

## **A Slow Fire Burning**

some of us are made to be carrion birds  
& some of us are made to be circled

Emily Skaja, My History As

*Blood-sodden, the girl staggers into the black. Her clothes are dishevelled, hanging off her young body, revealing expanses of pale flesh. Shoe lost, foot bleeding. She is in agony, but the pain has become inconsequential, eclipsed by other sufferings.*

*Her face is a mask of terror, her heart is a drum, her breath is the stricken pant of a fox gone to ground.*

*The night's silence is broken by a low hum. A plane? Wiping blood from her eyes, the girl looks up at the sky and sees nothing but stars.*

*The hum is louder, lower. A car changing gear? Has she reached the main road? Her heart lifts, and from somewhere deep in her gut she summons the energy to run.*

*She feels rather than sees the light behind her. She feels her shape illuminated in the black and knows that the car is coming from behind her. It's coming from the farm. She turns.*

*She knows, before she sees, that he has found her. She knows, before she sees, that it will be his face behind the wheel. She freezes. For a second she hesitates, and then she leaves the road, takes off running, into a ditch, over a wooden fence. She scrambles into the adjacent field and runs blind, falling, picking herself up, making no sound. What good would screaming do?*

*When he catches her, he takes handfuls of her hair, pulls her down. She can smell his breath. She knows what he is going to do to her. She knows what is coming because she has already seen him do it, she saw him do it to her friend, how savagely he..."Oh, for god's sake", Irene muttered out loud, snapping the book shut and slinging it onto the charity shop pile. "What utter drivel."*

# One

Inside Laura's head, Deidre spoke. *The trouble with you, Laura, she said, is that you make bad choices.*

*Too fucking right, Deidre.* Not something Laura expected to say or even think, but standing there in her bathroom, shaking uncontrollably, blood pulsing hot and steady from the cut to her arm, she had to admit that imaginary Deidre was bang on the money. She leaned forward, her forehead resting against the mirror so that she wouldn't have to look herself in the eye, only looking down was worse, because that way she could watch the blood ooze out of her, and it made her woozy, made her feel like she might throw up. So much blood. The cut was deeper than she'd thought, she ought to go to A&E. There was no way she was going to A&E.

Bad choices.

When at last the flow of blood seemed to slow, Laura took off her t-shirt and dropped it on the floor, she slipped out of her jeans, dropped her knickers, wriggled out of her bra, inhaling sharply through her teeth as the metal catch scraped against the cut, hissing, "fuck fuck mother of fuck".

She dropped the bra on the floor too, clambered into the bathtub and turned on the shower, she stood shivering under the paltry trickle of scalding water (her shower offered a choice of very hot or very cold, nothing in between). She ran the tips of her wrinkled fingers back and forth over her scars: hip, thigh, shoulder, back of skull. *Here I am*, she said quietly to herself. *Here I am.*

Afterwards, her forearm wrapped ineffectually in reams of toilet paper, the rest of her wrapped in a threadbare towel, sitting on the ugly grey pleather sofa in her living room,

Laura rang her mother. It went to voicemail, and she hung up. No point wasting credit. She rang her father next. “You alright chicken?” She could hear noises in the background, the radio, Five Live.

“Dad,” she felt a lump rise to her throat and she swallowed it.

“What’s up?”

“Dad, could you come round? I... I had a bad night, I was wondering if you could just come over for a bit, I know it’s a bit of a drive but I...”

*No, Philip.* Deidre, in the background, hissing through clenched teeth. *We’ve got bridge.*

“Dad? Could you take me off speaker?”

“Sweetheart, I...”

“Seriously, could you take me off speaker? I don’t want to hear her voice, it makes me want to set fire to things...”

“Now, come on, Laura...”

“Just forget it, Dad, it doesn’t matter.”

“Are you sure?”

*No I’m not no I’m not no I’m fucking not.* “Yeah, sure. I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

On her way to the bedroom, she stepped on her jacket which she’d dropped in the hallway in her rush to get to the bathroom. She bent down and picked it up. The sleeve was torn, Daniel’s watch still in the pocket. She took the watch out, turned it over, slipped it over her wrist. The toilet paper around her forearm bloomed scarlet, her limb throbbing gently as the blood pulsed out of her. Her head swam. In the bathroom, she dropped the watch into the sink, tore off the paper, dropped the towel on the floor. Climbed back under the shower.

Using a pair of scissors to scrape beneath her fingernails, she watched the water running rosy at her feet. She closed her eyes. She listened to Daniel’s voice asking, *what is*

*wrong with you?* and Deidre's voice saying *bridge, Philip, we've got bridge*, and to her own.

