

THE MODIGLIANI GIRL

by

Jacqui Lofthouse

"If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."
– Emily Dickinson

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'This is what I find encouraging about the writing trades: they allow mediocre people who are patient and industrious to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into something like intelligence. They also allow lunatics to seem saner than sane.'
– Kurt Vonnegut

I have often wished that I had been born at the turn of the nineteenth century, in Paris. It seems unfair to me that those lucky enough to be born in the right place at the right time had the opportunity of living a truly bohemian lifestyle, whilst those of us brought up in the eighties in Billericay are conditioned to a life of material acquisition that is hardly compatible with the pursuit of art for art's sake.

That thought again, tormenting me. I brush it aside and focus on what I see. I'm sitting before a mirror in a white dressing gown, gazing at my face but not quite recognising it. My hair is in foam curlers and my make-up is half complete: my kohl-rimmed eyes and Barbie-doll false lashes make me an airbrushed version of myself. The rest of my face is ghost-pale; even my lips are not yet painted. The mirror is rimmed by opaque light bulbs and – yes, I admit it – there's something of the *Moulin Rouge* about the scene and I ought to appreciate it, but somehow can't. I laugh out loud only there's no hint of jollity in the sound. I am not myself and I am definitely not in Paris, though the cabaret is about to begin.

Where the hell is the make-up artist, that's what I want to know? She was telling me her name is Ruby and she can't afford a down payment on a flat in Kentish Town. It was a distraction, at least, but now she's vanished to take a call and I'm left alone, staring at this new creation in the mirror, wondering what I'm doing here. In a few hours, everything should fall into place. Everything I've ever dreamed of is about to come true. If I win, I'll have it all (all the shallow stuff that is): fame, glamour and the kind of success that I always thought I wanted. My mascara is running down my face, cutting vertical lines across the pancake, but it's OK. Really, it's OK. It's only natural to cry on an occasion like this. It's stage fright. Last-minute nerves. Panic. The whole story is spinning in my head and threatens to spill out and I'm trying to keep it inside, but it's like an out of body experience. I am at once in front of the mirror and above it, watching myself, like a player in a bad farce that has become quite frighteningly real.

There's a knock at the door behind me and I stand to open it, half here and half lost in memory. Behind the door there's a young woman, pushing past me. She's holding a coat-hanger from which hangs a crumpled cream-coloured dress that looks a bit too much like a wedding frock for my liking. She's looking at me as if she wants something but I have no idea what it is that she wants.

‘Well?’ she says. She hangs the dress in the corner and stands back to admire it. When I don’t reply, she forces the issue. ‘So what do you think?’

‘Of the dress?’

‘Isn’t it stunning? I’m beside myself with envy.’

‘Why?’

She rolls her eyes as if I’m having her on. ‘It’s vintage Balmain?’ The inflexion in her voice makes me wonder if she is Australian. Either that or she thinks I’m extremely stupid.

‘Is that eco-friendly or something?’

‘Sod the eco-credentials – it’s a one-off piece. You’re going to look incredible in this.’ She is Australian, but she also thinks I’m stupid.

‘It looks a bit like a doily to me.’

‘Trust me. You’ll own the stage.’

I try to pull myself back into the room, to really get this moment and make it meaningful. *This is it, Anna Bright.* Sadly I don’t believe my own PR. *It’s your time. What does it matter how you got here and what you feel inside? When you put on that dress, you can do exactly what she says: walk onto the stage and work the audience. You can become Fahy and Brown’s next big thing.*

But even as I say these words, I am thinking of a girl standing before a high window in Paris. I can’t get her out of my mind. She has lost the only thing that matters to her and she is gazing down at the pavement far beneath, wondering if she will do it, whether the act she is about to commit is one of bravery or one of cowardice. And what would she make of me, that girl?

You are a liar and a thief.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ Ruby is back. She takes me by the shoulders and sits me down on the stool. ‘What did you say to her?’ she asks the wardrobe girl.

‘Nothing. She’s just been insulting the dress. Does she have any idea what it cost us to borrow that for the evening?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what Anna makes of the dress. What matters is that she wears it!’ She turns to me. ‘Anna – are you OK?’

‘I’m fine,’ I say, though my voice is no more than a whisper.

Ruby leans forward, puts a hand on my shoulder and picks up a sponge pad from her kit, repairing the pancake, before applying more glitter to my eyelids.

