

# Seven Days, Seven Stories

Gabriel Bergmoser

## **Contents**

- 3 – The Girl and the Grey
- 7 – Last Call
- 11 – Fanboy Tears
- 18 – Three Dollars
- 22 – Grandpa’s Attic
- 27 – Ghosts in the Snow
- 31 – The Crime Writer

# The Girl and the Grey

They call it the grind, but that doesn't seem the right word for it. Grind sounds harsh, painful, wearing. And maybe in some ways this is all of those things, but in the moment it doesn't feel that way. Just like you're in a strange, washed out purgatory where passion and ambition don't exist anymore. The grey, maybe.

It's hard to pinpoint when you fell into this pattern. You move into the wrong house with the wrong friends, who let the dishes pile up and chain smoke until every room stinks and you down bottles of wine to try and make it all feel fun and wild and free the way it used to, but it never does. All it leaves you with is a sticky hangover when you haul yourself up in the morning for the two-hour commute to work.

Wrong job too, maybe, but you never really think about leaving it. The work can barely be called work; you sit in a shop and talk to customers when they come and otherwise play games on your computer. Better than running plates and dealing with drunk jerks in bars. Except in those jobs there was anger and laughter and things to vent about when you hit the pub afterwards. Here, there isn't even anyone to hit the pub with. You clock off at five, two hours later you're home and it's too late to do anything because you have to get up again so it's the wine and the cigarettes and the hangover.

You don't want to go to the party, but you make yourself. A year ago tiredness wouldn't have stopped you. A year isn't that much older. Maybe you want to prove that something elemental about your life hasn't changed, so you dress nicely, you do your hair and you go. It's awful, of course. You barely know anyone and they're all the kinds of wankers who look down on you for not knowing who Bukowski is; writers who've never written a word that wasn't an attempt to impress a lecturer. But you smile and bear it and carefully stick to your beer budget until you find yourself sitting at a table with her.

You noticed her as soon as you walked in, of course. She's beautiful. Even thinking that makes you feel like an idiot fourteen-year-old, but feeling that way is worth it for this girl. And feeling like an idiot fourteen-year-old is, realistically, more than you've felt for a while.

You never assume she'll talk to you. But she does. And somehow it's easy. You laugh at her jokes and you throw your own back. She smiles and oh man, what a smile. Big and goofy and the brightest thing you've seen in months.

Still, you don't assume. Not even when you go back to a different party with her. Not even when you sit together on a couch in the corner and the conversation goes deep and dark.

You know you're too drunk. You know your pattern; ruin a nice thing by embarrassing yourself. You can't do that again. So you tell her you have to go. She asks you to stay and you want to more than anything, but that's the reason you have to go.

She walks you out. She hugs you.

Fuck embarrassment. You kiss her.

She kisses you back and it's fierce and hungry and it's all you can do not to undress her right there in the stairwell.

And maybe you can't quite help yourself and maybe she goes along with it and maybe you walk home with your arms in the air and a laugh that must make people think there's a crazy man wandering the streets.

Maybe. It's hard to say.

You're nervous to see her again. How can you not be? When alcohol's involved the moments you see as good have a tendency to look a little less flattering from the other side. Still, you turn up with a quiet promise to not drink too much this time, and for a little while it works. You talk to her about boring uni and your bad job, about stalled dreams and all the things you're supposed to share to let someone get to know you. She smiles and nods and after a couple of hours she's not smiling or nodding anymore and she asks you without rudeness or aggression if you've ever noticed how negative you are.

Man, if that isn't a bucket of cold water poured over your head.

You comb back through the conversation and holy shit she's right. Then she asks you if you ever talk about anything that doesn't involve yourself.

You'd be less embarrassed if you were slurring and vomiting. Your eyes go to the exit. You think of something to say, an excuse. It's late. You're sorry. This girl should not be here with you.

But then something flickers to life, some last little vestige of the teenager you were, the kid who refused to see an opportunity as lost until it had vanished into the night with you still chasing it. It feels good to be that kid again.

You know what you're doing. She knows what you're doing. It doesn't matter. You ask her about herself. You listen. But you don't feign interest, and maybe that's what gets you over the line. You challenge her when she says stupid things. You dig deeper when she tries to brush over something. And slowly that smile from the other night reappears and some crackling electricity has slipped into the conversation, something that sends you hand in hand to a cab back to yours.

Sometimes you have sex. Other times you don't. It's hard to say why. You strip to your underwear and rub against each other and bite and taste and kiss and maybe it's better than any sex you've ever had. Long summer nights, sweaty and not able to sleep but not wanting to. You miss work some days. Fuck it.

It's not always perfect. She likes to criticise. She tells you what to wear, what to say, how to have sex. It is, you reflect after a few weeks, just a little rich that she accused you of self-absorption, given that almost every sentence out of her mouth starts with 'I'.

Some nights you just don't want to see her. She gets angry when that happens. One time she turns up on your doorstep at 3am and shows you all the texts she's received from different guys that night, all of whom want her so much. Why can't you want her like that? You do, of course, but you won't debase yourself for her. That, you suspect, is why she likes you, even if she doesn't know it. Because you bite back.

But the arguments slip away and you fall into bed again and the laughter returns. After that, none of the bullshit really matters.

Some of your friends don't like her. You ignore them.

What you can't ignore is the timer. That little fact she mentioned the night you met, the fact you didn't register because you were too drunk or too disbelieving that this could go somewhere. Or both. The trip to Rome that she's taking for two months, right up until uni starts again. You've known this was going to happen all along, but you've never spoken about it. Or more to the point, you've never spoken about what it will mean for you.

But she starts bringing it up. Again and again. Not as it pertains to you, but as it pertains to her. How excited she is. The things she can't wait to see, the gap-year friends she can't wait to catch up with. You have the same token reaction every time. Smile, nod, say either 'sounds great' or 'should be fun' or something new depending on how recently you said the other ones.

Maybe she's baiting you though. Maybe she wants you to ask her where she stands.

You don't.

The night before she leaves arrives fast. You have dinner together. You laugh and joke. Then it's time for her to go. You stand on the street, kissing for over an hour. You both have tears in your eyes. Finally she asks; what happens now?

You will never be able to justify what you say next. You look at her and you say 'let's see when you get back.'

Later, you'll insist you didn't mean it, after you've seen the photos of her and the Italian boy. Later you'll claim you loved her all along and she should have known. You'll make it out as if she misunderstood you when she didn't. You just misunderstood yourself.

It's not bad for long. You probably knew it wasn't going to last. You're hurt, sure, and sad that it's over, but before too long the colour returns and you're out meeting new people and doing different things and hanging out with friends. Doing all the things you weren't before her.

It will take years for you to tell her that. Because whatever happened between you, whatever fell apart and whatever ugly things were said, she gave you more than almost anyone ever has. She brought you back to life. She turned grey into colour.

One day you'll say to her: even if it was short, if that wasn't love, you don't know what is.

Or maybe you won't.

# Last Call

They disconnected Nick's life support at 2:57pm. Jason wasn't there. He'd spent an hour by Nick's bed the day before, sneaking sips from the Johnnie and Cola he'd smuggled in and trying to talk to him as if they were back having a sesh at Aiden's place. But it felt too weird and so he'd left and figured he'd come back in a couple of days' time.

Nick's sister didn't even message him. He saw her post on Facebook around the same time as everyone else, a big wall of words followed by a bunch of photos of Nick smiling and one of her hand in his, positioned to hide the IV. Jason had stared at it and wondered if Nick was already dead when she'd taken it. How long she'd tried to get the angle just right.

