, yeah, niece eh?’

‘No, really,’ he said, ‘We were in *Uncle knows best* together, weren’t we Kirsty?’

I nodded because I just didn’t know what to say.

‘She’s a great wee actress,’ he carried on, ‘she’s my wee family treasure.’

And the guy backed off and offered to buy us a drink.

Billy said I shouldn’t be drinking, what with only being sixteen. ‘Don’t want to get me shot?’ he said and I agreed. I didn’t need to drink, I was drunk just being near him. So I just drank fizzy water with a bit of lemon in it.

And later on he said, ‘this is getting a bit dull. Do you want to eat something or...’

And there was a long pause.

‘D’you want to come up to try room service?’ And winked at me. I knew what he meant. I hoped I knew what he meant. I wanted him to mean what I thought he meant.

And he took me by the arm and out we went, into the lobby.

And it was quite quiet and nobody at reception really looked at us and he didn’t seem bothered anyway. And we went up to room 304. I remember that. The room number. And the room. I remember everything like it was happening in front of me right now. I know it wasn’t the first time, but it was

what I'd been looking forward to for so long.

And we went into the room and all I could see was this big bed. And suddenly, I'm not sure why, I got scared. I can't explain it. I mean, I was with Billy. I loved Billy. Why was I feeling so strange?

'Get them off,' he said, just like that. 'I want to see you naked.'

So I did. And I dived under the covers because I felt really stupid standing there in the middle of the room with no clothes on.

And he crossed over to the bed. He pulled the sheets right off, like magicians pull those cloths off the tables and leave the crockery there. Except there was no crockery. Just me, sitting there naked, hugging my knees. Feeling very young and very stupid. And not like I expected to feel at all. It was not romantic, that's for sure. And I'd wanted it to be romantic. I'd imagined, when I'd played this night over in my head, in my dreams, that it would be candles and soft lights and... but it was harsh overhead lights and just me, naked in the middle of this hotel bed and he still had all his clothes on and it didn't look like he was about to take them off and join me or turn the light out or down or anything. It just *wasn't* romantic. And I was scared, if I'm totally honest, just scared. And I hated myself for being scared. Because this was Billy. Billy who I loved and it wasn't he who was making me feel like this, was it? It was me, being stupid. I mean what was I expecting?

'You can't run and you can't hide,' he said. 'Too late to be coy about it now eh?'

And he got my hair and kissed me really hard and then sort of pushed me back on the bed. And his hands were all over me and even though he said a few things like, 'I've really missed you,' he was more doing things than talking to me. His hands were everywhere and I was still not really enjoying it. I sort of hoped he'd say 'relax' or something because you could see that I was kind of nervous, but he didn't, he just went ahead and did it anyway.

And even though it wasn't my first time, it wasn't that nice and it wasn't romantic and I just didn't feel how I thought I'd feel about it all. Afterwards. I sort of wanted to cry. But mostly I just wanted to cover up, because he still had his shoes on and everything. He just pulled his trousers back up and sat on the bed. And said, 'You'd better have a bath, you're a dirty girl,' and I didn't feel like he was really joking or anything.

I got up and walked through the room to the bathroom and as I went he said, 'Happy Birthday, Kirsty,' and I realised it really was me being stupid. That I just had all these notions of what love and sex was and it wasn't like they tell you in the magazines, it's something quite different and maybe I wasn't 'ready' for it but this was what it was and I needed to stop being stupid and stop feeling – cheated – or whatever it was I felt.

And I threw up in the toilet before I had a bath.

And when I was in the bath he came in and sat on the toilet as if nothing had ever happened.

'Kirst,' he said.

‘What?’ I said, wondering how he could be so calm about it all when I still felt sort of sick.

‘Ever fancied a threesome?’

And I didn’t know what to say about that. What did he mean? I didn’t know if he meant him and another man or another girl and I said, ‘I just love you Billy, isn’t it private between us two? I’m not interested in other men.’

And he laughed and said, ‘Don’t be such a party pooper. I don’t mean another man. I mean how about you and me and another girl?’

‘Why?’ I said, ‘Is that what you want?’

‘Just curious,’ he said and left it at that. ‘If you’re not into it, don’t worry.’

And he left the room.

He called out a minute later, ‘come on, get a wriggle on. I need to get you home.’

And when I came out he was on his mobile and he signalled me to shush a bit while he finished his call. And I could tell it was to a woman. I didn’t know if it was his wife or if it was someone else.

But I got dressed and then just as we were about to go, there was a knock on the door. I was terrified. Somehow I thought maybe it was my dad, out there, banging on the door because he’d worked out what was really happening. But it wasn’t.

Billy opened the door and it was a girl. No, it was two girls. They might have been twins. Not his children, I don’t mean that. I mean grown up about my age or maybe a bit older. Two of them. Sisters at least if not twins. And it was pretty clear to me what they’d come for. They giggled a bit. They made me feel more sick if that was possible.

‘Make yourselves at home, girls,’ he said to them showing them the champagne that was in the mini bar, ‘I’ve just got to take Kirsty home, she’s all partied out.’

And something just snapped in me. I said, ‘no it’s okay, I’ll get a taxi.’

‘Are you sure?’ he said. ‘I told your dad...’

‘No, it’s fine,’ I said.

And he went into his wallet and got out fifty quid.

‘That should cover it,’ he said and he told me I’d find a taxi rank right outside the hotel.

So I went downstairs. I was shaking and really trying not to cry. I’d got myself into it hadn’t I, after all? It was me who ‘stopped the party,’ but I really couldn’t believe he was expecting me to do it with him and those two watching, or do it with them and have me watch, or have us do things to each other

or... well, I couldn't think straight and I couldn't imagine what it was he really had in his mind other than it clearly wasn't that he felt the same way about me as I did about him.

And I promised myself as I got in the taxi that I wasn't going to see him ever again. I sneaked in the house and only once I'd got into bed and hidden myself right under the covers did I start to cry. I was sixteen and my life was over. And my brother was right. Billy was a perv and I was a hooker. I had thirty five pounds left from the taxi fare and was that how much I meant to Billy? I felt like rubbish. And in the morning I'd have to tell my mum what a great night I'd had and all that. Lucky I was such a great wee actress eh? At sixteen.

FIVE

Kirsty, 18

I kept to my promise. I didn't see Billy again, not after that night at the hotel. He texted me a couple of times. And I changed my mobile number. Oh yes, there were loads of times after that I wished I'd never done that, and of course I still had his number, but I still had something, I don't know if it was my pride or just my shame, but something always stopped me from actually phoning him. I was confused and disgusted with him, but mostly with myself. And I needed to get on with my life.

I went to college. I had to find a life beyond Billy. I told myself that Billy was just a stupid schoolgirl crush that went too far and I got what I asked for and it wasn't really his fault at all, it was me being stupid. But I was grown up now and I had to make a real life for myself. In the real world.

I was studying Spanish at college, with business administration because I hoped I'd get a job as a translator, or even a holiday rep or something. I didn't really think it through. I just wanted to be doing something. But I found it really dull. And that was probably why I ended up auditioning for some play at college. Which is where I met Trevor.

Trevor was like a very very cheap version of Billy. In that only Trevor fancied himself, no one else did. But he acted like we all should fancy him. And when I went for the audition and told him I'd been in *Uncle knows best* he acted all impressed and sort of smirked at me and said 'ah, a fellow thespian eh?'

Trevor was directing the play and he must have been about forty. He was what my mum would call 'past his best' and what my flatmate called 'distressed' meaning that he wore faded jeans and a crappy leather jacket and his hair was going grey but he walked around like he thought he was some guy off a jeans advert or something. A lot of people laughed at him. I didn't. I have to say, I found him a bit scary from the off. A bit creepy. Because so many times I saw him doing the 'charisma' thing I'd seen Billy do. And I realised then that it was all an act. That it was something you could learn to do to get people eating out of your hand. And Trevor really thought he had it off pat. And in a way he did. But he didn't have Billy's sex appeal. I don't think it was just because he was a nobody and Billy was a celebrity. There was more to it than that. Like I said, Trevor was just a cheap imitation. But cut from the same cloth.

The first audition, the moment I saw Trevor, I nearly turned and ran for the door. And I think he saw that. He looked me up and down and I think he knew. He encouraged me to stay and that's when he said all that 'fellow thespian' stuff. I hated the way it felt like he was undressing you with his eyes whenever he looked at you, but there were plenty of other people in the audition and it wasn't like I should let a dodgy director put me off. I thought I could handle it. And I got called back for a second audition. Where I met the producer as well. A guy called Colin. He was okay, and I sort of thought well, he'll tone down Trevor won't he, there's nothing to be afraid of here. It's just me, being stupid again.

And after the second audition we were told to 'wait to be contacted' to find out who was actually going to get into the play. And I waited long enough that I thought, well, that's it, not me. And I

confess that I thought, well, Trevor will have picked one of the girls who was taken in with him, not me. And was going to leave it. And then I got a text. From Trevor. Saying I should meet him at the theatre office at six o'clock that night. He wanted to tell me something. So I went.

