

February 2002

I should start from the bit you remember. The night of the big fight when it all ended. The night your dad got arrested. If we work back from there

you know, maybe we'll

although I have a feeling that however deep I dig, there won't be much sense to uncover.

Nothing much about what happened between me and your dad makes sense. Not the first time around. Not the second. But we may as well see how we go.

Altercations was what your dad called them, as if fancy words would gloss the ugliness of what we did to each other. But even by our standards this was a horror show. Middle of the night in your granny's flat with your dad losing it and eight-year old you pinning yourself to the safety of the dark, and blood spurting from the gash on my forehead where I'd whacked it off the handle of the living room door, and the hall carpet awash and walls splattered like he'd been at me with an axe, and your granny shock-white and cradling her chin like it's about to fall off.

Your dad stomps off into the kitchen. Grabs himself an interval refreshment. But me and Granny Jean, we're stuck where we are, and time is staggering between us, between the chaos and the carnage, and I'm not compos mentis enough to grab you and go.

And then, from nowhere, the police arrive.

Self-explanatory this scene they encounter, by their reckoning, so they are quick to make an arrest. Your dad, he's shouting *Tell them, Ronnie, tell them* and the two constables are being all official calling him *Sir* in a way that shows less respect than even my school day *Yes, Sir; no, Sir* to Mr Campbell the drama teacher when he tried to break up Smokers' Corner and your dad's getting more and more shirty until they have him as well for resisting arrest. He wanted me to say it was an accident, which it was, kind of, because I was pulling him by

the arm of his leather jacket, dragging him to the outside door, wanting to kick him out the flat and kick him out our lives full stop, but sweaty-handed I lost my grip and went flying. The uniforms are going *Well?* and I'm just like *Well, what?* and there's blood dripping off my eyelashes in gloopy tears. You're traumatised, not crying, just standing there, not speaking to me, not speaking to anyone. And your dad, he's gawping at me like he doesn't know who I am because he thinks I'm protecting his mother of all people. I fully expected your Granny Jean to say something, to defend him as per, but it must have been too much agony to open her mouth because when they led him away, she watched him go in silence.

The ambulance arrives for Granny Jean and Candy arrives with Kelly and she gets him to take you. For once in my life I forget my problem with Kelly

ie what a terrible husband he is to Candy

and I'm actually thankful as he takes your hand and leads you away. And seeing you like that, so bewildered and so little, I'm racked with guilt, and I'm raging at Gary, raging at myself for giving in to temptation and letting him back into our lives. So it's possible that what I said in my statement when I went down to the station with Candy early morning after out of hours stitches at the minor injuries unit in the old Infirmary with the smell of iodine and gauze coming off me in clouds wasn't an entirely accurate account of what had gone on that night but I knew I had to do something because his mother would never press charges.

The police station was

still is

opposite the underage pub where Candy's brothers took us for our first vodka and orange three years before I first met your dad. And where my reputation for pool and for hustling eventually outshone me. Maybe we'll come to that. If it counts for anything.

That night was the first time I'd seen inside the place beyond the front desk, the first time I'd been in since I'd grassed up Norrie Fletcher eight years earlier and been dismissed as a trouble maker and a timewaster, and it was a shock to be treated with a semblance of civility. Maybe the police force had moved with the times or maybe it was because Candy was with me and brought with her that missing element of respectability. Next-Door Candy looking out for me exactly as she always had, even though she hadn't lived next door since we'd graduated from sweet ciggies to Marlboro Light. The duty sergeant took my statement in an interview room which stank of stale coffee and bad breath, and said the liaison officer would be in touch with me. The police were efficient-verging-on-pleasant. I couldn't fault them. All the same, I couldn't help a bit of attitude slipping into their files.

It's true that some of the details in my statement were slightly fabricated but considering:

what you had had to witness

all the promises Gary had taken his fists to

I wasn't going to quibble over technicalities.