He finished work without a word. He laughed when Kev made a crack about what they could do to stop the sheila the house was for complaining about how long the job was taking. He told them he might see them down the pub later, then left. He shoved his hand in his pockets, trying to find his darts. He tried to light one. His hands were trembling. He dropped it, veered to the side, crouched behind a hedge and let himself shake, eyes tight against the tears. He crouched there until his breath steadied. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, picked up the dirty cigarette, lit it and kept walking.

He didn't realise he'd been heading for the hospital until he was standing across from it. Took him until then to realise how fucking pointless it was. They would have taken Nick away by now. He found a bench under a tree, a bench they'd used to sit on together and scull tinnies they'd hide if the cops passed. Sometimes, during the day, watching the oldies hobbling in and out, they'd laughed at the sorry cunts. They'd been shit kids. He knew that now. But that was what happened, right? You got older, got your head on straight, and all that dumb bullshit became the stuff your mates pulled out to embarrass you at your wedding.

That thought almost made the tears come back. He covered his eyes until he was okay again. Nick had gotten his twenty-first – and a fucking rager it'd been too. But Jason would never stand up at his best mate's wedding and tell those stories. He hadn't realised until now how much he'd been looking forward to that.

They'd been kids together; pissing off the teachers, borrowing Jason's dad's boat to hit the lake, sneaking darts behind the school. But beyond that, they'd grown into men. Gotten jobs, met girls, finally got their heads on straight.

Or so he'd thought.

He wondered if he should call Nick's sister. But no, fuck her. She hadn't done that for him. Nobody had, and that left him not wanting to talk to anyone. He wanted to hit something. He wanted to drink until he forgot or remembered or both. He didn't know. So he just sat there until the sky started to darken and he figured he might as well head to the pub.

He didn't go for the usual. The boys from work would be there and he didn't want to talk to them tonight. Didn't want to talk to anyone, really. So he went to the other pub across the road, the one owned by that big shot from the city with all the fancy beers on tap where the wankers went to drink. He hated that fucking pub, but at least he'd be left alone.

He and Nick had been kicked out of this pub. So many fucking times, back in the day when they'd thought this was the cool place to be, when it seemed a better option than doing their drinking where the old man did. But this was one of those places where saying fuck too loud had them warning you and a cheeky spew in the toilets had you out the door before you had time to wash your mouth. The first time he had gone back to the other joint the old man had laughed at him. *Have fun with the queens and the big shots, did you son?* Say this for the old man, the teasing only lasted a night. After that everyone settled into the new way of things. He and Nick knew their place, and that was alright.

But maybe it hadn't been. Not for Nick. Every time they'd caught up it was laughs and dumb yarns and trying to get with the same girls they'd been trying to get with since school. Sometimes they'd talk about the bigger shit, but it was never bad. A mate let you down, a girl did a runner and left you feeling like balls; never more than that. They'd have a vent, have a drink, and that was it. Life went on. Until it didn't.

He drank. Half his beer already gone. He smashed the rest back and got another. He went back to the table and closed his eyes.

Why hadn't Nick said anything? He'd have listened, if he'd known. Tried to help. All he ever saw was the same dopey, happy, fun loving cunt he'd always known. That top bloke who everyone liked and never had a bad word to say about anyone. Fucking hell, he knew he wasn't great with the sensitive shit; who was? But he would have tried.

The tears were back. Last thing he needed, being caught crying in this place. He lowered his head over his beer and tried to think about anything else. When he couldn't, he listened to the conversation around him.

'Look I don't want to say he had it coming, but he had it coming, right?'

He knew that voice. He glanced over at the mirror behind the bar, trying to see the face without turning fully.

Liam Pullman. Fucking hell. It took him a moment to recognise the prick. He was sitting on the table behind, back to Jason, talking to... was that Claire Harper? What the fuck was she doing back in town? He looked at his beer again. Maybe he should leave before he was noticed.

‘Can’t say I’d go that far, but I don’t see anyone mourning him,’ Claire said. ‘Remember the stuff him and his little bastard mates used to call you?’

‘I try not to. The reason I had to move fucking schools. I never got it. Never got why anybody could be so awful.’

‘I dunno, Liam. Some kids are just bad. Nick Hanson was one of them. He just happened to be friends with another five of them.’

Pullman snorted. ‘Friends. Yeah. I’m sure whatever was going on there fit that definition.’

Jason’s hand was cold. He hadn’t realised how tightly he was holding the beer. He raised it and drank.

‘Do you know what happened?’ Claire asked.

‘Killed himself, apparently. Whatever he did, I hope it was painful.’

‘Liam!’

‘Sorry, but like... Claire, the way those guys treated me. Six on one. Tough guys, huh? Obviously not tough enough.’

Jason tried to drink. He couldn’t. He put the glass down. He didn’t trust himself to stand. Something hot and cold was racing through him. His fists clenched. He closed his eyes tight.

‘What was he doing by the end?’ Pullman said. ‘A plumber or something? Getting pissed with his mates at the local dive every night? Probably had about four kids to four different mothers. Whatever happened, he’s no loss to the world.’

Jason stood. Turned.

Pullman looked at him. His mouth opened. Then closed. If there was fear in his eyes, it was gone fast. He just held Jason’s gaze.

There was no sound. Maybe the music was still playing, but Jason didn’t hear it. Maybe somebody was talking to him. Maybe he was saying something himself.

Pullman didn’t look away or speak.

Jason walked past him to the door.

Outside, he took several long, deep breaths. The tears were coming, but he didn’t try to stop them. He stood there as the cool wind picked up and he looked into a night without stars and thought about his friend.

He took a few steps towards the other pub, where his mates would be, where even now somebody would be raising a toast to Nick.

He stopped.

He put his hands in his pockets, turned and walked home.

## Fanboy Tears

His finger hovered above the record button. He looked into his computer's webcam and adjusted the mic. Ran a hand through his hair one last time, glanced around at the posters that covered his wall, then hit the button.

'What's up fellow truth warriors?' He said. 'It's Owen here, coming to you with another serve of the truth that Westland films *don't* want you to hear. It's been a big week in *Blade of Light* news; the new animated show debuted to a massive *thud* – don't believe me? Check out how many people on Twitter are raving about the ratings. Oh, none? Yeah, what does that tell you? But more important than that is the rumour coming out of the Westland camp that Matt Cusak will *not* be returning for the next film in the series. Truth warriors, if this is accurate it is *huge*. It means that we've been heard. It means the company is starting to see that this social justice warrior, identity politics obsessed narrative that Westland has been trying to shove down our throats since *Blade of Light Part V* will not stand. Because when you reject the fans, they reject your product.'

He was on a roll now. He waved his hands, he raised his voice, he let the righteous anger flow. He thanked his viewers, told them to have a great day, and hit stop. *11:42*. Decent length. He skimmed through the footage quickly. All looked good. He prided himself on not editing the videos too much. His viewers didn't want some overly polished cuck, they wanted someone who spoke from the gut, someone like them, someone *real*. He hit upload.

He made himself a protein shake in the kitchen then headed to his workout room. He pulled off his shirt and checked himself out in the mirror. Shit he was looking good. He no longer needed to wear tighter T-shirts to make himself look buff; he *was* fucking buff.