It was winter and dark outside apart from the streetlights. And there were no lights on at the theatre which I thought was a bit strange but I tried the door round the side which was the sort of stage door (it wasn't a real theatre, just a college black box studio sort of affair) and it was locked too. I rang the doorbell, but I was about to leave and go home when the door opened and there was Trevor.

'Sorry, I was working,' he said 'come on in.' And I followed him in. He didn't switch the lights on but he sort of ushered me upstairs to the 'green' room and he followed up behind me. I felt really uncomfortable because I imagined he was going to grope me from behind any minute, but he didn't. I thought I was just being stupid and decided I needed to stop that and just listen to what he had to tell me. It was me making this an odd situation, not Trevor after all.

But all through our conversation I felt sort of distanced. Like two things were happening at one time. He sat right across the room from me, he wasn't touching me or doing anything weird like that, but it was the way things were happening that I didn't like. I just felt spooked. I felt like there was some sort of 'subtext' going on and two stories were happening at the same time.

In the one story Trevor was telling me that I hadn't got the part and I accepted that and was about to get up and leave. And then he quite calmly told me that he was sure he would talk the producer round because *he* wanted me in the play and did I know what *the casting couch* was. Which of course I did. And he was making it seem, without ever actually saying it, like what he was suggesting was that if I was prepared to 'go on the casting couch' with him then I'd get a part in the play, and believe me, I didn't want the part that much and I was now feeling really really spooked and sick to my stomach. But again, a wee part of me was thinking, you are making this up. Trevor is just some sad middle aged guy who thinks he's a player and he's trying to impress you.

But I didn't like it and I decided I was out of there.

'I'm not sure if I'm going to be free for rehearsals,' I said, 'I've got a part time job.'

I didn't know what I was saying, I was just making it up the best I could, I just wanted to get out of there. The room we were in was lit only by a little side lamp and the rest of the place was in darkness and I was feeling really really bad about this and Trevor must have seen me eyeing up the door and he said, 'In space no one can hear you scream.'

And I know this might have just been his kind of a joke but it really frightened me and I thought, I have to get out of here because if he wants to rape me there's nothing I can do about it and no one would believe me anyway... so I said, 'No, really Trevor, I'm flattered and I'd really like to be in the play if I can sort my shifts out, but I've got to go now, I'm late.'

And I started off down the stairs and he followed after me and as I reached for the door in the dark his hand came over mine and pushed it shut again and he pushed me up against the wall and kissed me. I struggled, but only a bit because I knew he was stronger than me and that if he wanted to there

was nothing I could do to stop him, so I thought I'd better try and play the smart card for once in my life.

‘Really, Trevor, I’m up for it, but I have to go just now.’

And he let me go.

‘Remember,’ he said as I was leaving. ‘You’re a grown up. You want to be in the play and you’re asking for it. But if you say anything, you’ll not get the part and no one will believe you anyway.’

And I wasn’t a hundred per cent sure I knew what he was saying because it was like all the things he’d said before, laden with subtext and you could take it any number of ways. Nothing you could pin him down to if you told anyone. and it would only be my word against his and... but I couldn’t take what he did to me more than one way. Because however much I might have led Billy on when I was thirteen, I promise you that I never did anything to encourage Trevor. I just recognised some signs when they came, but I recognised them too late I suppose and I promised not to tell. Again.

I decided then and there I wasn’t going to be in that play or ever go near that theatre again and I hoped that would be the end of it. It wasn’t though. Trevor started texting me all the time and saying things to me on the phone, calling me a prick tease and a slapper and sometimes just heavy breathing. I changed my phone number again but he found out where I lived and he used to come round and stand under the lamp-post outside my flat until one of my flatmates went out to tell him to piss off or she’d call the police. Eventually he stopped but I wouldn’t walk home after dark on my own for the whole of the rest of the time I was at college. My flatmates just thought he was a sad old git and none of them ever suggested I was asking for it. But I couldn’t tell them anything about it so I think they just thought I was kind of stupid for not just telling him to sod off and get on with my life. But the thought of Trevor haunted me for the next two years and I guess I stopped thinking about Billy so much because I was more worried about what Trevor might have done and why it was that he’d picked on me.

And after the whole thing with Trevor I felt kind of sick and it really dented my confidence because I thought I was some kind of magnet for guys who want to... well, I don’t even know how you’d describe it. Was I some kind of serial victim? Or was I really just some little slapper who led men on without knowing it, like Trevor had told me. And wasn’t that the problem with Billy. Was I really just a prick tease? Whatever I was, I certainly wasn’t cut out to be an actress, or a celebrity. Or even a holiday rep. I just got my head down and finished my qualification and decided I’d get a job in an office or something and not try to be something I wasn’t ever again. And keep myself safe.

Kirsty, 21

I was working in financial services. I'd been there nine months. It was dire. I hated it. I hated my life and I especially hated myself because I was sure it was my own fault I was rotting away in this dead end job in this dead end life when I could, and should have at least been living it up in some holiday resort. Yes, I know that the life of a holiday rep isn't exactly that of a celebrity and I know that life isn't all one long party for anyone, but I did feel that I deserved something better than that.

At one point, just after my twenty first birthday I think it was, I decided it was time for me to 'deal' with my situation and I decided I'd go and 'slay the dragon' or something like that. Or maybe I was just kidding myself. I wanted some excitement. My twenty first birthday party had been less of a 'happening' than that of the average eighty year old and I was just plain bored of who I had become. I don't think I was aiming to 'confront' my past or anything like that, I just wanted to try and make sense of it. Now that I *was* a grown up.

So I got in touch with Billy. He wasn't hard to find. He was touring. His star had somewhat waned in the TV business but he was still 'treading the boards' on what they call a number one tour. That means the big theatres. The play was a 'vehicle' for him every bit as much as the TV drama series had been. Just not as big an audience and not as much money. But it was live. And Billy did like meeting his fans live. I couldn't quite summon up the courage to call him at first. I went to the theatre when the play was in the town nearest us with a theatre big enough to be on the 'tour' circuit. It was about half an hour away from where I lived. I'd left home and was flat sharing with a couple of other girls. I didn't invite them with me. I didn't tell them I was going. I didn't know what I would do. I just wanted to see what I thought of him all these years on, and whether seeing him would have any impact on me, or give me closure after Trevor or... I don't honestly know what I planned. I don't think I'd got as far as a plan. If I'm telling the truth I guess it was almost like an addict. The attraction of seeing his name in lights and sitting in the theatre being in his presence but 'safe' was too great to resist. We all know we shouldn't scratch itches, but who can say they don't from time to time? It's only human, isn't it?

That first time I just enjoyed the play. I got this surge of emotion when he first came onto the stage and I went away feeling better, but still somewhat confused. I kicked myself for chickening out of going backstage. By the time I'd driven myself home (because by now I could drive and had a beat up old car) I told myself I'd missed a chance. It was Billy. What was he going to do to me? The most he'd do would be blank me. Or laugh at me for the silly kid I'd been at sixteen. Surely I was big enough to face that? And he had been so nice, so funny and so captivating on stage, I couldn't believe he'd even do that. I was being stupid. My life was in the toilet and I was punishing myself pointlessly. The only person who'd made my life worth living was Billy and here I had the chance to make amends for the stupid way I'd left it when I was a daft, romantic wee kid.

I went. The next night. Before I could talk myself out of it again. I went to the play. Again I enjoyed it. And this time I went to the stage door. And asked to see Billy. The stage door keeper phoned up to him (you could see this was something he was used to doing by the sideways pitying look he gave me) and to both of our surprise, when the man said my name, Billy told him to send me up. I went up.

He was there, in the star dressing room, in his bathrobe, taking off his slap.

‘Come in,’ he called and I went in.

He jumped up and crossed over to me, ‘Great to see you kid,’ he said as if nothing had ever happened. Which I suppose for him it hadn’t.

‘How are you? Sit down.’ And he pulled out a chair for me. Poured me a glass of champagne.

He looked me up and down. Sighed. ‘It’s so great to see you Kirsty,’ he said, doing that trick that made me feel like he meant it and I was someone really important. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t be taken in by it. I was. He seemed so genuine. No, he was genuine. I’m sure of it.

‘It’s been so long,’ he said. ‘I’ve missed you. And look at you, all grown up.’

‘Yes.’ I said. ‘Sorry about...’ but I didn’t know what I was sorry about so I couldn’t really tell him. He stopped me anyway. He came over and took my glass and kissed me, on the lips but without sticking his tongue down my throat, just in a kind of ‘we’ve got a history’ sort of way and said, ‘It really has been too long, Kirst.’

And we chatted for a bit about how I’d been and what I was doing with my life and why I wasn’t acting any more and I said a whole load of things that weren’t exactly lies but aimed not to make myself look the complete sad idiot that I felt myself to be.

And all the time he was changing into his ordinary clothes, out of his costume. And he never looked like he was about to come and attack me or pin me to the wall and I realised that maybe I’d got Trevor and him all mixed up and that Trevor was my problem and Billy had been... well... maybe I just wasn’t ready for a grown up relationship then. It wasn’t that I thought I should give him a second chance, but I sort of felt that if he might give me a second chance it could all be different this time and so when he put on his coat and said, ‘Kirst, I’m sorry I really have to go, but could we...’

