

the
relative
harmony
of Julie
O'Hagan

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CHAPTER 1

Julie

My name is Julie. Julie O'Hagan. Julie's not a name people call their daughters any more, especially around here. Recently, I've been wondering what it might be like to be Julianne, Juliet, or, simply, Jules. I called my daughter Bridget after Mum. Not Thea or Coco or Lola or Lottie. Not Brigitte as in Bardot. Bridget as in Jones, and the midget. Dad cried when I told him, and Billy said she'd get over it in time.

Clackety-clack, clackety-clack. Here's my lovely girl now, running the stick she's just picked up along the railings of Priors Road Primary. I stop and stare into the empty playground, curling my hands round the iron bars which are cool to the touch in the mid-day sun. Terrible things happened to me there on my last day. Terrible things. July 17th 1981 it was. But it was nothing compared to what happened when I got home. Nothing at all.

I sigh and bat a wasp away from my face, wishing I could make the memory disappear as easily, then I call Bridget over. We're meeting some of the other mums for coffee. I heard Samantha Pointer whispering something about admissions to Broadoak at a playgroup yesterday, so for once I'm joining them.

Bridget is smashing her stick against the railings and shouting out Kung Fu style when Rachel Cleaver hurries by. She looks splendid in faded Levis, a turquoise vest top and matching toe nails. Rachel has been organically reared and has long limbs, high cheekbones and a silky blonde bob. Her kids have locally produced apple-red cheeks and chemical-free white blonde curls.

“A bit fractious, is she?” She gives Bridget a disapproving look. “Tobias can get like that when he’s overdosed on sugar too.”

She flips past me in her Birkenstocks with her compact buggy, Tabatha smiling inside, Tobias running happily behind. I drag Bridget away and head towards the High Street.

Bridget swings open the door of Delicious and Nutritious and stands with her legs slightly apart, one hand fiddling with her earring stud, the other on her hip. A bearded coffee drinker looks up nervously from his copy of *The Guardian*. She meets his eye with a long hard stare then marches to the counter and points to a lonely double chocolate muffin sitting away from the carrot slices and wheat-free selection in a kind of cake apartheid. The dreadlocked girl hands the plate over and we head for the back room where the other mums have gathered.

Bridget and I have been here once before. A low burgundy corner sofa covered in embroidered cushions takes up one half of the room and cheap aluminium, garden-style furniture is squashed into the other. I had a lovely time reading the flyers and the ads on the notice board and texting Billy to ask if he fancied advanced yoga in the home, a wheat-free freewheeling lodger or a carbon footprint consultancy.

I stop outside the door, take a few deep breaths and enter. I return Rachel’s mouth-only smile and pull up a chair next to her. Bridget joins the children on the floor who are colouring in and nibbling on apples and wholemeal bagels. The mums keep a close watch on *The Muffin* in case it gets into the wrong hands. But there’s no danger of that. Bridget does *not* share her sugar stash with anyone.

“D-day on Saturday,” I say, ripping open my can of Coke. “Postman usually gets to us around ten.”

Saturday April 7th 2007 is a date printed in indelible ink on my mind.

Amy Richards arches her professionally-plucked eyebrows in feigned surprise.

“Really?” she asks, “Is it this Saturday the letters come?”

Amy is a sweet-natured sparrow of a woman from the Home Counties who wears pearls and pastel coloured cashmere cardigans. Her criminal lawyer husband was recently transferred to his firm's Manchester office and Amy thinks she's moved to the Bronx. She dashes across the road at any sighting of an oncoming male in a hood and is considering a private school in Altrincham if identical twins Taylor and Tallulah fail to get a place in Broadoak.

Rachel sips her decaf latte thoughtfully. "Apparently there are a lot less places available this year," she says.

A Mexican wave of heads leans in her direction. "Really?" asks Samantha.

"Large number of siblings, I think."

Samantha's face falls with the speed of a broken lift. She's not like the other Chorlton mums. She wears racy white jeans and four inch heels, lets Brooklyn eat Haribos and doesn't possess a bike.

Rachel throws her head back. "I mean, I'll be fine about Tobias going to Priory Road if he doesn't get a place at Broadoak. It's an improving school and the last Ofsted was two years ago. I mean, I just love the fact that it's so multicultural."