He downed the shake then got to work lifting. Between sets he checked his watch. After twenty-five minutes, he went back to the computer. A thousand views already. He exhaled. The last couple had been slow to reach that stage. He would never say that he was worried, but he did have to wonder if their movement was slipping a bit. It had been a year since *Blade of Light Part Five* and for true fans the anger was as fresh as the day they'd walked into the cinema and seen their childhoods ruined, but maybe some of his followers didn't care as much. Maybe some of them had been taken in by the Westland narrative. He hoped not. He hoped they were smart enough to see through the feminist agenda of populating the new films with absurdly overpowered female characters while making the men who'd been their heroes growing up bumbling, pathetic idiots. Well, if people were stupid enough to fall for it, that was on them.

He would keep telling the truth, and there would always be people out there who wanted to hear it.

Satisfied at the high view count, he decided to head down to the shops and get himself something as a treat. He hadn't had a chance to grab the new *Warlord* game yet; some of his commenters had told him it was full of stupid 'woke' politics, but he guessed he could find out if that was true. Worst case scenario, he could do a video on it. Might be a nice change of pace to talk about something that wasn't *Blade of Light*.

He kept his workout gear on as he headed down to the shops. He whistled as he went, knowing girls were checking him out. He didn't look back. Didn't need to. He stopped at the supermarket first and wandered down the aisles. He needed more protein powder, for a start. Maybe he'd cook himself a steak tonight. He figured he deserved it.

'Owen?'

He closed his eyes. This had happened before; somebody recognised him from YouTube, tried to talk to him, and he had to be polite but firm. But then, this was a female voice and *that* had never happened before. He turned.

And froze.

Natalie Mulholland hadn't changed. The radiant smile, the long blonde hair, the wide, innocent eyes. He tried to calculate how long it had been; not since the end of high school, he guessed. She had to be pushing thirty but still looked nineteen.

'Nat,' he managed.

She threw her arms around him. For a moment he wasn't sure what to do. He hugged her back. His arms felt heavy and slow.

'Oh my god, I can't believe it's you!' She stepped back, taking him in. 'Owen, you look *amazing*. I almost didn't recognise you.'

He wondered if telling her she looked the same would be insulting. Surely not. Nat had always been beautiful, whereas the last time she'd seen him he'd been fat and acne ridden, tripping over his gown as he took the stage at graduation.

'What are you up to?' he asked.

'I work up the road,' she said. 'At *Jubilance*. You know, the club?'

'Are you a manager?'

She laughed. 'Bartender, but thanks. What about you?'

'I'm...'

He tried to think of how best to phrase it. Fuck it. He had nothing to hide and everything to be proud of. 'I actually, kind of...' He laughed and ran a hand through his hair. 'Oh man, it sounds so weird saying it out loud.'

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Okay, now you can’t *not* tell me.’

‘I actually make a living as a YouTuber.’

She blinked. ‘Wait, seriously? Don’t you have to get, like, thousands of views to make that viable?’

‘Hundreds of thousands, yeah.’ He didn’t need to try to look sheepish, he automatically did. ‘Yeah it was kind of a happy accident. I was doing call centre work, then about a year ago started this up and, well, yeah. Somehow found an audience.’

‘That’s amazing Owen! What kind of stuff do you do?’

‘Mainly like, pop culture review stuff,’ he said. ‘I know, super nerdy, but...’

‘Super *cool*,’ she said. ‘People would kill for that job! So what, you just talk about the stuff you like, upload it and let the cash roll in?’

He nodded.

Nat shook her head. He could see the newfound respect in her eyes. He hadn’t expected that, but he liked it a lot.

‘Amazing,’ she said. ‘Back when we were kids you always loved talking about that stuff; I remember you coming over to tell me all about the new *Blade of Light* and making me beg my parents to let me see it with you.’ She laughed. ‘I can’t believe you found a way to make a living off your passions. That’s the dream, right?’

He didn’t know what to say so he just smiled in what he hoped was an enigmatic, confident way.

‘Look.’ Nat glanced at her phone. ‘I’d better run; I’m shopping for a party I’m having tonight, but like... well, did you want to come along? I had no idea you lived in the area, otherwise I would have had you round ages ago.’

‘I’d...’ *Why was he hesitating?* ‘I’d love to come. What time?’

Later that evening, he sat in front of his computer, watching the view count. 7643. He glanced at the time. It had been up for just on six hours. The count was usually higher by this point. He ground his teeth, thinking. What if somebody at the party decided to look him up and saw that was all his latest video had?

Well it was a higher number than any of them would ever get. If they asked, he’d point them towards one of the videos that had cracked 200,000. He controlled his narrative, nobody else.

He checked his reflection in the bathroom. He’d talked himself down from wearing a suit. This was just a casual house party. Still, didn’t mean he couldn’t look good. He chose a nice shirt, designer jeans and, after considering the bottle of nice wine he’d been saving on his top shelf, chose the six pack of craft beer in his fridge. He figured that was the safest bet; it was

hard to work your way down from being overdressed and overprepared, but the opposite could be spun to his advantage, making him seem like a devil-may-care internet celebrity. Which, he reminded himself, he was.

He couldn't believe how close Nat lived. It was almost like history was repeating itself; a couple of blocks separated them, as opposed to the couple of houses when they were kids, but a couple of blocks felt like a less insurmountable difference than the one that had sprung up between them in high school. He wondered, with a brief rush of unpleasant panic, how many people from school would be there tonight. It didn't matter, he decided. He'd seen the way Nat looked at him. He was more successful than any of them. Or at least, more people knew his name. That counted for something.

Nat greeted him at the door of her small, slightly rundown house. They hugged before she led him in to the living area, where twenty or so people were milling around. Owen cast an eye about the place; it wasn't huge. Her TV was old and kitchen cramped. He recognised Kai Martel and Cole Phillips from school; by the looks of it already a few beers in and discussing the recent game. He kept his attention on Nat.

'I'm so glad you came,' she was saying. 'I've been telling everybody about what you do now; it's so crazy! You remember Kai and Cole? Oscar's outside having a smoke I think, and Felicity is here too – guys, look who it is! Owen!'

Owen did his best to hide his discomfort as Kai and Cole walked over to shake his hand. He could feel how hard they were trying to make their handshakes firm. Owen didn't need to try. He grinned. 'Good to see you boys. How've you been?'

It was easy, after that. Far easier than he could have guessed. There was something to be said for the years that had passed; in their heads he would have always been that fat, nerdy dweeb. What he presented now was very different. What he did made him more interesting than any of them. And they *knew* it. They were soon joined by other faces vaguely remembered from years ago, and Owen found all eyes and questions were on him. *What did he do? How did he make money? How much money did he make? How was that even possible?* He laughed and joked, winked and drank and before long he was having a far better time than he could have guessed. He liked these people a lot more when they liked him. No, not liked him. *Admired* him.

He avoided the specifics of his channel. He didn't want anybody to see the slowing of viewers. He knew it wouldn't mean much, but let them look him up later, when the newer videos had had time to make up the difference a bit. Besides, he wasn't about to hijack a party by showing off his success.

The night got later, everyone got drunker, and the conversation relaxed. Owen was able to breathe a little as everyone started talking about the movies and shows they'd liked recently; a conversation he could be part of but one that wasn't centred on asking him hundreds of questions. Way better.

Then.

'Hey, did you guys see *Blade of Light Part V*?' Cole asked.

'Did anyone *not*?' Kai replied.

Owen sipped his drink.

'Shit that was a good movie,' Nat said. 'The best since the originals, I reckon.'

'It was okay,' Felicity said. 'I dunno. My boyfriend loves those movies. I honestly find them kind of boring.'

'If there's one thing *Part V* was, it wasn't boring,' Oscar said. 'Especially not after it came out. Man, did you see the salty fanboys online? *Too many women! Lord Aridius wouldn't do that!* Jesus Christ. These are grown adults.'