I said ‘here’s my mobile number. Call me.’ And I felt so grown up. Like I was in control. Like this time it would be equals and it would work and I had made some real progress. And he showed me out and I all but skipped past the stage door keeper and didn’t even hardly notice the posse of girls and women still standing outside the stage door waiting to get a glimpse of Billy. Because I had given him my number. I knew him. We had history. And we were friends again.

That’s how it started again. He was on a long tour and I used to meet up with him whenever I could. If it was driving distance from where I lived. Even if it was quite far. Over the months I met up with him backstage, in rehearsal rooms when they were working in a new cast, or in hotels and restaurants between and after shows. And it was different. And for a time I thought I liked it and it was okay. I wanted to ask him how his wife was, but I didn’t think I should. I knew there’d been some scandal in the tabloids the year before about him having an affair with an actress but I hadn’t read the papers – though I’d cut a picture of him out of one of them and kept it in my wallet (as a reminder I told myself. Though I’m not sure a reminder of what.)

What was good now was that we could go out places in public and I didn't feel ashamed or embarrassed and he bought me meals and drinks and things. But of course it didn't just stay at that did it? There's no such thing as a free lunch, isn't that what they say? And so of course part of it was about after the restaurant or what went on after everyone had left the rehearsal room. It was usually just a quick grope or a blow job or something. He never suggested we spend any real time together. And we never had real sex. I half felt this was my fault. That I'd blown it before and that he didn't want to push me too far in case I ran away again. I know I should probably have talked to him about it, but I just didn't know what to say. I didn't want to sound desperate and I didn't want to seem stupid and maybe I thought, maybe he really doesn't fancy me that more anyway, he's just trying to be nice.

And I'd have had to be blind not to notice that there were other girls. Of course there were other girls. I shut my eyes to that. Younger ones. Older ones. But mostly younger ones. Billy likes younger girls. But mostly he loves devoted girls. Girls who will do anything he says. And that includes not getting 'clingy' or thinking that they are the 'only one.' Without saying a word he made it very clear that I should think myself lucky he spent any of his precious time with me anyway and I needn't get all stupid and jealous. There's more than enough of him to go around. I might dream that he'd leave his wife and that he and I could just live all our days and nights together, but that's never going to happen. And I'm sure I'm not the only girl with that dream. I bet even my mum has that dream from time to time. She still dines out on the story of when her daughter was taken out for dinner by Billy. You know, Billy. They talk about him in hushed tones as if he's the Pope or something. And I wonder what she'd say if she really knew what happened that night.

But the point is that I realised that if I was not prepared to share him, I might as well 'do the other thing.' It's funny though, that I could put up with the idea of 'sharing' him with his wife, it's the other girls that got to me. Because as time went on and increasingly when I was in his dressing room he'd be on the phone to some other girl or looking at his watch and kind of suggesting after a quick fumble that I should be off – more or less opening the door after he'd 'got what he wanted' (as schoolgirls would say). And when I was on my way out the door I started noticing that more often than not I was passing a starstruck little thirteen year old on the stairs coming up for an autograph and usually she's got her mum with her (never her dad) and I thought to myself, I know what's going to happen to her before she's a fourteen year old. If she picks up on the wink. If she palms his mobile number. Or gives him hers. While her mum is busy falling apart in the background because Billy has 'given her the eye' and made her feel like 'she's special' and she'll tell all her friends how lovely and sparkly his eyes were and how he made her feel she might have been in with a chance, but how could she, with teenage kids and a husband and all. But she could have... and they all believe her. I know better. Those times started to get to me. I found myself wanting to shout out to the mums 'you're too old, Mrs.' Because when I looked at the way he looked at those thirteen and fourteen year olds I realised that I was too old and I was only twenty one. Getting past my sell by date as far as Billy is concerned. However hard I looked away, I could see that I was on borrowed time. Damaged goods. Only good for one thing. And it wasn't love. Not even friendship.

I ignored it for as long as I could. I told myself I'd lasted longer than most of them. I'd known him for seven years. How many of them would be able to say that. I thought I was more resilient. Or more in love with him. Or more stupid. And there I was, back into the same spiral again. And once again I'd brought it on myself. No one else to blame.

And it didn't make me feel any better, seeing those other girls, knowing that at least some of them were doing what I was doing, or what I had been doing. I decided I didn't want to be a 'Tuesday fuck' or a 'Thursday blow job' which was all any of us were to him I'm sure. I wanted to be something more than that. Even if I wasn't sure I was worth much more than that. Because however much I hated myself, when I was twenty one I found myself again believing that he was the only good thing in my life, that I couldn't really live without him even if I only saw him once a month or less. I lived for those moments when I was down on my knees showing him how much I loved him, even if I'm gagging on his dick. Even if he was playing rough and talking dirty and being anything but loving and charismatic. He could do what he liked. He knew I'd never tell. And he knew no one would believe me. I asked for it after all didn't I? I'd come onto him first. When I was thirteen.

And I tried to pull myself together because I could sort of see I was getting myself into a place I didn't want to be. And however good he made me feel he also made me feel bad about myself and I thought, at twenty one, I've got to be mature. I was determined not to do what I did when I was sixteen. So I didn't just run for the door. I decided to talk to him. Adult to adult and thought maybe if we can talk I'll break through whatever this problem I have is and we can be friends. At least.

So I brought it up one evening when we were sitting in his car. Just his car and mine, alone side by side in the car park. It's not that I was trying to 'call' him on his behaviour. It's not even that I was less starstruck than I was when I was thirteen. I just convinced myself that if we could just be 'honest' with each other then things might change. It might be good. I might feel good about myself.

So I asked him... I don't even remember exactly how I put it. It was something about how much it hurt me when I saw him looking at younger girls and did he think he should do that. It came out all wrong, I know that, because he gave me a really dirty look and put me right back in my place.

'What makes you think you're so special?' he asked.

I tried to back track. I tried to point out that I wasn't trying to 'judge' him or 'blackmail' him but I just didn't understand what I meant to him and I was confused about what he meant to me.

'Kirty, you come here of your own free will,' he said. 'I don't beg you. I've never asked you to do anything you weren't begging to do.'

Which wasn't strictly true but I didn't feel I could argue. It didn't seem worth it. He reached over in front of me and for a moment I thought he was going to do something, I didn't know what. He looked pretty angry. But he just leant over, opened my door and said, 'If you don't like it, you know what you can do.'

And I didn't get out. Not then. I said I was sorry, not because I was, but because I just couldn't handle how I felt. How quickly he could turn it on and off. I thought, that's not right. I should mean more to you than that. So I sat there. I apologised. I even gave him a blow job and then I *did* get out of the car and went back into my car and watched him drive off. And I sat at the steering wheel, unable to get the taste of him out of my mouth and I cried like a baby.

And I thought to myself. He's used me. I'd seen him 'in action' enough times to know that he's got

the kind of charisma that makes you think you're the *only* important person in the world but then he can make you feel like the dirt he's just scraped off his shoe as well. I think he enjoys it. I remember wondering if I was just thinking this because I was jealous. Or because I didn't understand how it is for men, and especially for a famous man, a celebrity like Billy. I told myself, let's face it, Billy is special and so normal rules don't apply to him, do they? He's been famous since he was fourteen. Even at twenty one that was longer than I'd been alive. I told myself, as I sat in that car, unable to face going home, he can't even remember what it's like to be a normal person and have normal thoughts and feelings and worries and jealousies. He's beyond all that. But somehow, at twenty one, I couldn't quite believe myself. And I knew I had to end it.

SEVEN

Kirsty, 30

Of course I felt like killing myself. Of course I felt like life wasn't worth going on. But I picked myself up. I drove home. I stopped at a petrol station and bought chewing gum and a bottle of water. I spat in a gutter and I chewed like I was a cow on acid. I didn't know what I was going to do next but I knew I'd royally screwed up my life and if it was pointless, dead end and made me feel like shit that was my fault. I did it. I made it this way. Billy helped, okay. But as Trevor proved. If it hadn't been Billy it would have been Trevor. If it hadn't been Trevor it would have been someone else. Maybe some of us girls are just like that. Maybe we don't deserve anything better. And that was how I lived my twenties. If you can call it living.

Then I met John. It was a few years later. John was nothing special. I didn't even notice him the first time we met actually. In fact I think he'd worked in my section for about ten weeks before I even knew he was there. But he knew I was there. He told me that he was too shy to come and talk to me and had to get Annie, my flatmate to introduce us at a houseparty because he was so tongue tied. I never thought I'd have that effect on somebody. And at first it freaked me out a bit, if I'm honest. He kept telling me how beautiful I was. I went out with him a few times, maybe because I felt sorry for him, or maybe because I felt sorry for myself, but after a few times I just felt a bit freaked.

'I'm not a celebrity,' I told him. 'Don't put me up on a pedestal.'