We spent that night and several nights that followed at Candy and Kelly's. There must have been something up with Kelly because I didn't hear a single word from him about me being a charity case or any of his usual nonsense. But him being polite like that, it was more disconcerting than him shooting his mouth off. Because it was pity that kept him quiet. And so,

even though we had a bedroom each

a bathroom just for the two of us

extra posh with a walk-in shower and a separate bath

entirely renovated by yours truly

I spent every hour where I wasn't at work trying to find us somewhere else to live. That's when I discovered it is next to impossible to find a rental when you have stitches across your forehead, especially in a small town where housing stock is limited and your face is marked with trouble. *Nothing against you or your wee girl*, we were told as one landlord after another turned us down. The joke was I couldn't even get a rental on the static caravans where my ma had lived. To camouflage the damage and spare the assumptions, Candy gave me some of her fancy foundation in a glass bottle that she buys from Alnick's, the department store in Strathmirton. In the end, though, I found it simpler just to stick a plaster over the stitches until the red in them faded.

Alnick's Department Store. Funny what sparks at the mention of things. Makes me think of the days when I still lived with Aunty May. Me and Cands and had a history with that shop.

As a teenager Cands had

still does

a major addiction to the gunk from the beauty counters immediately inside the entrance. She never had to fork out a penny though. The second we swanned through the doors, the makeup ladies would be falling over themselves give her a free try out, desperate to test their products on the perfect living advert. Weren't so keen to dole it out to the scabby lassie who looked about 12 though.

No choice but to entertain myself while Candy was getting her face done, so I'd see how many times I could:

walk up the down escalator

run down the up escalator

do a complete circuit in the revolving door

before the security guard intervened. There was always the assumption that I was shoplifting.

Pretty poor kind of shoplifter, I'd go, if their escape is trapped by a spinning door.

Same thing every time. We'd leave the store with a warning for me and a full night-club face for Cands and her pockets loaded with samples. We'd do my makeup on the bus home with Candy's freebies, nip back to Dysart Street for a snack to line our stomachs before we met the others in the pub, crossing fingers toes everything that we'd be out again before Aunty May got home from work. If we timed it wrong, if we bumped into her as we were leaving, Aunty May would grab my face with her bony fingers making indents in my cheeks so deep they were practically holes, and spit her disgust. *You can clean that muck off your face right now.* And she'd get on a roll. Going on how she was ashamed of me, because:

my miniskirt was indecent

she'd seen belts with more coverage

my top was cut too low

did I think I had a cleavage to show off?

my heels were too high

I was tottering like a prostitute

but she spent her whole life being ashamed of me so her comments didn't touch me. Once I'd escaped her bony grip, I'd pull my mouth, my cheeks into contortions to ease up the pain and maybe it accidentally might have possibly appeared like I was screwing my face at my aunt. And I'd be like *Come on Cands, we're out of here* and Auntie May would *young lady* me and say she was sick to the back teeth of my attitude and that, come to think about it, I needn't bother coming home that night.

'Bye Mrs Cowan,' Candy would say but her politeness was always lost in the crash of the door slamming behind us.

But anyway, I digress.

Two weeks after the fight and we were still freeloading at Candy's with not much more than the clothes we were slobbering around in but it felt wrong to go around and collect our stuff from Granny Jean's when she was still in hospital. I don't know why I bothered showing the woman any consideration. The day she got discharged from Strathmirton District General, I got a call at work from Alan who owned the video shop below her flat, saying Jean was flinging our clothes and shoes out of her living room window, screeching blue murder as much as her wired jaw would allow, and that a crowd had gathered for the spectacle. I had to promise Mr Grinstead from room 13 that I'd set up the DVD recorder when I got back, and that yes it would definitely be before Neighbours started, and I sprinted from Sunnybank to the High Street with the SCART lead still in my hand. Next thing, I'm scrabbling around in the middle of the road, grabbing our belongings, shoving them into a holdall that had been helpfully flung on top of the pile, and the audience are gawking like it's some twisted game show. Your granny leans out of the window, would have spat on me if her mouth had been working, and flings one of my work boots right in my face. And I'm starting to panic because my tool box is in there and I can't afford to sacrifice it, and you are due back from school with Candy any sec and I really