'Grown *men*, I assume,' Nat said.

'Technically,' Felicity replied. 'Angry little boys sounds a bit more accurate.'

Owen's beer was finished. He laughed along with the others then went to get another one. He lingered by the fridge a few seconds, took a sip, then re-joined the group, hoping the conversation had moved on. It hadn't.

'Point is, it broke the rules,' Cole was saying. 'You ask me, I'd rather something new than the same old crap again and again. But oh man, if that isn't a recipe for fanboy tears. These guys are so caught up in their childhoods that they still haven't left their parents' basement and take even the slightest change to the formula as a personal attack. Which hey, maybe it is. A reminder to *grow the fuck up*.'

Everyone laughed. Owen drank.

'What do you reckon, Owen?' Kai asked. 'I figure you covered *Blade of Light Part V* on your channel?'

'Yeah look...' Owen drank. 'I'd be lying if I said I was the biggest fan, but also like, it came out a year ago. There's other stuff to talk about, right?'

'But people are still talking about *this*,' Cole said. 'Which is crazy, right? Like, I think it's cool that a dumb blockbuster can create genuine debate, but this goes a bit beyond that. The obsession some people have with this film is pathological.'

Owen asked where the bathroom was. Nat pointed him down the hall. He left his beer on the kitchen bench then followed her directions. He closed the door behind him and leaned

against the sink. Several seconds passed. He took out his phone and checked his channel. The latest video had his 11,876. He exhaled. Good. That was good. He was on track.

He looked in the mirror. He was flushed. He turned on the cold tap and splashed his face a couple of times. He opened up the video again and checked the comments.

*“Blade of Light Part V ruined the franchise.”*

*“I can’t believe those SJW cucks are still defending it. IT WAS AN OBJECTIVELY BAD FILM.”*

*“Thanks for fighting the good fight, Owen. We’ll make people see the truth eventually!”*

He pocketed his phone. Looked at his reflection again. Then he turned, opened the door, and walked back towards the group. They were still in conversation.

‘Anyway,’ Felicity was saying, ‘if he gets elected, I reckon—’

‘*Blade of Light Part V* was a fucking travesty,’ Owen said.

Everyone looked at him.

Kai frowned. ‘Sorry?’

‘It was,’ Owen said. ‘And if you can’t see it, you’re blind, okay? The identity politics agenda – who wanted that shit in a *Blade of Light* movie? Also, Matt Cusak *clearly* hated the franchise he was hired to take over, because anybody with even the most basic understanding of the world that Robert Stone created knows that what was put on screen was wrong. Just wrong. Why was Apolonia so powerful without any training? In what world would Lord Aridius’ ghost tell Hermia to give up? And what was with all the pre-school fucking humour?’

He had them. All eyes were on him. Everyone was listening. Even beyond the circle, partiers had stopped what they were doing. And he could feel it, feel that crackle of angry power he felt every time he made a video, every time he knew that thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands were hanging on his every word; cared what he thought, wanted to hear someone telling the truth and giving fuel to their outrage. His voice lifted and his fury rose. He gestured. He could see the spittle flying but it didn’t matter. It just meant he cared, and that’s what these idiots needed to know – if you cared about something, you didn’t let some idiot with an agenda tank it. You got up and you fought and you let everyone know even if they didn’t want to hear, you spoke the truth and you changed their minds and you *showed* them why this was important. Even the music had receded. Nobody else was talking now. It was just him and his audience.

‘So if anybody really, genuinely thinks it was good, then go on; tell me why. You’re wrong, but I’ll listen. Go on.’

He looked around the room. Not a word. Not a movement. He had them.

He exhaled.

Somebody near the back of the room snorted with laughter.

Conversation spread again. Shaking their heads, giggling, people turned to each other. The music seemed to pick up.

The circle of old schoolmates were still looking at him. His eyes found Nat's. Was that pity or embarrassment?

'Owen, dude,' Cole said. 'It's just a movie, yeah?' He slapped Owen on the arm. Kai laughed and turned back to Felicity, whose eyebrows were raised. Oscar just stared at him.

Owen looked at Nat again. He went to say something, but his mouth had gone dry.

It didn't matter. Her attention was back on the others.

He stood there for several seconds. He glanced at his beer, wondering if he should just drink and join in whatever they were talking about now.

He thrust his hands in his pockets and went for the door. He hoped Nat would chase after him. She didn't.

He walked home with his head down. There was a cool breeze and nobody out on the streets. He remembered walking home from school alone all those times, feeling like he was the only person in the world. That nobody would listen and the ones who did laughed.

He got back home and sat down in front of his computer. He could see his faint reflection in the dark screen. He turned it on. The video app was already on the screen. He leaned back in his chair. He looked around at the posters. Took a deep breath.

He hit record.

## Three Dollars

Jackson stepped out of the shopping centre and sipped his coffee, as he did scanning the carpark. It was a hot day; probably too hot for coffee, but he needed a fix to keep him going. He checked his phone. He still had some time.

Hoisting his bag over his shoulder, he started to walk. The coffee was bitter and burnt. That was what he got for buying from some cheap bakery next to a Big W. There was a bin nearby. He made to head towards it, then he saw the woman.

She was clearly homeless; picking through cigarette butts ground out on the metal top of the bin. Her hair was straggly and dirty, her face made up of hard lines, and she muttered to herself as she went. Beside her was a shopping trolley full of bags and bundles of bedding. Another, empty trolley stood nearby.

She gave up on the cigarette butts and started moving her possessions from one trolley to the other. Jackson wondered what the difference was. He glanced down at his coffee. He could wait for the next bin. Probably not a great look, throwing out most of a coffee in front of a homeless person. He went to keep walking just as she picked up the dog from the trolley.

He was a tiny thing, brown; maybe a poodle cross. His fur was matted and straggly. After a bath he probably would have been fluffy. But his wide eyes and tentative licks of the woman's face made something inside Jackson twist. He stood there, watching as the woman whispered something to the dog then kissed him on top of the head. She closed her eyes and whispered something else.

Jackson glanced behind him, towards the shopping centre. Did the dog get fed enough? Almost certainly not. That thought made the twisting worse. He probably ate scraps. How much was dog food?

But maybe that was condescending. Maybe he would buy the food and come back to find the woman gone. He could ask her to stay, but maybe then the question would be why he was buying food for the dog and not her. That would be hard to justify.

The woman placed the dog on top of the bedding in the new trolley, then continued moving stuff over.

Jackson took his wallet from his pocket and opened it. He had three one-dollar coins in there, and nothing else. He could get cash out, but it wasn't as though he was well off himself. Was three dollars considered rude? He had no idea.

The woman had moved everything to the second trolley. She glanced back at the bin. Jackson walked over to her. She looked up at him, wary.

‘I just...’ Jackson emptied the coins into his hand. ‘I just, I mean, I don’t know if this helps. I’m really sorry, it’s not much, but I figured... it’s all I’ve got on me. Sorry.’

He handed her the coins. She took them. She looked at the money then back at him.

Jackson did his best to smile. ‘He’s – is it a he? It’s a beautiful dog. I used to have one who looked just like him – her? Sorry.’

The woman said nothing.

‘Anyway, I just, I hope it helps.’

The woman smiled. ‘Thanks love.’

Jackson nodded, went to say something else, looked at the dog, who was gazing up at him from the trolley, then shoved his hands in his pockets and kept walking.

Three dollars. Jesus. What a pathetic effort. He could have afforded more, right? What could she buy with three dollars? That wasn’t going to cover dog food. Or her food. He glanced back. He stopped. He shook himself and kept walking.

