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Portfolio and Critical Essay

by

Emma K Marsden

Department of Music, Humanities and Media, University of Huddersfield.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

Masters by Research English Language and Literature

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SUPERVISORY TEAM

1st Supervisor:

Dr Michael Stewart (Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing)

2nd Supervisor:

Dr Jodie Matthews

Department of Music, Humanities and Media, University of Huddersfield.
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One

Something is wrong.

I’m sitting on the bathroom floor looking straight ahead but there’s something in my peripheral vision. Something my brain has registered but my eyes have not. I scan the room, my head not moving but my eyes sweeping across my line of sight. Left to right. Right to left. Up, down. Down, up and around. Scanning, scanning...Mirror? No. Taps? No. Towels? No. And then I see it.

My gaze settles on the toilet roll holder. It’s an open, chrome, vertical stand with a horizontal bar at the top where the current toilet roll is placed. The stand itself is used to stack toilet rolls, five of them. So with the one in use on the short horizontal bar; that should make six. Except it doesn’t. Not today. There are four white rolls forming a haphazard tower, queueing up for the worst job in the world, and one nearly finished on the top. Which makes five.

I use the remains of the roll on the bar to blow my nose and throw the used tissue in the toilet. I place the empty grey cardboard tube next to the door to remind me to put it in the recycling bin in the kitchen. Then I reach over to the cupboard and pull out two big, plump, brand new toilet rolls to add to the tower. First, though, I remove the other four rolls so I can place the new ones on the bottom so the old ones go on the top. Now I can get on with my morning.
One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, check.

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three thousand, check

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three thousand, check

‘Hey, Rach, you seen my car keys?’

‘Mm-mm.’ I’m still in the bathroom. I shake my head, my lips pressed together.

‘Rach, my car keys, have you seen them?’ Jake, pops his head around the bathroom door. I smile back at him, then frown.

Go away. Can’t you see I’m busy, I think, but I say nothing. I can’t disturb the routine.

‘Rach?’

Go away I say again in silence. One-

‘Rachel!’

‘No,’ I manage out the corner of my mouth, hoping he’ll go away.

One, one th-

‘What you doing Rach?’

CHRIST! Got to start again now. And I’m running out of time.

‘Nuthin’,’ I say, barely even moving my lips.

One

‘Why you talking funny?’
Oh for fuck’s SAKE. Just leave me alone to do this and then I can get on with my day. I’m going to have to do it six times now instead of three.

I point to my neck: ‘Sore throat,’ I mouth silently.

‘Oh, why didn’t you say, want me to get you anything?’

I shake my head again and feel bad for snapping in my head at Jake. It’s not his fault he has a total nutcase for a girlfriend, one who is always hiding things. Not keys, no, more like thoughts, emotions, the truth. He has no idea the stuff that goes on inside my mind. Good job really or he’d probably run a mile. But even as I think that I know he wouldn’t. Well not for that reason anyway. He’s a good man, not like some men, not like—

‘Here they are! OK babe. Hope you feel better soon, ring me if you want me to get you anything on the way home from work OK? I love you.’

He bends down to where I am sitting cross-legged on the bathroom floor and kisses me on the lips, ruffles my hair and then he’s gone.

I hear the front door slam, not out of anger, just because Jake is always in a rush and today he’s running late. I usually have to complete my morning ones by nine o’clock, it’s now eight minutes past. I know this because I have a clock in the bathroom. I have a clock in every room. I listen to the sound it makes Tick-tick. Tick-tock. It’s a good rhythm for me to do the rest of my chants. I count each time I say it on my fingers.

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, check (one)

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three one thousand, check (two)

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, check (three)
One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three one thousand, check (Wait, is that three or four? Damn, I’ve lost count).

I look down at my hand. I ignore the scars on my wrist and focus on the palm of my left hand. I have unfurled three of my fingers, my thumb is still bent at a right-angle, holding my index finger, which means I haven’t counted either yet. My fingers subconsciously track my counts, even when I consciously lose count. So that means I have two left. I do them quickly.

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three one thousand, check. One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, check.

Ahhh… I breathe a sigh of relief as the tension leaves my shoulders and I watch them lower in the full-length mirror propped against the wall opposite where I’m sitting. Keep meaning to hang it up. But I’m too lazy. And not very handy. Or domesticated. Jake offered but I keep saying I’ll do it.

I peer at my reflection, at my unkempt hair, my eyes still smudged with remnants of yesterday’s eye liner, or was it the day before’s? My hands and feet peep out of scruffy pyjamas that I probably won’t get out of until just before Jake returns home from work. They say love is blind— Jake should be legally registered by now if he still finds me attractive. They also say people like me are obsessively clean and tidy. Well not me. Why couldn’t I have had that bit instead of being scruffy, lazy and messy? I wish I could press a button and I would be fully washed, dressed and all the housework done.