really

don't want you to see either of us like this. What I should do is take a breather and persuade her to let me up to collect our bits but my aggravation runs a short-cut through common sense and before I know it I'm like *Don't strain yourself now, Jean. I wouldn't want you to do yourself an injury*. Which obviously makes your gran extra livid and her curses start hissing like acetylene from a blow torch, and she

drops a spanner

drops a screwdriver

drops a hammer

drops my voltage detector

and me, I'm darting around under the window trying to catch them and then she empties the rest of the box, loose change from a money box, and the riches rain down on me and I have to shield myself from the clatter with my arm. I was gutted. I couldn't even tell you how much of my stuff was dented or lost or rolled down a drain. But if the woman hated me enough to do that, she was close to murder by the time your dad got his day in court.



A comparison of Granny Jean and Aunty May:

Jean: hated me

May: also hated me

Jean: not directly related to me (in-law doesn't count)

May: also not directly related to me (aunt through marriage doesn't count)

Jean: we had nothing in common

May: we both detested my ma

Verdict: what is it with the women in my life?

In the old days, your dad would have had access to the best criminal law minds to defend him but his stint with Norrie Fletcher's gang had ended before you were born. Instead he landed a duty solicitor who bragged that he would get Gary off with no more than a slap on the wrist. Granny Jean was making out that her injuries were accidental and the solicitor was counting on the fact that as a witness she was marginally less dubious than me. I think we all were if I'm honest. I tied myself in knots trying to work out how

if

me and your dad would untangle once it was all over.

It turned out, though, that my account of the night in question was as plausible as the truth. More so, it transpired, because with the blood and the stitches and the police report from Accident and Emergency at Strathmirton District Hospital on the extent of her injuries and the arm-length inventory of his previous form, your dad got his first short stint behind bars.

The one time I went to see your dad, I asked him if he wanted you to visit. *Don't let her come here*, he goes. I swear there were tears in his eyes.

You didn't want to visit anyway. You were adamant. Sensible and more grown up than me. Eight years old going on thirty eight. But that didn't stop my guilt. It was my fault your dad had been missing from the first seven years of your life and it was my fault he would be missing from the rest of it. I always kept tabs on him, though

in case you ever

in case I wasn't

you know

but you always made out it was ok and, anyhow, you had Candy and Kelly (*even though I know you don't like him, Mum*). And Jay.

But we'll come to him later.

We couldn't stay with Candy and Kelly forever. Once it was clear that your dad wasn't getting released, we moved into Aunty May's. It wasn't exactly an ideal arrangement for any of us. The best I could hope for was that she'd be mainly too far gone to notice we were there.

It was weird to be back living in the house I'd been brought up in. More than weird that the Aunty May we had moved in with almost

not quite

made me miss the Aunty May I'd known as a kid. You only ever knew her as a whisper of the woman who raised me, collapsed in on herself in her recliner, her head too heavy for her neck, her pink scalp kind of obscene under her scanty hair, and her chin stuck to her chest with dribble. But my childhood was soaked into the wallpaper, the carpet, the brown furniture of the house in Dysart Street. It leaked out sometimes when I wasn't paying attention. At night, her reflection trapped in her dressing table mirror glared at me. A melodramatic tut if I put the laundry away without ironing. A martyr's sigh if I didn't wash the dishes straight off. The viscous tug of a hairbrush in my knots or the rip of the elastic band catching hairs in my pony tail when I was getting ready for work. Relentless petty acts to remind me that I wasn't hers, that she'd been lumped with me, that I had ruined her life. The new Aunty May was too weak to summon her spite, too confused to channel it in my direction and too numbed by daytime telly to bother. She was so quiet those days, so subdued, it was hard to believe that her distinctive voice

so crisp and cutting

a local legend for its put-downs

always primed for a gratuitous lecture

had been left quivering somewhere in the back of her throat.