But I couldn't shake him off. He didn't pester me. But he just didn't go away. He was always on hand if I wanted someone to play badminton with or go for a walk at weekends and before long I realised that we were becoming an 'item.' I didn't really know what to do about it. I still found it hard to trust myself when it came to working out what was going on under a relationship and the stupid thing was that I couldn't see anything wrong with John and that worried me. I thought for about six months that he was going to change or 'reveal' something if we went out for long enough. Poor John. God knows what he must have thought about me, or what he thought I was playing at. Playing hard to get. But he stuck with it. And somewhere, out of the blue for me, he asked me to marry him. We'd been going out about nine months and we'd never even slept with each other. It came as something of a shock to me really. But he asked. And he kept on asking. And eventually I said, 'I've got to tell you something, John. There's something you need to know about me.'

And in my head was a voice saying 'no one is going to believe you,' but I knew I couldn't get serious with John without telling him. And he said, 'That's fine. You can tell me anything.'

And even though I was sure he meant it, that thought was being drowned out by another voice telling me that no one would believe me, not even John and that if he did believe me he'd just see what a horrible person I was and he wouldn't want me any more. So I said, 'Look John, it's really important, but I just can't tell you now.'

And he said, 'That's fine, take your time,' and left it at that.

And I pussy footed around it for a few weeks but I realised I was never going to be able to tell him

and it wasn't fair to keep him hanging on, hoping that we could be something to each other because that was never going to happen, even though I knew he was a really good guy and we would probably be really happy together and my friends said we were 'good together.' But I kept imagining his face and I was sure that even if he said the words 'I believe you,' his face would tell me he didn't. And even if he did believe me, what would that make me? Why would he want anything to do with me after that?

So I ended it. There wasn't a fuss. John didn't do making a fuss. But he moved departments and then transferred to another town and I thought, unfairly, there you are, you couldn't stick around for the long term. But really it was me. It was my fault not his. I was the one with the problem. In fact I *was* the problem.

And then, before I knew it, I was thirty. Still single. Still in a dead end job. Still hating myself and my life. And still avoiding Billy. Still knowing that 'No one is going to believe you.' And half the time not believing myself.

And then I met Sally. Quite by chance. In a bar. Sally had been in *Uncle knows best* with me. I'd forgotten all about her. She was brought in quite near the end of the first series before they realised that there wasn't going to be a second series. She was supposed to be some cousin who was going to have a romantic thing with my older brother in the series. She hated him. He hated her. They were both pleased when the series was canned because they were terrified they were going to have to kiss each other on screen.

After all that time I'd not have recognised her. She recognised me though. She came up to me and said '*insects*' which was a silly little thing everyone used to say – I didn't know at the time it was the production team's joke about 'incest, best kept in the family' - because the production team didn't have a very high opinion of the show from the off. They just kept their heads down and did their jobs and made jokes of it the best they could. I just thought it was a joke I didn't get because I was only thirteen.

Anyway, Sally came up to me and we got chatting. She asked me if I still saw Billy. I said no. She went red. I could tell there was something else she wanted to say. We got a bottle of wine. And we went back to my place. And then she said, 'Did Billy ever... you know... uh...' and I looked in her eyes and I knew exactly what she was asking me. And for a split second I thought about saying 'no' and denying it all. But something in the way she was looking at me made me think I had to tell the truth now. So I said, 'Yes.' And then the penny dropped and I said, 'and you?' And she just burst into tears and told me a story which is pretty much the same one I'm telling you but with her own personal variations.

And at the end of the night, we were both a bit the worse for wear with drink and she had been crying quite a lot and I confess I probably had too and she said, 'I've never told anyone about that before because...' and I finished her sentence 'because no one would believe you.'

And she nodded. And you might think that it was cathartic for us both to come clean about this and that it helped us to work out our 'problems' but it didn't. Somehow it didn't make it better, only worse, to know that we were in the same boat and that probably lots of other girls were too. Maybe

that should have empowered us, but it just made me feel sadder and more guilty and worse about myself.

So why am I telling you all this now? Because she can't. Because pretty soon after that Sally killed herself. Now I can't tell you that was because of what happened to her or because of how she felt or anything like that. But I can tell you I understand why she might have done it. I know she felt as desperate as me that we couldn't tell. The last thing she said to me when she left my flat that night was 'I believe you.' And she clutched at my hand and I looked her straight in the eyes and said, 'and I believe you.' And she said, 'but it doesn't make it any better does it?' And she was right. It didn't. I'm not sure anything can make it better when someone has stolen your life that way. Taken your childhood and twisted it. That's the real price of fame.

'No one is going to believe you.'

'No one will believe you.'

'You're a liar.'

We're not.

You may not want to hear what we say. There's a lot of uncomfortable truths out there. But people need to start listening. And people need to start believing.



Girls and Boys Come Out To Play

‘I’ve never read such depraved, disgusting filth in my life. What do you think you were playing at Frankie?’

The Principal was nearly apoplectic with rage.

‘We’ve had enough of your antics to last a lifetime, Frankie,’ she continued. ‘And if you keep treating Mrs Martin to this level of abuse, because that’s what it is Frankie, then you will be excluded. Permanently. Do you understand?’

He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

‘What did you expect me to do, Frankie?’ Mrs Martin asked him as they went back to the classroom, his head hung low and his feet scuffing the ground.

He didn’t answer.

‘It’s not a rhetorical question,’ she said. ‘You are already on a shoogly peg Frankie, you’d better start thinking and fast.’

‘Nothing, miss,’ he said. What else could he say?

‘Take this,’ she said, waving his essay *Charity Begins at Home* ‘and I don’t care what you do with it, but I suggest you burn it so that I’m not tempted to show it to your parents.’

He took the grubby, rat-eared bits of paper from her and shoved them in his pocket.

‘And next time you hand in a piece of creative coursework, make sure it’s something that doesn’t break all the laws of libel and decency. This is not what we mean by a work of fiction, whatever rubbish you read in your spare time,’ she added.

She was finished. That was it. Job done.

What had he been thinking of? He didn’t know. It was the title. It enraged him. He thought it was time people woke up to themselves and stopped thinking that he was some kind of teenage troublemaker. Oh, it was all right when they were reading of serial killers and *Fifty Shades* of this or that, but hit them with a home truth they didn’t want to recognise and suddenly he was the perpetrator of the crime. He would laugh if it wasn’t so sick.

Frankie sat playing with his Zippo lighter, a present from his uncle that his parents didn’t know about. Like so many things about his uncle no one seemed to know about, or turned a blind eye to, and he wondered whether he should just burn it. No one believed him anyway. Call Childline. Yeah right? Like they’d be any different from the school. No one would believe him in a million years. But he’d laboured long and hard and not just on the word count. The emotional toll it had taken on him to finally write this piece was immense. And okay, maybe he thought they wouldn’t ‘believe’ it as such,

but he did think they'd at least ask a few questions, on his behalf. He'd been so wrong. When they said you had to be alert to bullying and abuse they didn't mean a word of it. Priceless. The head accusing him of being an abuser. He shook his head. He thought Mrs Martin was better than that. He didn't think she'd like what she read, but he'd worked hard to make sure the spelling was right, and stupidly he had convinced himself she was someone he might be able to trust. She was always saying they could 'tell her anything'. And she was his guidance tutor as well as his English teacher. Well, he knew better now. You couldn't trust grown-ups, not any of them. They just spun garbage lines like 'family is safe' and 'charity begins at home' and they didn't have an idea in the world what was actually going on.

He was going to read it one more time, before burning it. To remind himself that he was not a liar. They could pick him up on the spelling and they could tell him it was disgusting and he couldn't argue with them on either count. But they couldn't tell him it wasn't true. That was unfair. Even at fourteen, too old to cry, Frankie felt the tears well up in his eyes as he thought about it. This was just another level of abuse, wasn't it? Not being believed. And all because his uncle was a charity worker. He pushed back the tears and he read. As if he needed reminding. As if it wasn't part of his waking and sleeping self every single day.

Charity Begins At Home.

When people say that charity begins at home they mean that good things start with the family. I don't think this is always true. For example, my uncle runs a charity. He has always done this ever since I was a little boy. And my uncle isn't really a good man. But everyone thinks he is because he runs a charity. For children. In Africa. It's far away and so no one who pays money into the charity in this country really sees what's going on. But I've seen it and I know it. And I don't think it's right. I know it's not right. But no one believes me.

My uncle takes little orphaned girls and boys (and sometimes they aren't really orphans but their parents can't afford to keep them so they give them to him, or maybe they sell them to him or swap them for something like a cow or goats) and he raises them in his charity school. And they all think of him as their 'father' and the newspapers say that they all love him like a father and he loves them like as if they are all his own children. Like they are his family. That's not true. Because of what he does to them isn't what a good father should be doing to his children.

Yes, he gives them presents and he takes them on trips and he gives them food and clothes and all that. That's good, I suppose. But what do they have to do in return? That's the question no one ever asks. Everyone just pays their money into the charity to keep my uncle away in Africa and they all think the children are better off because they have more clothes and food than they would have otherwise, and they get to go to school. But there are more important things than that for a child.

