

THE
SILENCE

SUSAN ALLOTT



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In a basement flat in Hackney, the telephone rings. It's two in the morning. Isla Green stands in the hallway, pyjamaed, barely awake. She is entirely sober. A good thing, if a little fragile; a little surprising. No tide of shame waits for her, no bloom of pain. She feels clean in her skin, like a schoolgirl. She can taste toothpaste in her throat.

On the third ring she reaches for the receiver. It's Dom's voice she will hear if the answerphone picks up, and his voice will set her back. It's three months since he left and every day she means to wipe the message. She lifts it to her ear just in time.

'Hello?'

It takes her a second to place him. 'Dad?'

'I didn't wake you, did I?'

She doesn't know why she's gripping the receiver. Why a trill of fear has sounded in her head. It's good to hear her dad's voice, which is more Australian than her own these days. He's

got the time difference wrong, that's all. At the end of the street a police siren starts its upward loop and cuts out. Its blue light flashes silently.

'What time is it there?'

'I don't know.' She stretches her free arm above her head, arching her back. In the eight weeks and three days since her last drink, she has been sleeping like the dead.

'Shall I call back later?'

'It's fine. Is everything ok?'

'I wanted to talk to you,' he says. 'Your mother doesn't know I'm calling. She went into town.'

She sits down on the carpet. This is the thing she couldn't put her finger on, that she should have known was wrong from the start. Her dad hasn't called her in the decade she's lived in London. It's her mum who makes the phone calls, leaves messages on the answerphone. Her dad writes letters. He hates the phone.

'What is it?'

'I didn't want you to hear it from your mother. She hasn't taken it well. I wanted to tell you myself.'

She drops her head between her knees. She thinks, if he's going to die, I'll need a drink. Cold, practical thoughts: she will finish this call and she will put her clothes on. There's an all-night takeaway at Clapton Pond where they sell six-packs of beer under the counter.

'The police came to see me,' he says.

'The police?'

'They're looking for a woman I used to know.'

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Isla lifts her head. She's sweating. She runs her hand through her damp hair. 'What woman?'

'She was a neighbour of ours, back when we first moved to Sydney. You wouldn't remember.' He coughs. 'It looks like she's been missing a long time. Nobody's seen her in thirty years.'

The police car crawls past outside, swinging its blue light across the walls.

'What's this got to do with you?'

'The police think her disappearance is suspicious,' he says. 'They think I was the last person to see her, before she went missing.'

'And were you?' She tries to sound calm. 'Were you the last person to see her?'

'I can't have been. She moved away with her husband. I told them there must be some mistake.'

He lights a cigarette, exhales. She thinks of Dom, smiling behind a flame.

'Is she dead?'

'They think she must be.' His voice is quiet. A bad news voice. 'There's no record of her at all, in all that time. Her father died last month, left her most of his estate, but she hasn't come forward. Her brother's been asking around, trying to trace her. He turned up a few things that the police are looking into.' He laughs unconvincingly. 'One of those things is me.'

Isla finds a line of stubble along her shin. She runs her thumbnail over it, back and forth, until it hurts.

'The cops are searching through their records,' he says. 'They keep records of people who died without being identified.'

‘What if it turns out she was killed?’

‘That would be the worst-case scenario, love,’ he says. ‘That would mean a murder enquiry.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Look, I don’t want you to worry.’

‘But if you were the last person to see her –’

‘I wasn’t.’ He shouts it. ‘I told you, I wasn’t.’

Isla rests her head back on her knees. In the part-light she sees unopened post on the doormat, soiled with the tread of her lace-up boots. Her bike, leaning against the wall, its basket stuffed with junk mail. On a hook by the door, the smart coat with the belt that she wears to the office. All of it familiar, unchanged.

‘Are you there?’

‘I’m here,’ she says.

‘Sorry to snap at you.’

‘Dad.’ She feels hot, but her skin is cold. Her pyjamas cling to her. ‘What was her name?’

He hesitates. ‘Mandy.’

Mandy. Isla smells a hot iron against cotton sheets. Eucalyptus.

‘She looked after you a few days a week, before you started school. Back when your mum was working at Hordern & Sons.’

