

A PAINFUL POST MORTEM is a tragic, but tender, story of contemporary issues: love stretched to its limits by divorce, drugs and bereavement. Faced with their daughter's death, Claire and Mark are forced to confront their own dark past.

A Painful Post Mortem

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MEL MENZIES

A PAINFUL POST MORTEM

Mel Menzies

CUMCARITAS♥UK

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This book is a work of fiction inspired by fact. Most of the scenes are derived from the author's imagination. Where real events have been described, all names of people and places have been changed to protect the identity of the living and dead.

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MEL MENZIES

About the Author

Mel's appetite for reading began as a child, when her father's books were banished to the attic-playroom by her mother, who perceived them merely as collectors of dust. Shakespeare, Dickens and a large leather-bound volume of Great Short Stories of the World, together with a good dollop of Enid Blyton, thus helped to shape her early understanding of human relationships. When her father began a course on short-story writing, Mel secretly sent off her own offering and, at the age of fourteen, received her first rejection slip. Marriage and motherhood curtailed a growing collection until recent years. Under various pen-names, she has since had seven books published – one of which reached **No. 4 in *The Sunday Times* Bestseller list** – plus numerous articles. She is also a speaker.

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Acclaim for

A PAINFUL POST MORTEM

... skilfully handled, interlinking present tense narrative with third/past point of view – and oh boy, how it adds texture and dimension.

Characterisation is strong and well balanced. I am, as you'll gather, very impressed with

A Painful Post Mortem – a very moving book.

JESSICA STIRLING

Chapter One

A COPY OF the Pathology Report – promised, and ambivalently awaited – has arrived in my absence. For some reason that upsets me, though I can't think why. What possible difference can it make? By its very nature a Post Mortem is posthumous. And death brings an end to influence and change. Doesn't it?

I've dragged myself round the usual early morning circuit – beside the vapid, dust-strewn waters of the canal basin, through St Kit's to the Thames footpath and the muted early summer sounds of the river, under Tower Bridge and back home again – driven by a half remembered sense of the comfort to be derived from routine, familiarity, activity. That's how it's been for the past ten days: the routine of being; of breathing – in and out; of forcing a response from reflex swallowing muscles that appear to have lost spontaneity; of sipping, without revulsion, the scalding sweetened liquids with which I've been plied; of seeing, without registering, familiar faces etched with unfamiliar expressions – pity? sorrow? concern?

Activity has come easier: planning a funeral – an event that can have no date until the body is released; helping in preliminary enquiries with the police; learning that an Inquest has been opened and adjourned. Keeping on. Keeping going. Feeling in control of a spiralling situation. Or at least kidding myself that I am. The role of grieving mother might not be an everyday occurrence, but it's one I've rehearsed many times in my mind.

The package, protruding from the cubby hole for Flat 7, is visible the moment I let myself in through the front security door. My stomach heaves. A large brown envelope – on top of the customary wad of junk mail, flyers, and business letters addressed to Mr Richard Lombard – the handwritten scrawl is instantly recognisable as Mark's. *Claire Lombard*,

it reads. No title, then! No Mrs, or even a despised Ms. As if, even after all these years and the precedent of his own remarriage, Mark is indicating his disdain of mine to Richard.

A prickle of frustration seeds itself in my mind: the faint flowering of remembrance of myriad, similar, small humiliations planted, bindweed-like and pervasive, in the soil of my marriage to Mark, which, over a fourteen, fifteen year period, all-but choked me of meaningful life. I give myself a mental shake to loosen its hold.

The small cramped hallway in which I'm standing is communal to the four flats in this section of the low-rise building. Unwilling to be engaged in small talk by any of my neighbours, I pick up the package and the remainder of the post and make my way upstairs to my own front door. The apartment, purchased by the pooling of resources when Richard and I married, is on two levels: hall, dining room, kitchen, bathroom and master bedroom on the first floor; and under the eaves a large lounge, small study-cum-second bedroom and adjoining toilet and shower.

With no high rise building in the immediate vicinity, the entire living area is filled with a wonderful sense of airiness and light which, when we were property-hunting, immediately appealed to my need of space and tranquillity. Both are rare commodities in the city, and I've enhanced the illusion of outdoors-come-in, through a combination of window boxes, indoor plants, and a décor of winter white with highlights of sharp limey greens and citrus yellow. Since privacy is not an issue, calico curtains suffice at the windows, softening the contours with their billowing folds.

The furnishings are now faded and worn, but in all the nine years that we've lived here, the different nuances of sunlight by day and lamp light by night have never failed to surprise and delight me. Today, everything jars!

Once inside, I drop the mail on the dining table and, as if it has no significance, turn my back on it and walk through to the galley kitchen. My chest feels tight, but I tell myself that this is due to my run. When the churning in my belly has receded and I can breathe more easily, I take the water-filter jug from the fridge and fill a tumbler from the draining

board. Turning to face the dining room door and table beyond, I lift the glass to my eye, study the distorted view, then lean back against the counter top and drink deeply.

When I've finished, have washed and dried the glass and replaced it in the cupboard, I immerse myself in the small daily activities of domesticity: sweeping little piles of crumbs into my hands from around the toaster and breakfast table, to-ing and fro-ing between kitchen and dining room, giving a wide berth to the mail in general and the brown envelope in particular.

Oh hell! This is absurd. I am dismayed by my lack of courage, but can't help myself. I wish the package had not been delivered; wish I'd never agreed to Mark's suggestion that he send me a copy; wish that the circumstances were different, that Katya's death had not occurred, that I'd not been thrust into this nightmare.