*Set fire to things. Set fire. Set fire set fire set fire.*

## Two

Every second Sunday, Miriam cleaned out the toilet. She had to lift the (always surprisingly, unpleasantly heavy) cassette out of the little toilet at the back of the boat, carry it through the cabin and out onto the towpath, and from there a full hundred yards to the loo block, where the waste had to be tipped out into the main toilet and flushed away, the cassette rinsed out to clear whatever remained. One of the less idyllic parts of narrowboat living and a task she liked to carry out early, when there was no one else around. So undignified, to ferry one's shit about among strangers, dog-walkers, joggers.

She was out on the back deck, checking she had a clear run – that there weren't any obstacles on the path, bicycles or bottles (people could be extremely anti-social, particularly late on Saturday nights). It was a bright morning, cold for March, though white buds on glossy new branches of plane and birch hinted at spring.

Cold for March, and yet she noticed that the cabin doors of the neighbouring narrowboat were open, just as they had been the night before. So, that was odd. And the thing was, she'd been meaning to talk to the occupant of that boat, the young man, about overstaying. He'd been in that mooring sixteen days, two full days longer than he was entitled to be, and she'd intended to have a word with him about moving along, even though it wasn't really her job, not her responsibility, but she – unlike most – was a permanent fixture around here and that imbued her with a particular sense of public-spiritedness.

That was what Miriam told the Detective Barker, in any case, when he asked her, later on, *what was it made you look?* The detective was sitting opposite her, his knees almost touching her own, his shoulders hunched and back rounded. A narrowboat is not a comfortable envi-

ronment for a tall man, and this was a very tall man, with a head like a cue ball and a perturbed expression, as though he'd been expecting to do something else today, something fun, like taking his kids to the park, and now he was here with her, and he wasn't happy about it.

"Did you touch anything?" he asked.

Had she? Touched anything? Miriam closed her eyes. She pictured herself, rapping smartly on the window of the blue and white boat. Waiting for a response, a voice, or a twitch of a curtain. Bending down, when no such response came, her attempt to peer into the cabin thwarted by the net curtain coupled with what looked like a decade's worth of city and river grime. Knocking once more and then, after a few moments, climbing up onto the back deck. Calling out, *hello? Anyone at home?*

She saw herself, pulling on the cabin door, very gently, catching as she did a whiff of something, the smell of iron, meaty, hunger-inducing. *Hello?* Pulling the door open all the way, climbing down the couple of steps to the cabin, her last *hello* catching in her throat as she took it all in: the boy - not a boy, a young man, really - lying on the floor, blood everywhere, a wide smile carved into his throat.

She saw herself sway on her feet, hand over mouth, pitching forward for a long, dizzying moment, reaching out, grabbing the counter with her hand. *Oh, god.*

"I touched the counter," she told the detective. "I think I might have held onto the counter, just there, on the left-hand side, when you come into the cabin. I saw him, and I thought... well I felt... I felt sick." Her face coloured. "I wasn't sick though, not then. Outside... I'm sorry, I..."

"Don't worry about it," Barker said, his eyes holding hers. "You don't need to worry about that. What did you do then? You saw the body, you leant against the counter...?"

She was struck by the smell. Underneath the blood, all that blood, there was something else, something older, sweet and rank, like lilies left too long in the vase. The smell and the

look of him, impossible to resist, his beautiful dead face, glassy eyes framed by long lashes, plump lips drawn back from even, white teeth. His torso, his hands and arms were a mess of blood, his fingertips curled to the floor. As though he was hanging on. As she turned to leave, her eye snagged on something on the floor, something out of place – a glint of silver mired in sticky, blackening blood.

She stumbled up the steps and out of the cabin, gulping mouthfuls of air, gagging. She threw up on the towpath, wiped her mouth, cried out, “Help! Somebody call the police!”, but it was barely seven-thirty on a Sunday morning, and there was no one around, the towpath was still, the roads up above quiet too, no sounds save for the throb of a generator, the squabble of moorhens ghosting gently past. Looking up at the bridge above the canal, she thought she might have seen someone, just for a moment, but then they were gone, and she was alone, gripped by paralysing fear.

“I left,” Miriam told the detective. “I came straight back out of the boat and... I called the police. I vomited, and then I ran to the boat and called the police.”

“Okay. Okay.”

When she looked up at him, he was looking around the room, taking in the tiny, neat cabin, the books above the sink (*One Pot Cooking, A New Way With Vegetables*), the herbs on the sill, the basil and coriander in their plastic tubs, the rosemary going woody in a blue-glazed pot. He glanced at the bookcase filled with paperbacks, at the dusty peace lily sitting on top of it, at the framed photograph of a homely couple flanking their big-boned child. “You live here alone?” he asked, but it wasn’t really a question. She could tell what he was thinking: fat old spinster, tree hugger, knit-your-own-yoghurt, curtain-twitcher. Poking her nose into everyone else’s business. Miriam knew how people saw her.

“Do you... do you get to know your... neighbours? Are they neighbours? Don’t suppose they really can be if they’re only here for a couple of weeks?”