‘You coping?’ Candy asked one night. We were upstairs in Dysart Street, in the bedroom which had been Auntie May’s with you asleep in my old room, drinking gin straight from the bottle and sorting through shoeboxes of bank statements and phone bills, old photographs and postcards. I even found a box file of all my school reports which was pretty astonishing considering Aunty May had done her best to convince me that she had taken no interest in my education whatsoever. For a second, I was daft enough to imagine that there might be other surprises hidden there, that even at this late stage I might find some answers to the secrets that Aunty May and my ma had kept from me. But I found no more info about where I’d come from than what I already knew

ie zilch nada nothing

and instead was left with the nausea and vertigo that always came hitched to hope.

‘Totally,’ I said taking a swig, and Candy put her arm around me the way that no one else was allowed and I coughed away the alcohol burn and listless tears, and then together we carted sacks of junk mail out to the bins in the back court that we’d set alight with our first firework displays some twenty odd years earlier and Candy made the bin lid talk to make me laugh and in some ways, it felt like she was still Next-Door Candy and we were five six seven again, and some ways, it felt like I’d never lived in that house, that I didn’t recognise the kid who had and that I didn’t know whether I wanted to or not.

I knew it was stupid to think that I might find something out about my dad hidden in Aunty May's shoe boxes but I couldn't help myself. It was a habit pre-programmed that I didn't know how to wipe. I'd be at it since I was a kid. Me and Candy used to devote hours to finding him. We were absolutely obsessed. Always investigating, forever coming up with candidates to test and eliminate.

When you think about it, it's bizarre that I spent my childhood on a mission to discover who my dad was, considering that in all the pics that form a record of my life

the ones in Candy's photo albums

the ones we found in Aunty May's shoe boxes

it is my ma's absence that marks them. Her absence was as visible as the water stains that yellowed and crinkled half of the old shoebox pics because I'd known she existed since before I could speak. My dad, on the other hand, even his absence wasn't properly there. It was a rumour. A whisper. A tattle of gossip on the lips of Aunty May.

I remember one time when we were nine, me and Cands took the bus to Strathmirton on a mission to find him. It was a tip-off from Aunty May that started it all. Just because a vase got smashed when I was round at Candy's, there was the automatic assumption as per that it was my fault. Which it was, as it happens, but I still resented being taken for granted. 'She's the Devil's daughter, that one,' Aunty May goes to Candy's mum in place of an apology 'I don't know what to do with her.'

It was the most concrete lead we'd had. After lengthy discussions, Candy and I came to the conclusion that the Devil was far more likely to hang out in Strathmirton than East Logie, given Aunty May's description of the big town as Hell on Earth. We borrowed the fare from one of Candy's brothers, who made us sign a contract to pay him back with interest

a penny on day one



doubling each day until we paid it back

until the only way to settle up was to win the football pools

but you had to be 18 for that

and gambling was forbidden in Aunty May's house

and Candy played

mainly

by the rules

so that was never going to happen.

Cands and I cycled from her place to Newton Lane and shoved the bikes under the hedge at the bus stop next to the water tower. The bus driver questioned us when we slapped our coins on his plastic coin tray but by then I was already an expert liar and had no trouble persuading him that we were off to visit our nan in hospital and that our mum would meet us there. Lying for the sake of it was pretty mundane for me but I got a real thrill out of pretending to be Candy's sister.

Problem was that once we got off the bus at the bus station,

vehicle exhausts coughing diesel

hydraulic doors sighing with trapped wind

there was no sign of anyone who resembled the Devil.

'He's not here,' Candy whispered.