It was something. She had smiled. She had appreciated it. How many people would just give her money without asking? That smile had been genuine. It wasn’t much, but it mattered to her. He walked a little taller.

Sitting on the train, heading into the city, he didn’t look at his phone. He watched the suburbs race by out the window and thought about the woman. A little act of kindness. Nothing earth shattering, but enough to matter. He was surprised by how warm it made him feel. Like something inside him had clicked into place and left him with this strange, certainly temporary, feeling of completion. He’d never given money to a homeless person before. He felt for them, sure, but he couldn’t go bankrupt in the interest of giving people money that he couldn’t be sure would be used responsibly. Helping your fellow man was a lovely thought, but at a certain point you had to ensure that you were helped too.

He arrived at the roof top bar with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. He’d turned the exchange over and over the whole train ride and had decided that he was proud of himself. In some small way he’d improved someone’s day, and that was a good thing. He replayed the woman’s smile as he sat with his friends around the table made of crates as they all smoked their rollies over the cut-in-half beer bottle that served as an ashtray.

The conversation was pretty typical. Allie was in the middle of doing a play and was fed up with the problematic dialogue and old-fashioned gender norms. Kyle had just started writing

for an arts blog – no pay, but great exposure. Jim was still just waiting tables, nodding along with what the rest of them said without ever contributing.

Jackson usually was the first to join in, to bemoan the reliance on the same old plays or question Kyle's decisions. But today he didn't feel like it. He sat back, sipped his cider, and when a lull in conversation came he took his chance.

'I'm really starting to notice how many homeless people there are around the city,' he said.

'It's so tragic,' Allie replied.

'I dunno,' Jim said. 'I kind of get a bit fed up with all the guilt tripping. Holding up the signs saying "God bless" or whatever while they're literally surrounded by syringes. Makes me wonder.'

'That is a fucking horrible thing to say,' Allie replied.

Jim shrugged. 'Is it? It's just what I see.'

'They're people who need help.'

'They're people who want drugs.'

'Not all of them though,' Jackson said.

'Yeah but how do you know?'

'Exactly,' Kyle interjected. 'You can't know. Either way.'

'So what, you just don't help?' Allie said.

'When was the last time you gave a homeless person money?' Jim asked Allie.

'I did,' Jackson said. 'Today.' He relayed the story, taking his time, faltering and trying to make himself sound uncertain. He didn't mention how much he'd given. 'Anyway,' he finished, 'it wasn't like, a big deal or anything but you could just tell it meant something to her. I dunno. I think a little kindness goes a long way.'

'How much did you give?' Kyle asked.

'Not much,' Jackson said. 'What I had.'

'Which was?'

He looked at his drink. 'Just twenty bucks.'

'Oh, I guess that's why I brought the last round then,' Jim said.

'That was really good of you.' Allie was smiling at him, and there was something new to her expression, something Jackson hadn't seen before; at least not aimed at him.

The conversation went on, but Jackson found himself talking to Allie more and more. They discussed the play in depth, the problems she was having with the director, the angry reaction he'd had when Allie had suggested changing some of the lines. She asked him more questions about the homeless woman. Jackson told her about how he'd held the dog and had a bit of a

chat to her, heard some of her story, how she'd ended up there. He explained how sad it had made him feel, how helpless; that a small gesture was still a small gesture. He wished he could do more. Allie hugged him. He'd done something, which was more than most.

It was getting late, Allie had an early start and Jim had a Tinder date to get to. Jackson didn't especially want to hang out with Kyle, so he made his own excuse and they all said their goodbyes. As they walked out, Allie asked him if he wanted to get together after rehearsal some time, help her come up with a new angle to try and convince the director to make some changes. They could meet at her place; she had some bottles of whiskey she wasn't using. Jackson smiled and told her he'd like that. They held each others' eyes for a second too long, then it was a goodbye hug and off they went in different directions. Jackson hung alone outside the door, watching after her. He was still smiling. He rolled a smoke, lit it and started to walk.

'Spare a dollar mate?' a man sitting outside the bank asked.

Jackson checked his wallet. No coins. He apologised and kept walking.

## Grandpa's Attic

Grandma and Grandpa had the most beautiful house I'd ever seen. When we were kids, we used to love the weekends when we'd be taken for the long drive out of the city and to the windy road that led through the hills, past towering and gently swaying trees, until one of us had to run out and get the gate so we could head through on to their property. My sister and I would always crane our necks to get the first look at the house; tall and covered in ivy that looked like it held the place together. It was painted bright and the garden around it was alive with flowers; it got messy sometimes, but that was okay. It made the whole place feel like something that had grown naturally out of the ground.

Grandma and Grandpa were like that too. Grandma always seemed frail, but there was a strength and warmth to her that overcame that. Her hands shook when she held her tea, but her hugs were warm and she always played cricket with us at Christmas. Grandma was never afraid of telling cheeky jokes; she had a laugh that boomed and shrieked and made all of us laugh too. Mum seemed embarrassed of her, sometimes, but Grandma always said that was just because Mum was born an adult and only got more serious as she grew up.

You're supposed to love everyone in your family equally, but I think I loved Grandpa the most. He didn't talk much; when Grandma would gossip and tell stories, he would sit back and just smile this secret little smile. Sometimes he'd wink at you in a way that made you feel like you were sharing some private joke, except you never knew what the joke was and you just hoped Grandpa hadn't figured that out.

Sometimes he'd go for these long walks. If we asked, he'd always let us come. He took us up the hill that overlooked the house. He showed us rocks and secret caves, showed us where the colourful birds nested and the little pond with the fish that shone and sparkled. At sunset we would watch the house from the top of the hill. It had this strange quality that made it seem bright and alive even on the darkest days, but at sunset it was like it belonged to a different planet, like all that pink and orange light was pouring from within. I liked to imagine that it was Grandma and Grandpa's souls, that at the end of the day there were a few minutes when you could see the light they shared, so bright the walls of the house could never really contain it. But night would fall and everything would go back to normal and we'd have to hurry to the house to not miss dinner.

Grandma told a lot of stories, and she sometimes repeated them. The one that came up again and again was how, when she was pregnant with Mum, there had been some complications.

The doctors weren't sure if she would live. They had to work hard to keep her and the baby alive, and for a stretch of time it looked like they would both die. Grandpa, who had never been to church in his life, never believed in God or picked up a bible, had prayed all night. Grandma said that the next morning, when the doctors handed her Mum and said it was a miracle, Grandpa had looked worse than she felt; pale and wrung out and pained.

Grandpa didn't smile when she told that story.

We could always go wherever we wanted in the house, but there was one rule. The attic remained out of bounds. Grandpa's eyes lost their twinkle when he told us that. It didn't matter what we did; we just couldn't go in the attic. It was dangerous, he said. There were spiders in the corners and nails where you least expected them. My sister had laughed and said she wasn't afraid of spiders. She tried to hug Grandpa, but he just looked at her and made her promise to never go in the attic.

Once I asked Mum why it was so important. She shrugged. She had no idea, but it had been the rule for as long as she remembered. When she was a kid she had tried once. Grandpa had yelled at her so loudly that she cried and tried to run away from home. She said it was like looking at a monster, like something in his eyes had gone out and in disappearing revealed something else she wished she hadn't known was there. I didn't believe her. That wasn't Grandpa.

But I made sure to never go in the attic.

