'Gripping, twisty and beautifully written'

Erin Kelly

MISSING, PRESUMED

72 HOURS TO FIND HER...

SUSIE STEINER

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‘The end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started’

Little Gidding, T. S. Eliot

17 December 2010
Saturday

Manon

She can feel hope ebbing, like the Christmas lights on fade in Pound Saver. Manon tells herself to focus on the man sitting opposite, whose name might be Brian but could equally be Keith, who is crossing his legs and his foot bangs her shin just where the bone is nearest the surface. She reaches down to rub it but he's oblivious.

'Sensitive', his profile had said, along with an interest in military aircraft. She wonders now what on earth she was thinking when she arranged it, but then compatibility seemed no marker for anything. The last date with a town planner scored 78 per cent – she'd harboured such hopes; he even liked Thomas Hardy – yet Manon spent the evening flinching each time his spittle landed on her face, which was remarkably often.

Two years of Internet dating. It's fair to say they haven't flown by.

He's turned his face so the light hits the thumb prints on his glasses: petroleum purple eggs, the kind of oval spiral they dream of finding at a crime scene. He's talking about his job with the

Rivers Authority while she looks up gratefully to the waiter who is filling their wine glasses – well, her glass, because her companion isn't drinking.

She's endured far worse than this, of course, like the one she travelled all the way to London for. 'Keep an open mind,' Bri had urged. 'You don't know where the man of your dreams might pop up.' He was tall and very thin and he stooped like an undertaker going up the escalator at Tate Modern – giving it his best Uriah Heep. Manon thought that escalator ride was never going to end and when she finally got to the top, she turned without a word and came straight back down, leaving him standing at the summit, staring at her. She got on the first train out of King's Cross, back to Huntingdon, as if fleeing the scent of decomposing flesh. Every officer on the Major Incident Team knew that smell, the way it stuck to your clothes.

This one – she's looking at him now, whatever his name is, Darren or Barry – isn't so much morbid as effacing. He is talking about newts, she's vaguely aware of this. Now he's raising his eyebrows – 'Shopping trolleys!' – and she supposes he's making a wry comment about how often they're dumped in streams. She really must engage.

'So, one week till Christmas,' she says. 'How are you spending it?'

He looks annoyed that she's diverted him from the flow of his rivers. 'I've a brother in Norwich,' he says. 'I go to him. He's got kids.' He seems momentarily disappointed and she likes him the more for it.

'Not an easy time, Christmas. When you're on your own, I mean.'

'We have a pretty good time, me and Col, once we crack open the beers. We're a right double act.'

Perhaps his name's Terry, she thinks, sadly. Too late to

ask now. 'Shall we get the bill?' He hasn't even asked about her name – and most men do ('Manon, that's a funny name. Is it Welsh?') – but in a sense it's a relief, the way he just ploughs on.

The waiter brings the bill and it lies lightly curled on a white saucer with two mint imperials.

'Shall we split it?' says Manon, throwing a card onto the saucer. He is sucking on a mint, looking at the bill.

'To be fair,' he says, 'I didn't have any wine. Here.' He shows her the items on the bill that were hers – carafe of red and a side salad.

'Yes, right, OK,' she says, while he gets out his phone and begins totting up. The windows are fogged and Manon peers at the misty halos of Huntingdon's festive lights. It'll be a cold walk home past the shuttered-up shops on the high street, the sad, beery air emanating from Cromwell's, and out towards the river, its refreshing green scent and its movement a slithering in the darkness, to her flat where she has left all the lights burning.

'Yours comes to £23.85. Mine's only £11,' he says. 'D'you want to check?'

Midnight and Manon sits with her knees up on the window seat, looking down at the snowy street lit by orange street lamps. Flakes float down on their leisurely journey, buffeting, tissue-light. The freezing draught coming in through the sash frame makes her hug her knees to her chest as she watches him – Alan? Bernard? – round the corner of her street and disappear.

When she's sure he's gone, she walks a circuit of the lounge, turning off the lamps. To give him credit, he was stopped short by her flat – 'Whoa, this is where you *live*?' – but his interest was short-lived and he soon recommenced his monologue. Perhaps, now she comes to think of it, she slept with him to shut him up.