The telephone rings. It's Richard: his customary call home to catch up on the morning's news.

'It's arrived.' My voice is strident. 'The Pathology Report from Mark.'

'What does it say?'

Pulling out a chair at the dining room table, I seat myself, lacing the telephone flex through my fingers.

'I haven't opened it.'

'Are you going to?'

'I don't know if I want to.'

There's a pause. I picture Richard standing in a telephone booth – perhaps in some restaurant or hotel – his brow furrowed as he thinks through the implications.

'I suppose it'll be full of medical details,' he says, at last. 'Could be upsetting. Perhaps you'd better leave it until I'm home? We could look at it together, if you like. I'll try and get back early.'

I'm grateful – pathetically grateful – for his insight, and grasp at his suggestion. For some moments after I've put the phone back on its cradle, I continue to sit at the table. My breathing is fast and shallow. Emotion knots my throat. Then my fury explodes into the silence of the empty flat.

‘Why did you have to die?’ I shout.

Instantly, I’m enveloped with hot guilt and confusion. I know from a friend who offers bereavement counselling that anger is a normal reaction to loss. Anger against the deceased for letting go of life; for causing pain to those they’ve left behind. Anger against God, all-powerful and all-seeing, for permitting – or failing to stop – the events that have led to this end. Anger against yourself for your lack of foresight; your stupid, helpless, useless futility. I understand the concept! I’ve simply never considered that I might succumb.

Action is called for: a shower. I cross the hall to the bedroom, find clean knickers and bra, and pause in front of the mirror to peel off my joggers and drop them into the dirty laundry basket. The woman who looks back at me with fading hair and red-rimmed brown eyes seems to be perceptibly nearer the half century that will soon be upon her, than the mid-forties that I actually inhabit. With a grimace I make my way back across the hall to the cloakroom shower.

The scented lather with which I begin to soap myself eases the ache of well-exercised muscles, the gush of water rinsing away the furrows of a sleepless and over-active mind. For a moment, I’m deluded into thinking everything is normal. But suddenly, the protective elements of numbness and the passage of time are sluiced away. Ten-day old memories cascade through my brain.

IT’S JUNE. EARLY Saturday morning. Richard’s and my ninth wedding anniversary – and there he is applying the last coat of paint to the kitchen ceiling!

‘Half an hour,’ he calls. ‘Promise! Quick shower and we’ll be off. Get your glad rags on. We’re going to be tourists for the day, then up to the West End for a show.’

‘Yeah, yeah!’ I retort, plumping up pillows and smoothing the duvet on the bed. ‘Half an hour, my foot. When have I ever known you to manage a shower in half an hour?’

Had the day really begun so benignly filled with affection and expectation? The recollection brings with it a renewed stab of pain that hits me just below the ribs.

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The phone begins to ring as I am about to leave the bedroom. What if it hadn't rung until after we'd left home for the pleasures of our day? What if we'd been on the river with my bridesmaids of nine years earlier, Richard's best man, and their families? Or in Piccadilly, alone at the theatre? But it didn't happen like that. I pick up the receiver, stand at the bedroom window, look down at the once functional – now purely decorative – docks below, and listen to a voice which, though clearly that of one of the girls, is not immediately identifiable as to which.

'Mum?'

'Katya? What's wrong?'

The assumption that it's my younger daughter is a natural response to the tension that crackles down the line. A less frequent caller than her sister, Rosie, Katya rings only in extremis, the tremor in her voice indicating that she's in need of money, refuge or sympathy – sometimes all three in equal measure – which need she will later, obstinately and independently, refute. Aged twenty-five, Katya has recently split with her partner, the father of her baby daughter, Zara. She has already phoned home several times that week.

'Katya?' I repeat.

The voice at the other end of the phone is high-pitched and rasped with the resonance of shock.

'It's Rosie. Mum, is Richard with you?'

I turn from the window.

'What's the matter, darling? It's not Steve again?'

A year older than Katya, Rosie lives in the West Country, Molvelly Abbey, an inland hamlet half an hour from Katya's coastal home in Compass Quay. Steve, Rosie's husband for the past seven years, and father to three of my four grandchildren, has recently had surgery for an inflamed bursa.

'It's not Steve,' Rosie responds breathlessly. 'It's Kat. Is Richard there?'

I sink onto the bed, oblivious of the crumpled duvet I've smoothed only moments earlier. The persistent enquiry for Richard's whereabouts begins to seep into my thinking. My heart pounds.

Did I know then? Is it true, as I've heard said, that some sixth sense applies; some inner antennae between a mother and child that, from conception through birth and life, goes on transmitting and receiving without thought or action on the part of either, without being perceptible? Until it's broken. When the imperceptible clamours for attention; transmission ceases; a persistent crackle and hiss intone inside: an incessant, cacophonous white noise. And you know. You just know!

But I didn't know. That's the point. After all these years, this scene, this death scene, so long imagined, so fervently rehearsing itself in my mind, has been put to death. R.I.P. I've allowed myself hope, and hope has become surety, surety, peace. How could I know? What inner sense could have detected that the peace was about to be shattered?

'Katya?' I echo, stupidly, down the phone line. 'What's happened Rosie? Have the two of you had a row?'

ROSIE BACKED THE Range Rover out of the yard. Behind her stood the stone cottage that had been her home for the last seven years. To one side, beyond the thick *Leylandii* hedge, lay the adjoining Garden Centre and Nursery – heavily mortgaged to the bank – from which she and Steve scraped a living. She tooted her horn to let him know she was off.

