

What's Good for Us

It's when I'm driving home from Luke's that I get the phone call from my husband telling me that Sarah is dying. He is with her, of course. He's always there, holding her hand. Watching and waiting for her to wake up.

How close I was to ignoring his call. Then what? But I arrive at the hospital just in time to watch our daughter die. I had ten minutes.

The cubicle door seems too small, as if it were a child's toilet. I'm vulnerable with my legs in view, and when I stand up, my head is exposed. I take some loo roll and wipe my mouth. Red patches blush on each knee, my skirt not quite covering them.

He's standing in the corridor.

'Come home, Mel. Please.' He leans back against the wall; arms behind him as if he were trying to contain them, lest they give away some irreversible emotion. Or action.

'I can't, James.' I say, 'I won't.'

'But I need you.'

I've become numb. Numb to the weeks of blame and accusation; numb to that sterile, barren ward; numb to the hope and faith that she'd be fine. I'd already done my grieving. Only yesterday, I considered killing her. She would have wanted me to. But she beat me to it and decided to let go all on her own. My brave girl.

'It's over, James. I won't go back to the way it was before.'

'Why not?' his voice switches. That was more like it. 'I know what's good for us.'

Within the walls of the hospital, I was safe. I could stand up to him. 'No. I'm going to my sister's. I'll be back tomorrow to collect some things. Then we can talk.'

His mouth twitches, lips tight. I wait for him to spit in my face.

He sits in his car across the car park. I can see him, pounding the steering wheel. He doesn't know I'm watching. It feels wrong to look, but I can't help myself. It's strange to see

his rage from this perspective. I inhale another drag of my cigarette and lean back against the headrest, closing my eyes. I see her eyelids: eggshell blue, tiny green veins laced like pond weed. Her arms had been placed on either side of her body. I could see inside the crook of her elbows. Her birthmark a smear of milk chocolate. I had forgotten she had it.

When I open my eyes, his car is gone.

I don't remember the drive, just the insistent pinging of the warning sensor demanding that I put my seatbelt on. I park, order a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, and take it to a booth at the back of the bar.

I'm glad of the shadows in this corner, secure in the envelope of darkness. A faint glimmer comes from an over-sized bulb, hanging bare from the ceiling. I sit on my hands, waiting for Luke. He's the only one I want to be with. The only one I can talk to.

'Mel.' Luke slides into the booth next to me, his lips graze my cheek and I nuzzle into his neck. His gentleness always surprises me.

'It's okay. I guess it happened in the best way possible.' I tell him. 'She just ... faded away.'

'And James?'

'He's ... devastated. And angry with me. But he must know it's over now. For sure. I'll go back tomorrow and get some stuff.'

'I'll come with you. Don't go on your own.'

I imagined James sitting in the house alone. I mustn't feel sorry for him. I mustn't. He had this coming long before Sarah's accident. I wonder why it takes something like this to realise what is important.

Sitting with Luke gives me the courage I never thought I could have. And freedom. With him, I don't need to let him know where I'm going, what my plans are, who I'm with. I never

knew trust like that existed. And having him next to me now, knowing that I'm not a monster for feeling relief ... for feeling liberated, I can try to make some sort of sense of it all.

*

It was New Year's Day. Only six weeks ago. Sarah had been at a party the night before and James had gone to pick her up at one o'clock in the morning. That's what we had agreed. Just as we had agreed to spend New Year's Eve talking things through and then spending the next day with his family. It was an agreement to appease him.

He told me she had been sitting on the doorstep, waiting for him. She'd sat next to him in silence, he said. Only nodding her responses to his questions. She was sixteen. As if she was going to tell him. He'd come to bed, silent and brooding. I'd pretended to be asleep, even when he began pawing at my pyjamas, pulling down the bottoms.

The next morning, I had gone in with a cup of tea. Her dark hair knotted and greasy, her green dress strewn on the floor, a smear of pink lipstick on her cheek and smudged mascara. I'd smiled, remembering the parties I'd gone to as a teenager. I replay this memory every day, before sweeping it aside and putting the image back in its box.

'I'll make an excuse to Gran about why you can't make it. Sleep it off and we'll see you when we get back.' She'd sat up then and embraced me. As she lay back into the pillows, I noticed the bruises on her forearm – staggered circles a centimetre apart: fresh and angry.

'What's this, Sarah?' taking her arm and brushing my fingers lightly over them.

'Nothing, Mum. Just ... at the party.' She'd hesitated, biting her lip. 'Look, it doesn't matter. I'm fine.'

'Tell me what happened. Was it Josh? Has he been hurting you?'

James appeared at the door then, telling me we'd be late. I wonder now how long he'd been standing there, listening.

‘Let’s talk about it when I get back.’ I said. I kissed her on her forehead and left the room. How could I have done that? Knowing what I do now? I thought it could wait. That she’d be in a better frame of mind once she’d slept. And I’d make sure James was out of earshot.

It was only an hour later when we received the call. News like that; it’s like being in a vacuum: the breath is sucked out of your lungs, you’re deaf to everything except the intensity of white noise. It feels like you’ll collapse if it weren’t for your ankles and feet cemented to the ground.

It’s that waking panic, your skin prickling with needles of sweat before you realise it’s all fine and it was merely a bad dream. But it wasn’t fine. It wasn’t a dream. Terror grasped me by the throat, lungs, ribs, heart and wound its way inside me, lurking like a dark monster, waiting for its moment to possess me. Sometimes I think it already has.

Oh, the times I’ve wished that darkness would come. The times I have boiled myself in a scalding bath, scorching my skin almost to a blister. Then an ice shower to remind myself that I am alive. And I deserve to be.