‘Don’t cry,’ she said. ‘It would be really helpful if you could do “internal” nerves rather than “external” ones. That way, you know, it won’t mess up your face.’

If I can’t cry, perhaps they will allow me to scream. I hold back, bite my lip quickly and nod. I realise it doesn’t matter really. I’m not quite here any more. I’m somewhere else, driving my car, a whole year ago now. I can hear the music, the voice of Ian Dury playing my town’s theme tune *Billericay Dickie* and Dury’s voice takes me right back to the evening when all this madness started.

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I was stuck in a traffic jam, en route to the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith. It was a drizzling June evening, the sky was low and a summer rain threatened. The driver’s window was open and I was smoking, inhaling deeply, perhaps believing that if I inhaled quite hard enough, the nicotine rush might take away the memory of my argument with Will. But even nicotine would not do it. I kept going over the issue in my mind, trying to understand his point of view, but failing. I could not get over the fact that he had chosen to go to the *Telegraph* party rather than coming with me to support Hilary on her big night. *Had* I been too obnoxious? Quite possibly I had. Now, as well as having fallen out with my fiancé, I was also late and likely to embarrass Hils.

That was when Dury came on the radio ... His lyrics were out of tune with my

thoughts, but against my will I began to laugh. I tossed the burning cigarette stub from the window and listened. Dury's voice made me think about my sister Lois: a memory of her pogoing about the kitchen to the strains of *Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick*, tossing her head furiously to the beat, while Mum – the original Dury fan – was busy cooking our fish fingers.

The traffic ground to a halt.

It was odd to think that Hilary was about to join the ranks of the Essex glitterati. Hilary – the same girl I met at the Mayflower School. It didn't seem real or even right that she was appearing on stage that night with the much-lauded Meryl Wainwright, *Grande Dame* of British Letters. In typical Hils fashion, she had tried to play it down. '*It's just in the studio theatre, Anna. It's not such a huge deal.*' But it was impossible to miss her excitement. This was a fund-raising event for The Reading Trust and Hilary would be reading an extract from her recently published novel, alongside five other authors, including Wainwright, the notorious Harish Devan and the man that I considered the wildcard, the latest bestselling guru, James Loftus.

It had taken a while for me to adjust to Hilary's success. If I said I wasn't envious, I'd be a liar. Who wouldn't be envious of a school friend who'd just secured a six-figure publishing deal? If it had been anybody else, I'd say it was enough to make you vomit. But Hilary is my oldest friend and I was beginning to see there was some price to pay for this break. Every insecurity that ever haunted her before she signed that contract was now magnified tenfold. If she was a perfectionist before, now she was bordering on OCD. I had never known anyone more hardworking than Hilary but these days I hardly saw her; until very recently, she'd been working all hours on the sequel to her novel in a desperate bid to meet an impossible deadline. Tonight, at least, was her chance to enjoy what she'd achieved and I was furious at myself for being late.

But I was even more furious at Will. Because if Will had come along that night, I would not have been late in the first place. Will is never late. The word isn't in his vocabulary. He was certainly not going to be late for the *Telegraph* party. Having decided it was more important to network in his own little circle than in mine, he was in his dinner suit and favourite Fornasetti tie before I even got home from work.

But I had to put my bitterness behind me. It wasn't often that I fell out with Will and I vowed we'd make it up later that evening. It was likely I was being selfish. Will had been a freelance cartoonist for a couple of years now, but he got a lot of work from *The Telegraph* and if he didn't suck up to the editors at these events then somebody else would suck up in his place. In any case, I should possibly have thanked Will for his absence because being late was what caused me to bump into Meryl in the first place.

When I arrived at the Lyric, the foyer and bar were deserted. The audience had already gone into the theatre. I tried to sneak in quietly but as I stepped into the darkness of the auditorium, an usher followed me.

'You have to wait at the side,' she said. 'It's started.'

Keeping close to her, I shuffled forwards in the darkness. As I approached the stage however, I realised that Hilary was standing immediately in front of me. Harish Devan was on the podium and had just begun his reading.

'What are you doing here?' I whispered. 'Aren't you meant to be up there?'

'They screwed up,' Hilary said. 'They were meant to put out six chairs on stage but they forgot. The stage manager's in a right strop, so we've got to take it in turns.'

'Where are the other writers?'

'They managed to find a couple of reserved seats in the front row. But the others were all taken. It's full up, so I have to wait here until it's my turn to read.'