The walls of the lounge are Prussian blue. The shelving on which the television stands is Fifties G-Plan in walnut. Her sofa is a circular design in brown corduroy. Two olive-green velvet wing chairs sit to each side of it and beside one is a yellow domed Seventies floor lamp, which she has just switched off at the plug because the switch is bust. The décor is a homage to mid-century modern, like a film set, with every detail of a piece. The scene for a post-ironic East German comedy perhaps, or *Abigail's Party*; a place absolutely bursting with taste of a charismatic kind, all of it chosen by the flat's previous owners. Manon bought the lot – furniture, lamps, and all – together with the property itself, from a couple who were going abroad to 'start afresh'. At least, that's what the man had said. 'We just want to shed, you know?' To which Manon replied, 'Shed away. I'll take the lot.' And his girlfriend looked around her, swallowing down her tears. She told Manon how she'd collected all of it, lovingly, on eBay. 'Still, fresh start,' she said.

Manon makes her way to the bedroom, which at the point of sale was even more starkly dramatic: dark navy walls with white-painted floorboards and shutters; a whole bank of white wardrobes, handle-less and disappearing into themselves. You had to do a Marcel Marceau impression to discover the pressure points at which to open them.

The previous owners had a minimalist mattress on the floor and a dishevelled white duvet. Under Manon's tenure, however, this room has lost much of its allure: books stacked by the bed, covered with a film of dust; a cloudy glass of water; wires trailing the floor from her police radio to the plug, and among them grey fluff and human hair, coiling like DNA. Her motley collection of shoes makes opening the cupboards additionally tricky. She kicks at a discarded pair of pants on the floor, rolled about themselves like a croissant, throws off her dressing

gown (100 per cent polyester, keep away from fire and flame) and retrieves, from under the bed-clothes in which he has incongruously lain, her flannelette nightie.

Up close he smelt musty. And vaguely sweet. But above all, foreign. Was this her experiment – bringing him close, out of the world of strangers? Was she trying him out? Or smelling him out, as if intimacy might transform him into something less ordinary? People who know her – well, Bryony mainly – disapprove of her emotional 'immaturity', but the fact is human beings are different up close. You find out more through smell and touch than any chat about newts or shopping trollies. She becomes her mammalian self, using her senses to choose a mate. She's read somewhere that smell is the most efficient way of selecting from the gene pool to ensure the best immune system in offspring. *So she puts out on the first date!* She's a scientist at the mating frontline.

In her darker moments – and she can feel their approach even now – she wonders if she is simply filling an awkward gap in the conversation. Instead of a ghastly shuffling of feet and 'well, that was nice, but we should probably leave it there', she forces the moment to its crisis. It's like running yourself over to avoid shaking hands.

In the bathroom, she picks up her toothbrush and lays along it a slug of toothpaste, watching herself in the mirror as she brushes. Here is the flaw in her argument: the sex was pretty much a reflection of the night's conversation: all newts and shopping trollies and a definite lack of tumultuous waterfalls or even babbling brooks, if you wanted to pursue the waterways analogy.

She looks at the springy coils of her hair, bobbing ringlets, brown mostly but with the odd blonde one poking out like a rogue pasta twirl – *spit* – unruly and energetic, as if she is some

child in a playground, and discordant now – *spit* – that she is on the cusp of her forties. She can feel herself gliding into that invisible – *gargle* – phase of womanhood, alongside those pushing prams or pulling shopping wheelies. She is drawn to the wider fittings in Clarks, has begun to have knee trouble and is disturbed to find that clipping her toenails leaves her vaguely out of puff. She wonders what other indignities ageing will throw at her and how soon. A few centuries ago she'd be dead, having had eight children by the age of twenty-five. Nature doesn't know what to do with a childless woman of thirty-nine, except throw her that fertility curve ball – aches and pains combined with extra time, like some terrifying end to a high-stakes football match.

She wipes a blob of foam off her chin with a towel. Eventually, he asked about her name (her moment in the sun!) and she told him it meant 'bitter' in Hebrew, and she lay back on the pillow, remembering how her mother had squeezed her secondary-school shoulders and told her how much she'd loved it; how 'Manon' was her folly, much as her father objected. A Marmite name, you either loved it or loathed it, and her mother loved it, she said, because it was 'all held down', those Ns like tent pegs in the ground.