They wouldn’t let us in when we arrived. They wanted to prepare us. Sarah had been hit by a bus. You couldn’t make it up, could you? We joke, *well, you could get hit by a bus tomorrow*. That poor driver. He couldn’t have stopped in time. No one could blame him, of course. She must have deliberately stepped out in front of it.

Her body had been smashed; it was a miracle she survived, they said. But she’d never walk again, probably never be able to speak, see, laugh, love. James said he knew what was best for her; what was best for us. She’d stay on life support longer, he told me.

Josh came to visit the next day. James stood over him, yelling at him to get out before he yanked him by the forearm, dragging him down the corridor. The bravery of coming, knowing her father would be there. I couldn’t believe he’d have hurt her. But then, who was I to know?

*

When she died today, her heart must have finally accepted what her mind wanted. So, there it is. The truth of what happened. But of course, it isn't the truth, is it? That much was obvious. James was probably at the police station, insisting they question the party-goers again. Demanding someone take responsibility. I can see him, banging his fists on the desk, face reddening to a puce.

My phone vibrates on the sticky table. Why can't he just leave me be? But when I look at the number, it's not who I expected.

'Hello.' I say, alert.

'Good evening, Mrs Collins? It's DCI Peter Alexander here. I am so sorry to hear that Sarah passed away.'

'Thank you,' I reply, waiting for what he really wanted to say.

'We've been trying to get in touch with your husband, but he's not answering.'

'I've no idea. I'm with my sister.' I glance over at Luke, guiltily.

'Yes. We realised you must be out. We called round earlier and no one was home. Is it possible for you to come to the station, Mrs Collins? As soon as you can.'

It isn't a question. The politeness and sympathy from before, is now a firm imperative.

*

The DCI greets me, perched on a metal bench beside the automatic doors.

'Have you heard from your husband yet, Mrs Collins?'

'Mel, please. No, I've no idea where he is. I'm sure he'll be home at some point.'

'Come with me and we can talk.' I follow him into a room off the reception area. We sit on the sofas scattered with mismatched cushions, opposite each other. Garish yellow blinds cover the windows, and on the walls, children's paintings depict happy families holding hands.

‘Once again, can I tell you how sorry we are for your loss, Mrs ... Mel.’ He shifts in his seat. ‘A lad your daughter knew was attacked this afternoon. He is in hospital.’

‘What? Who?’

‘This lad was at the New Year’s Eve party. He says he was in a relationship with your daughter.’

‘Oh right. Yes. Josh? Is he ok?’

‘That’s right. Josh Taylor. He was badly beaten up. We have evidence that it was James who attacked him. Josh has told us that he and Sarah had planned to meet on the day of her accident. According to him, they were finalising the arrangements to leave – to run away. We are certain, now, that it was not suicide. Josh had booked train tickets to Glasgow. She’d bought new clothes. She’d stored them at his house.’

‘She wouldn’t –’ I stopped. Would she? But hadn’t I desired to escape? That time last year, when I’d packed a holdall, then saw Sarah from the bedroom window looking down at me. And years before. Before she’d have really understood. That’s when I should have gone. But where? I had no family, and the few friends I did have, he’d made sure to drive away. It was a miracle I’d met Luke at work. Not many men working at a beautician’s parlour, are there?

‘The CCTV on the street where she was hit – it was so difficult to make out,’ DCI Alexander continued, ‘it was impossible to know for sure, but Josh was there. He told us what he saw. We’ve no reason to believe he is lying.’

‘What did he see?’

‘He was on the other side of the road. She saw him and made to cross. He yelled out to her, but she ran to him – without looking, it seems. He’s in a bad way about not telling you the truth.’

All these weeks – and Josh had said nothing? I'd seen him with his mum at the supermarket. Passed him on the skatepark. He'd always given me a sympathetic smile.

As if he read my mind, 'It seems he was too frightened to come forward before.' He tells me. 'Josh said he tried to tell you. At the hospital, apparently. But James was there, too.'

I'd never noticed how dark the DCI's eyes were. Almost black.

'What did he say happened at the party?'

'Your husband did go to pick her up. At 1am, as planned. But when Sarah didn't come out, he went inside the house.'

'He told me she was waiting for him on the steps.'

'Yes. Well. She wasn't. She was with Josh in one of the bedrooms. Josh tells us that your husband dragged her out to the car and drove off.'

That would explain the bruising on her arms. I should have recognised it. The times he'd pulled at me, leaving marks with his huge hands.

'We are worried about James' wellbeing. The nurses said he wasn't in a good state at the hospital earlier – understandably, of course. But his attack on Josh? It's serious, Mel. We need to find him. Urgently.'

*

His car is parked sidelong on the driveway forcing us to park on the pavement outside the house. My hands are shaking as I clasp them on my lap in the backseat of the patrol car. Is it necessary that they have four patrol cars? I'd handled him on my own for years.

I knew Sarah had a boyfriend. But James didn't. I warned her not to let him know. He wouldn't have allowed it. What that boy must have gone through, watching Sarah being dragged off like that?

I remembered the times James joked that he'd kill her if she ever had sex before she got married. We had laughed at his patriarchal performance. But I knew. I knew he couldn't bear the idea of his little girl growing up. Leaving him.

Moments later, the DCI is back. 'Have you got a key for the garage? It's locked.'

'There's usually a key in the door.'

'It's not there.'

The garage is in darkness, a musty tang in the stagnant air and motes of dust speckle in the single beam of light emanating from the open door. We never use it. We always leave our cars on the driveway. I stand staring into the darkness; my eyes adjust slowly to the dim light.

Then I see it.

A chair in the middle of the concrete floor, tipped up, on its side. I hear the unmistakable squeak of rope. James' bare feet are limp and white, like freshly caught fish.