'You haven't forgotten that I have another doctor's appointment this morning, have you?' she'd asked him, earlier, before breakfast.

Tall, lean, and tanned, he'd paused in the act of lathering his face prior to shaving, and eyed her, quizzically, in the mirror.

'You alright with that?' he asked.

Her eyes flicked up and over him, as a sudden recognition filled her – warm and wholly unexpected – that here, in Steve, was the security she'd craved as a child.

Severe stomach cramps in the months following Erin's birth – her longed-for and cherished daughter – had prompted the original appointment ten days earlier. But with Steve worried about an outbreak of black spot among the hybrid roses, and the twins acting up as only four year old boys could, she'd almost convinced herself that the pain didn't warrant the doctor's attention; that it would right itself, soon enough; that she should cancel the consultation.

‘Go!’ Steve had urged her. ‘Marjorie can take the twins on a tour of the new aquatics, while I organise a spraying programme of the roses.’

Marjorie was one of the staff in the tiny café area, which abutted the conservatory that housed the potted house-plant section. A grandmotherly woman, whose rich dialect delighted the boys, she was more friend than employee. It was she who, as the day evolved, had taken them home with her and kept them over the weekend so that Rosie could concentrate on *other things*.

Other things had begun with Rosie’s arrival that Saturday morning at the surgery in Compass Quay.

‘Rosie Timblin for Dr Wharton,’ she’d announced, presenting herself at the counter.

The Receptionist, Pauline, looked up from her desk. But instead of checking off the appointment in the diary before her, to Rosie’s acute embarrassment, she came round the counter to her side.

‘You won’t be seeing Dr Wharton this morning,’ she said, her voice hushed and slightly nasal. ‘Dr Morris wants a word with you. He’s running rather late so he’s asked me to take you into the Clinic to wait.’

Conscious of the curious stares of other patients, Rosie’s cheeks flushed and her mouth felt dry. She seemed to have been back and forth to the surgery no end of times in the last few years. If it wasn’t a pregnancy or a miscarriage, it was some minor ailment or other; either her own or those of the children. Was this to be a reprimand for wasting surgery time? An old childhood guilt that could never quite be assuaged, an irrational fear of having failed the expectations of others, gnawed at her insides.

She allowed herself to be steered away from the doctors’ surgeries towards the newly-built annexe, which housed the Clinic.

‘Will the doctor be long?’ she asked, indicating the sleeping baby. ‘It’s such a palaver getting out and back home in time for feeds these days.’

Pauline showed her empathy in a half-smile half-grimace, pushed open the double doors of the annexe and switched on the lights.

‘Sorry. Shouldn’t be too long now. He particularly wants to see you.’

Rosie's heart missed a beat. Something must be afoot. She set the baby chair on the floor and perched on the edge of her seat as if for flight. Pauline hurried back to the Reception Desk.

The Clinic – usually packed with the subdued chatter of ante- or post-natal women awaiting scans and other minor miracles of obstetric care; mothers, with pre-school infants mercifully unaware of the terrors of the needle ahead; or the elderly and disabled juggling exercises of body and mind – was, that morning, silent and foreboding. The emptiness, the shadowless ceiling lights, the grey walls, and red plastic seats rigid in their attempt at informality, felt cold and cheerless.

Rosie shivered.

When, at last, Dr Morris appeared at the door of the Clinic, she had no sense of how long she had waited. The doctor shook her hand, leaned over the baby in her chair and made the right noises, then seated himself at right angles to Rosie.

He was not Rosie's GP and was known to her only by hearsay. Somehow, his appearance didn't match the image Rosie had formed. She thought him unkempt, his eyes bleary, his jowls dark and unshaven. He leaned forward, his forearms on his thighs, the flesh on his face falling into crumpled folds.

'I'm sorry to have kept you,' he began. 'I'm afraid I have some bad news.'

Rosie's heart began to thump. It thumped so loud she thought it would leap from her chest. All she could hear as the doctor started to speak was an endless drumming in her ears.

THE MEMORY OF that morning, ten days earlier, brought a sharp reflux in Rosie's chest and throat. She came to a halt at the junction at the top of the lane, scrutinised the traffic conditions to right and left, then turned onto the main road that would take her into town. Even now, after more than a week of assimilating accumulated information, she found it difficult to recall the details of that Saturday. She cast her mind back.

Dr Morris had been called out by the police at four o'clock that morning, he told her.

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‘I’m so sorry Mrs Timblin – Rosie, if I may? There’s no easy way of saying this. Your sister, Katya, was found dead in her home.’

The blood surged and pounded in Rosie’s ears. Strangely, Katya had been the last person on her mind when the doctor had warned her of bad news. Such was her state of confusion, that she’d thought, initially – was convinced, in fact – that Dr Morris was about to tell her of some disaster that had befallen her mother. A road traffic accident on the way down to the river for their celebratory pleasure cruise? A drowning? From a boat they had not yet boarded! How stupid was that?

‘Katya?’ she repeated. But her brain refused to give up its image of Mum.

Little by little, his voice resonant with kindness and fatigue, the doctor relayed what he knew of the situation. Little by little, like arrows fired at ramparts and falling short, the blunt facts barely penetrated the thick layer of insulation that Rosie’s mind had erected around her intellect.

With some effort, she recalled the facts. Kat had been to a party – a barbecue – on the Friday evening. Her estranged partner, father of fifteen-month old Zara, had stayed over to baby-sit. It was he who had found Kat in the early hours of the next morning, slumped on the sofa downstairs. In a state of extreme shock he had telephoned the emergency services, who had then contacted both the police and the Duty Doctor, Dr Morris.