There was silence, in which she supposed he wanted her to ask about his name, which she couldn't really, because she wasn't sure what it was. She could have said, 'What about yours?' as a means of finding out, but by that point it seemed unnecessary. She had smelt him out and found him wanting. Her mind was set on how to get him out of her flat, which she did by saying, 'Right then, early start tomorrow,' and holding open her bedroom door.

She smoothes out the pillow and duvet where he's been and pushes her feet down under the covers, reaching out an arm

from the bed to switch on the radio, with its sticker reminding her it remains 'Property of Cambridgeshire Police'. A cumbersome bit of kit, and no one at detective sergeant rank is supposed to have one at home, but it is not a plaything. It is the method by which she overcomes insomnia. Some rely on the shipping forecast; Manon prefers low murmurings about road traffic accidents or drunken altercations outside Level 2 Nightclub on All Saints Passage, all of which she can safely ignore because they are far too lowly for the Major Incident Team.

'VB, VB, mobile unit to Northern Bypass, please; that's the A141, junction with Main Street. UDAA.'

Unlawfully Driving Away an Automobile. Someone's nicked some wheels. Off you pop, Plod. The voice begins to sound very far away as Manon's eyelids grow heavy, the burbling of the radio merging into a pebbly blur behind her eyes. The clicks, switches, whirring, receivers picked up and put down, colleagues conferred with, buttons pressed to receive. To Manon, it is the sound of vigilance, this rapid response to hurt and misdeed. It is human kindness in action, protecting the good against the bad. She sleeps.

Sunday

Miriam

Miriam is washing up, looking out over the bleak winter garden – the lawn smooth as Christmas icing. She'd have liked a bigger garden, but this is about as good as it gets in Hampstead.

She's thinking about Edith, her hands inside rubber gloves in the sink, washing up the Le Creuset after lunch's monkfish stew. The pancetta has stuck around the edges and she is going at it with a scourer. She's so lucky, she thinks, to have a girl, because girls look after you when you get old. Boys just leave home, eventually going to live cheek by jowl with their mothers-in-law.

And then she curses herself, because it goes against all her feminist principles – requiring her daughter, her clever, Cambridge-educated daughter, to wipe her wrinkly old bottom and bring her meals and audio books, probably while juggling toddlers and some pathetic attempt at a career. Her own career hadn't recovered from having the children, those three days a week at the GP surgery feeling like time-filling in between bouts of household management.

Feminism, she thinks, has a long way to go before men take on the detritus of family life – not the spectacular bread and butter pudding, brought out to 'oohs and aahs' (which always has the whiff of 'Man makes pudding! Round of applause!'), but ordering bin liners and making sure there are enough light bulbs. When the children were little, Miriam felt as if she were being buried under sand drifts from the Sahara: music lessons, homework folders, kids' parties, thank-you notes, fresh fruit and meter readings. It silted up the corners of her mind until there was no space for anything else. Ian sidestepped it with strategic incompetence so that his mind remained free to focus on Important Things (such as work, or reading an interesting book). It was one of the biggest shocks of adult life – the injustice – and no one had warned her about it, certainly not her mother, who felt it was only right and proper that Miriam take on the more organisational tasks in life because she was 'so *good* at them'. She'd better not think about it now, or she'll get too angry.

She lifts the Le Creuset onto the white ceramic draining board, wondering why people rave about the things when they are almost un-lift-able and scratch everything they touch. Ian hasn't made it home for lunch so she's eaten the stew by herself, then struggling to lift the damn heavy pot in order to pour the remains into a Tupperware box and struggling also not to feel hard done by. She's alone so much these days, in part because when the sand drifts receded, along with the departure of the children, they left an excess of time, while Ian's existence maintained its steady course, which was essentially Rushing About Being Important. She has to fight, very often, not to take umbrage at the separations and also its converse, to retain some sense of herself in their togetherness. Wasn't every marriage a negotiation about proximity?

The temptation she feels during periods when he's very busy and she's left alone a lot is to become defiantly independent, but then it's hard to let him back in. She has to make herself de-frost in order to come back together. She wonders how far Edith has travelled on this rather arduous journey or whether she has even embarked on it with Will Carter. When you are in your twenties, the problem of dependence and independence can be swiftly resolved by ditching your boyfriend, and she has a feeling Edith might be on that brink.

