

VALENTINA

by S. E. Lynes

She always loved fairy stories: Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood – tales of misadventure and revenge and cottages hidden in the deep dark wood. At night, when she wanted to lull herself to sleep, she would close her eyes and conjure up one of those imaginary cottages. It was white, in her mind's eye, with a low roof and wisps of blue smoke curling up from a pink brick chimney. It was in a clearing, covered in vines and lit by a million blinking stars. So when she saw this place, she knew it was hers.

And here she is. Can you see her at the clearing edge, in the dark and the silence that are so absolute? Impossible not to be seduced by a silence like that, she's thinking, watching from the shadows, waiting. Here, no one bothers you. Here, all that happens between one day and the next is the slow stretch of black sky over fields. No stars tonight. Tonight, the sky is lagged with cloud, insulation so thick it would guarantee anyone the deepest of sleeps. They're sleeping now, inside, tucked up in their warm bed, while outside her teeth chatter, her toes freeze.

And it is freezing. It is bone-penetrating, lip-chapping, bollock-tightening freezing. Look at the ice, hanging in frosted pendants from the low window ledges, the short white walls hunkering down against the cold. Feel the cold, pushing its wet, frozen fingers down the back of your neck. Enough to make you tremble in your boots – so why? Why is this woman standing out here alone, shivering away at this God-forsaken hour on a Scottish winter's night? You probably think it's all a bit strange, probably think she's not quite herself. And you'd be right.

Forty-eight hours ago, she would have said the same.

Now, the air has changed. From under the lazy arm of the sycamore she smells bitterness. If she looks closely, she can see the glimmer on the roof giving way to patches of matt lead grey. That's the ice melting. Heat pushing through slate. Any time now, the living room curtains will recoil: crisp cotton transformed to gothic lace. At a certain temperature, the flames will break the windows. They will pull at the sky, beg for escape with their long ragged wings only to give up, recede, reach out again.

Fire is a fascinating spectacle. It's hypnotic. She should get away now, really, before she becomes too transfixed to move.

ONE

I remember the day we moved here, back when the two of us thought only happiness lay ahead, how the tyres crunched on the gravel, how the tree branches knocked against the roof of the jeep. The pair of us were leaning so far forward we practically had our noses squished against the windscreen. I remember running into the hall, clambering upstairs and back down again, dashing into the garden and out onto the vast lawn. Honestly, I was so excited about our new home, about our new life straight from a magazine, I even laid a fire for us that first day. We didn't need one – it was late May – but I laid one anyway.

We didn't light the fire that first night. It was the second night, I think, and the funny thing was, instead of going up the chimney, the smoke billowed back the way, right into the lounge. Next thing, the smoke alarm goes off. What a laugh. See us, all aren't-we-brilliant one minute, the next, we're running around like turkeys at Christmas trying to find the damn thing. We found it, of course. It was on the ceiling by the living room door.

"Push the button," I shout up at Mikey. "It'll wake the baby."

Mikey's standing on a chair by this point, jabbing with a kitchen knife at this white plastic saucer thing with its flashing red light and all the while the screaming racket's setting our teeth on edge.

"I am pushing it," he shouts back. "I keep pushing it but it doesn't do anything!"

"Mikey! Let me try!"

He steps down, hands me the knife. "Listen, you're more practical. You try."

But I couldn't reach it – I'm too short. In the end we had to bring the stepladder from the barn and I had to go round taking the batteries out of every single smoke alarm in the house. It was only supposed to be a short-term measure, until I changed them for something less sensitive. But I suppose I never got around to it.

And then, on the Saturday, Mikey had to go. He'd got a job offshore, you see, that's why we moved up to Aberdeenshire. It meant that he'd be away to the rig two weeks out of every four. I knew it was going to happen, don't get me wrong. I'd psyched myself up for it, knowing the first week or two would be the trickiest. And so that morning, I had to wave him off from the front step, Isla's head hiding my tears. I had to watch the taxi disappear down the lane, clouds of exhaust lingering in the air, like things we meant to say but never did.