"Oh yes, Priory Road will be great too! Sooo multicultural." Amy is practically bouncing in her seat as she glances over at Aisha Hamad who is squirming in hers.

I hold a few babies on my knee and fend off enquiries about when I'm having my next one. I half listen to talk of mid-term breaks in Andalucía, the new restaurant on Beech Road and how great the latest Rachel Cusk novel is. Billy is very scathing about Chorlton mums like these. Over-educated and under-utilised is how he describes them. I quite like them, in the way I like Indian takeaways. They're fine once in a while but I couldn't eat them every single day. I chat for a while longer then decide to leave.

I prise my daughter away from Tallulah whose pink suede shoe Bridget is colouring in with a black felt tip pen. She is working with the energy and concentration of a shoe shine boy and has

only the toe to finish. I mumble my apologies to Amy and lead my daughter outside.

As we walk along the high street we pass yet another new bar that's opening up on the corner of Manchester Road. It's about the tenth this year. Simply Sartre says the shiny new sign. These days I barely recognise the ordinary Manchester suburb where I was raised.

Sometime in the early nineties, someone, somewhere decided that Chorlton was suddenly *the* place to live. The rumour flew around the city with the speed of a George Best dribble and house prices shot up within months. Just the same houses, no extension or anything, plus the rumour, equals forty grand more. Then the Broccoli Brigade arrived, media and education types in beanie hats and goatee beards carrying canvas bags screaming, "Eat your Greens." Some even had southern accents. The traditional pubs closed down, wine bars with names like Lounge Lizard and The Left Bank opened on every corner and Poundland was replaced by a non-profit-making fruit and veg co-op, Essential Organics, where a brown loaf costs two pound fifty six and they sell six different flavours of hummus. Tables and chairs have appeared on the pavements everywhere. Café culture they call it. Then the Broccolis had kids and the parks filled up with well-behaved toddlers sharing their raisins and taking up all the places in Broadoak Primary, the best school in Chorlton.

Billy and I struggled to buy our modest terrace before the prices became ridiculous. Tucked away in a back street near Chorlton Green, where all the trendiest shops and bars are, it's a compact three-up two-down with a tiny back yard that leads out to an alleyway full of cats and bins. Well-fed cats and nice clean bins, mind you.

Our house has doubled in price now. It's worth more money than Dad earned in his lifetime. That's not right really, is it? I mean, it's not like we've actually earned it or anything. Lots of families who grew up here can't afford to stay and have had to move out to Old Trafford or Whalley Range or 'Chorlton

Borders' as the estate agents in Sherlock Homes call it. But then they also call the terraces in our road 'secluded cottages on the doorstep of the most bohemian enclave in the city'.

We moved near enough to Broadoak so our kids could go there. I had it mapped out before they were born. Well, kid. We've only managed the one so far. The tests say everything is fine, but it gets you down sometimes, all that shagging and no baby.

Broadoak and Priory Road are the only options for Bridget. Though we're in the catchment area for St. Joseph's, the local catholic primary, Billy won't have her anywhere near it, so we're left with the other two. I shudder at the thought of Priory Road. The memory of its spiked iron railings and gothic towers makes my insides staple together in fear. Rachel and Amy and the others never admit to themselves how terrified they are that their kids might be sent there.

I do. All the time, because I spent the darkest days of my life in those corridors and playground cells. But I never tell the other mums or Billy or anyone because I never talk about it to anyone. Ever.

The sun has disappeared and an April shower of fine rain forces shoppers to run for the precinct and shelter in doorways. I put my umbrella up, my arm around Bridget's shoulder, and I sing to her,

"Now that it's raining more than ever Know that we still have each other.

You can stand under my umbrella ella ella."

We pass a café where the al fresco customers are gathering their things and dashing inside.

Café culture in the Rainy City? My arse!

* * *

Saturday arrives. It's a glorious spring day. Bridget and I are dancing around our front room to one of my favourites from my clubbing days, Prodigy's 'Smack My Bitch Up'. I turn the volume

down as Billy's having a lie in. He came home in a right state at two in the morning and woke up all the neighbours.

The sun is streaming through our front window on to our new pale blue and chocolate floral Next wallpaper. Bridget and I leap around with abandon in front of the interest-free, distressed leather sofa, laughing and singing along in our matching pink velour track suits. I grin at the sight of my daughter's wild copper curls flying around her face and the freckles hopping off her nose.