I shuffle closer to the mirror, using my knees, feet and behind, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, too lethargic to get up. I peer into my eyes. Then I blink. Once then twice then three times until I reach twenty-six and then I stop. Then I swallow six times and haul myself up.
I turn the light off. Then on again. Then off again. Then on. I do this six times. Sometimes I can do things in twos or threes if I’m really struggling, otherwise it’s sixes, or any number with a six in it, like 16 or 26. The first time I bought a lottery ticket the numbers were: 2 6 16 20 26 and then for some bizarre reason I chose 36. It was only when I pulled the ticket out to check it later that night for the draw that I realised my monumental mistake. 22. I had forgotten about 22. I panicked and I prayed. I actually prayed to God that the number 22 didn’t come up, even though I’m an atheist. I could barely breathe when the numbers were called. What if, because of my error, I could have won £8 million. What if I couldn’t live with my decision and I killed myself?

Well it didn’t matter. None of my numbers came up. I didn’t even get one but I couldn’t get that number out of my head for months. 36. It meant that I had to get two lottery tickets every week, one with 22 and one without it. The whole thing unnerved me. I felt like it was a sign. I don’t know what of though. I’m just relieved it wasn’t 40. Even as I think this I know I couldn’t have gone up to the 40s; 4s are very unlucky. Ones aren’t though. So, if ever I had to pick a number without a 2 or a 6, if my life depended on it, I’d pick 10. Or 100.

I leave the bathroom and am halfway down the stairs then I come back up and do the lights again. Then I go back down the stairs, making sure I step over the last one. I never step on the top one or the bottom one. If I pass someone on the stairs in a public place, I have to say something and cross my fingers. I’ve had many strange looks from doing that but I can’t not do it; that would be worse. I’ve also had looks when someone’s asked me something and I have to swallow twice before I reply. Or when I pick a can of coke from the fridge in Greggs. Then put it back and pick an identical one just because it looks and feels better than the other one. I can spend half an hour in the biscuit section of the supermarket choosing between the McVities Digestives and the non-branded ones. I’ll finally choose one, walk all
the way around the store, then come back and swap it for another packet. I’ve had this for as long as I can remember. It did go away for a bit. But then it came back.

Sometimes I wonder if I am like this in my dreams. When I was little I wouldn’t talk to anyone whose name began with M. The teachers would tell my parents I was always ‘off’ in my own world’. I was, it’s just my world was assigning colours to all my classmates. Sarah is yellow. Becky is blue…I always wanted a green name, like Kate, but Rachel is a red name and I don’t like red. Fours are red.

One potato, two potato, three potato, four, five potato, six potato, seven—

I’m interrupted by Vivaldi. Not the man himself but the sound of the ringtone on my phone. Damn, God. Am I ever going to get anything done today? I’m tempted to ignore it but am reluctantly aware it could be something more important than my potato chant. That’s all I seem to do lately, reading, chanting, counting, lying…

It’s Jake.

‘Babe, I forgot, can you nip down Asda’s and get some food for Dave? I totally forgot and he needs it before eleven.’

I sigh. Ugh, now that means I’ll have to get washed. And properly dressed. And go outside. And pretend like I’m actually normal. Like I do when Jake’s away. Or when I have to go into uni to discuss my thesis on Sylvia Plath and her descent into madness. Or her ascent from it. Whatever. Not that I get anything done anyway. Because of how I am, if I get a book from the uni library, even if I only need to read one section, I have to read all the sections and all the references and every single page which takes me forever. But I can’t not do it.
I look at the clock in the bedroom: 9.59. How long have I spent doing all my utterly useless but completely essential crap? OK, well I better get a move on. Need some breakfast first though, I’m starving.

I go downstairs, my feet making contact with twelve out of the thirteen steps and head into the kitchen. Jake’s left the TV on. I don’t know why we have one in the kitchen but we do, just a small one. I’m about to turn it off when I am distracted by the human form of someone from Fraggle Rock appearing on my screen. Orange skin, yellow woolly hair, a crazed expression on his face and a mouth that makes me want to say parsimonious. I pause for a second. Why does his mouth remind me of this word? Oh, right, it’s because I once asked a friend what parsimonious meant, as I had just read it, and she said: ‘Tight as a duck’s arse’. When I see this creature’s mouth on TV it reminds me of this. Tight and puckered and…well not that I have seen a duck’s arse but just the analogy fits. Anyway, I turn the sound up and listen to the loon on the telly.

“I was down there, and I watched our police and our firemen, down on 7/11, down at the World Trade Centre, right after it came down…”

A sea of trucker cap-wearing, flag-waving, animated people cheer him on. What a douche. A 7/11 is a frigging store. What a complete donut. I listen again:

“One of the key problems today is that politics is such a disgrace. Good people don’t go into government.”

Got that one right, Donno.

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re not sending you, they’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists… And some, I assume, are good people.”
Well how very racist and, at the same time, magnanimous of you, Don.