That afternoon I couldn't settle. I tidied up, sorted through some of the packing boxes, even made soup, for God's sake. When I coaxed Isla to eat her mushed up greens, my voice trembled with a kind of simmering hysteria. That's what comes from trying too hard to pretend everything's OK. Your real feelings do nothing but knock at the surface of you. You know you can't let them out. You know that if you do, you might never get them back in.

And then I was up half the night – pacing, shushing, pleading with Isla to go to sleep. Then, when she finally did sleep, I was scared, way more scared than I'd thought I'd be. The black of night out in the countryside has this way of chasing reason into the darkest corners of the rooms, bringing its shifting shapes and throwing them against the walls. I hadn't figured on how frightening the nights would be without Mikey, out here, so far away from the city, and now I lay awake and alone, primed for every noise. What was that scratch at the door? Was that a figure I could see at the window? Was that creak a foot on the stairs?

At 4am I heard a car outside and opened my eyes to see an amber beam slide across the bedroom ceiling. I shot out of bed and ran to the front window. A little way into the lane, a car had parked. The headlights died for a moment then relit. The car pulled out of the mouth of the lane and crawled past the front of the cottage, away up towards the big house at the end of the track. I waited, straining to see through the trees, but saw nothing. I opened the window a crack. The freezing air shot down the front of my nightie, sending me swearing through chattering teeth as I dashed to get my dressing gown. As I returned, the car passed by the cottage in the opposite direction and headed back up the lane. Slowly, the red tail-lights receded to nothing.

Someone must have taken a wrong turn. And at this hour of the night. Maybe someone had had too much to drink and lost his way home. That was the logical conclusion, the one I used to talk myself down from the crazy ledge as I crawled back under the covers, dressing gown still wrapped tight for comfort, to stop me from shaking.

The next morning at 6am, I staggered down to the kitchen, made tea and sat cradling Isla in the half-light. And from there I saw it: an entire fortnight without him stretching ahead of me. The day was too long. There were too many hours in it. And there were thirteen more days like this until he came back. As I said, I'd known it would be tough, of course I had. I'm not stupid. But in all the excitement, all the novelty, I hadn't reckoned on this: my own intolerance for solitude. Stands to reason. I grew up in a flat with three brothers. I worked in news. I lived for other people.

So that was the problem, you see. Loneliness. If I hadn't got so lonely, I would never have met her. I know that now. I'm fucking well *blessed* with knowledge now. But it'd be easy to start beating myself up, blaming myself for everything, so I hold on to that loneliness and how it felt, otherwise I'd go mad. And as with most outcomes, there's a chain of events, isn't there? This happened and because of it, that happened: simple cause and effect.

I must have left the cottage a little after 7:45am. Ridiculous o'clock, for crying out loud; the dawn chorus were barely getting around to clearing their throats. I was pretty sure I'd seen a supermarket on my side of town, over the River Dee, so I thought I may as well drive there, pick up a few messages while I was at it. And so, two hours out of my bed, there's me, a grey-faced zombie woman pushing her baby girl up and down fluorescent aisles. I must have looked like a poster girl for postnatal depression but I wasn't depressed, at least I don't think I was. I was just plain done in.

Still keyed up from the spooked out night I'd had, I popped into the hardware store next door and bought some locks for the cottage windows and two thick bolts for the front and back doors. After

that, I headed for the beach. Fresh air was always my mother's cure-all so I thought it might blow away my heebie-jeebies.

I found my way to the coast. It was blowing a hoolie there, right enough, a real hold onto your eyebrows job. Let me make a wee point about the weather here: it has these mood swings like you wouldn't believe – but, as the saying goes, if you don't like it, wait five minutes. So, with the wind howling round my ears, I put Isla in her sling, put on her wee gloves and hat and, after grabbing a coffee and croissant from a café, made my way down to the wet sands.

The shoreline was deserted, save for a couple of windsurf nuts scooting over the grey spikes of a frigid North Sea. Oh, and the seagulls of course, screeching and scrapping overhead, bunching and swooping. On the groyne post, a fat gull perched, a bloated coastal overlord, eyeing me up, twitching, blinking: *I'm watching you, incomer*. Along the shoreline, about a mile away, were what looked like cooling towers or something, to the right, the harbour wall, and a white lighthouse perspective had shrunk to no bigger than my thumb. Far out, flat against the horizon: tankers, trawlers maybe, out for the day's catch.