'Fabulous,' I said. 'Star treatment.'

As I spoke, I sensed that somebody was now standing behind me. I turned around

and the person seemed so familiar that I greeted her.

‘Oh – hello!’

She laughed and I immediately realised my error. I recognised her now, even in the gloom. It was impossible to mistake her trademark craggy features. I had seen that face in Sunday supplements, on book jackets and on TV. Yet Meryl Wainwright was smaller in the flesh.

‘I’ve lost my damn umbrella,’ she whispered. At first I thought she couldn’t be talking to me, but Hilary’s attention was focussed on Devan and the usher had returned to the foyer. It seemed incongruous to hear a literary legend talking about something so banal. I had only ever heard her pontificating on cultural artefacts. The umbrella clearly mattered to her. ‘I put it down in the caff and now it’s gone. Do you think I’ve got time to find it before I go on?’

‘Um. I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Do you want me to have a look?’

‘Would you? Oh sod it. We’ve probably got hours yet. Harish is always so up himself. I’m gasping for a fag.’

‘Me too,’ I said. My forwardness took me by surprise. If it hadn’t been so dark I might have been more circumspect. ‘I couldn’t cadge one, could I?’

In the end, we found the umbrella behind a sofa and I suspected its loss had been nothing more than a ploy for nicotine. We nipped out the back via a fire door and stood outside, huddling beneath a small canopy. There was a light drizzle but not enough to distract Meryl from important business. She sheltered the flame beneath her coat and ensured that mine was lit before her own. I found myself trying not to count her wrinkles; it was simply a nervous reaction, a distraction from the fear of not knowing what to say. I was determined not to sound pathetic but the sycophantic stuff must have been on the tip of my tied-up tongue because without quite knowing how it happened, I found myself praising her latest novel.

‘I thought the characterisation of Ethan was so accomplished...’ I said. ‘Your prose is so tight. And there’s something... elastic about it.’ *Elastic? How can it be tight and also elastic? What was that supposed to mean?* My inarticulacy was killing me. Meryl must have thought I was a total prat but she was very nice about it.

‘Thank you, my dear. That was a terrible nuisance about the umbrella. And how kind. Do you write?’

I hesitated. I had been considering the idea of writing seriously for some time. I had written fragments in notebooks, then torn them out and thrown them away. Sometimes I would scribble ideas on scraps of paper and I occasionally gathered images and kept them in an attractive polka-dotted box folder marked ‘Novel’, but it was not something that I ever spoke about. It had been years since I had admitted such an ambition. In our early twenties, when Hilary was at Cambridge and I at Warwick, we would write long letters to each other, professing our love of Hardy and the Brontës and our desire to write great works, but Hilary had made that desire concrete and I was still at the back-of-an-envelope stage. My answer to Meryl’s question must surely be a resounding ‘No’.

‘Not yet,’ I said.

I suppose it just slipped out.

‘Fool’s game, of course,’ she said. ‘But you could do worse than listening to this Loftus fellow.’

She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow as she spoke, as if to say ‘don’t underestimate the chap’. She was looking directly at me, as if issuing a challenge. I had expected her to be patronising or dismissive or abrupt but she was none of these. Meryl appeared entirely serious. The look might even have been called *encouraging*. And something about this made me feel uncomfortable. It reminded me of a look my father used to give me, a look he gave me on the day Hilary and I went up for interview at Cambridge. I did not want to remember it.

It's possible that Meryl noticed the impact of her expression. If she did, she passed no comment. I attempted to laugh it off and to continue the conversation without crying.

'You think he has a serious message?' I said.

I'd read all about the silver-haired guru in *The Observer* at the weekend (Will called my newspaper habit treason). Loftus was not such big news then as he is now, but his work was already a hit in the States and he was beginning to cause noticeable ripples here in the UK. His book, *How to Be a Literary Genius* was, as far as I could make out, an invitation to would-be writers everywhere to abandon self-doubt and to believe that they had a book inside them. I could not think of anything more depressing. The man appeared to be on a single-minded mission to convince us that "everyone is creative". It was nothing that had not been said by a thousand other gurus before him, but no one could deny the power of his marketing machine. Loftus's holiday company *Genius Vacations* had just expanded to take over half the Greek Island of Ouranos.