Things changed as we got older. The trips to Grandma and Grandpa's came less frequently. I was focussed on school and then I was focussed on other things, on parties and kissing and fretting about who liked who. Some weekends Mum and Dad would go to see Grandma and Grandpa, but I would stay with friends. I don't think it meant I loved them less. I still went to see them whenever I could. I still went for long walks with Grandpa. I wasn't one of those angry teenagers who suddenly decided that everyone in their family was an idiot. At least I hope I wasn't.

I was seventeen when Grandma died. It was sudden and peaceful. I was at the library, studying for my final exams, when Mum called. I couldn't study after that. It was like my insides had turned into boiling jelly. I sat on the steps outside in the bright sun that felt so wrong and I cried until it was night, then I went home and cried some more.

At her funeral I sat next to Grandpa. I held his hand and glanced at him occasionally, hoping he was okay. He didn't cry. He didn't do anything. He just sat there, eyes blank, as if there was nothing to look at anymore.

Grandma's wake was held at the house. People I'd never met milled around, sniffing and smiling and for some reason it made me angry. They all talked about a woman I'd never known. They didn't mention the cheeky jokes or the whispered gossip. They talked about a loving, giving, generous person which sounded like a crayon outline of Grandma that could also be applied to a billion other people. If they couldn't celebrate the best things about Grandma, then why were they here? I said that to Grandpa. He didn't reply. He just kept shaking hands and looking at nothing.

Evening fell and everybody was still around. They were all drunk now; knocking back sherris and asking who was going to be next. It made me sick. The wake was all about them, not Grandma. And Grandpa just stood in the middle of it all listening and nodding and thanking and never once telling them to shut up.

I went and stood in the hall. I could still hear the voices so I headed further into the house. It took me a few minutes to realise I was standing under the trapdoor to the attic. I paused and listened. I could still hear the buzz of voices. I reached up and opened it. I was worried it would creak loudly, but the hinges were as silent as if they had been oiled daily. The extendable ladder slid down and touched the ground without even the slightest thud. I looked back towards the party. The voices still hummed. I climbed the ladder.

I don't know why. Maybe I was angry. Maybe I missed Grandma and thought that if I went up there I could find something of hers I hadn't known about; even just an old photo. Maybe I honestly thought that spiders were the only reason Grandpa didn't want us going up here, and the rules had changed now that I was older.

But the attic wasn't cluttered or dusty. It was clean and almost empty. I scanned the wooden floor but there were no nails. Everything was smooth. There were no windows but I could see just fine. I knew it was dark, but it didn't seem to matter.

There was only one thing to see up here. A single, plain box at the far end, about the size of a large book. It sat alone on the floor. It looked odd and out of place, all by itself up here. I walked over to it. I couldn't hear anything anymore. The silence seemed to go beyond just a lack of noise. It was as though noise had been replaced, but I didn't know what with. Or I couldn't name it.

I knelt in front of the box. I was scared to touch it. But I did. It was warm. I opened it.

I might have looked for a minute. I might have looked for an hour. But either way, when I closed the box, I knew I had to leave. I stood and turned.

Grandpa was behind me, standing just beside the ladder. His face remained blank. I braced for anger but it didn't come. He just looked at me.

I walked over to him. He didn't move. I went to climb down. He didn't stop me. He just stood there, looking at me without speaking. As if he didn't have the words for what he wanted to say. I understood that feeling.

I found Mum and told her I was sick. She glanced at her watch and agreed it was time to go. I didn't look back at the house as we drove away.

After that I made excuses every time Mum and Dad wanted to go see Grandpa. The moment school was done I moved in with some friends and made a point of always being busy when they called and suggested a visit. I wondered sometimes if Grandpa would contact me himself, but he never did. I wasn't surprised.

The years got faster after that. I lived life and ticked off the boxes. I made friends and lost them. I found jobs and moved on. I got married and we had a child. Forty came and we found a nice house of our own. Fifty came and I spoke at both my parents' funerals. Sixty came and we went on a long trip around the world, knowing we might not get another chance.

It was the day of my seventieth birthday that I thought about Grandpa again. I supposed that at some point Mum had called to tell me he'd passed away, but I couldn't remember it. That happened, these days. Important moments were so far out of reach that they might as well have never happened.

But I kept thinking about him.

I didn't make the decision to go back to the old house. I just slowly realised that I was going to. I got in the car and drove down the highway. I still knew the way, even though it had been a lifetime since the last time I'd followed it. Even though everything looked different now.

I wondered if the trees would all be gone now, ripped away for some kind of housing development scheme. I wondered if the hills and the ponds and secret caves were still there. Maybe the house still stood, home to new people. I doubted it.

As it turned out, the trees were there. But they weren't the same. They were gnarled and dead, twisting bone pale towards a washed out grey sky. They stretched for miles on either side of me. I kept driving.

The gate was open, but it was twisted and misshapen, like it had been driven over several times. Beyond it the grass was brown and dry. It was hard to tell if it was alive or not. It had grown over the road, but I still knew where to go.

The house stood where it had always been. It was the same, I suppose. I knew the contours and the design. But it was like being shown a black and white copy. You recognise the shape just as you recognise what it's not. The vines were thorny now, and looked to be pulling the

house into the ground. The paint had peeled away and grey wood was all that was left. The garden was a tangle of dead things.

I got out of my car. The wind picked up. I glanced at the sky. It hadn't looked so dark before.

I looked back to the house. Somebody sat on the front porch. I walked a little closer.

Grandpa looked the same. He just sat on the chair, eyes staring straight ahead, as if at nothing. I walked a little closer. I wanted to leave, but I didn't.

I said his name. The wind rose. He looked at me.

## Ghosts in the Snow

‘Tell them about the race,’ Sarah said, laughing. She grabbed Pete’s wrist. ‘You’ve got to hear this. Seriously, it’s insane.’

‘Apparently I’ve got to hear it because it’s seriously insane,’ Pete said.

I shook my head. ‘It’s not seriously insane so much as seriously embarrassing. Come on, let’s skip it. We should get back out there anyway.’

The pizza place was starting to empty as people in their colourful ski jackets stomped their way out to get a few more runs in before the end of the day. That was never a good sign; it meant you’d stayed a little too long. I checked my watch; sure enough, we’d been here over two hours, which didn’t leave much more than that for skiing.

‘We’re here all day tomorrow as well,’ Ella said, sipping her beer with a devious grin. ‘I’m not letting Nelson off the hook.’

I groaned. ‘Fine, fine.’

They all leaned forward, equal expressions of wicked anticipation on their faces.

‘I was fourteen,’ I said. ‘My parents were running a lodge up here, which meant I pretty much lived on the mountain every weekend.’

‘That sounds awesome,’ Pete said.

I nodded. ‘Very. I mean, thinking about it now I think my parents might have been irresponsible bordering on negligent, but man the freedom I got...’ I shook my head. ‘Well, anyway, it might have gone to my head a bit. See, we had all these regular customers, and a lot of them had kids. Some of those kids were my age and some of them were girls.’

‘Nelson, as it turns out, was quite the player before he met me,’ Sarah said.

I gave her the finger. ‘Try the exact opposite. It was the first time I’d ever had a girl so much as look at me and, well...’ I winced. ‘There were two girls, who came up on alternating weekends from each other. And being a fourteen year old boy-’

‘Oh my god,’ Ella said. ‘They both fell madly in love with you and you didn’t tell either about the other until it all exploded in spectacular fashion.’

‘Wait for it,’ Sarah said.