Miriam shrugged. “Some people come and go regularly, they have a patch, a stretch of the water they like to cover, so you get to know some of them. If you want to. You can keep yourself to yourself if you like, which is what I do.” The detective said nothing, just looked at her blankly. She realised he was trying to figure her out, that he wasn’t taking her at her word, that he didn’t necessarily believe what she was telling him.

“What about him? The man you found this morning?”

Miriam shook her head. “I didn’t know him. I’d seen him, a few times, exchanged... well, not even pleasantries, really. I said hello or good morning or something like that, and he responded. That was it.”

(Not *quite* it: it was true that she’d seen him a couple of times since he’d moored up, and that she’d clocked him right away for an amateur. The barge was a mess – paint peeling, lintels rusted, chimney all skew – while he himself looked much too clean for canal life. Clean clothes, white teeth, no piercings, no tattoos. None visible, in any case. A striking young man, quite tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, his face all planes and angles. The first time she saw him, she’d said good morning and he’d looked up at her and smiled and all the hair stood up on the back of her neck.)

She noted this, at the time. Not that she was about to tell the detective that. *When I first saw him, I got this strange feeling....* He’d think she was a nutcase. In any case, she realised now what it was, what she’d felt. It wasn’t premonition, or anything ridiculous like that, it was *recognition*.

There was an opportunity here. She’d had that thought when she first realised who the boy was, but she’d not known how best to take advantage. Now that he was dead, however, it felt as though this was all meant to be. Serendipity.

“Mrs Lewis?” Detective Barker was asking her a question.

“Ms,” Miriam said.

He closed his eyes for a moment. “Ms Lewis. Do you remember seeing him with anyone? Talking to anyone?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “He had a visitor. A couple of times, perhaps? It’s possible he might have had more than one visitor, but I only saw the one. A woman, older than he was, closer to my age, perhaps in her fifties? Silver grey hair, cut very short. A thin woman, quite tall I think, perhaps five eight or nine, angular features...”

Barker raised an eyebrow. “You got a good look at her, then?”

Miriam shrugged again. “Well, yes. I’m quite observant. I like to keep an eye on things.” May as well play up to his prejudices. “But she was the sort of woman you’d notice even if you didn’t, she was quite striking. Her haircut, her clothes... she looked *expensive*.” The detective was nodding again, noting all this down, and Miriam felt sure it wouldn’t take him long to figure out exactly who she was talking about.

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Once the detective had gone, officers cordoned off the towpath between de Beauvoir and Shepperton, moving along all the boats save his, the crime scene, and hers. At first, they’d tried to persuade her to leave, but she made it clear she’d nowhere else to go. Where were they going to house her? The uniformed officer she spoke to, young, squeaky-voiced and spotty, looked perturbed by this shifting of responsibility, from her shoulders to his. He looked up at the sky and down at the water, up and down the canal and back to her, this small, fat, harmless middle-aged woman, and relented. He spoke to someone on a radio and then came back to tell her she could stay. “You can go back and forth to your own... uh... *residence*,” he said, “but no further than that.”

That afternoon, Miriam sat out on the back deck of her boat in the pallid sunshine, taking advantage of the unusual quiet of the closed-off canal. With a blanket pulled around her shoulders and a cup of tea at her elbow, she watched the policemen and the scene of crime

officers scurrying back and forth, bringing dogs, bringing boats, searching the towpath and its borders, poking around in the murky water.

She felt oddly peaceful, given the day she'd had, optimistic almost, at the thought of new avenues opening up before her. In the pocket of her cardigan she fingered the little key on its keyring, still sticky with blood, the one she'd picked up off the floor of the boat, the one whose existence she'd withheld from the detective without even really thinking about why she was doing it.

Instinct.

She'd seen it, glinting there next to that boy's body – a key. Attached to a little wooden keyring in the form of a bird. She recognised it straight away, she'd seen it clipped to the waistband of the jeans worn by Laura from the laundrette. Mad Laura, they called her. Miriam had always found her quite friendly, and not mad at all. Laura, whom Miriam had witnessed arriving, tipsy, Miriam suspected, at that shabby little boat on that beautiful boy's arm, two nights ago? Three? She'd have it in her notebook – interesting comings and goings, they were the sort of thing she wrote down.

Around dusk, Miriam watched them carry the body out, up the steps and onto the street where an ambulance was waiting to take him away. Miriam stood as they walked past her, out of respect, she bent her head and said a quiet and unbelieving go with god.

She whispered a thank you, too. For by mooring his boat up next to hers and then getting himself brutally murdered, Daniel Sutherland had presented Miriam with an opportunity she could simply not allow to slide by: an opportunity to avenge the wrong that had been done to her.

Alone now and, despite herself, a little afraid in the darkness and strange quietude, she took herself into her boat, bolting and padlocking the door behind her. She took Laura's key

from her pocket and placed in it into the wooden trinket box she kept on the top bookshelf.

Thursday was laundry day. She might give it back to Laura then.

Or then again, she might not.

You never knew what was going to turn out to be useful, did you?