I'm bursting with love for my little girl and thinking, "Life can't get much better than this."

Then the letterbox slams.

"Go out into the yard and practise your penalties love," I say, conscious of the quiver in my voice as she runs outside.

I go into the hall and there it is, lying on the mat, the white envelope with the Manchester City Council stamp on it containing my daughter's future. My heartbeat echoes the thud-thud of the ball smashing against the wall outside. Trembling, I pick it up.

CHAPTER 2

Billy

Jesus wept. The smash of the ball slamming against the back yard wall reverberates in my throbbing temples. Beads of sweat crawl like stoned ants down my forehead. I reach out blindly for the glass of water on the bedside table and gulp it down. Some of it misses my mouth and falls in small pools on my pillow. I groan, slide the glass back, then plunge my face into the cool wet cotton. I am never ever drinking again.

The letter is due today. Thank God it'll be all over soon. She's talked of nothing but Broadoak Primary for months on end. It's driving her demented and me along with her.

Oh, I liked the school well enough on the tour we had. What's not to like about a shiny new, three million pound extension backing on to lush green fields and a healthy intake of middle class children? It couldn't be more different from the schools in my day, thank Christ. There is colour everywhere, pint sized tables and chairs for group work and every inch of wall bursts with paintings, collage and sculptures. No grey stone walls, no regimented rows of desks or pictures of JFK and the Pope, no threat of a leather strap hanging somewhere.

At one point we stopped outside a classroom of older children and I lingered after the others in the group moved on. A blonde boy caught my eye. He was sitting at one of the tables at the front. He looked like he'd finished his work and was leaning back on the hind legs of his chair with a bored expression on his face. Then he turned to the window and stared out, smoking his pencil like a cigarette. He started chatting to the boy next to him, and

the young bearded teacher looked up from his desk where he was writing and walked over to him.

I was that boy. Restless, bright and bored. He probably got a telling off. I got a hell of a lot more.

* * *

Oh, my head. Or should I say heads? All ten of them throbbing in unison. When will I ever learn? The events of last night are coming back to me. It's as if I'm on a ghost train. Things are leaping out of the darkness and filling me with terror. Then, just when I think I'm safe, something else jumps out. If I could move my hands I'd put them over my eyes. Then comes the shame, its glare beating down on me like a Middle Eastern sun. As a collapsed Irish Catholic I know all about shame, of course. Shame leads to confession. So here goes:

Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It is a very, very, long time since my last confession and last night I committed the following sins:

1. Gluttony. I drank eight pints, five whisky chasers and took a small amount of recreational drugs.
2. Blasphemy. I woke the neighbours on both sides of our small terrace with a two a.m. rendition of The Stone Roses' 'I am The Resurrection'. As I struggled to get my key into next door's front door, Julie appeared and pulled me inside. Bob, seventy and in his vest, looked down from his bedroom window. "Don't know about the resurrection, Bob," she shouted up at him, "it'll be more like the crucifixion when I get him inside."
3. Lust. I'll come to that bit later.

It was all meant to be so civilised. Just a few pints in the Horse and Jockey with Steve and Donal. Jal came out at the last minute and nursed his usual orange juice until closing time. These days

the two of us normally meet up in the park with the kids, at the pub quiz or at the match. My drinking and occasional drug-taking bore him sometimes, as his sobriety does me, but we have too much history to let it destroy our friendship.

“Good to see you out,” I said as we were leaving. “It’s almost like the old days.”

“Not quite,” he said, shrugging off my drunken hug and looking wistful as the rest of us headed off towards to the Irish club.

“Cead Mile Failte.” The sign above the Irish Association Club entrance promises a hundred thousand welcomes. The place has had a recent makeover. Framed Irish football jerseys, black and white photographs of deceased club members and Popes line the freshly painted walls of the lounge bar along with corkboards full of photos of painted faces in over-sized leprechaun hats. You can see your face in the varnished floorboards, and copies of *The Irish Post* and leaflets for last month’s Manchester Irish festival lie scattered on new pine tables.

It’s mainly private hire for weddings and funerals there these days. Irish gigs are few and far between. The older generation come here for the odd pint but their kids drink in the wine bars down the road.