‘They both fell madly in love with me and I didn’t tell either about the other until it all exploded in spectacular fashion,’ I said. ‘And by spectacular fashion, I mean they both came up on the same weekend for a ski race I was doing. They found out about each other, I was trying to get out of dodge, so I borrowed one of the staff members’ ski gear and-’

‘Snuck into the *adult* division,’ Sarah said. ‘And then came third. And then got called out by one of the girls in front of everyone when he was on the podium.’

Laughs and gasps from Ella and Pete. I made a face that hopefully communicated something along the lines of ‘*mea culpa*’ then finished my beer.

‘Anyway,’ I said. ‘Big humiliation, worst moment of my teenage life, got exactly what I deserved, the end. Now can we get back out on the slopes?’

I gathered up my stuff quickly while the others debated the story. I kept smiling and wished they’d hurry up and talk about something else.

There was, realistically, only about an hour and a half of good skiing left. An hour and a half that turned out to really not be enough time given how often Pete fell over and how many times I had to help him up and slowly inch down beginner slopes with him. I wasn’t too bothered; my plan had always been to head out early the next day anyway, while the others were still sleeping off the inevitable hangover, but the whole afternoon was still a little frustrating.

‘Come on Nelson mate!’ Pete said for about the third time as I slowly trailed him past gnarled gumtrees and the occasional t-shirt wearing snowboarder taking a break with a Corona on the side of the run. ‘You won’t be winning any races at this pace!’

I considered telling him that first timers deciding to snowboard because it looked cooler than skiing was a selfish and stupid move that meant the rest of us had to waste our trip babysitting. Instead I just smiled and thought about another person at another time. A snowboarder who was so fast she left me in the powder.

Before our last run, I told Sarah I’d meet them all back at the lodge. I had a friend I wanted to briefly see. Sarah asked if she could come, but I assured her it would be all tedious in jokes and reminiscing. I hung back as they headed off together. Laughing and jostling each other. Pete had already fallen over before being shoved once.

As soon as they were out of sight, I sat down at the top of the run and looked out over the snow. Only a few skiers left, winding their way back home. The sun was starting to set and the sky was a faded blue that became orange the further down you went. I smiled. The sunsets up here had always been something else. But then, everything up here had always been something else.

I took my time skiing back towards the village. Halfway down the mountain’s main run, I stopped. I kicked off my skis and leaned them up against a tree. Then I crossed the slush covered road that separated the run from the buildings and walked towards the gentle slope of a gravelly driveway. I stopped at the bottom.

The Victor Gallagher Memorial Lodge loomed up in front of me, unchanged. It was as run down as it had been over ten years ago, despite however many renovations it had undergone. It was a fairly ugly, boxy building; jutting out of the slope behind it with a faded blue sign hanging over the sliding front doors.

I hadn't set foot inside the Gal since I was a kid. For the first years after that winter spent there, I had wanted nothing more. I wanted to be back with the people I'd known and loved, living out the weird adventure that had somehow become my life for that one stretch of months in 2005. Exciting things had happened after that; exciting, strange and beautiful things, but there are times in your life that have this impossible quality you can't explain or replicate, this sense that magic is real and at work all around you. My time at the Gallagher had been like that. And even as the years crept on and that time just became a washed out but still warm memory, I think I think maybe part of me still put even the best times of my life up against that one.

Maybe it wasn't the Gallagher. In the end, it was just another old lodge on a mountain full of them. But some strange mix of singular circumstances and being fourteen had created an alchemy that never came again.

I closed my eyes and thought about them all. Grace, the always smiling, gentle, kind girl whose heart I'd broken. Laura, spiky and snappy but so very insecure, who I'd loved in that way you can only love people when you're a teenager and nothing ever matters as much as the feelings you have for the girl you dream of. Robbie; the older woman in reception who might have been the first adult who talked to me as though I was on her level. Matt, the English backpacker who left the lodge under a cloud of disgrace when it became clear the many promises he made weren't exclusive to one girl up there. Steph, who taught me how to ski well enough to come third in the adult division of a major race.

I had kept in touch with Robbie at first, but then the years slipped away and she joined the rest, just part of a memory. It was weird to think they were all still out there in the world. Maybe they remembered me. Maybe I hadn't mattered to them at all.

Hands in pockets, I walked up the driveway. I paused briefly outside the sliding glass doors.

If I was being honest with myself, I would have known that half the reason I suggested this overnight trip was so that I could go inside the Gal again. As a teenager, I had no good reason. As a young adult, other things had taken my time and attention when I did manage to get up the mountain. But maybe now, so far separated from those days, I needed to taste them again somehow. To walk through the halls, to sit in the same rooms and hope that I would feel closer to the long gone ghosts. It would be easy enough. I was just a random twenty-something skier,

stopping in for a beer after a day on the slopes. Nobody would look at me twice. Nobody would know what I really wanted.

I turned and looked back towards the slope. How many times had I made that walk? The morning of the race was one, but there had been hundreds of others too. Every time I went out to ski and came back. Just part of living here. Part of the magic and the tapestry that formed the time I was trying to see again.

I closed my eyes. I had felt nothing, making that walk. There were no ghosts closing in and welcoming me home. Just a cold walk to the front of a building with nothing in it I knew. Even if some of the rooms were the same, too much time had passed. Even an identical facsimile of the building as I knew it wouldn't have meant anything. And if it did, what did I really want from it? To remember or relive a time long gone? Why?

I cast an eye over the building. I wasn't stupid. I knew I couldn't go back even if I wanted to, and I knew I didn't want to. Not really. But sometimes, maybe, we look for comfort in familiar things that stopped being familiar a long time ago. Maybe, when the world is big and scary and we aren't sure if we recognise ourselves or the lives we're living, we seek again echoes of the moments that anchor us.

Maybe it's safer not to find them.

I nodded. Then I turned, left the Gallagher behind, and walked back to my life.

That, in the end, is the thing about those magical times. You can't discover any new ones if you're always trying to reclaim the old.

## The Crime Writer

Lillian joined the line near the back and thrust her hands in her pockets. The swiss army knife had been knocking against her thigh, and she took a hold of it, both to keep it still and to ensure nobody recognised the outline.

Pointless fear, really. They were all too caught up in their excited chatter about what they were going to say, which book was their favourite; how many did they think she'd be willing to sign? Lillian kept her eyes down, so as not to see the beaming face on all those posters, looking down at them with what, to her, couldn't be anything other than disdainful condescension.

They didn't see it, these snivelling, salivating fans. They didn't see anything other than the chance to be in the presence of their genius deity, then scurry away with a scrawl in the front of the book they claimed to love but would sell for riches the moment the author was dead.

Well, today would be their lucky day.

The line was moving fast. Lillian wanted to laugh. Kate was nothing if not efficient. She'd be sitting up there with the same smile and words of encouragement or false modesty for everyone, all the while keeping an eye on her watch and ushering them along to ensure she wasn't here a second longer than she was being paid for. Then back to the mansion, the doctor husband and the grown up kids living large on Mummy's dime. She'd seen all the magazine profiles. Collected and collated them, just in case her nerve failed her. All she needed to do was read them again then look in the mirror. The difference was stark; Kate had grown into her forties well, with the immaculate blonde hair and the first signs of wrinkles (maybe kept nothing more than first signs by just a touch of chemical assistance) making her seem down to earth and accessible. But Lillian... oh, she didn't need to think about it. She didn't even need a mirror. The looks thrown her way were enough. The wrinkled noses and the whispers. The eyes so shamelessly moving over her stained, baggy tracksuit pants, her faded hoodie, the pockmarks and the thinning hair. Let the fuckers look. She'd give them a real show soon enough.