I turned a slow circle, took in the parade of cafés, the rickety-looking rollercoaster and beyond, about half a mile away, the impregnable blocks and turrets of the granite city. This city was like any other, I thought: full of people. Except, unlike Glasgow, here I didn't know any of those people and they didn't know me. So far conversation had been no more than transaction: a coffee, a paper, a bag of groceries. *Here's your change. Will that be all? Goodbye now*. It was as if everyone I'd seen or spoken to was behind a screen. I felt that if I reached out, my fingertips would only press against glass.

A sharp snatch at my hand. The rustle and tear of a paper bag. I cried out, covered Isla's head with my arm, staggered back and fell. My coffee dropped to the ground, pooled, and was sucked away by the sand. Immediately above me, like shears sharpening against a blade, came the jealous scream of the gulls. Still trying to figure out what the hell had happened, I looked up and saw my breakfast in the greedy beak of one as it flew away, hanging and limp as dead prey.

"I can never go back to Govan now, Isla," I said, chafing my hands together to clear off the wet, gritty sand. "I've just been mugged by a seagull."

The first few days run together in my memory, to be honest. I know I found the pool pretty quickly, being a bit of a water-baby myself, and took Isla there. I know I tried to make eye contact with the other mothers, all as sleep deprived and bedraggled as me, that I tried to communicate through a roll of the eyes that here we all were, getting through the day. We were colleagues, weren't we, floating and distant in the world's biggest office? Surely we could talk to one another? But as their cubicle doors closed behind them with a bang I realised that, no, we couldn't.

I drove up to Beechgrove Terrace. I wanted to find the BBC, thinking I might look for work there. I found it, made a mental note of where it was and resolved to drop off my CV in a couple of months' time. I found a park nearby and, thinking I might find a friendly face, went in. A woman about my age was pushing her boy on the swing so I carried Isla over on my hip. Bear in mind, won't you, that at this point I'm still smiling away like I'm on Prozac or something. Looking back I must've looked like an axe murderer but I was only trying my best.

"How old is he?" I said, nodding at her wee one.

"Eighteen months." She did not take her eyes from her child.

"This is Isla," I said, swinging her forward a little. "She's four months now."

She glanced at Isla but said nothing so I added, "We've just moved here actually. From Glasgow."

It appeared to be killing her to turn her head in my direction. Maybe she had a stiff neck. She almost smiled before she moved away, before she strapped her son into his buggy and made for home. I felt like shouting after her: *don't flatter yourself, Doll. I only wanted a wee blether, for fuck's sake, not lifelong fucking friendship*.

But that's not exactly the way to meet people either, is it?

I fed Isla on the bench, my face by now set in a rictus grin. I burped her and stood her on my lap, felt her push against my thighs with her tiny feet. I made faces, asked her who was a lovely girl and all the daft things you say to a baby until I realised my hands were growing numb. My nose, too, felt almost damp with a wintery cold and, when I looked up, I saw the sun had gone. Wait – the sky had gone. In its place a thick white mist had descended all around me like dry ice.

So this was the Aberdeen haar, I thought, the famous sea fret that lowered its dank weight onto the city without appointment, without warning. And here I was, right in the middle.

By the time I got Isla to the car, I was shivering, the fog even thicker than before. I set the GPS for home, turned the heater on full blast to take off the chill. Even once I'd put on my sweater, I was still trembling, my hands spread against the fan. Outside, the haar pushed against the car windows, swallowed whole the end of the car bonnet. Headlights on full beam, I hooked myself over the steering wheel and set off.

On the road, I could see no more than the tail-lights of the car in front. On the other side, the other cars bloomed from the fog, headlamps like police searchlights. In the rear view mirror, Isla's baby blue eyes stared out, as if she'd been alarmed by a sudden psychic event which, to be honest, is what it felt like. I crept in second gear back towards the river. At the Brig O' Dee roundabout, I took a right towards Banchory. I drove on, tight-shouldered, vigilant. The haar seemed to dissolve a little. Two cars ahead had formed now as if born from the ghostly mass, now the houses at the side of the road stepped from the dissipating white, clumps of woodland, fences, gateposts.