Clubs like these are losing money and closing down all over the city as the Celtic Tiger keeps its young at home. I’ve never felt the need to frequent these places myself. They’re too much like dusty museums, full of ghosts and songs about the past and yearning for an Ireland of priests and bogs and simple living that died a long time ago, an Ireland I’m more than happy to forget.

Last night’s gig was more my style. It’s run by Tom O’Brien, a gregarious type I knew on the rave scene in the nineties. Like myself, he found it hard to swap his partying shoes for the comfortable slippers of middle age, so he came up with a monthly night of nostalgia where Chorlton’s thirty- and forty-something parents unlock their responsible selves, throw away the key for the night and let rip on the dance floor to The Smiths, New Order

and a selection of 80s and 90s tunes. The sight would make their kids hang their heads with shame. And last night I was no exception. It didn't take much, a few Stone Roses and Happy Mondays tracks, a bit of MDMA and Steve, Donal and I were dad-dancing like we were back in the Hacienda days.

It's all coming back to me now. Steve and I were standing at the bar in a sauna of bodies at the end of the night. We'd lost Donal earlier to a blousy brunette. Then Steve abandoned me for the dance floor and the Clash's 'Should I stay or should I go'. A minute or so later I felt a tug on my arm. I turned and my heart sank. I had to pinch myself. It was probably the drugs but for a moment I really thought I had travelled back in time to those Madchester years.

She stood far too close for my liking and she was glassy-eyed drunk, her lips curled in a knowing smile that she probably thought daring or playful.

"Hello Billy."

She's almost as stunning now as she was then. She was wearing something short and black and shimmering, the hair fashionably bobbed, the face well preserved and unlined, the body fuller but athletic, all no doubt the result of regular yoga, an easy life and inherited wealth.

I first met Rachel Cleaver, Rachel Elliot that was, at a club in town when we were in our early twenties. It came as no surprise to me that she settled in Chorlton and heads up the Broccoli Brigade. She couldn't have ended up anywhere else. Neither of us has mentioned what happened between us when we've bumped into each other in Chorlton and I've told Julie nothing. But the tension between us is always there, brewing under the surface and threatening to rear its ugly head, especially now that our children could be attending the same school. So last night, brimming with Dutch courage, I decided to say something.

She bleated on and on about how the schools in Chorlton are all so bloody marvellous and there's no need to worry one teeny weeny bit if Tobias doesn't get in Broadoak, he'll be fine at Priory

Road and Bridget will be fine and we'll all be fine. Well, I wasn't fine. I'd come out to get away from hearing about schools. The more she talked the more I felt like someone hard of hearing listening to a badly tuned radio.

I asked her to move to a quieter spot and we moved over towards the exit, stopping just inside the doorway. She leaned back against the wall, tilted her head and stared at me in that feline way she has. I cleared my throat and leant down near the side of her ear, disturbed for a moment by the curve of her long alabaster neck.

"Look Rachel," I said, "I don't want you to ever mention what happened between us to Julie, and if Bridget gets into Broadoak, to anyone else at the school either. Do you understand?"

The moment the words were out of my mouth I realised what an aggressive prick I sounded. It had come out as a threat, not the polite request or desperate plea I'd intended.

"Look, I didn't mean..."

A flicker of something, pain, hatred, I'm not sure exactly what, crossed her face. She pushed past me and I grabbed her arm.

"I'm sorry for what I did," I said, "but that was the past. I was a different man altogether back then."

Then she disappeared back into the crowd.

* * *

Hey, sunshine! Who said you could creep through my blinds uninvited and throw your morning rays all over the duvet? Get lost. I'm not in the mood. I'm wrestling with the idea of going for a piss and I'm in desperate need of medical attention but shouting down to Julie for painkillers would involve energy, conversation and, God forbid, movement, all of which are beyond me right now. So I'll stay where I am.

I can hear her pacing up and down the hallway like a woman possessed then she suddenly screeches my name like a fire alarm. God almighty! I jolt fully awake and sit up on the edge of the

bed, my head in my hands, crushed by the filthy black cloud of my hangover. My stomach is churning, fat with dread and anticipation. The time has come. I pull on a t-shirt and jeans and make my way unsteadily downstairs via the toilet to learn Bridget's fate.