‘She had a washing line strung out across her yard,’ Isla says, remembering as she speaks. ‘I used to hand her the pegs when she hung out her laundry.’

‘Did you?’

Isla can’t recall Mandy’s face but she remembers being in her

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presence. Being liked by someone she liked. An easiness about her company that made other people seem less than her.

‘Your mother wants to cancel the party for my birthday,’ he continues. ‘She’s been upset since the police called round. She can’t put it out of her mind.’

A door slams in one of the flats upstairs. Raised voices. Isla sits up. She understands now why he called.

‘Does she believe you, Dad?’

‘I don’t think so. No.’

She cradles the phone. New connectors are opening in her brain these past few weeks, fuelled by mineral water and sleep. Unbidden memories startle her on the bus; on the escalator at Bethnal Green; as she sits in traffic on the Essex Road. Her life has an awful clarity now the protective, hungover fug is gone. She sits cross-legged on the carpet, in the middle of her life, in its crisp, central crease. She is thirty-five years old, tall and lean; striking, people say. A body that has been neglected but is still strong, surprisingly resilient. A thick head of hair, cropped short at the back; blonde strands on top that grow up and out, like a dandelion. A woman whose life took a nosedive, who is getting herself together, who needs to be careful. Whose father is silent at the end of the line, asking her wordlessly to come home.

‘I could come back for a couple of weeks,’ she says. It’s the only thing to say. ‘I could help with the party. Get Mum to see sense.’

‘Could you?’

‘I think so. I’m owed some leave.’

‘That would be wonderful, Isla.’ His voice has lifted. ‘What about the apartment? Aren’t you buying a place?’

The apartment. A two-bed on Sinclair Road with high ceilings and a Juliet balcony. It’s beautiful, well-located and well over budget. They close in three weeks. She rubs her forehead with the heel of her hand. ‘I can deal with it over the phone,’ she says.

‘Can they spare you at work?’

‘They’ll have to.’

‘Are you sure this is a good time for you?’

No, she is not sure. She doesn’t want to be in Sydney, where there are empty hours to fill and people she hasn’t seen in a decade. She wants to sleep and work and hide.

‘I’m sure,’ she says. ‘It’s about time.’

Rain falls hard over London as the sun comes up. Isla lies on the surface of sleep, refusing the dreams that want her to be four years old again, walking through rooms that are familiar but not home. She starts the day, dresses herself. Her dad’s voice is loud and scared in her head, playing on a loop, acquiring a strain of panic. She makes coffee, tells herself she does not need anything stronger. She is over-thinking this whole thing. He is not lying.

Sydney, 1966

Mandy supposed Steve must always have opened his gifts this way. A ham-fisted rip-and-crunch of the paper; a quick kiss and a 'thanks darl', and that was it. No ceremony. No comment on the way she'd lined up the stripes on the gift wrap. He did appreciate the gift itself, mind, so long as it was something practical that he could use or wear, that wasn't too different from anything he already owned.

Nothing new there, except Mandy found it aggravating this year, and wanted to thump him. She knew she was being unreasonable. Why would he notice the paper? He was the same man she'd been married to for seven years. And it was daft that she'd done that with the stripes. She'd become a woman who was uptight about gift wrap. How had that happened?

She sat beside him on the bed and turned her gift from him around in her hands. A bigger box than she'd expected. She picked at a piece of tape with her thumbnail and peeled it,

slowly, free of the gift wrap. She did the same with the tape at the other side of the box.

‘Why don’t you just rip it, Mand? We’ll still be here for New Year’s at this rate.’

She gave him a look. ‘I feel like taking my time.’

Turning the box onto its side, she reached her hand under the wrapping and managed to slide it free, without any tearing of the paper or damage to its hollow structure. Steve picked up the paper, as if to crush it, but thought better of it and put it back where it was.

‘A watch!’ She hadn’t expected that. ‘You got me a watch?’

He sat up straight, arranging the pillows behind him, and smiled. ‘Let’s see it on you.’

She fixed the tiny buckle and turned the watch so its face was centred. It was designed for a woman with bony wrists. A frail, skeletal woman who couldn’t lift the weight of anything bigger. It made her arm look huge and muscular. She hated it.