Yet here was Meryl Wainwright giving him a plug and challenging my cynicism. Was it possible I was missing something? According to the article, Loftus had a strong fan-base. Tens of thousands of people had used his methods to overcome chronic writer's block but that didn't give him any intellectual credibility. I had pretty much dismissed him out of hand. The last thing the world needed right now was more unblocked writers. The net result of that would surely be more bad literature. Hadn't Meryl thought of that?

'There's only one serious message in the end,' Meryl said. She stubbed out her fag on a railing.

'What's that?'

'Get black on white,' she said. Then, after a brief silence added, 'Guy de Maupassant. No one ever became a writer by thinking about it.' She shivered then, and pulled her raincoat closer across her chest. 'Come on. Devan's probably still droning on, but we'd better not miss the rest.'

We arrived back in time to see Hilary walking onto the stage. She glanced in my direction and I wasn't sure if her expression was one of relief or reprimand. I smiled back, as if to say 'of course, I never would have missed you' but I don't know if she believed me. Beneath the brilliant light, Hilary appeared at once brittle and vulnerable. She wore a black Ghost dress, just on the decent side of transparency, the kind of dress that I could never carry off. Her hair was newly cropped and bleached. If you didn't know her, you might think her composure unnerving. Though she fixed her eyes on the audience and raised her chin and did not allow her jaw to quiver even a fraction, the small fluttering movements of her hands to her face revealed her fear to me.

Hilary need not have been afraid however. Her novel was a deeply serious one, an apocalyptic vision, rooted in science and conveyed in crisp, elegant prose. I had read a previous draft and the opening moved me now as much as it did the first time. As Hilary read, I watched Meryl leaning forward, her hand resting on her cheek, frowning and absorbed. Afterwards, Hilary told me, when she came off the stage, Meryl had whispered 'Bravo, my dear' in her ear. I had seen that moment, as Meryl placed her hand on Hilary's shoulder, her mouth to her ear and I experienced that closeness as a small stab of pain beneath my ribs.

When Meryl read, the Meryl I had always imagined reappeared. The distracted woman who had lost her umbrella receded and once again she was the literary diva, reading her work aloud in her trademark gravelly tone. Meryl spoke with authority and her talent for combining intricate research with a gripping narrative astonished me. It did not seem possible that I had just shared a cigarette with this woman. She was a legend and my friend had been on stage beside her. I remember her words in a

fragmented way; perhaps I was distracted by the memory of our encounter beneath the canopy and the apparent encouragement she had given me. I was waiting for Loftus to come on; I began to anticipate his appearance as something significant. Whilst I attempted to remain calm, some small, neglected part of me would not be still; a buried voice that was now yelling out, like a spoilt brat sporting ringlets.

But I did not anticipate what happened next. The host walked to the centre of the stage, kissed Meryl on both cheeks and waited until she was seated again. He approached the microphone.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘My thanks to Meryl Wainwright for what I’m sure you’ll agree was a remarkable reading. We are honoured to have you here and deeply appreciative.’ He paused for more applause, cleared his throat. ‘I’m afraid, however, that I’ve just learned that due to unforeseen circumstances, our fourth reader, James Loftus, is unable to attend this evening’s event. He sends his sincere apologies, but he has been waylaid by – a family emergency.’

My disappointment took me by surprise. There was something unconvincing about this absence. The brat inside my head wanted something and threatened to yell if she did not get it. I shook her off. I didn’t really understand this feeling, nor where it came from but I knew I did not like this part of myself. I would send the brat to her room and lock the door until she came to her senses.

Afterwards, the foyer was packed. Hilary was on the other side of the room, at a table with Meryl, Devan and the others, signing books. I did not want to be disloyal, but the idea of queuing up to have my best friend sign a book was not remotely appealing. In any case, Hilary had already inscribed a copy of the novel for me. “*For Anna*” – she wrote – “*Your turn next! With love and thanks for all your support, H x*”

Hilary knew that I wanted to write. I denied it sometimes but she had known me long enough to see beyond my protests. Now as I looked about the room, I recognised a few familiar faces. These were exactly the faces I did not wish to see, the people that Hilary wanted me to meet, though I had no inclination to know them. There was the novelist Julia Claiborne, standing at the bar and laughing like a horse, surrounded by her acolytes, the small clique of women Hilary now belonged to: “the Martini Girls” they called themselves, all published novelists with varying degrees of success; their group seemed impenetrable and alien to me.