And then the air cleared. Completely. Just like that.

I sat back from the steering wheel, turned off the headlights and eased my foot down on the accelerator. But when I checked my rear view, I saw the cloud had not, in fact, gone. It had simply not followed me. It had waited at the edge of the city and had shaped itself into what looked to me like a monstrous paw, the thick swollen hand of an ogre, grasping but not moving forward, as if thwarted not by any physical boundary but by fear of what lay ahead.

More than a wee bit crept out, I pushed on. Before me, the landscape spread and to my relief I recognised where I was. The road narrowed and I knew I had to take a left. No houses now, only the lone horse in the field – the signpost that I was not far from home. I slowed the car and took in the tender dip of the horse's long back, the slide of its neck as it tore at the grass in a chaos of quivering lips. I thought of *Gulliver's Travels*, which I'd read when I was about thirteen, of how the Houyhnhnms had blown my teenage mind. I'd always wished I'd known how to pronounce the damn word, even to myself. Whiminims? Hooeyhunhums? Whatever, what I remember most is that those magical horses had to say *the thing which is not* because, in their world, there was no word for lie.

After tea, I put extra locks on three of the downstairs windows with the battery-powered screwdriver my dad had bought me for my twenty-first birthday. While Isla kicked about under her mobile, I even managed to screw the bolt onto the front door and still have time to stand back and admire my handiwork.

"No one," I said to Isla, "not even the Big Bad Wolf could get through that."

I never did put the bolt on the back door. Which is a blessing, now I think about it.

The hour came for Mikey to return home from work, to kiss my neck and reach into the fridge for a beer. *Hey Shone, what's for dinner?*

"Three jumps at the cupboard door for you, pal," I answered aloud, watched him laugh in my mind's eye.

I switched on the radio, twiddled the tuner until Adele came crackling through like some spooky chanteuse from the afterlife. I sang along at the top of my lungs but when the song finished, I felt even more bereft. I wanted so badly to call my mum or Jeanie but I didn't want to sound sorry for myself. This was the life I'd chosen. This was the dream.

At 7:30pm I was about to try Isla in her cot when the landline rang.

I lunged for it. "Hello?"

"That was quick." It was Mikey. "How's it going?"

"Ach, we're fine." I jiggled Isla about to stop her from whining. "I've got my wee pal, haven't I? How's the rig?"

There was a pause. I listened for the sea.

"So," he said. "Seen anyone today?"

"I spoke to the cashier in the supermarket. She was nice."

He never asked if I was lonely. Probably afraid of what I'd say. Maybe I was afraid. If he'd asked, I might have said, maybe should have said *yes, I am lonely. I'm going off my head here*. But I kept it in when I spoke to him and saved the tears for when I was on my own. Nothing major, just eyes filling here and there, the odd shoe thrown across the room.

There was one time I really went for it though – shaking, snotters, the works. It was that very first trip. I was washing up the breakfast things, staring through the low, square back window out over the lawn to the leylandii at the far end. Hands in the suds, I was giving myself another sink-side pep talk: *It'll get easier, Shone. Early days are always tough. If anyone can make this work, it's you.* But no sooner had I said the words when I burst into tears. Funny, how one minute you've got your colleagues in hysterics with some joke you're telling by the coffee machine and the next you're in a cottage in the middle of nowhere talking rubbish to yourself.

And then I remembered 'dry your eyes'. It's something my mum always used to say. I'm not sure if it's Scottish or what, but it's for when someone's feeling sorry for themselves when they've got nothing really to be sorry about. I had a loving partner, a beautiful baby daughter and a fairy tale cottage – more, much more, than I'd ever dreamed of. Self-pity, that's what this crying at the sink business was all about and I knew it. What was going on here was not death, not divorce, not anything I'd even bother writing about for the paper, it was no more than *nae pals, pal*.

So I walked into the hall where I'd hung the mirror and I looked at my silly, red, swollen face.

"Dry your eyes, Shona," I said. "Get a life."

I had to act. If I was going to find work once the dust settled, I needed childcare. I'd have to get Isla used to someone other than me sooner rather than later and, besides, at this rate I was going to end up in a special ambulance. I needed friends too. And I certainly couldn't make any of those by sitting at home waiting for a neighbour to come and borrow a cup of sugar, could I?