My uncle uses these children, not in a way an adult should use a child. He is like a god to them it's true. But what evil kind of a god is he? He goes into their dormitories at night and he chooses one of them to spend the night with him. Or when he comes here on trips he will sometimes bring his special favourite with him. We've even had one of them stay with us when my uncle came to visit.

The boy, Lakshmi, stayed with me in my bedroom. He didn't speak a lot of English, but we talked. And I found out things. He didn't want to say bad things about my uncle because he's frightened of him. But I got some things out of him. He told me he was happy to be sharing a room with me, because he thought he'd have to share with my uncle, like back at the school. I knew what he had to tell me and I told him that I knew about it. Because my uncle tried to make me do that once too. Only the once. And he pretended he was joking after and he bought me a load of things because he said I had 'misunderstood' him and he wanted to make it up to me. He bought me a CD player and a racing car set. And he keeps buying me things, whenever he comes to this country. Like he bought me a lighter last year and told me not to tell my parents, 'because they would think I wasn't old enough'. He wanted me to keep it a secret. Not just the lighter. Everything. Because he knows I know. And what he tried to make me do, calling it loving, I hadn't misunderstood him at all. I was ten and at ten you know fine well what is and isn't right. What people should try to make you do and what they shouldn't. I didn't believe that my uncle would do that to me because I thought he loved me. But that's not love. Never. And once I got Lakshmi talking I found out that the very same stuff that my uncle tried to do to me, he was doing to Lakshmi. And not just him. To all of them. All the boys and girls in the charity school he runs.

Lakshmi didn't want me to tell anyone, not to make a fuss. He was proud that he was a special boy who got to come on a trip to Scotland with Father David, but he told me that he wished he was my brother and could stay at my home because my dad didn't do things like that to me. He said he loved my uncle because otherwise he would have been all on his own, and if my uncle found out he'd told me, he would get beaten and he'd probably be thrown out of the school and then he'd have no way of making money to get food because he's only twelve. And everyone would shun him because even though everyone knows what my uncle is doing, they all turn a blind eye because he's doing such good charity work 'saving' the children from poverty.

But I think there's more than one kind of poverty. And I know that Lakshmi told me not to tell, but I think it's important that people understand that charity doesn't always start at home and that some homes are not places of safety and some people are doing terrible things to children and it might be you who is putting money into a charity box that goes to fund my uncle keeping up his abuse. Because I know that's what it is. It's abuse. Sexual. And mental. And that's poverty. When you are a child and you don't feel safe because the adult who is meant to be keeping you safe is doing terrible things to you and you can't tell anyone because they won't believe you. That's worse than going hungry or wearing ragged clothes. I believed Lakshmi. I don't think it's right that I should keep his secret and I wish I could do something to stop my uncle and make sure that Lakshmi and those other children are still safe. Because someone should be looking after them. And properly. But my uncle is just using them. He set up his own charity about twenty years ago, before I was even born, because he was 'on the run', my mum said, from this country because there were 'rumours' about what he was 'up to'.

I thought maybe if I went out to Africa then I might be able to do something to help and I started saving money. I told my mum I wanted to go there and spend the summer, like on a gap year, or a sort of work placement holiday. And she said 'no way am I having you spend the summer with David. No way.' So I think she knows fine well what's going on. But my mum's a good woman so I don't understand why she hasn't done anything about it. Except maybe no one would believe her if

she told either. Or maybe she can't because she thinks it's important to keep family loyalty. And that's okay but surely there are more important things and it has to be said that my uncle is a paedophile if he is, doesn't it? I don't like it. I don't want it to be true. But I know it is. And so isn't it right that I should tell, even if it is something awful that you wish wasn't true? So in conclusion I'd like to say that I don't think Charity does always begin at home and sometimes even if it does, charity isn't always a good thing because it's not just good people who get involved with charities. And sometimes there are more important things than family loyalty. Like the truth.

He finished reading. How could they have read this and then blamed him? He couldn't believe it. At least they should check out the accusations, he thought. They owed him that much. But he'd learned a lesson today and that lesson wasn't just that people don't believe you if you tell them something they don't want to hear. Sometimes they start giving you the same label. Like the Principal calling him disgusting and depraved, which he wasn't. He wasn't doing anything wrong or bad to anyone. Just telling the truth. But from her reaction you'd think he was the paedophile. And maybe that's why his mum didn't tell. The thought that things like that 'run in the family'. Frankie finally learned the meaning of the phrase 'vicious circle'. And that it doesn't do to question the empty clichés that people want to believe in. He burned the essay. He only wished he could burn the memories. Or the truth. But memories and truth don't work like that. They are more powerful than paper. When you know something like that, it's not so easy to forget it, or to turn your head and pretend it hasn't happened. Even if no one believes you. Which they usually don't.



Between Seeing and Believing

When you are four or five you know that seeing is believing. You believe that the camera can't lie. Or you did in the days before Photoshop. As you grow to adolescence you learn there is a difference between fact and fiction. You learn that fact can be stranger than fiction and you learn that telling the truth (even though you learn there is no absolute truth because everything is relative) is important and telling lies can get you in some very hot water. Except that if you are a fiction writer, you spend your days writing lies. And that's okay. You are 'telling stories' and stories are fundamentally not true. Or are they?

I'm not asking you to believe the story. But it's not fiction to me. Though of course in one sense I am fictionalising it in the telling. For example you'll note I use the narrative framing device favoured by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* to construct the 'reality' of the world in which I place this story. Because this story in one sense belongs to this 'other world' type of narrative. And yet, at the same time, there was a time when it was a present reality. I haven't told this story in many years. Because it used to matter to me that I wouldn't be believed. And I didn't believe it was a story. Now I think the story may go beneath the surface and I want to explore that, which is why I'm telling it to you. I am exploring the ground between seeing and believing. In fact and/or fiction.

I have separated my 'story' into two levels but there are possibly many more. The 'italics' are the simple story. The rest is quite another story, a much more complex one which nevertheless impacts upon the simple story. It's up to you what you believe. And so this becomes your story too. You take from it what you want. You add it to your belief system, you call it fact or fiction, truth or lies. And you will judge me based on what you believe I'm telling you. And it becomes our story. It becomes your story. I put my memory into the world and it runs free. It is no longer mine. It becomes public property.

I saw the Loch Ness Monster. No. I don't believe it either. It was over forty years ago and life changes you, doesn't it? It changes what you believe anyway. If pressed, now I'd say that I believe that I believed I saw the Loch Ness Monster. But that doesn't seem to go far enough. I'm no longer sure I believe in the Loch Ness Monster for one thing. But I believe in myself as a five year old. I wasn't making it up. I was being honest in what I saw. All I can do is tell you the story as I remember it now, with the added dimension of 'memory' thrown into the mix. And memory is not fact. Indeed perhaps all memory is a kind of fiction?

We went on holiday near Inverness when I was five. It was my first holiday. We went camping. This is camping circa 1968. A small caravan by the side of Loch Ness, in an isolated spot just down from Urquhart Castle. The caravan was small. Very small. Me and my brother slept at the end furthest from the door and had to climb over my parents to get out if we needed the toilet in the night. I have never been blessed with being able to spend a whole night far from a toilet so it was a particular trial for me. The toilet stood some way behind the caravan and was small, cramped and full of spiders. I didn't like it. But I had to use it. Every night at least once. However much I tried to train myself to hold my bladder, I just couldn't do it. Of course this was in the days before I knew that the famous scientist Tycho Brahe died of an exploded bladder. At least that's what I believe to be true. He might have been experimenting like I was, wondering how long he could hold it. Fatal. I've learned my lesson. If I have to get up three times, I get up three times. But when I was five, I had more simple beliefs and realities to concern me than Tycho Brahe and his bladder. I just wanted to avoid the spiders and stop annoying my family by waking them up every night.

My mum didn't seem to be enjoying the holiday. Which I thought was odd because I'd been looking

forward to it ever since she took us out and bought us each three pairs of brand new jeans for the holiday. She must have known there would be no washing facilities. She knew her children. Me and my brother were runabout, climb trees, grubby little urchins. I'm not sure she had banked on the constant rain though. Yes, there we were on the picturesque banks of the Loch and it rained. Constantly. The best we had was a sort of smirry drizzle and the worst we had – the day we finally abandoned and went into Inverness to the cinema – was torrential.