‘I’m afraid there was nothing I – or anyone else – could do,’ said Dr Morris. ‘She’d been dead for some hours before anyone got there.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Rosie said repeatedly. Illogically. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Even to her own mind she was unsure to whom and for what she was apologising.

The doctor was kind and understanding. Kat’s death was due to asphyxiation, he said. But a Post Mortem would have to be conducted before the full facts could be known. Shaking off the shock that engulfed her, Rosie roused herself.

‘I need to let my mother know. And can I see her? Kat? Mum will want to know how she looked.’

Dr Morris arranged for a cup of tea to be brought to Rosie, for her to see the body at The Chapel of Rest, and then for her to make whatever phone calls she deemed necessary.

TEN DAYS LATER and here she was again!

At the outskirts of Compass Quay, Rosie slowed to the obligatory thirty-mile limit. She would have to pass the end of Locket's Lane, where Kat had lived – and died – in order to reach the doctor's surgery. Her heart lurched at the thought.

She drew a sharp breath and, to calm herself, turned her head to smile at the baby in her rear-facing car seat strapped to the passenger seat beside her. Rewarded with a windy grin on the tiny, puckered features, she lingered too long before returning her attention to the road. Heart racing, she slammed on the brakes to avoid a collision with the car in front.

Claire's response to her phone call from the surgery to convey the news of Kat's death had been equally unnerving. Should she – could she, Rosie wondered – have broken it any better?

'Mummy – I'm so sorry. Kat's been found dead at home.'

There *was* no easy formula; no pat phrase; no acceptable tone of voice. Besides, she had been in shock, herself. It had been all she could do to force the words out past her teeth and lips. The cavity of her chest felt empty, as if her lungs had deflated; as if there was insufficient breath on which to convey the sound and meaning of her message. How did you tell any mother of the loss of her child? How could you cause such pain to your own? Her teeth chattered.

'I'm so sorry, Mummy. I'm so sorry.'

Over and over, her guilt spilled out, inane, irrational, unstoppable: for being the harbinger of bad news; the cause of pain and anguish; for every hard thought she had ever harboured – against Kat, their mother, their father; for being hundreds of miles away from dispensing and receiving a hug; for feeling utterly, devastatingly, helpless.

And then – silence.

She'd imagined her mother sitting on the sofa in the lounge. Or perhaps on the edge of her bed. She tried to get her mind round what it

would be like if someone were to tell her, Rosie – one day, in the far off future – that her precious Erin was no more.

Are you okay, Mummy? I understand how you must feel, Mummy.

The crumbs of comfort she had been about to offer were never uttered. Instead, an inhuman moan, which emanated from Claire, began to echo down the phone line. It grew to a crescendo, and became a wail that filled Rosie's head.

Immutable, it had filled her head for the past ten days.

STEPPING OUT OF the shower and beginning to dry myself, I realise that I have little coherent memory of the day of Katya's death. Is this the nature of grief? A savage slash across a known territory. A ripping, searing pain. And then – nothing? Nothing but the blurred edges of reality, like those left by softly falling snow; the blotting out of familiar landmarks until – yes – almost nothing known remains.

Patchworks of disconnected impressions burn bright and clear in my mind, but it's as if they are the borrowed memories of some other entity – a character of whom I've read, perhaps; a photograph of some past event that has been vividly brought to life by the descriptive powers of its participants, or observers.

That's how I feel: a spectator of something outside myself; something that touches me empathetically, but fails fully to involve me. It's as if the events unfurling before me, however dramatic, are not grounded in my understanding of reality, but have a dreamlike quality about them. There are two minds at work: the one that has left its lived-out abundant life at home but continues to operate at the level of banality: sustenance, sleep, self-preservation; the other that brings into play the detached watchfulness of an interested bystander.

Like a photographer accompanying a journalist to the scene of a disaster, the camera of my mind merely records the victims and helpers; their actions and reactions; the mood and emotions of the occasion. But it's not my disaster. And its importance seems ephemeral.

I apply deodorant and talc and pull on my underclothes, sweater and jeans.

The news that Rosie broke that Saturday morning hit me like a body-blow. But the shock I felt was not simply that of Katya's death. This shock took the form of astonishment: disbelief that a death so long anticipated should elicit so predictable a response, when I'd thought myself inured. Or cured!

At some point, a howl broke the sleepy Saturday morning feel of residential Dockland. But though reason told me it must have originated in *my* throat, I felt no sense of ownership.

It did, however, bring Richard running. Poor Richard, I thought, regarding him from the edge of the bed as he appeared at the door, paint-laden roller still in hand, red-faced from the contortion of looking ceiling-ward for so long. Had he truly understood what he was taking on when he married me, a thirty-six year old divorcee, with two teenage girls? And I realised, with that other mind – the spectator-mind – that there was no incongruity in my concern for him; that anxiety for others was a buffer, a kinder reality than the realism that had thrust itself, cruel and barbed, into the soft underbelly of sorrow, pain and disappointment which, together, amounted to self-concern.

Richard's face was etched with fear.

'What's happened?' he asked. 'I thought you'd fallen. Thought you must've killed yourself.'

Wordlessly, I passed the phone to him.

A drop of white paint fell from the roller onto the polished oak of the bedroom floor. Viscous, like blanched blood, it remained perfectly round. I stared at it, unseeing. Did Mark know of Katya's death, I wondered? He was her father, after all. I hadn't thought to ask Rosie. It hadn't seemed to figure in my thinking at the time.