We had no neighbours. And I didn't have any sugar.

There's still not enough light to make out the trees at the back of the cottage. But she doesn't need to see them to know they are there: the leylandii and the pines, the beeches and the oaks, bunched like criminals at the limit of the land. There was a time when she didn't know their names – they were simply trees. What she can see from here is the grey front door, the dense leaves and frilled velvet petals of the briar rose, the thorns that prick and draw blood. See how the tendrils reach around the windows. See how they grip on, claim ownership. Maybe the rose knows, as she does, that possession is nine-tenths of the law.

TWO

By the time Mikey called from the rig that evening, I was brightness itself.

"Guess what?" I said. "I'm going to see a nursery on Monday. The Blue Moon, it's called."

"Doesn't sound like a nursery." How lovely he sounded. I could have eaten that Scouse accent, that voice. "The Blue Moon, did you say? Sounds like a nightclub. Do they have strippers?"

"I'll let you know," I said, laughing.

"What time do you have to be there?"

"Two o'clock."

"Two o'clock, right. And that's this Monday coming? Sure you'll find it OK?"

"Cheeky sod. Of course I will."

"Shouldn't cost too much, should it?" he asked.

"Not too much. I mean, I don't know. I didn't ask. But it's OK, isn't it?"

I heard him hesitate. Not heard, sensed, and wished he could come home right away so I could chat to him in person. I pressed my fingertips to the mirror. Around my nails, the skin whitened. Mikey couldn't come home. He was in the middle of the North Sea.

"Mikey, listen," I said. "You're not here. You don't know what it's like. If you expect me to carry on like this with no one to talk to day after day ..."

"I wasn't saying that ..."

"I was only thinking a few hours," I rushed in. "Give me a chance to meet people. And once Isla's settled I could maybe think about picking up some freelance stuff, set up some meetings."

“Shona, stop. It’s fine. Honestly.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. All I could think of was that I’d never before had to ask permission to spend money, not since I was a kid. I’d always worked, since I was fourteen – a paper round, Saturday jobs, waitressing, babysitting. So I’d always had my own cash, always spent it how the hell I liked. But now, the work I did was important, yes, but it was not paid. I supposed I’d have to ask or at least discuss things like this in future.

Maybe I’d been oversensitive. Mikey had never mentioned a budget in all the time we’d been together. He was the extravagant one, not least of all because his parents always seemed to have lump sums to give to their precious only child, cheques that took my breath away flung out over restaurant dinners whenever they were back from the villa. Always on my best behaviour on these occasions, I would eat carefully while slowly his mother’s mouth slackened, the Mersey swelling her vowels, hissing against her consonants, her tanned eyelids thickening, drooping. She got so very drunk, drunker than any of the neds I knew from back home. So I sat and smiled and ate my strawberry parfait, his mother slurring wetly at my shoulder: *of course Michael’s twice the man his father ever was. Opportunist, he calls himself!* Her spit wet in my ear. *Cheating bastard, I call it.*

Special Brew or vintage Malbec, drunk is drunk.

“Shona?” Mikey broke the silence. “Come on, I didn’t mean anything by it. Besides, if they do have strippers, I’ll drop her off for you myself.”

Once we’d said our goodbyes, I stood for a moment staring at the five misty oval rings my fingertips had made on the mirror. Slowly, they vanished, a fading imprint of where I had been.

I got to The Blue Moon at five to two on the Monday. The sunny promise of the morning had given way to cold sky, heavy, graphite clouds. I’d caught the forecast in the car on the way in: rain, they’d said, possible thundery showers.

And there on the step, baby clinging koala-like to her hip, was Valentina.

She struck me the way women can strike other women – because she was pretty, I suppose, and dressed in a pink cheesecloth maxi skirt. At her waist, she’d knotted a plain white t-shirt, thrown a green woollen shawl over the top. I remember thinking she was one of those women who get away with throwing on any old thing and, running in luscious waves down her back, she had this magnificent auburn hair. Titian, I think it’s called, not the classic redhead you see more commonly up here.