I don't remember the rain bothering us, but I imagine it must have been hell on earth for my mum. *We went to Inverness to see what there was to do. Not much. In Dundee, where we lived, when it rained we went down to the Docks to the amusement arcade and for twopence I could get a ride on Champion the Wonder Horse and my brother could get a ride in a model sports car. If we were smart we could both squeeze onto each others ride. But if they had amusements in Inverness, we didn't find them. Instead, we went to the cinema. I liked the cinema. It was dark and warm and big. And it wasn't a 'usual' experience. The film was in colour but heavily black and white – it was Thoroughly Modern Millie- a musical set in the twenties. It didn't really hold my attention. My brother and dad hated it. My mum was just pleased to be out of the caravan and out of the rain. We were a family. That was important to me. We were sharing our lives.*

Now I'm wondering if it was 1967 instead of 1968. Research tells me that the film came out in 1967. I wonder if Inverness was advanced enough to get the film on its first theatrical release? I expect so. So already, my story's credibility starts to crumble. Okay, well I was either four or five and it was either 67 or 68 but it was wet the whole time we were there. Two kids under ten in a small caravan beside a loch. I'm sure all parents everywhere are shuddering at the thought. Remember this is in the days when largely one had to make one's own entertainment. No CDs or DVD players. No portable TV's. We may have had some board games, Mousey Mousey was a particular family favourite, but the caravan was so small I can't imagine how we all four sat in there and played games in comfort. There's a thing. You know when you go back to places you were as a child you usually think 'how small it is' compared to what you thought then. Well, if I'm thinking it was small then... we are not talking a static caravan, a mobile home or the like, we're taking SMALL caravan.

For the rest of the sodden holiday, my dad tried to keep us amused by 'spotting' the Loch Ness Monster. We spent a lot of time looking out into the loch, sometimes paddling in it (not too far of course and only under supervision) and several sightings (when we were getting bored I suspect) were revealed as bits of rotting wood. I was a very gullible child, also strangely biddable if given a task to do. And I had great powers of concentration – even when essentially doing nothing. For example, back home I would hide under the sofa for ages 'being a cat called Rosy Possum' and in later years I would lie at the top of the stairs for hours being 'Ginger' after he'd been killed in our games of Biggles, while my brother and his pal went off outside doing more exciting things. I never deserted my post. I was the most convincing dead body you would ever see. And my dad obviously knew of these skills because he set me the task of looking out for the Loch Ness Monster. So I did. For hours. At least it felt like hours. But I didn't see it.

Until...

My memory (which we've already agreed will be less than perfect and possibly more fiction than fact) suggests this was the last morning of the holiday, and certainly a narrative creation would require this to be the dénouement stage, so we'll go with it. After all, credibility is stretched to the limit here anyway now, isn't it?

I'd managed a full night without a trip to the toilet. It was very early in the morning, just after dawn, which makes it about four o'clock that time of year in that part of Scotland. And I couldn't

wait any longer. I needed the toilet. I clambered out over my sleeping brother, mum and dad. It must have been nearly the end of the holiday because being quiet enough not to wake them was a skill I nearly perfected during the holiday, and they didn't stir. I went to the toilet. Relieved, I was on my way back to the caravan, when I looked out to the Loch. I saw something. It was like the classic 1933 picture of the Loch Ness Monster, head and couple of hoops out of the water. I couldn't believe my eyes. I remember standing there thinking; 'No one will believe me. I am looking at the Loch Ness Monster and no one will believe me.' I stood for a while – quite a while – wondering what to do. Then I realised that I needed to take a picture of it. I didn't know how to use a camera, but I knew we had one in the caravan, so I decided to go in, get my dad's camera and come back out and take a picture of it. I'd figure out the details when I got the camera in my hands. So that's what I did. Only of course by the time I got back out of the caravan (having woken up my family, to their displeasure) it had gone. And of course no one believed me. But I knew that I'd seen it. I saw the Loch Ness Monster.

What I cannot remember clearly is when I first went to the Loch Ness Monster museum in Invermoriston. Was it before or after my sighting? Because that might be significant. Implanted false memory syndrome? Of course there are plenty of other people who have 'seen' the Monster. There is evidence either way. It's not the sort of thing I would normally give credence to. If I hadn't seen it for myself. It stands in defiance of my rational being. I don't believe in ghosts, the other world, UFO's or any of that stuff. So how can I believe in the Loch Ness Monster? I can't. But what can I do? Say that I was a suggestible child who thought they saw something because they'd been primed to see it? I know myself better than that. That 'story' doesn't convince me any better than the sighting, though I'd like to. I know it's a 'story'.

The thing is, I have this memory, which is more than a memory. I can see myself there. I believe it. The 'moment' is as real to me today as anything else in my life (and more so than many things I know happened for 'real'.) There I am, the young me, seeing the Loch Ness Monster and held in the grip of the knowledge that no one would believe me without proof. And that I was unable to provide proof. It was an issue I wrestled with for a long time. Long enough to get cold out there in my pyjamas. So in some way, whether Nessie does exist or not, I saw him/her/it. Nessie is part of my life 'story' and we are as Sabin points out 'storied beings'. Why me? Why this story? These are questions I can't answer. All I know is that however much I try to convince myself I don't believe in the Loch Ness Monster, I still know I've seen it. Or believe that I saw it. Which may be why seeing, believing and memories are so important to me in life. They make up 'reality' for me.

I have very few memories of my dad. By the time I was seven my parents had divorced and I have seen him only twice in the last forty years. My memories of him are both less and more real than of the Loch Ness Monster. And for this story I've just told you, they come together as ficitonal characters and happy memories. Does there need to be more explanation?



Shona's Magic Shoes.

I'm standing in the Sue Ryder shop in disbelief. I've gone in there to get a new stuffed toy for the puppy, who had finally destroyed his prized stuffed gorilla, Gizmo. But before I get to the bargain box where you can buy soft toys for 50p each, I pass the shoes. There, unremarkably, sitting amongst all the other pairs, was the pair of shoes I dreamed of as a seven year old child. My 'imaginary' shoes, in reality, staring me in the face. Brown, instead of the black ones I'd worn in my young imagination, but my size. Adult size. Like it was meant to be. A sign. If I believed in such things. Which I don't, but the moment gives me pause for thought. I pick them up, a pair of men's brown Clarks slip on shoes. The tongue reminiscent of the eighteenth century buckle shoe, without the buckle. The kind of shoe that was new and fashionable in the nineteen seventies when not wearing lace-up school shoes was the ultimate in 'cool.'

Hoping I'm not being watched, I try them on. I feel ridiculous. I don't even need a new pair of shoes. And I've never worn second hand shoes in my life. My mum was most particular about that. She used to have stand up rows in shoe shops if they didn't measure our feet properly. Start rite sensible shoes. No discussion. No argument. No choice. I'm instantly back in that other shoe shop imagining what she'd say if she saw me. As I pull them on, I'm seven years old again. It's a time I have tried long and hard to block out of my mind. But which stays with me every moment of every day of my life. Which 'is' my life when it comes down to it.

And yet strangely, as I pull these shoes on, for the first time I feel okay thinking about it. It must be the magic shoes. These real ones make a difference now, as the imaginary ones did then. And they only cost four pounds. So I buy them along with a stuffed tiger and still have change from a fiver when I leave the shop. And I've done my bit for charity. Which, as we all knows, begins at home.

When I put the shoes on again in the privacy of my own home, all the memories come flashing back once more. It's nearly forty years ago, but truth, however hard you try to disguise it as fiction, doesn't disappear. Deny it as you will, hide it as you will, when something has happened, it has happened and you can't turn back the clock and change that. You cannot shut Pandora's box. That's an indisputable fact.

But things are getting out of line. The story isn't flowing in a straight line as I believe stories should. One has control in stories after all. Not like in life. There are no straight lines in life. But this story is a true story so I guess I have to accept some bending of the line. Anyway, my point is, that the shoes came after. After the life-changing 'event'. The shoes were a way of dealing with things, when a secret was being kept; and for a child who would never see a psychologist, or social services, or have a chance to 'tell' her story, they were more than a fetish object. The shoes were part of the child's way of dealing with it. And the shoes now come back, as a conduit for the adult to tell the truth as a 'story.' But none of this is fiction.

I'm still not sure I can expose myself to tell the story in the first person, even wearing the magic shoes as I write. So forgive me if I slip into an outside, narrative stance and refer to myself by name in the third person. The shoes make me brave, but fiction makes me braver. I can tell the truth in fiction. Too many people get hurt if I tell the facts. So here's my story:

At seven years old, Shona lived on the top floor of a tenement block in Edinburgh's fashionable Morningside. And was scared. Every moment of every day of her life, she was scared. With good reason. No friends, no one to turn to, no one to tell. The shoes helped. Creating her own reality helped – a bit – for short periods of time. Everyone needs a break. Her mum used to make her go round to the shops, probably only a couple of hundred yards, to get milk, or anything else that had been forgotten; but Shona was afraid of the dark. Afraid of what might happen to her on the trip round

to the shop. Stupid really, since, as for most people, the real danger of her life lay within the home, not on the street. But to deal with this fear Shona invented a pair of imaginary shoes. The kind of shoes that only tough, cool, boys who weren't afraid of anything would wear.

As she left the top floor flat (left) she put them on and changed into 'Sam' to go round to the shops. 'Sam' had lots of friends. In fact at every door, and there were six of them between the flat and the communal front door, painted purple by Shona's step-father, she stopped, knocked, kicked her heels while waiting, and picked up an imaginary friend. They went round to the shop in a gang and no one could touch them. Okay, in reality Shona still ran all the way, but for the time she was in the stair she felt brave at least. It was hard to keep the friends there when running round the corner, but in the dark you could imagine they were in front or behind and there was some sense of security within the fear. On the way back, the process was reversed. All friends were deposited at their doors and 'Sam' scuffed his/her shoes against the hundred and thirty seven steps which had to be climbed before Shona was back home, where she never felt safe. Never was safe.