She was nearly at the front. She could hear the low hum of Kate's voice, no doubt telling some inspired fan that they could achieve everything she had if they ignored the doubters and shot for the stars. In her pocket, Lillian's fingers found the edge of the blade and started to flip it out. There wouldn't be much time. It had to be quick.

The line moved forward again. Only one person separated them now, one person and a table blocking Kate from Lillian's view. In her pocket, the knife was out. She held the hilt tight. She'd go for the heart. In and out, see the blood spurt and Kate's eyes go wide and dead then before the police could reach her she'd bring the knife across her own throat and that would be it. The papers would love it. A bloody end to the Queen of Crime's illustrious literary career. It might, she supposed, consolidate Kate's place in the canon. Well, so be it. A place in the canon was only worth something if you were alive to enjoy it.

The person in front was moving, saying 'thank you' again and again in a voice thick and near tears. Then they were gone. Lillian stepped forward. Kate looked up.

Neither moved.

Kate's mouth fell open. 'Lillian?'

Lillian said nothing. *Now. Now, you stupid bitch, now!*

Kate stood. Her eyes were wide, disbelieving. She reached out a hand. Lillian tried to pull the knife. *In the heart. See the blood. Now, Lillian.*

Kate touched her face. 'I don't believe it.'

Nobody seemed to hear the click of the closing knife.

Kate turned to a young, impatient looking man in a suit. 'How much longer, Paul?'

Paul glanced past her at the line, then checked his watch. 'Twenty minutes. About twenty minutes less time than you have to get everyone's book signed.'

'Twenty minutes,' Kate said to Lillian. 'Can you wait twenty minutes?'

'Wait for what?' Lillian's voice was a rasp. She and Kate had sounded similar, once.

'For, I don't know Lil, a talk? I'll get you a coffee or a drink or whatever you want. But please; wait for me, okay?'

Lillian nodded and moved off to the side. She took her hands from her pockets. The knife felt heavy again.

She walked outside into the late afternoon sun. She sat on the stairs of the hall and watched the river, winding its way through the middle of the city, gleaming and dancing. She traced its progress until she sensed movement and somebody sat down beside her.

'It probably goes without saying that I wasn't expecting to see you today,' Kate said.

'You're still saying it though.'

'Consider it emphasis.'

'You care too much about emphasis. People get it.'

'Okay Lillian.'

There it was. The condescension. *Sure, I'll accept whatever you say, because why would I need to ever listen to someone like you?* Lillian wanted to put her hand back in her pocket. But she'd failed once and she didn't like her chances of being luckier a second time. Besides, the momentum was gone. Now she felt as helpless as that river; just following the same current to whatever fate she'd eventually arrive at. At least she'd thought about changing course. That was more than the river ever did.

'Why are you here?' Kate asked.

Lillian shrugged.

'Come on. You made the trip, you know the answer. It's been...'

*Twenty years, you fucking cunt. You know it. I know it. Don't pretend.*

'Just wanted to see you,' Lillian said.

Kate stood. 'Come on. Let's walk by the river.'

Lillian followed like an obedient child. She lingered slightly behind Kate, watching her languid pace with a prickle of renewed dislike. Kate strode. Always had. She was moving slow for Lillian's benefit.

'Let's not pretend we parted on good terms,' Kate said.

'Wasn't intending to.'

Kate looked at her. 'I have to ask, then. Do you still feel the way you did back then?'

'My feelings have developed.'

'Into what?'

Lillian's hands slipped back into her pockets.

'I know I didn't handle things as well as I could have,' Kate said. 'But I need to be honest with you, and I hope you'll do me the same courtesy. Deal?'

Nowhere in that sentence had Kate asked for something that could be summarised with 'deal'. Lillian let it slide. She nodded.

'What I said back then... I still stand by that,' Kate went on. 'I was angrier at you than I should have been, and maybe that meant that you felt under appreciated. I want you to know, above anything else, that isn't true. Your help meant the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you.'

At some point she had almost *become* that smiling poster.

'But putting the words on the pages, Lil, that was all me. You helped me develop the ideas. A *lot* of ideas. You helped with the outlining, yes. But I wrote the stories. I took them to the publishers. That was all me.'

They had reached a peaceful little overhang of thick trees. It was darker, here. There was no-one around. Lillian turned the knife over in her hand. She looked at Kate, who came to a halt, watching her expectantly.

Lillian shrugged.

A flicker of anger crossed the other woman's face. 'Lillian, I don't know why you came here if it was just to shrug at me. If you have something to say, say it.'

Lillian's jaw clenched. She looked at the river. 'I deserve a co-credit.'

'You didn't write the books.' Kate's voice was cool, even.

'You wouldn't have had the stories without me. When you weren't sure what Nick would do in *The Man on Ice*, when you couldn't figure out the whole fucking second half of *A Heart for Valerie*; Jesus, the whole plot of *Black October* was my idea. I brought it to you, we stayed up all night throwing ideas around and you...' She stopped. Caught her breath. No use losing control. She took her hands from her pockets.

'I did the work,' Kate said. 'You couldn't write the stories, so I did. With your help at first, then without.'

'Right.' Lillian nodded. 'Yeah. And how great have the reviews been since you stopped using the ideas we came up with together? *Rote. Formulaic. Derivative. Predictable.* Their words, not mine.'

Kate seemed to consider her for a moment. 'What do you want, Lillian? Acknowledgement? A pat on the back? An apology? *I did the fucking work.* I'm still doing the fucking work. If you didn't want me to use your ideas, you should have said something. Or at least, something that wasn't "use this Kate, it'll be awesome!" It was. But it didn't make the work yours.'

Lillian turned away. Looked out past the river. Her breathing had gotten heavier, as it did every time the rage threatened to take over. She imagined the river bursting its banks, releasing a tsunami that would wash everything away. A tsunami had no more say over its fate than a river.

'Lillian.' Kate was close behind her now. There was something conciliatory in her voice. Or at least, a good impersonation of something conciliatory. 'I would love for us to patch things up. I would love to help you, if I could. But hanging on to this old grudge.' She put a hand on Lillian's shoulder. 'It's not good for you, Lil. If things have been rough for you then I'm sorry. I really am. But you can't blame me. Or try to force me into giving you credit that you're just not entitled to.'

Lillian said nothing.

Kate squeezed her shoulder. ‘Come on, Lil. This is ridiculous. You know I’m not going to give you what you want. So where does that leave you? You’ll go public? Claim I’m a plagiarist or something? Try and tell my family and loved ones I stole from you?’ She squeezed again, harder, longer. ‘Please just let this go, Lil. The sooner you accept it, the sooner I can help you.’

Lillian closed her eyes. ‘I don’t want your help.’ She reached into her pocket.

It was empty.

Lillian went to turn just as the knife slid between the ribs of her upper back. She felt something inside her tear, then a strange, sucking sensation as she tried to gasp or breathe and heard only gurgles. She tasted blood. The knife was pulled free then in again. Her vision swam. It was happening so fast. *How could it be happening so fast?*

Then Kate’s voice, gentle in her ear. ‘It took me too long, Lillian. Too long to get here. I can’t risk losing that. I hope you understand.’

Lillian could see only outlines now. She spoke and her voice, thick and wet, sounded like it was coming from far away. ‘I hope you do too.’

She barely felt the shove. The world tilted around her and then she was in the water. It was warm. The current was strong. She was moving and submerged but she didn’t feel any of it. She was floating in a strange half-world where nothing was quite formed. The river was taking her away, pulling her towards where she was always going to end up.

But curiously, she felt somehow at peace with it. Because she knew it wouldn’t be long before the river came for Kate too.