“Hey, I like your haircut,” she said – before either of us had even said hello. She seemed to have an accent: Australian, possibly New Zealand. “It’s cute, what is it, a pixie cut?”

“Thanks,” I said, rubbing my head in embarrassment.

“Suits you. Very gamine. This is Zac by the way.” She swung the baby closer to me. I noticed, couldn’t help but notice, her wedding band, the glint of diamond in her engagement ring. Incongruous somehow, given her hippy style.

“Hello, Zac,” I said, smiling at the baby who said “ahwa” before burying his face in his mother’s arm.

She rolled her eyes and stuck out her hand. “Ignore him, he talks bollocks. I’m Valentina by the way. We’re here for a trial if anyone ever answers the frickin’ door.”

I managed to introduce Isla and myself but I was still laughing at her saying bollocks, especially in front of a child.

“Don’t laugh,” she said, laughing herself now. “I’m afraid of what his first word’s gonna be. His seat belt doesn’t work and every time I try to fasten the bloody thing I end up dropping the F-bomb right in his face. My ma’s coming to stay in a few months for Christ’s sakes and I know the moment he sees her he’s gonna come out and say it: f-u-c-k.” She sighed, a little theatrically, and fixed me with an emerald green stare. “I need to clean up my act.”

We laughed. After so long cooped up alone, the release of it felt good.

As no one had yet come to the door, I reached up and pressed the bell. The first *ding dong* repeated itself three times and when it finished we looked at one another and smiled, expecting perhaps to continue our conversation. But the melody, such as it was, repeated itself and, while we stood there waiting for the interminable *ding dongs* to end, unsure of where to look, I examined her red shoes, which were flat and looked hand-stitched. I thought the bells had ended and opened my mouth to

speak, but they hit yet another repetition. Our eyes met again and we raised our eyebrows at each other and smirked. At last the chimes stopped, but not before rounding off with two prolonged *dongs*.

Valentina was rolling her eyes.

“For whom the bell tolls,” she drawled. “Christ, I thought it would never end.”

“Doorbell with delusions of grandeur,” I said. “I like your shoes by the way.”

“These things?” She stuck out her foot, pointed her toe. “They’re really old actually. But thanks.”

“Did you buy them here?”

“God, no, you’re joking. Got them in ... back home, actually.”

“Back home?”

“Australia.” A shark smile, two great white rows of teeth, a jagged canine snagged on her bottom lip. Her skin was pale, but creamy pale not pasty like mine, creamy and uniform, apart from a spray of tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose.

“Australia,” I said, “whereabouts?”

The nursery door opened and I felt a twinge of disappointment that our chat had been interrupted. A spotty lass of no more than sixteen gave us a dreary hello and led us up the dark stairs. Inside, babies sat around on the floor and the whole place held the whiff of off milk, biscuits and, I have to say it, deodorised poo. A stick-thin woman of about fifty with a millipede of grey at the roots of her dull brown hair introduced herself as the manager and ticked off Isla’s name in the diary. There was a fuss then over Zac – they had no record of him ever being booked to come in.

Valentina leant over the countertop and ran her finger down the diary. “I spoke to a girl last week. She must’ve forgotten to write it down.” She straightened up, stood quite still and said nothing more, simply continued to look in the most incredibly direct way at the manager, as if performing some ancient Eastern mind trick.

“I suppose we can fit him in,” the manager said, shrinking, turning her attention back to me and prising Isla from my grasp as you’d remove scissors from a small child. “It’s good to leave them early while they barely notice.”

I didn’t want Isla to barely notice. I couldn’t have said how I wanted her to react, to be honest. But as the manager carried her away, my wee girl didn’t cry at all and I was troubled by the sight of her in a stranger’s arms – so placid, so trusting.

We were shoed out then, Valentina and I, as if the two of us were already friends. The heavy wooden door closed behind us. The sound of children that had lingered in the hallway died.

“It’ll get easier, don’t worry,” Valentina said, her bouncing voice summery and light. “It’s hard for you, not her. Zac’s always had childcare and I’ve heard really good things about this place.”

“How old’s Zac?”

“Four months.”

“Same as Isla.”

“Cool!” Her eyes really were a peculiar shade of green. Like wet parsley – verdant but dark.