You are possibly saying 'Clearly a child with a vivid imagination.' You may think that I'm making the rest of the story up. Or you might see deeper and suggest that the 'imagination' came afterwards, as a way of dealing with an impossible situation? In a story the reader is the judge. In life, it's not that easy. People believe what they want to believe and denying truths for long enough can turn truth tellers into liars.

Shona knows the truth. Shona in fiction and Shona in fact. This is Shona's story and Shona's truth and Shona's story. And you can make of it what you will. It doesn't matter to me any more. Shona has kept this secret and will do so till her mother is buried. And maybe longer. Maybe afterwards there will be no need to tell, no point in the telling. Or maybe there just isn't anyone to tell who will want to listen. Or who will believe. Maybe I won't tell because telling will only cause more pain to people who have their own truths to deal with, their own secrets to hide. But the magic shoes are a sign. A sign that truth will out. If that doesn't sound too Shakespearean. And Shona will not deny the truth, will not be a liar. Not any longer. Because keeping the truth secret is telling lies isn't it? And the story is the truth. Not a version of truth, not a fiction of truth – TRUTH itself.

Shona was seven years old. Her parents had divorced some time before and her father had been given custody of her and her elder brother Douglas. Her mother had been granted access in holidays. It must have been the February half term that Shona was seven, that her mother refused to send them back to her father. It seems he didn't fight too much but Shona doesn't know the truth of this situation. What she does know is that they stayed with her mother. That the 'deal' with whatever authorities were involved was, that if her mother provided 'a stable home' for them, they could stay. So they stayed.

The stable home? Shona's mother had taken up with a man called Malcolm, ten years younger than her. Charismatic, but with plenty to hide. For one, that he was a practising homosexual. The 'family' provided a good cover for him while homosexuality was still illegal in Scotland. For the other, he had mental health problems. A propensity to random and extreme violence. Which Shona witnessed. Repeatedly.

Once Shona got up in the night to 'break up' a fight. She had learned that if she went into the room where Malcolm was hitting her mother, she could bring things to a stop. Usually. On this occasion, she went in just as he hurled a very large, heavy crystal bowl at her mother. It hit her mother on the shin and blood poured out everywhere. That was enough to stop Malcolm that time. Her mother went to hospital. The official story was that she'd 'tripped.' No one questioned it. The same as no one questioned the broken nose some months later. On the occasions when Shona phoned the police to

break things up, and on the rarer occasions when Malcolm didn't wrest the phone from her, squashing her small wrists in the process, and she got through; they came, said 'domestic' and left. If Shona's mother wouldn't press charges, they couldn't do anything. The message was clear – stop bothering us. But Shona would always reach for the phone. It offered some distraction at least, though it also often diverted Malcolm onto her. But while he was grasping her wrists, or her neck, his hands were no longer round her mother's neck.

This is my story. But I'm not the only one in it. However, mine is the only truth I can tell. The rest is speculation. I can't be an omniscient narrator who finds the motivation in the other characters. So this part of the 'story' is something of a fiction. In case you're wondering. I can only tell it from my perspective. It's not a lie but some parts may be the 'whole' truth. You'd have to ask Douglas. Or maybe I have to ask Douglas. About the next bit.

In the story Shona wondered where her brother Douglas was during all this. Her memory is that he stayed in his room. Kept out of sight. She thought it was because he couldn't cope with it except by absenting himself. But I've asked him and his truth is different. He has his own story to tell. His own truth. Although we were close, so close in those days; we were, as children, fundamentally alone, each dealing with our own version of the horror. I don't want to put words in his mouth. I respect his choices. We each did what we could. And I know that Douglas felt as powerless as I did, and I know that he had thoughts of what he could do to stop the situation. And I'm glad he didn't act on those thoughts. It's true, violence begets violence and that would never have helped anyone. No one could keep me safe. We couldn't keep ourselves safe. I couldn't keep him safe and he couldn't keep me safe. We couldn't 'watch each other's backs.' It doesn't work like that when you are kids in the middle of an adult war.

Douglas was older than me. Smarter than me. He knew we were powerless. Me, I invented all kinds of 'rituals' and 'if only's in my attempt to 'stop the bad things happening.' You know, like when you pray to God – 'I'll do this or that if only you...' or 'the traffic lights will turn green when I count to 10...' I almost believed in this power but it never really worked. That's where the magic shoes came from. An attempt to gain some power, or a way to run away from the powerlessness. I don't know.

Back in the present of the story Shona did the only thing she could. She lived with smashing of furniture, overturning of tables, throwing things, hitting things and one day, the punch in the stomach of her pregnant mother. Pregnant with Malcolm's own child. Is there a depravity below that? I find it hard to imagine. The violence didn't stop after that, but maybe it changed. That was when Shona was turning nine.

Today, I'm wearing the magic shoes in my peaceful home, far away from my mother, and my past, all the time I think about this. And the shoes feel like they give a sort of power even now. But the only real change was growing up. Growing up was the running away from a childhood. When I was a child I didn't have dreams of what I'd be when I grew up. My dream *was* to grow up. To grow up and get away from it all. And largely, I did it. But some of the child comes with you. Sometimes you still need the magic shoes. And now I have them.

Because there is more of the story to tell. More secrets to unlock. More fact to face through fiction. For now, it's pushed aside because my mother is dying of terminal cancer. With months left to live, but refusing to accept the truth. Refusing to go 'gentle into the night', still believing that she creates the reality for herself and everyone around her. Still refusing to acknowledge anyone else's life as real, as valuable; still creating her own truth and demanding that everyone else goes along with it. Still messing with everyone's head. It makes me so angry. And sad. Mostly I hoped that at this point

my mother would actually come to terms with life, death and reality and have some dignity, allowing everyone to behave as well as you can during a difficult stage of life. But as we live through this reality I understand that this will not happen. It cannot happen. Some realities just don't fit into the world. My mother's reality is like that. It's her way or no way. She can't compromise on her truth. Even when it exists nowhere but in her own head.

We are living in the reality of death. But no one wants to know about that truth, do they? I don't feel love but I do feel responsibility. I will have to do what I can. What can I do? Forget the truth. For a time. But not deny it. Never deny. I need to wear my magic shoes. And see what they can do for me in facing this time.

I look at my mother, bedridden, demented with the loss of control. She tries to run the world from her bed. It's not that easy. She, who spent a large part of her life threatening us she would kill herself, is now holding on to life with a ferocity that makes us begin to believe she will not even die. She has an end of life 'care package' which means she can die at home. With 24/7 care. She is putting the carers through hell. She got this package because she put the hospitals through hell. Everyone must bend to her will. To her truth.

When she really loses it they try to tell us it's down to the stage of her cancer and the dementia associated with it. She doesn't mean it. It's just a stage. We tell them that she has actually been like this all her life. That we grew up in this sort of atmosphere, that it's nothing new. There is a long pause. They take in this information. They begin to listen to us. To counsel us. They are beginning to see a truth. And yet I feel so guilty that I've given part of the secret away. That's why I can't tell the 'big secret' except as a fiction. I hope you can understand that.

I told this story the first time, in my twenties. I remember that first breaking of the silence when I told Douglas about 'the secret.' When, even without my magic shoes, but with the misplaced certainty of the adolescent that I was an adult, I stood up to my mother. It was less an act of aggression and more a need to come to terms with it. To tell the truth and move on. It wasn't really about forgiveness. It was beyond that. And it wasn't about forgetting. You can't forget such truths. Well, I can't. And I don't think my mother ever forgot it either. She just buried it and the lie lived between us until she died.

I told the truth. It came out spontaneously. And my mother stood there and called me a liar, to my face, in front of Douglas. I didn't know what Douglas believed. I thought he believed her. I've asked him since. He didn't. He knew the truth. But what could he do with it? What could any of us do? The lesson learned was that my mother was never going to accept the truth. Even as I stood there, forgiving my mother but telling the truth; because it was an act of forgiveness (when young I thought it was possible to forgive) my mother's reality took precedence.

There was no forgiveness. Instead I became a liar. The consequence of that was enormous. I hope you can't imagine how it feels to have your life experience invalidated because it is too awful for other people to accept. But that's what happened.

Now I don't try to forgive. I try to understand. And I understand that my mother couldn't accept that truth. My truth was her guilt after all. But that didn't change the truth. This was a truth that is far above story, or narrative perspective. Some things just happen and they are the truth. Whatever people say and however they try to deny them or cover them up or run away from them. Truth exists. I know it. Believe me, when your life has been turned into a lie you know what truth means. Real truth.

As I've aged, I've told this truth a few more times. And only after my mother died. There you are. I told you the story has got a kink in it. I've had you believing that I'm still tending a dying woman,

when in fact I can't write this story till she is long in her grave. Till my responsibility for her secret is gone. Till my life is my own again and it's my truth. Because, even without her, I find it still matters. It's still a vital part of who I am.