I bring to mind other occasions when I've had to break news to him of some disaster or other concerning Katya. There was purpose, then. A reason for the two of us to leave our respective spouses and go haring off together in an attempt to avert greater catastrophe. The morning of Katya's death, there was none. Just an empty, gaping void.

He would hear soon enough, I told myself. Just as I tell myself, now, ten days later, that there's no need for me to ring in respect of the Pathology Report. My reluctance, I fear, is palpable.

Chapter Two

THE TAPROOM OF The Hirelings at Fairling Dale was dim at the best of times. With a sullen summer sky bruising the light above the Derbyshire village, it was positively gloomy. Inside, Mark StJohn gave up trying to decipher the business pages of *The Telegraph*, and downed the dregs of his lunchtime pint.

He leaned against the bar and rattled the coins in the trouser pocket of his crumpled Saville Row suit. Dismissing the fact that Claire had had the devil of a job ringing around to locate him before digging him out of the pub to alert him to Kat's death ten days earlier, he cursed her, softly, under his breath. She had not deigned to acknowledge receipt of the Pathology Report he'd sent her and he supposed it would, therefore, be down to him to make contact with her. He contemplated, with distaste, the pay-phone in the draughty, stone-flagged hallway at the entrance to the toilets.

Women! he thought. Clichéd it might be, but he'd never understand them. He'd believed Claire, as a seventeen year old, with her scarlet-painted nails, mini-skirts and bouffant hair, to be a sophisticate, with all that that implied in terms of sexual activity. She had certainly said nothing to disabuse this perception, and in his

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recollection had encouraged it. It had come as a shock when he'd learned just how naïve she really was. As fumblingly uninformed as he, himself!

They'd met at a party, someone's twenty-first, he thought, which, along with several other young undergraduates whom he'd met for the first time in the pub, he'd more or less gate-crashed. Claire, he later learned, was an invited guest.

For a bloke whose entire life had been lived in the cloistered all-male communities of, first, Rutwich College – part of the Public Boarding School Trust – where his father was Head of the Science Faculty, then Lamplard Engineering College, he'd found her combination of femininity and forthrightness irresistible. No one else, other than those paid to do so, had ever, in the entire twenty-one years of his life, even acknowledged his speech impediment, let alone accommodate it.

'Start again,' Claire would command, patiently. 'And slow down. Then I'll understand what you're trying to say.'

She had never made him feel uncomfortable with the show of embarrassment or impatience that he'd encountered in others – notably his parents, whose intellect and ideals he was left in no doubt he failed, miserably. In time, with Claire, he found he achieved greater clarity and enunciation than in all the tedious years of speech-training that had preceded their meeting.

So what *had* gone wrong between them, he wondered, not for the first time? Well, an unplanned pregnancy, for a start! Mark hadn't felt ready to become a father. Nor – when Claire intimated that she wouldn't contemplate the private abortion he could arrange, and he'd

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made it equally clear that he abhorred the idea of a child of his growing up with no awareness of its origins – was he ready to become a husband.

Through the alcoholic fog of decades, vague memories of a hastily and disingenuously convened white wedding stirred in his mind, the set piece of bride and groom, parents, in-laws and guests looming large like the fearful characters of some shadow theatre melodrama. He shuddered. God knows, he'd tried not to feel resentful when Claire, only weeks into the marriage, reverted to type. Gone was the drinking companion of their courtship – if that's what it could be called – and in its place was a housewife. He might, he thought, have married his own mother. Except that his mother could match him drink for drink, and still be standing when he was under the table!

And then there was Danny. Or not! Still-born only three months after the wedding, he had weighed barely more than the proverbial bag of sugar. Had Claire had a hand in that too? All the nest building throughout her pregnancy, up and down ladders with paint pots to adorn the little flat they'd rented: she'd been like a woman possessed.

It hardly mattered. If he'd thought, at that point, that a bid for freedom might have been possible, that they might have parted and gone their separate ways, Claire had pretty soon disillusioned him with the announcement of a second pregnancy. Then a third.

Danny, Rosie and Katya. He allowed himself to bring them visually to mind, or at least some apparition of the three of them, standing to attention, all in a row.

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Three green bottles he began to hum, Standing on a wall. And if one green bottle should accidentally fall –

He broke off abruptly. Two down! One to go.

HE CAME OUT of a trance feeling foolishly conspicuous, and glanced around the shabby olde worlde bar to see who might be in by way of diversion. He liked to know he had an audience before launching into his repertoire.

‘This your local?’ asked a spotty youth whose pristine climbing boots had clearly never made contact with open ground.

‘Certainly not,’ Mark responded. ‘Extension of home. Just a short stagger across the village square!’

The boy laughed. It made Mark feel good.

He turned to the landlord and said, throwing his voice for the benefit of the three or four hill walkers clustered at the end of the bar: ‘Don’t see my name above the ruddy door yet, Len. Must have bought the place several times over with my custom.’

Len dutifully played stooge.

‘Haven’t seen the colour of your money for rent,’ he returned, cheerily reeling off an inventory: ‘Use of premises as registered office; exploitation of pub staff as go-between, message-takers and delivery boys; monopolisation of telephone in hall – Need I go on?’

To the hill walkers, for whom he was drawing pints of ale, he said, ‘Property tycoon, Mr StJohn. Better watch which route you’re walking. Might find Mark’s bought up Mam Tor from under your feet and bulldozed it to build a shopping mall.’