It would have been easier if Will were there. We could have found a quiet corner and had a glass of wine together. He would have made me laugh and put everything into perspective. Without Will however, I was like an uninvited guest, wondering how I might make myself inconspicuous.

In the end, I was rescued by a small display of books. There was a separate table where one could purchase the books prior to having them signed and as it was fairly crowded it was easy to browse and remain unnoticed. Though James Loftus had failed to show this evening, the display included his work. The bold lettering drew me: *How To Be A Literary Genius*. It was a crazy promise yet one which had made the man a small fortune. Will had laughed out loud when he first heard that title. ‘I’m sure it must be ironic,’ I said. ‘If it was ironic, nobody would buy it,’ he replied.

Certainly nobody about this table now seemed concerned at the stigma of the title. All around, people were handing over their cash and debit cards, as if the very fact that the book occupied the same table as novels by Wainwright and Devan made this purchase quite respectable. Yet it did not seem respectable to me. The brat inside me craved a copy but I was not about to be controlled by my alter ego. I told the brat that if she wanted one of those absurd books, she had better wait until I ordered it online, because I sure as hell wasn’t going to be seen dead buying one.

I glanced in Hilary’s direction. I tried to catch her eye but she didn’t see me. She was speaking to a woman whose book she was signing; her eyes were shining and her

cheeks lightly flushed. Then she laughed, handed over the signed book and turned her attention to the next person in the queue.

It occurred to me that if I bought a copy of this book nobody would even notice. If I took a copy of the Wainwright too, the cashier would see that I was a serious reader; she might think I had bought the Loftus as a gift – for a deluded friend perhaps. Before I could change my mind, I picked both up and paid for them. I did not look the cashier in the eye. I stuffed them in my bag and walked quickly away from the table.

As I turned, I could see Hilary still, leaning towards Devan who touched his hand to her shoulder, smiling. I felt like a bulimic who had just stuffed an entire chocolate cake into her mouth and now must find the lavatory and be sick.

2

‘I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences.’ – Gertrude Stein

‘What time is it?’

‘It’s nine-thirty.’

‘Oh Jesus.’

Will turned his back to me and pulled more than his fair share of the sheet across his body, leaving my bare shins and toes exposed. Then, immediately, with no pause for breath, he began to snore again, as if he had never woken in the first place. How did he do that? It was a particular talent he had, to sleep through just about anything, even his own waking up.

I considered taking pity on him. After all, he had been out “networking” the previous evening and it was churlish of me to complain and start that argument all over again. Our wedding was only three months away now; we needed every penny we could save.

My feet were cold however. I lay very still for a few moments, admiring the fine line of Will’s shoulder blades and the way his dark hair curled at the nape of his neck. Byronic – that’s what I thought when I first saw him at Hilary’s party. Though over the years I had become used to his good looks – perhaps even took them for granted –

I was still a sucker for his physical charms and it was possible to forgive him much.

All the same, a swift tug of the sheet would do no harm. It was not my fault that Will had been knocking back the vodka the previous evening.

‘An – na!’ He groaned. I pulled a little harder than I’d intended. ‘Give that back.’

‘It’s not yours,’ I said, pouting.

‘Yes it sodding is,’ he replied. He was half-asleep but awake enough to wind me up by wrapping the sheet about his hand and removing the whole thing from my body in one fell swoop.

‘Hey! Stop playing silly-buggers.’

‘I love your cute little Geordie expressions.’

‘I am NOT a Geordie,’ I said. ‘Having Geordie parents doesn’t count.’

‘Get-a-way man,’ he replied.

‘Come on, give me the sheet!’

‘Geordies don’t feel the cold,’ he said. He wrapped the edges of the sheet beneath his feet to ensure I would be unable to budge it. ‘How about a cup of tea?’ he

suggested, then leaned forwards to kiss me hard on the lips, which would have been very enticing were it not for the tang of last night's vodka on his breath.

'Why-aye, pet,' I said and flipped my legs over the side of the bed.

When I returned to the bedroom ten minutes later, Will still had the sheet wrapped beneath his legs but now he was snoring deeply. I took a shower hoping that the noise of the boiler starting up would wake him, but afterwards he remained in exactly the same position. He had not moved an inch. I stood beside him stark naked to see if that would make a difference, but there was no response. So I got dressed, banged a few cupboard doors, and when it was clear he was likely to be spending the morning sleeping off his hangover, I decided to start my day without him.