I'd like to stop telling this story. I'd like it not to be my truth. I've only told the story to a few people in the last ten years. Only when I felt it was 'appropriate' to give them an insight into 'who I am.' I wish it wasn't who I am, believe me.

There are a few people I've told this to who have understood me better because of it. Who I feel really know 'me' as a result. And that is good. But there are other people whose reaction, to be frank, doesn't do them justice. Some people are like that. They can't deal with truth when it turns ugly. That's why I want you to read this as a story. I don't know you so I can't trust you enough to know whether you are already going to judge me as a liar. Or whether, the worst of reactions, you shy away from me because of the truth. You wish I hadn't told you. It's too horrible for you to process. You don't want it to be true. Believe me, I don't want it to be true either. And I certainly don't appreciate being called a liar, or being turned away from as if I'm dirty because this happened to me. I don't want your pity. I don't even want your sympathy. But when you deny me because of this truth you do the same thing my mother did. You let your own guilt or distaste of the 'subject' deny my lived experience. You call my life a lie. I'd rather you just dismissed it as fiction.

This is the truth.

Shona was seven. She had gone to sleep as usual. She awoke to discover she was being suffocated with a pillow. Her mother was over her, face maniacal, tears rolling, saying, over and over 'she has to die, she has to die, she will be better off dead.' This is an experience beyond fear. Beyond descriptive power. Pulling Shona's mother off her was Malcolm. Shona came to consciousness and Malcolm dragged her mother out of the bedroom, still screaming. Moments later, he was back. He showed Shona how to put a chair against the handle of the bedroom door so that her mother couldn't get back in. And then he left. Shona put the chair against the door. And got back into bed.

After a short time, her mother was back at the door, wailing, hysterically and scratching at the door... 'let me in, you have to die.. it's better' the full gamut of disjointed rantings. The words were not as scary as the scratching. The door buckled but the chair held and eventually it stopped. Shona didn't sleep. But tried to deal with the fact that the man whose violence had, in her mind, caused her mother to crack into this madness, had been the one who saved her life. How could she call the police on him again? How could she ever be unafraid again? She couldn't. She would have to learn to survive. The one lesson Shona did learn that night, which stayed with her forever, was the value of life. Her mother had tried to kill her. And failed. And Shona knew that she wanted to live. That her life was valuable to herself as to no one else and that she would do everything necessary both to keep living and to make her life count for herself. To take all the experiences she'd so nearly been cheated of. That night Shona faced a deep truth, a deep reality; the sort of situation which changes who you are forever.

The next morning, everything was 'normal'. Nothing had happened. No one would speak of it again. Not without being called a liar. Shona's mother was distraught of course but she never spoke about what she'd done. Shona reasoned that it was better not to say anything. She decided that she could, if not forgive, then accept that Malcolm had driven her mother temporarily mad, and that talking about any of it was only likely to cause more violence and trouble. And she wanted to live. She would do anything now to live. So she didn't talk about it. But she put the chair against the door for a good long time. She had nightmares for years. And she knew that some truths are beyond matters of opinion. Life goes on in stages. A life, Shona discovered, can be a very long time. A fact she was glad for

every day she lived. And there are stages when one tries to face things, to move on and to grow. Within the family this was impossible for Shona. The day her mother told her and Douglas that Shona was lying about the suffocation was the day Shona realised as a family they would never face truths. And that fear was more powerful an emotion than love.

Let's go back to the time when I first spoke of this truth. It shows that something that happens when you are seven can live with you for a long, long time. Can never fully go away. Even when you find your magic shoes. Even when you write about it. Even when your mother isn't there 'to defend herself' or to call you a liar any more.

I was in my early twenties and my mother was pushing me and Douglas beyond endurance, as she often did. She was trying to use the force that her reality was the only one, to make us do something – something to do with coming back home to live and support her, or pay for something, or something.

There were so many of these times, and they all merge into one. Like the multiple suicide attempts. You can't imagine how painful it is as a child to live with a parent who keeps threatening to kill themselves. Who uses life and death as a power trip. Which is what my mother did. Eventually, it does brutalise you. Eventually I just used to tell her 'go do it.' And of course she never did. Not when she knew I wouldn't save her. Can you blame me? She tried to take my life and then she wanted me to save hers. That was a step too far. I did everything I could for her up to that point. But not that. I don't play games with life. It's far too important to me. Every day is a gift and I'm still pretty short with people who moan about their lives. I know that's tough on them. But having someone try to take your life when there's nothing you can do about it – when you wake up realizing you would never have known, never have had the power, the choice, the chance. Well, believe me, that makes you see life in a whole new way. And maybe it breeds an intolerance.

Back then, as I recall it, Douglas couldn't understand why I was being so intransigent in whatever the demand was. Why I didn't just give in as we usually did. And because I wanted my brother to know the truth, and because I wanted my mother to know there was nothing to fear in this truth because it was over and I had forgiven her and I would never tell anyone else, even though I was angry with her. Mostly I think because I wanted her to realise that I was not her enemy. That I didn't want her guilt to come off on me. Because I wanted to love her and she to love me and I couldn't feel love while this unspoken truth stood between us all... because of all these things I took a deep breath and told the truth.

I prefaced it with 'we've never spoken about this, and I don't blame you for it, because I understand that you were mentally not there and it's okay, but it did happen and it has made me the person I am and means that I am not going to go along with fictional versions of reality, however much you try to make me.' I did my best. Honestly. I thought I was trying to do something good, I wasn't trying to hurt her. I was just trying to reach her. With the truth. Which at that time I believed might set us all free. Her only response was, 'she's lying.'

I told you. It could never be spoken of (at least not in her lifetime) without bearing the mark of the liar. I don't know if she believed that. I don't know if Douglas believed that. But she recreated my existence all over again in that moment. She made me a liar in her world and for us, her world was the only one which we were allowed to acknowledge. So for the rest of her life, I was a liar. And I spent the next twenty years wondering if she really knew the truth and couldn't deal with the guilt or if she truly believed I was a liar. Maybe that shouldn't matter. But it was all that mattered to me. I could try to love a woman who had tried to kill me. I couldn't love a woman who denied my 'truth.'

Because my truth was me.

In hindsight maybe there I have the answer. Our truths could not converge. I wish they could have. If

she could have accepted the truth we could both have been free, in our ways. I often thought that my experience, a mother trying to kill you is one of the worst that can happen to a person. But I now think that perhaps her experience was worse. Not being able to accept the truth. Carrying a guilt so deep that you have to create a forceful reality which denies everyone else their truth. Carrying it to the grave. It's such a waste.

As you already know, my mother died. We all do. It's the one truth none of us can deny. Though she did her best. And we almost believed her then too. I wrote and read the eulogy at her funeral. It was the last thing I could do for her. The last 'story' to tell in her voice.

In case you still wonder about 'my' truth. We found documentation to 'support' my 'story' in the form of a written exchange between my mother and her GP where she told him she had tried to kill her daughter. It was in the context of trying to prove she was depressed and needed medication. The GP thought she was a fantasist and didn't believe her. My younger brother burned the evidence. But we all know the truth now.

When subsequently I presented at the doctor rather too frequently with horrific stomach pains, I was told, aged eight, that we didn't stop 'bothering them' because there was 'nothing wrong with me' I would be put on anti depressants. No adult covered themselves in glory in my childhood. The only person who ever 'saved' me was the one who frightened me most.

Bad things happen. I accept that. Sad things happen too and they are probably worse than the bad things. The night before my mother's funeral, her best friend said to me 'do you know what your mother thought of you?' I said, 'no' and she said, 'she told me you were the person she always wanted to be.'

And I wept, as I wept at the funeral the following day. Not because I loved my mother but because I couldn't love her and I wished I could. If only we could have come together and moved on from that moment of madness. I wore my magic shoes at the funeral. They gave me the strength to speak the eulogy. I have worn them plenty since. But they aren't magic shoes any more. They don't need to be. They are just a nice, old, comfortable pair of shoes.

We all make up stories. We all tell lies. We all have our own 'versions' of the truth. But beyond that, we should remember never to deny that there are deeper truths. It's when we forget this, or deny this that our lives become poorer and love becomes nothing more than a word in a sea of words that mean nothing. The truth underneath all this is that the one thing more powerful in life than love is not fear, but acceptance. And that every day is a gift because, sooner or later, death is the reality none of us can avoid facing.



and more...

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about Guerrilla Midgie Press

Founded in 2012, Guerrilla Midgie Press is an advocacy publisher whose aim is to 'voice the unvoiced' and our other publications to date include:

A Week With No Labels (Cally Phillips)

Fair Trade Fiction Volume 1 (Cally Phillips)

Jock Tamson's Bairns (Cally Phillips)

Tales From TattyBogle (Jack MacRoary)

More Tales From TattyBogle (Jack MacRoary)

We Didn't mean to stop the War (ed Cally Phillips)

All of these are available from [our website](#) and are distributed digitally via Amazon (Kindle) and Kobo (epub)

A Week With No Labels and *Fair Trade Fiction (Volume 1)* are also available as paperback editions from Amazon.