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It was an incestuous and practised routine, whereby Mark and Len benefited, respectively, from increased consumption, and sales, of ale. The hill walkers laughed, and Mark paid for the first round of what would, undoubtedly, develop into a hardened drinking session at their expense. Commercial property development and shop-fitting had not given him the tycoon title Len had bestowed upon him, but it had won him the illusion of achievement and prestige. He liked to keep up the charade.

‘Keeps me in pints,’ he explained, modestly ignoring the bonhomie he knew he was capable of engendering in those – like his publican, butcher and tailor – who thought nothing of his raising a two-year tab with them. And why not? They’d eaten and drunk at his table often enough! Corny it might be, but the old adage of back-scratching had done neither he nor his cronies any harm.

What harm there was in his life – and there’d been plenty, he acknowledged – had come into being entirely at his own behest. No assistance required! Give yourself a pat on the back, StJohn, he muttered.

He was becoming maudlin. Kat’s death had done that to him. He felt suddenly tired of the usual routine and turned away from the hill walkers, signalling Len for another pint of bitter and one for himself.

‘On your own today?’ the publican asked.

Mark nodded. In readiness for the pay-phone, he laid a handful of silver and copper coinage on the treacly brown varnish of the bar and swore again, with the conspiracy of men of the world.

‘Women!’ he said. ‘More trouble than they’re worth.’

Len looked up from pulling a pint of his best bitter.

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‘Still, you’ll miss your Katya. We all will. Didn’t see her often – but when we did! Chip off the old block. Life and soul, she was. Life and soul.’

‘Little beggar,’ Mark said, affectionately. ‘She’s caused enough trouble in her time. And still doing so! Couldn’t even die quietly. Ruddy police involved, Post Mortems, Inquests – and now the ex-wife.’

Len grinned; the understanding of two old friends hung between them.

‘Talking of wives,’ he said, nodding in the direction of the pub door which had just opened to admit the voluptuous and stylishly attired figure of Sylvia StJohn.

‘As if one’s not bad enough,’ Mark sighed with mock exasperation. ‘Must have needed my head read to collect three!’

He watched as Len, with the garnered knowledge and practice of years, proceeded to pour Sylvia’s preferred lunchtime tippie, a Dubonnet and soda, without needing to be asked.

Mark swore again, softly, and stuffed his small change back into his jacket pocket.

‘Now I’ll never manage to make this ruddy phone call to Claire,’ he complained *sotto voce*. He pulled out an adjacent bar stool ready for Sylvia’s occupancy.

‘I’LL HAVE TO ring him.’

Percolating breakfast coffee in the kitchen – the smart, newly painted kitchen! – I make the statement with the full, unspoken assurance of Richard’s agreement. My mind leaps, seamlessly, to

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make the comparison between what was lacking in my marriage to Mark, but is so evident in the relationship I enjoy with Richard. It can be summed up in a word: Friendship! I glance through the open door to where Richard sits at the breakfast table, dressed for work in one of his three off-the-peg dark suits, noting the way his hair corkscrews on the crown of his head; the unconscious habit he has of pushing out his bottom lip in a perturbed, but non-belligerent way, as he reads the day's news; the long, lean, fingers that curl, absent-mindedly, around the handle of his still empty coffee mug.

Richard has a franchise supplying, gratis, tea and coffee-making machines, the commodities for which he replenishes on a sale-or-return basis. Clients include hotels, offices, hospitals – anyone and everyone to whom he can sell the concept of a risk-free, effortless means of trading. Under-capitalised, it's taken him several years of hard slog to build a core clientele, but by the time we met, Richard had a small workforce whose loyalty and enthusiasm have secured at least a modicum of comfort and security for us all.

It's meant that, in the past nine years, there's been no need for me to earn a living, which has left me free to give part-time, voluntary, assistance to a charitable organisation serving the local community. One of a group of volunteers, I specialise, in an amateur way under the banner of several professionals, in debt-counselling, help and advice on divorce and lone-parenting – all of which I experienced myself in the four years between my divorce from Mark and marriage to Richard. It's a good feeling, knowing you're a valued member of a team. And that you're giving something back to society.

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Comforting others with the comfort with which I have been comforted, I paraphrase from the charity's literature.

By way of contrast, in my spare time, I dabble in watercolours – night time views of the river, the Portobello market at dawn, a lone vagrant in a shop doorway. Some have sold for a modest sum in a friend's shop and I've been urged – but have so far declined – to give up the voluntary work to develop my art.

Adjusting the belt of the short-sleeved cotton robe I have on over my candy-striped pyjamas, I unplug the percolator and take it through to the dining room.

'I'll have to ring Mark,' I repeat, my lack of enthusiasm loudly declaring itself.

It's lost on Richard!

'Of course!' he replies. 'He'll want to know that the Report has arrived.'

I STAND AT the table. From behind the newspaper, Richard says, 'I didn't think Mark looked well when we were down in Compass Quay.'

I give myself time to consider the statement, casting my mind back nearly a fortnight to the day of our wedding anniversary: to the discarded jeans and sweater that were to be worn on the boat trip; the unused *little black frock* that had been chosen for the night at the theatre – and to the disparate collection of clothes that had replaced them, grabbed from hangers and drawers and hastily thrown together into a suitcase.

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‘It seems like a lifetime ago,’ I reply, pouring coffee into porcelain mugs and passing one to Richard.

Memories crowd my mind: of frantic telephone calls to Mark’s home in Derbyshire; his office; Directory Enquiries for every pub I know him to frequent; and of the mounting sense of frustration as the minutes became half hours, and the half hours, hours. Time appeared to slow down that morning, yet simultaneously to speed up. It felt as if it were passing me by, sluicing through an hourglass like water instead of sand; slippery, eluding my grasp, escaping my urge to be gone from here, to be on the move, to be where Katya was.