She squeezes out a cloth and wipes the kitchen surface in slow, pensive swirls. It is a slog, marriage. How could she tell her daughter that without making it sound worse than it is? Built on hard work and tolerance, not some idea of perfection as Edith might have it. Miriam has had the thought in the past that Will Carter's handsomeness is an emblem of Edith's belief in perfection – or at least her belief in appearance. She hasn't realised yet that looks count for nothing, that how things appear are nothing next to how they *feel*.

If she were here now, Edith would no doubt spout forth – rather self-righteously – on all the shortcomings that she, herself, would *never* put up with in a marriage, as if there were some gold standard from which she could not fall. She gets that from Ian, of course. Well, life isn't like that. It is full of compromises you never thought you'd make when you were young. Marriage is good – that's what she should say to Edith: that you get to an age when your attachments are so solidly stacked around you, like the bookshelves that reach to the ceiling in the lounge, and they are so built into the fabric of your life that compromise seems nothing next to their dismantling. Yes, she thinks, running the cloth under the tap and enjoying the warmth of the water through the rubber gloves, with age comes the recognition that one is grateful for love.

Looking out again to the garden and squeezing the cloth, she thinks back to their evening at the theatre last night; all their clever friends who loved to talk about books and philosophy. She'd wondered if they had more money and more sex (they couldn't possibly have *less* sex) and better second homes or whether they were, perhaps, (well, one shouldn't hope for these things) secretly miserable and having affairs.

'Are we all here?' Ian said, on the snowy pavement outside the Almeida theatre. 'Ready to set off?' Miriam looked at him, her handsome husband with his impeccable scarf in a cashmere double-loop. He was commanding – well, that's Ian of course – but also vaguely distracted. Work, probably – it so often took over his mind. That was the cost of being married to The Great Surgeon and she noticed, then and there, a swell of pride.

They set off towards Le Palmier restaurant, talking and laughing, arms looped in arms. Miriam walked by herself, though she was at the centre of the group. She'd been crying – *Lear* always made her cry – and her body had a rather pleasurable spent feeling of release, while her stomach growled in hot anticipation of dinner. Someone took her arm – it was Patty, pressing her body close to Miriam's. She got a blast of Patty's perfume – Diorissima – even over the cold.

'I thought that was just wonderful, didn't you?' said Patty.

'Completely wonderful. I feel wrung out, in a good way,' said Miriam. Thought Gloucester was a bit shouty though.'

'Yes, quite. Why can't they just *say* their lines? There's a sort of Shakespearean delivery, which is so irritating. Ah, here we are. I'm starving.'

They handed their coats to the maître d', who bowed slightly while draping them over his arm and then hung them in a wardrobe. Their table was broad and round and the spotlights twinkled off the glasses and highlighted bright circles on the

starchy white tablecloth. Miriam felt happy with her very cold glass of something dry and Argentinian (Ian being the wine expert). She watched him across the table, feeling in his breast pocket and taking out a pair of reading glasses with leopard-print frames – a pair she'd bought for £4.99 at Ritz Pharmacy on Heath Street. He put them on the end of his nose in order to read the menu, while Roger talked away at him and Ian laughed at something Rog was saying. The glasses were small and feminine on his patrician face.

'Darling,' she said to him, reaching an arm across the table, but with her head turned to Patty, who was talking about the play.

'Oh yes, sorry,' he said and took off the glasses to pass them to her so she could read her menu. 'Come on, everyone, are we ready to order? Nothing will come of nothing, after all.'

And everyone laughed.

Xanthie told the table she'd been re-reading Boccaccio's *Decameron*. 'It's so witty! I mean, really, I've been laughing out loud on the bus.' And the way she said 'bus' was like some glorious egalitarian experiment. Their laughter around the table had the tinkle of money in it.

Now Miriam is peeling off her rubber gloves as her thoughts return to her daughter, as if to a favourite refrain – her beloved topic. Yes, she hopes for more for her daughter than the things she anticipates for her. Now she frowns. It doesn't make any sense. She wants Edith to fulfil her daughterly duties (thoughtful Christmas presents, regular phone calls, eventually home-cooked meals when Miriam's in her dotage) yet at the same time she wants to liberate her; she wants for her total professional freedom and a truly feminist husband who empties the dishwasher without being asked. And mingled in, she wants her daughter to share in her suffering, the same sacrifices, and

she doesn't know why. Is it a hunger for fellow feeling or a fear that Edith might succeed where she failed? That Edith might actually throw off the shackles when Miriam . . . well, she's spent thirty years effectively wiping the kitchen surfaces and doling out antibiotics for cystitis. It's so *complicated*.