I grabbed her hand. 'It's ok. I've got a plan.' I didn't have a plan and Candy knew it.

But as long as I blagged it, we would be fine. We followed the other passengers into town and were drawn like moths to the fluorescent lights of the Nethergait shopping centre and the menu at Wimpy. I was all for blowing what was left of our cash on a burger and reverse charge calling Candy's mum to come and collect us, but Candy said her mum would kill us

and barred the entrance to stop me spending my bus fare home. We did two complete circuits of the shopping centre

Saturday shoppers in their hundreds

jostling us with carrier bags of clothes and shoes

but no sign of the Devil there either. Outside, the roads criss-crossed in unfamiliar patterns and instead of finding our way back to the bus station, we found ourselves in the queue for the matinee performance at the Odeon. Inside, I gave Candy a quick lesson on how to attach herself to another family and dive past the ticket collector while he was still counting heads. We found each other by the light of the adverts and trailers and sat through the film. I'd written it off as too young for us but it didn't take long to be sucked into the technicolour tragedy and beauty of Bambi's rereleased life. At the end we watched to the very last line of the credits and both of us pretended that we hadn't been crying when we resurfaced, blinking into the daylight.

One day when I was feeling charitable, I took Aunty May's wedding photo downstairs to brighten up her room. The picture was taken outside a town hall somewhere in the north of England

whatever the town was that Aunty May was from.

In it, she looks like a Vogue model from the 1920s or something, not like the shop girl from the 1960s that she actually was. Uncle Robert is totally dapper in his suit and skinny tie. He doesn't even reach her shoulder but, somehow, they are still managing to gaze into each other's eyes and no sign of a cricked neck. It's cute, actually. Kind of dreamy, the pair of them. Like there is no one else in the world.

*Get that man out of my sight*, Aunty May goes when she sees it. Seemingly she hadn't forgotten how much she loathed him.

Carers came in three times a day to wipe and brush and spoon feed Aunty May. It was ironic that I worked in a nursing home where she would have fitted right in, but my work didn't make me qualified to take care of her. For a start, I wasn't hands on with the residents at Sunnybank — my job involved mending the lift or mowing the grass or checking the roof slates. And also, even if I'd been that way qualified, I don't think I'd have had it in me. Imagine if I'd discovered that the woman I had been so frightened of turned out just to be made of saggy flesh and teeth that were kept in a jar!

On the rare occasions that Aunty May joined us in the real world, her timing was totally out. Generally, she thought you were me. Clearly she had no idea who I was, but there were still enough brain cells firing for her to realise that I was someone that she ought to know. Someone she had a total twist in her knickers about. If the carers had ever had the time to lean in and listen to the filth spewing from her mouth, they would have wondered what hideous crime I'd committed on her. Scrubber, whore, man-eater she called me and worse. Finally, it makes some kind of perverted sense the day I hear her croak, 'I don't know what he ever saw in you.'

What a joke. As if Uncle Robert would ever have dared to have an affair.

So there we were. Your dad in jail, Aunty May losing the very last of her marbles and me back living in the house I'd escaped at 15. Whichever way I turned, all I could see was how makeshift everything was. You were shooting up and I didn't have a clue how to protect you from the future. I kept thinking how optimistic I'd been when your dad came back into our lives. How we'd buried the past. How we were going to build a proper family with stability, security, normality. All the time, trying to pour cement to make the shaky walls secure. But you can't put foundations under a house after it has already been built.

Now, everything had crumbled. You and me, we were left living in the wreckage and I couldn't see how to get out. I wanted more for you than the life I'd had

no dad and a waste of space mother

beholden to Aunty May for her reluctant charity

or the life you'd had when you were little

no dad and a waste of space mother

beholden to Candy for her unconditional charity

but things felt so bad, so insecure that I was starting to believe that Candy and Kelly

or even your Granny Jean

could offer you more than I could, not seeing my ma in the shadow of my thoughts.