I think of the friends who, by intuition or underground wireless, called round, wrapped me in their arms, and wept with, and for, me. I think of the salad lunch, prepared by loving hands, then left uneaten on the plate, until someone – I don’t know who – took it and scraped it into the bin. I think of the afternoon sun that hung in the sky when – eventually – we made our mad dash by car, Richard and I, to be there *in time*.

Before we left, in the midst of the dreamlike sequences of the day, I insisted on ringing the police, to hear, first hand, what Rosie had already conveyed to me. To ask to see, for myself, the body that Rosie said was now at peace. I encountered confusion. The force of it permeated the protective shell of numbness that had built itself around me. The police weren’t expecting there to be a caring family, a loving mother, I thought! It came as a shock to them when I asked to see Katya.

My suspicions were confirmed: the body, I was told, had already been sent to the Mortuary; a Post Mortem was imminent. The

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inference was like a body blow. I grasped the telephone receiver as if it were a weapon of defence. A rising sense of panic threatened to engulf me.

‘I want to see her,’ I cried.

I was asked to hold. Voices whispered, indiscernibly, down the line. I was given the number of the mortuary, and of the undertaker. I rang the former. Tinny pop-music reverberated in my ear.

‘It’s about that stiff that came in earlier this morning,’ a voice shouted above the cacophony.

I rang off; dialled the undertaker.

‘I want to see her,’ I repeated. ‘Before they do anything.’

The unctuous tones of the undertaker sought to reassure me: *Mrs Lombard would know no difference when he had dressed her daughter and laid her out*, he said. *Katya would look merely as if she were sleeping.*

‘I want to see her as she is,’ I persevered. ‘Please ask the Mortuary to hold the Post Mortem until I get there.’

My persistence surprised Richard; I could see it in his eyes. Out of character it might be, but it was crucial to me to convey to those concerned the magnitude of my need.

I succeeded! Katya’s body was returned to the undertaker and, following the mad dash down to Rosie’s, Richard and I were able to see her the following morning. We shuffled into the Chapel of Rest in Compass Quay and stood, holding hands, while sickly music played over the intercom. Katya’s face and fingers were bloated in death, denying the pert, petite prettiness that was hers in life. Her dark hair,

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once thick and glossy, had been combed smooth and flat. Dull and lifeless.

The undertaker, before he withdrew, intimated that it would be perfectly permissible for me to touch my daughter, to kiss her, if I felt so inclined. I did not. I felt not the slightest inclination to do so. I knew, with absolute certainty, that the daughter I had known and loved was no longer present in this travesty of a body. This was, quite literally, simply a bag of flesh and bones. Katya – the real spirit and essence of Katya – had departed.

I came out of the shadowy Chapel of Rest into the sunshine of the undertaker's office and told him calmly but emphatically: *That's not my daughter in there!*

I didn't intend to create consternation. Nor did I immediately see Mark and Sylvia who, within earshot, were awaiting their turn to view the body. Only the stunned silence that greeted my words and the ensuing gabble of dismay from the undertaker conveyed to me the false impression I had given. *He thinks he has the wrong body*, I thought. Then the greasy pallor of Mark's face swam into view.

'I THINK MARK had been drinking heavily before he went to the Chapel of Rest,' I say now, in response to Richard's observation. 'He doesn't seem to be able to hold his drink as well as he used to.'

I feel no condemnation. How can I? A man who requires several pints of mind-blurring medication in order to face life is bound to require several more to face death.

'I'll make myself scarce after breakfast,' says Richard. 'So you can speak to him alone.'

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Grateful for his understanding, I drop a kiss on his forehead and sit down at the table, opposite him.

It is three days since the arrival of the Pathology Report, and almost a fortnight since Katya's death. Saturday again tomorrow. A second week's anniversary! My heart lurches: that sickening, plummeting sensation that is becoming a regular occurrence – as if I've forgotten and have to be reminded! As if I am to be newly confronted with the unthinkable! But I haven't forgotten. And nothing is unthinkable. Thoughts teem and tumble through my frenzied mind with the random patterns of bacteria in a lab dish on a TV medical drama; or the commotion and confusion of a swarm of fruit flies.

Forgetfulness would be a welcome alternative, I sometimes think, oblivion a coveted state of mind. But how can it be, when every moment of every day, layered over, above, and within the normal experiences of everyday life, I encounter familiar, once taken-for-granted, evidence of Katya's vitality? A designed-to-shock snapshot she sent three, four years ago, of her grinning – a tiny figure – astride a huge motorbike; some expensive trinket given to me as a Christmas present long ago, purchased (if at all?) with money acquired who knew where; a tiny pair of potpourri-filled satin slippers to announce the pregnancy that led to Zara's birth fifteen months ago. Like film in a camera that has not been wound on, image upon image of transparencies deposit themselves in my mind, interspersed with the ordinary events of the day.

I sip the coffee I've poured, cupping the porcelain mug in both hands to warm them, then set it down and help myself to toast and marmalade.

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A thin, early morning sun floods the dining room with a pale, oblique, light that does no favours to the faded furnishings. Richard is oblivious to such things – except, I reflect, in so far as they impinge upon his perception of the lifestyle I once enjoyed with Mark, and the sense of inadequacy that this evokes in his own ability to provide. It irks me that in nine years of marriage to Richard, I’ve never quite succeeded in eradicating this misconception. Nor in convincing him that although aesthetics are important to me, it is more a matter of ambience than any need to follow fashion.