“I just want to go back and get her.” Heat rose in my face. I looked away, blinking hard. “I’ve never left her before and it’s ... I don’t have family here and my partner goes away with his work, you know, and we live out in the country, I mean, I’m not saying ... the cottage is beautiful and everything but it’s ... it’s remote, you know, and if I’m honest I’m finding it harder than I thought I would and I thought Isla might ... but now I’m not so sure ...”

Valentina laid her hand on my arm. “Listen, do you want to grab a coffee?”

I met her gaze. “I would love that.”

Meeting Valentina that day reminded me a lot of the first time I met Mikey. There was the same flirtatious energy spreading like peacock feathers at our backs, the same good humoured testing each other out. Since the night before last, when my life ended, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I’ve done nothing but think, to be honest, about all sorts of things and meeting Mikey is one of them.

I’d gone to a panto with my pal, Jean, whom I was renting a room off at the time. Jeanie’s about ten years older than me. A senior journalist, she’d been my mentor when I’d first joined *The Tribune*. She’s funny and kind and has the sharpest nose for a story I’ve ever known. She’s the type of person people cross the room for, just so they can tell her their craic, or a new joke, and have the pleasure of making her laugh. That’s how much everyone loves Jeanie.

She had come over to my desk earlier that day and said her big brother, Robbie, was in an amateur production of *Peter Pan* at St. Matthew's Church in Bishopriggs, did I want to go along. At the time I was newly single after a six-month relationship that was never going to be anything had deflated like a tyre with a slow puncture.

"Ach, no thanks Jeanie," I said. "I'm all right."

"Don't be a fanny," she said, picking up my pen and drawing a silly face on my notepad. "We can grab a drink after."

"Who's Robbie playing?"

"Mr. Smee. The fat bastard, you know? Come on, Shona. It might be a load of shite but it's better than moping at home on your own."

Typical Jeanie. She always did look out for me.

"Go on then," I said.

So off we went to see Mr. Smee. But it was Captain Hook I was watching – tall, thick black hair, ridiculous fake beard right enough and the poshest English accent you ever heard. In Scotland a posh English accent's all you need to be the baddie but he had the strong features too, the longish nose and chin, the booming singing voice, the swagger. I could not take my eyes off him. And that's not merely a figure of speech.

"Who's that?" I whispered to Jeanie, leaning against her on the dark pew.

"Mark or Mike ... something like that. Have a look in the programme."

I lit the programme with my phone and read through the cast list. I didn't have to read far.

Captain Hook Michael Quinn.

Jeanie nudged me in the ribs. "Will I ask him to come on for a drink with our Robbie after, aye, I will."

"Not on my account."

"Course not."

When the panto finished, before I could stop her, Jeanie texted her brother to say she and I were going ahead to The Crow, did he fancy coming along and did he want to bring his pal, Hookie? About ten minutes later Robbie arrived at the pub saying Mikey was on his way, that he'd stopped to get some cash. I wondered how much longer he'd be, what he'd look like up close.

The bar was five deep. It was so hot in there, with that hanging, too-much-information smell of bodies there always is now that you can't smoke inside. While I tried not to watch the door, Jeanie fussed Robbie, told him he was great.

"Ah, get to fuck," he said, waving her away. "Make yourselves useful will you and find somewhere to stand. I'll get these."

We were about to do that when in walks Mikey, all teeth, elbowing through the crowd. He was wearing a black leather motor racing style jacket with what looked like a falcon logo on the chest and I was surprised to see he still had the silly beard on. And there were wisps of black acrylic in his eyebrows too, making fuzzy muppet eyebrows which he wiggled as he made his way over. I laughed. He joined us in the stramash, still grinning. Close up, turned out he had a rim of orange foundation at his hairline where he hadn't washed his stage make-up off properly. Normally that would have put me off. But this wasn't normally.

Robbie by this point was three back from the bar but still managed to introduce us over the heads, pointing, shouting. "Jeanie, Shona, this is Michael Quinn. Mikey, this is my sister, Jeanie and her pal Shona McGilvery from *The Tribune*."

Subtle as a breeze block, Jeanie said, "I'd better help our Robbie with the swallies. What's yours Mikey, pint?"