She reaches into the cupboard under the sink for a dishwasher tablet, thinking about her beautiful daughter who is still young, who has a flat belly and tight little arms, who can still carry off a bikini, who has yet to fall in love, and she feels pricked with envy. Oh, Will Carter is all right, but he's a bit up himself and she suspects he isn't The One. Edith still has that ahead of her – all the pleasure and pain of it. Lucky thing. The older you get, the less choppy life becomes. But Miriam misses it too – the lurching outer edges of feeling that accompany youth. Nothing is exciting any more, though to listen to Xanthie, you'd think reading Boccaccio's *Decameron* on the bus was euphoric. Perhaps it is only Miriam for whom life has become duller and sadder, like the silver hair on her head.

'Where've you been? I woke up and you weren't here,' she says, smiling at Ian who is coming through the kitchen doorway carrying an orange Sainsbury's bag and bringing the cold in with him. He is wearing his polo-neck sweater and tracksuit bottoms. He has that curious inability that the upper classes have to wear casual clothes convincingly. She wonders if he emerged from his mother's vagina in a sports jacket.

He comes over to her at the kitchen counter, kisses her cheek and she smells the winter on him. 'Got up early and went to the office – I've got a ton of paperwork hanging over me.'

'Poor you,' she says. 'Shall I warm you up some stew?'

'No, no. I'm fine.'

'I can microwave it; it's no trouble.'

'No, I had a sandwich. Edie call yet?'

'Not yet, no.'

'Tell you what, let's light a fire. It's freezing outside.'

'Good idea, that'd be lovely,' she says, and the house feels complete again with him in it. His smell, his bigness, his company. Married love has been a revelation to Miriam – not the lurching outer edges of feeling, no, but the sheer depth and texture of it. All her memories – thirty years of them, especially the really vital ones, like having the children – involve him. And loving the children. He is the only person on earth who can talk about the children with the same exhaustive gusto that she does, as if they are both examining Rollo and Edith at 360 degrees. And she is wrong to be quite so consumed by feminist rage. It's not as if he does *nothing*: the cup of tea, for example, he brings her in bed each morning; his final checks on the house at night (doors locked, lights off); the way he'll run upstairs to find her slippers when she sighs exhaustedly and says, 'Darling, would you . . . ?' These are small, repetitive acts of love.

They spend the afternoon in a Sunday-ish homely fug, the log fire spitting and then dying down in the lounge. It brings back the smoked, countrified scent of Deeping, where they will spend New Year. (Must buy light bulbs for Deeping, she makes a mental note to herself.) Miriam could watch those flames for hours until her face is cooked and her eyes dried out. Ian is in and out of his study, some Mozart piano concertos drifting through the house from his iPod dock. She potters about too, tidying up mostly, putting some washing on or reading the 'Review' section of the newspaper.

In the evening the doorbell goes and Miriam opens it to the florist delivering 300 stems of scented narcissi and the fresh holly wreath for her front door. This and her mulled wine spice, and the clove oranges she makes will fill the house with

festive perfume. Just as she is closing the door against the night, the phone rings and she answers it, still holding the narcissi like an opera singer at her curtain call.

'Calm down, Will . . . No, she's not here . . . Since when?' she says, as Ian joins her in the hallway, slightly stooped and craning to hear. 'So you've just got home?'

'What's he—' says Ian but Miriam frowns at him to shush.

'Well, she's probably out at a friend's or gone to Deeping,' she says into the phone while looking into Ian's eyes.

Miriam listens, placing the flowers onto the hallway table, then she cups her hand over the phone's mouthpiece. 'He says he found the door open and the lights on. She's left everything in the house – her keys, her phone, her shoes. Her car's outside. Even her coat's there.'

Ian nudges her aside to take the phone off her. 'Will? It's Ian. When did you last speak to her? Have you called Helena?'

She watches him frowning at the hall table, listening. Then he says, 'Right, call the police. Straight away, Will. Tell them what you've told us. Then call us straight back.' He puts the receiver down.

'No,' says Miriam, looking into Ian's eyes and shaking her head, her hand clamped over her mouth. 'No, no, no, no.'