‘There. Fits nicely. Just snug,’ she said. First lie of the day: ‘I love it.’ Second lie: ‘What a nice surprise.’

Steve shifted onto his side and pulled her down to lie next to him. ‘Merry Christmas,’ he said. He reached around and stretched his hand over the flesh of her backside. ‘I knew you’d like it.’

She moved closer against him so he couldn’t see her face. Her nightdress crackled with static against his pyjamas. ‘You dark horse,’ she said into the warm meat of his neck. ‘I thought you were getting me the necklace I showed you.’

‘What necklace?’ He rolled her away from him and pushed her hair from her face. ‘You didn’t mention a necklace.’

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‘It’s all right.’ She brightened her voice. ‘Sorry. It’s a beautiful watch. I didn’t mean –’

His eyes moved side to side, trying to remember. ‘You didn’t say anything about a necklace.’

‘I showed you, is all. In my catalogue. A gold chain with a pendant.’ She held a finger to the base of her neck, where the pendant might have hung. ‘I showed you a while back. It had a small letter A for Amanda. A pendant.’

He shook his head. ‘You have to spell it out, Mand. If you want a necklace, tell me you want a necklace. You can’t expect me to pick up on a hint like that.’

She smiled, and pinched his face until he smiled back. ‘D’you like the jacket?’

‘I love it, darl. Good for the truck when I’m driving at night.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

She turned her back to him and picked up the gift wrap the watch had come in, red with gold bells, still holding its box shape. From this position on the bed she could see one of Steve’s socks beside the wash basket, where he must have thrown it and missed. He’d left his new jacket on the carpet at the foot of the bed, and the striped paper was torn, strewn across the floor. The Christmas cards she’d arranged on the chest of drawers had fallen sideways, and the water needed changing in the glass vase where she’d arranged a few orchids earlier in the week. The rest of the house could do with a once-over. She ought to get moving.

‘I could take it back,’ he said, sitting up. ‘The watch. I kept the receipt. I think.’

‘Don’t be daft.’ She balled up the gift wrap in her hand and wondered how long she could pretend to like the watch. Not much past Boxing Day, she figured. ‘I’m hungry.’ She swung her legs over the side of the bed. ‘You take a shower and I’ll get breakfast going.’

‘No rush, is there?’ Steve patted the sheets where she’d lain and looked up at her hopefully.

It was only nine-thirty, according to the Timex, and already she felt like a bitch. She ought to get back into bed with him, she knew that. Start the day again. Morning sex was a tradition she could get behind, as a rule. More her bag than Christmas. But the fun had gone out of it lately, and she couldn’t bring herself to fake it.

‘You know it’s been weeks, since we—’

‘It has not.’ She tightened her grip on the ball of paper. ‘It has not been that long,’ she said, smiling through the third lie of the day. ‘You’re exaggerating.’

‘Come back to bed, Mandy.’

‘The Walkers are coming over before lunch. I need to get the house clean.’

‘It’s nine-thirty, Mand—’

‘I know the bloody time.’

‘So are we still trying then or not?’

Her heart thumped at the question, the starkness of it in the morning light of their bedroom. It was typical of Steve to come out and say the thing that needed saying; the thing she was trying to pretend was not a thing.

‘Course we are. Not right now, is all.’

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‘My timing off again?’

‘Don’t go on about it, Steve. Just – leave it. Please.’

He thumped a pillow with the palm of his hand and his face flushed a dark red. He didn’t look at her. ‘Righto,’ he said, to the pillow. ‘I’ll take a shower.’

In the kitchen she leaned against the counter, rubbed her hands over her face and let out a sigh. So warm in here. She turned to look out at the yard, opened the window and got a burst of noise from the cicadas. The heat was taking a grip; you could feel the strength of it, even at this hour. The cloud had burned off already. It was going to be a belter of a day.

She nudged the back door open and sat on the step to light a cigarette. Holding her arm out, she tried to like the watch, to reconsider it. It was a nice enough watch, if you could forgive it for not being the necklace she’d wanted, and for being too tiny for an ample woman like herself. It had a gold-plated strap and a small oval face, with notches where the numbers should be and a dial on the side which moved the hands around. She’d have preferred a watch with numbers on it, since the whole point was to tell her the time. Why would you leave the numbers off a watch?