"Callie Eighty." He gave her the thumbs up. "Cheers."

Off she went, leaving us to it. I didn't know where to look, what to say. But I guess I must've been wanting to make an impression because in the end I closed one eye, pulled on his beard and said in a silly pirate voice, "Can't be bothered to take your beard off, then, Cap'ain? A-hargh."

"Ow," he shouted – and grabbed both my hands.

"I – I –" I slipped my hands from his, mortified. "I ... sorry ... thought it was fake."

"No." He held onto his chin. To contain the pain, I imagined. "No, it's real."

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” I said. “I’ve never met a pirate before. Need to dust up my pirate etiquette ... Jim lad, pieces of eight, shiver me timbers ... what are timbers anyway, did you even wonder that? Oh God, seriously, are you all right?”

“I’ll live.” He was laughing, thank God. “You’re all right.”

All right. The hissing T of a Liverpool accent. The River Mersey ran in his veins like the Clyde ran in mine. Shipyards. Docklands haunted by ghosts. I’d always had this notion that Glasgow and Liverpool were linked because of that heritage, in their souls or something. Twinned like they do with French towns. I don’t know, I’d always thought of Scousers as being like us Weegies – blowing their wages on a Friday night, looking a million dollars on a pittance, generous, sensitive, sometimes to the point of chippy. Murderous when crossed.

“Which bit of you is real then?” I said. “That your real voice for a start? Here’s me thinking you were ever so posh.”

“Well now, you shouldn’t always believe what you hear.” He looked down his nose at me in the cocky way he has. “I am ever so posh, I’ll have you know. My parents’ve got a bay window.”

“A bay window? Didn’t realise you came from aristocracy.”

In the dense heat of the pub my cheeks burned. We had to shout to talk, push ourselves into an alcove by the door and it was wrong of me, I know, especially as Robbie hadn’t even got back from the bar yet, but I kind of wanted him and Jeanie to clear off. Terrible, but I felt that straight away and you can’t help how you feel can you? Valentina was always saying that. She was a great one for that.

So we chatted away and that’s when I found out he was over at Heriot-Watt University studying for a Master’s in petroleum engineering.

“What’s an engineer doing in a panto?” I asked. “And if you stay in Edinburgh, how come you’re through in Glasgow? Don’t they have theatre groups where you stay?” My fifth question, I counted, and told myself to shut up.

“My girlfriend has a place here so I stay over and get the train back in the morning.”

Girlfriend, I thought.

Shit, I thought.

Served me right.

“What are you anyway,” he was saying, “some sort of journalist?”

“Lucky guess, Sherlock. I’m here with Jeanie aren’t I, so ...” For the second time I was floundering, this time on account of the girlfriend grenade. But – good thing about being Scottish in these moments? You can pass off any flirting you might have engaged in by mistake as pure Gallic friendliness. And I guess he could do the same: that famous cheeky Scouse charm.

“So you’re a hack then, eh,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He grinned – water off a duck’s back. “What d’you do then, go round digging in people’s bins? Doorstep the rich and famous?”

I shook my head, as if he were a sad, sad man, which made him grin all the more. “I’m interested in the truth, if that’s what you mean.”

“Truth and justice and all that?”

“Aye. Truth and justice. You cannae keep a good journo from the truth.”

“And what’s your drink?” he asked.

“I’ll give you three guesses.”

“Let’s see. Heavy? Stella? Guinness?”

“Wrong.” It was my turn to put on the posh voice. “You’ll have to give me your first-born child now. Mine’s a white wine spritzer. You see, I’m considerably more sophisticated than you think.”

There we were, then, being friendly. I found out he played keyboards, had become a Munro bagger since he moved north. I found out he’d met his girlfriend at uni, that she was reading Geology and came from Hampshire. She sounded clever, at home in the place her education had brought her to, since she’d always expected to get there. She sounded like she played a classical instrument, I thought, a cello or a harp or something like that. These things I imagined about her, along with flawless skin, killer body, cordon bleu cooking skills and wished her, only momentarily mind, involved in a fatal music-related accident – strangled by a cello string, maybe, or crushed to death by a massive harp.