The telephone rings. Richard turns in his seat towards the dresser, picks up the receiver, and says a few words that fail to penetrate my absorption with the past. He taps my shoulder.

‘I’ll put her on,’ he says. And in one fluid movement, he passes over the receiver, retrieves his coffee, and indicates that he’ll take it upstairs to the study.

‘Mark,’ he mouths as he strides towards the dining room door and out into the hall.

‘WELL, DID YOU get it?’

There’s no preliminary, no small-talk to lead into conversation with Mark! As always, I have to stifle my frustration; to do otherwise only provokes dissension.

Rising from the breakfast table, I link the flex through my fingers, take a step to the window to steady my emotions. The dining room faces south, away from the canal, towards the unseen bow of the Thames. Below me is the empty expanse of the adjoining building plot, razed to the ground decades earlier and left that way because of

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some ownership dispute or other. But, as I often say to Richard, someone else's loss is our gain. To the left, way, way in the distance, across the low-level sky-line of older buildings, a glimpse of the lower reaches of the river and the unmistakable monolith of Canary Wharf are clearly visible.

I draw air deep into my lungs to still the nervous pounding of my heart, a physical manifestation of the inner turmoil that seems, always, to accompany any encounter with Mark.

'Yes,' I reply.

'And?'

Mark's voice is brusque.

'Thanks for sending it,' I say, in an attempt to mollify him.

'Is that all?' he demands.

'I – I'm sorry, Mark?'

'Have you read it?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'And,' I respond, slowly, clarification firing my voice as I go on, 'I'm not having it.'

Mark swears. 'Why do you have to be so ruddy aggressive all the time?'

'That's rich!' My fists clench.

I wince, annoyed with myself; flex my fingers in an attempt to dissipate my defensiveness.

'Have you read it?' I ask, more patiently. 'Bottom of page one. Second line. *A known drug addict*, it says.'

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My voice falters and my eyes sting with unshed tears. ‘She wasn’t, Mark! They’ll write her off at the Inquest as just that: a junkie. An open and shut case. Not worth the time or money –’ My tears are falling freely now, and a sob catches in my throat.

‘Don’t, Luney. Don’t cry.’

The old intimacy takes me by surprise. Mark’s private nickname for me: Luney, pronounced loony, a silly malapropism derived from his interpretation of the poem *au clair de la lune* (Oh Claire de la loony-bin!) that appeals as much to his embarrassment in showing affection as to his penchant for derogatory humour. He hasn’t called me that for years.

I draw myself up; hold myself stiff so as to withstand the debilitating effects of the breach in my emotions.

‘I don’t know about you,’ I say, my tone of voice and choice of words deliberately formal and distancing, ‘but I can’t let that be the last word on Katya’s life. I have to do whatever I can to refute that allegation. To erase the slur on her memory.’

At the other end of the line, Mark clears his throat.

‘Are you sure – she wasn’t – using drugs?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘Even though it says –’

‘Whatever it says. It’s wrong. Categorically!’

‘Then I agree. It can’t be allowed to stand. Clearing her name is the only thing – the last thing we can do to help her.’

Rigid behind my shell of self-preservation, I lean my forehead against the window pane. Down below, on the derelict building site, a stray Canada Goose – one of many that populate the canal – leads her

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family of fluffy goslings towards the chain-mesh perimeter fence. She picks her way carefully across the uneven ground, waddling extravagantly from side to side, head held high, seemingly oblivious to the plight of her offspring who, downy and, therefore, flightless, half-flutter and stumble in their comical attempt to keep up.

Involuntarily, I draw a sharp intake of breath. From behind an abandoned supermarket trolley, a cat has appeared. It lies close to the ground, stealthy, steely-eyed in its observation of the little entourage. The race is on! Ambush seems certain. The perimeter fence lies only a few feet ahead of the avian procession, but progress is slow. The cat has the advantage of speed; the goose of strength and ferocity should they engage.

‘We could do it together –’ says Mark ‘– if that’s alright with you?’

His voice breaks, and my defensiveness with it. Down below, the goslings slip under the fence and the cat slinks away, disappointed.

I turn from the window. I feel, momentarily, a hint of hope. Perhaps Mark and I could work it through? Together! Perhaps, belatedly, we can behave as parents? Other thoughts crowd in: the years of futility, during which the children and I squandered our lives waiting on Mark while he indulged his fantasy of being the *life and soul* of the pub.

‘Daddy will be home soon, and *then* we’ll go to the park,’ I’d pledge. Or, ‘I know Daddy promised he’d take you to the pictures to see *Bambi* this Saturday, but he’s going to be away on business. Next week, perhaps . . .’

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The darkness of evening would close in before Daddy's arrival home deferred the trip to the park, and *Bambi* would be long gone from the local cinema before the latest series of business jaunts came to an end.

How reliable is Mark's word now, I wonder? Has Katya's death changed him in ways that her life – our marriage and divorce – have failed to do? There is no more guarantee, I imagine, than there has ever been. But whatever Mark chooses to do, I realise that this telephone conversation with him has brought clarity to my own thinking. For the first time since Katya's death and Post Mortem, the path ahead is clear. I shall have to pay a second visit to Molvelly Abbey and Compass Quay to talk first hand with those who knew and befriended Katya. That, I feel sure, offers the only chance of learning who and what she met with in the days leading up to her death.

The sense of self-determination this insight imparts fills me with hope.

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