But that wasn’t it. She disliked the way it sliced time into prim, breathy little ticks. She’d never noticed seconds before, and now they were twitching around the dial, interfering with her natural rhythm. That was why she’d never owned a watch, come to think of it. She liked to do things as and when she was ready, in her own time. The watch was trying to push her around.

She heard him singing in the shower. He was good-natured, her Steve. Didn't take the hump for too long. She sat back against the door frame and smoked her cigarette, watching the horizon, a fine blue line just darker than the sky, visible through the tea trees at the back of the yard. She could hear the waves from here, whenever the cicadas took a breather: a low boom; quiet; another boom. That was a rhythm she could appreciate.

'You'll need to give those up, Amanda.' Steve was standing in the kitchen with a towel around his middle, dripping on the lino. His skin was paler from the neck down, and the hair on his chest was blacker than the hair on his head. 'Meant to be bad for you. For your lungs. I read an article in the *Herald*.'

'I know. I read the same article.' She turned back to the yard. 'You have the odd ciggie yourself.'

'Let's pack 'em in together, then.'

'Since when did you get to be a health fanatic?'

He sat down next to her, holding onto the towel, knees together. It was a squeeze, the two of them side by side on the back step. His skin was damp, soaking through the sleeve of her nightdress. She could see the tracks of the comb through his hair.

'It can be bad for the baby too, they reckon.' He watched her crush her cigarette into the ashtray. 'Bad for the unborn baby.'

'I didn't read that part.'

'It said it can cause the baby to be born too small.'

She looked out at the yard and managed not to say that she thought a small baby sounded better than a big one, from a

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logistical point of view. 'I'll give up if I get pregnant,' she said. 'How's that?'

'Mandy.' He reached out and held her hand. 'You'll make a great mum, you know.'

She moved her thumb back and forth across the palm of his hand and kept her mouth shut. He didn't know. He could hope, was all. If she turned out to be anything like her own mother, she'd be a disaster. Mandy had a growing fear, which she would not speak out loud in case it became irreversibly true, that she was very much like her own mother. Her own mother, for example, would have snubbed a kind, well-intentioned gift from Mandy's father, would have returned it the minute the shops opened. Mandy looked down at the Timex on her wrist and dropped Steve's hand, hoping he'd go off and get dressed now, leave her alone for a bit.

He didn't budge.

Steve also didn't know that Mandy had not yet stopped taking her daily contraceptive pill. Every morning, as she popped the small, white tablet from its foil bubble, she told herself this was a temporary situation. When she was ready for motherhood, she would stop taking the Pill and get herself pregnant and that would be that. The time would come, surely, when she would long for children; she would need to be pregnant and be unable to think of anything else. Louisa next door had told her she'd felt that way before she fell pregnant with Isla. She'd felt ready, and that readiness had been all-consuming. Mandy would have that feeling one of these days, Louisa had told her. But Louisa didn't know either.

Mandy leaned in against Steve and felt his chin on her head; his good, strong arms around her. She let her head rest against his shoulder. Shoulders like an anvil, her Steve.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ she said.

Fourth lie of the day. Mandy knew that this lie, the Baby Lie, was the one that made everything else a lie, and made it pointless counting the small, polite ones. She also knew, in a quiet, buttoned-down place, that she was falling out of love with her husband. And she wasn’t fighting it, this fading out, this dimming of the light. Because it made the lie easier to tell.

‘I was thinking,’ he said. ‘I might set off on this job first thing tomorrow. Get it over with.’

‘Oh?’ She managed, she hoped, not to sound delighted. ‘First thing?’

‘Might as well crack on. Won’t be any easier if I leave it.’

‘You’re probably right, love.’ She could smell the sea spray in the air. ‘You’ll be gone a few days, then?’

‘Fraid so, darl. You know I’d sooner be home with you.’

‘I know.’ She stood and put her cigarettes in the drawer under some serviettes. ‘I do know that.’