Half an hour later, as I walked across Richmond Bridge, a flock of geese flew overhead. The river was at high tide. I paused to lean over the balustrade and watch the geese as they settled to land on the water. The summer crowds had already begun to gather on the riverside before the fake Georgian façades and in the distance I could make out a group of people paddling in flood water beneath the White Cross pub.

Life is good, I told myself. *Life is very good*. And it was. Here was I living in a *bijou* residence, a three-bedroom cottagey affair in one of the most sought-after boroughs of London. I had a halfway decent job in a highly respected suburban theatre and I was engaged to Will Isenberg, a talented artist, a Cambridge graduate with the looks of a Romantic poet. *It doesn't get any better than this*.

Why then did I feel so uneasy? It didn't make sense to question my happiness. It was true that my job was not exactly high flying. As Senior Marketing Assistant at the Walpole Theatre, you could hardly say that I had "arrived". But I was on a career path: there were prospects at the Walpole and if I could just hang on a bit longer, I'd be sure to be in line for a promotion. Most likely, I reasoned, it was my experience of the previous evening that had unsettled me; the being-in-presence-of-greatness. When I thought about what Meryl had achieved simply through the power of words and her imagination, it awakened a sense of inadequacy. But there was only one way to counter this feeling and that was to do exactly what I was about to do. I had the Loftus book and my laptop in my backpack. I would go to a café and in the words of Meryl, 'get black on white'. If I did not begin now, perhaps I never would.

Twenty minutes later I was in Starbucks, sipping a latte and bemoaning the failure of the Wi-Fi access, a thought incompatible with my desire to have been born before Wi-Fi had ever been invented. It occurred to me that if I had been a native of Montmartre, Paris in 1910, I would by now have taken out my notebook and fountain pen and begun to write. Instead, I was trying to catch the eye of the barista and fretting about the fact that I couldn't get online.

But the baristas were busy and uninterested and in the end, I took out the Loftus book and opened it instead. Given Meryl's recommendation, I experienced a flicker of excitement, but I had no desire to be seen reading a book with such a title in public so kept the cover folded back and out of sight.

The first chapter was unexpectedly lucid. The only difference between a writer and a non-writer, Loftus wrote, was that the writer actually bothered to pick up his pen. 'If you wish to become a writer, you must take that first step,' he said, which was an obvious, but strangely mind-blowing statement. By the time I reached the end of the chapter, I was curious to attempt his methods. 'If you want to write, begin now,' he said. 'Take out a notebook and pen. Don't even stop for a cup of coffee.'

It was too late of course. Not only had I disobeyed the coffee rule, but I had no notebook and no pen. The laptop was suddenly unappealing and I reasoned that if I were to take this seriously, it would be vital to work with *exactly* the right materials. So I downed the rest of the latte and headed out to buy some stationery.

As I was walking up the High Street towards Waterstones, I picked up a

voicemail. It was my Mum.

‘Hello? Anna? Are you there?’ Her words were followed by a pause as if she was waiting for me to pick up. ‘No? I just wanted you to know that I’ve ordered the cake stand,’ she said. ‘I’ve put a deposit down.’

What?

‘Speak soon, pet.’

The cake stand? It didn’t make sense at first. Then I realised that she was talking about the wedding cake. *My mother was putting a deposit on a stand that would be used to hold my wedding cake.*

I decided not to think about it.

In Waterstones, I headed for the notebook section. There was a whole stand full of Moleskines in different shapes and sizes and I stood in front of it pondering whether the legacy of Bruce Chatwin and Van Gogh actually made these notebooks any better than your bog-standard cheapskate notebook. I decided that it did and picked up two.

At the checkout desk, clutching the books, I tried to convince myself that this was not simply another form of procrastination. It was surely more authentic to write longhand and it was possible that the right tools could make all the difference to my work.

I had nearly reached the front of the queue when I was distracted by a small display of novels on a stand to my right. It was a local author promotion: an author whose first novel I had already enjoyed. I hesitated before stepping out of the queue to take a closer look. Will and I would be celebrating the anniversary of our first meeting next Friday and I figured this might make a good present.

Carl McGahan was a young Irish novelist, so it came as a surprise that he was living here in Richmond. I had read his first novel *Caitlin’s Trial* – a novel set in Armagh at the time of the Troubles – and had been impressed. His new hardback promised much. The cover was like so many I’d seen lately, a blown-up black and white photograph of a woman’s face that told us very little about the world we would encounter inside the book. I skimmed the blurb and turned to the author photograph on the back-flap of the dust jacket. It was a full-length portrait. McGahan was sitting on a metal staircase, resting his head on the palm of his hand. The overall effect was an enticing combination of boy-next-door and intellectual. His slightly scrawny physique and floppy fair hair were balanced by a sharp nose, pointy chin and eyes that beckoned me right in. I closed the book swiftly and put it back on the display stand. Will had never expressed an interest in Irish politics. It would make more sense to buy him oil paints.

It was midday when I arrived back and Will was still sleeping. He’d never slept this late before but I put it down to the many evenings he’d spent at the drawing board recently, working till the early hours, a victim of his own perfectionism.

I made tea and opened the curtains in the front room. I sat in the armchair, picked up a pen and unwrapped the Moleskine. Outside, I heard a mother calling to her child, the hum of a distant radio. I tried to ignore them, allowed my pen to hover above the page. The notebook was crisp and pristine. There was something so perfect about the leather binding, the ribbon bookmark and the slightly yellowing lined pages. I craved a cigarette. According to the recent *Observer* article, Loftus disapproved of artificial stimulants but I was convinced that like many writers, I worked better with props. It was impossible, after all, to imagine Henry Miller without a drink; or Burroughs without heroin. Would a little shot of caffeine or a single cigarette detract from my ability to write great literature?

In the absence of cigarettes however, I opened a packet of biscuits. There was a reason why I’d chosen this brand. Shortly after Hilary graduated from Cambridge,

when I was temping in Billericay, she embarked on an MA in Norwich. She was studying Creative Writing and the prominent novelist Ewan Sutherland was visiting to give a talk on campus. It was a difficult time for me, entering her world when my own had reached such a dead end. I stayed for a few days and even now those days are imprinted on my memory. We stayed up late most nights, drinking cheap wine and talking about literary theory and sex, writing and ambition. The Sutherland seminar was a highlight. We had him to ourselves in a small room, just fifteen students, Sutherland and me, the gatecrasher.

We were in our early twenties then, so I like to think that my faulty memory of the talk is down to my immaturity at the time and has no deeper meaning. I have some notes somewhere – in a forgotten ring binder in the cupboard beneath the stairs. Sutherland spoke in particular about characterisation and the idea of allowing a work to grow organically; he told stories about the importance of dreaming, the necessity of reading great works. But what I remember most clearly – and I am a little ashamed to confess this – is Sutherland's statement about the importance of routine in a writer's life. He talked about the inception of his latest novel and vowed that he might not have written it at all were it not for his reliance on a particular brand of biscuits. My ears pricked up at that point and to Hilary's horror I picked up my pen to write down his recommended choice: a German brand, with a thick coating of dark chocolate on the top. Sutherland always broke his writing morning by partaking of these biscuits, he said. Nobody else in the room seemed to think this particularly significant; they laughed politely and awaited his next intellectual offering. But I underlined the words 'Choco Leibniz' in my notebook and went out and bought a packet the next day. To this day, when I eat those biscuits, I feel myself in the company of the master.

I took a bite and picked up the Loftus book again. Will was stirring upstairs but there would be time for a writing exercise before he came down, something simple to break through the block that had been holding me back.

Loftus suggested putting the word 'WRITING' down the page, like this:

W
R
I
T
I
N
G

The object of the exercise was to write seven inspirational words beginning with these initial letters – things that you must do or have, to become a writer. It seemed puerile to me and not the sort of thing that ought to sully my notebook – so I found a separate scrap of paper.

I wrote:

Wisdom
Room of one's own
Inspiration
Trust
Intuition
Nicotine
Gin

Maybe the last two weren't strictly necessary but I was beginning to think the caffeine alone wouldn't do it. The Sutherland chap was probably lying when he claimed to feed his talent on chocolate biscuits alone.

There was only one thing for it. I went to the kitchen and found a packet of

Marlboro Lights stashed on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard. I opened the back door, lit a cigarette and stood looking out at the garden. Fag in hand, there's no doubt you feel a lot more writerly. Perhaps Meryl was right. Perhaps this Loftus guy had something. All I had to do was find my subject and study hard. If Hilary had done this, why couldn't I? I closed my eyes and inhaled, raised my face to the sun and felt its warmth on my forehead. Now all I had to do was find the words.