Donald Trump. Even his name is a joke, I’d rather have Donald Duck running my country than Donald Duckbum. What the hell is America thinking? This Don is more dangerous than a mafia don any day of the week. Dangerous. A weak and yet powerful man. I have met those in my time. I recall a passage from King Lear. Even though I can be absent-minded, I have a photographic memory for certain things which I can recall verbatim:

"A base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue."

A lily-livered, action-taking knave. Hmmm.

I turn my attention back to the TV and Trump. Reality TV from hell, except it’s not ‘reality’, hyper-normal. It’s real. DT in HD. I watch him yell and pontificate, his face looks about to explode as he expels his poisonous gas all over the assembled crowds and through the TV set. He looks like he is inhaling helium, his face red, eyes narrowed, his small mouth stretched to capacity. I look at his tie. Doesn’t anyone see that? It’s too long and it’s hanging over his waistband, pointing to his crotch. It’s starting to annoy me. I can’t stop looking at his tie. I change channels. I key in any number, just to get rid of his tie and his face and his crotch.

He is dangerous. The world is dangerous. That’s why I like staying in. That’s why I do what I do. If I do my things then I will be ok, my family will be ok, everything will be ok.

*****
I open the cupboard and reach for a small white plate. There are two big plates and six small ones. I take it out, look at it, put it back and take out another one that looks identical, but it feels better than the other one. Then I change my mind and go for the original one. Then I swap it and go for the second one again. Yes. Good. I feel relief as I realise I chose the right one.

I remember the article. I cut it out and hid it in a kitchen drawer in the packet of blu-tack behind the dusters. I get it out and read it. I only have time to do it once today.

Decidophobia (from Latin decideo, "decision") is the fear of making decisions. Sufferers may fear most making a wrong decision. Decidophobes are overwhelmed by life choices. The cause of decidophobia is usually a bad experience with decision making in childhood, an unwise decision that led to devastating consequences or witnessing that result in another individual.

I think about all the bad decisions I have made in my life. Well not all of them as that would take weeks.

As a result, sufferers stick with the majority of the status quo. Some sufferers may feel slightly uncomfortable, become nauseated or begin to perspire when confronted with decision.

Many times, I have been paralysed, unable to make a decision, desperate for someone to make it for me. Should I do this or not? Should I get this or not? Should I say this or not? I don’t know, I can’t decide. Help me. Help. A terror. A blind panic over nothing.
At the opposite end of this spectrum, other people are so severely impacted by their fear of making a decision, that they can experience full blown panic and/or anxiety attacks with symptoms like heightened senses, rapid heartbeat, breathlessness, trembling, dizziness, feeling out of control, and intense perception of incoming disaster.

This is me in the cereal aisle. I wonder if I hold the world record for choosing cereal. I once spent 46 minutes choosing between granolas. I took my phone out a few times to pretend I was talking to someone so I didn’t look weird just standing there. Although I doubt anyone else was there long enough to even notice. I envy shoppers, people, anyone, even animals, who can just make a decision, no messing, no procrastinating, no dithering. This one please. Thank you very much. Job done.

It has the potential for becoming an irrational obsession which triggers excessive worrying. One can also trace the root of indecisiveness to lack of self-trust and self-confidence. Lacking the confidence for making the right decision poses as a deterrent to decision making, and more often than not, leads to no decision being made at all. Avoidance tactics like procrastination are frequently employed by indecisive people.

Hmm.

Decidophobia, if left untreated, would devastate the individual's life. There are several treatment options for decidophobia, including traditional talk therapy, self-help techniques, relaxation techniques, desensitisation therapy, exposure therapy, and hypnotherapy.

Forget that talking therapy shit. I don’t believe in all that stuff. Shame should not be shared. Hey, that’s hard to say, maybe I should save that one for later. Two sets of six. I tried
meditation but when it was silent all I could think about was counting or reciting the alphabet. Hypnotherapy sounds kind of interesting though. I just don’t know if my brain is capable of relaxing.

I put some bread in the toaster and try and sing all the words to my favourite song in my head before it pops up. I manage to do it. Another win. It’s a bit like gambling though as I never really win, I just challenge myself to do more things until I lose again. I butter my toast and glance back at the TV. A dark-haired girl with big eyes and big lips is talking to the camera. She sounds like she is holding her nose as she talks. I count how many times she says ‘like’ in between her other words. I want to try and count to six before she says it again:

“So, like…” okay, start again

“I am, like…” this is not going to go well, maybe I should reduce it to three…“sooo excited” (she pronounces it in an American accent, it sounds like ‘ex-hated’) “because [yes, three!] … like…” She pronounces it like lake. Well if you pronounce ‘lake’ with a southern accent, not a northern one. Well, a Manchester or Liverpool one maybe but not a Yorkshire one. Or a Newcastle one. God, Brain, shut up! I listen to what she has to say:

“Kanye is, like, releasing his new album today and it is just soooo, like… amazing.”

Not much by the sounds of it. In fact, when does Kim K ever have anything to say worth listening to? Although I guess some people aren’t interested in what she has to say. Some people call her a slut. I don’t though. I don’t because I am one. I recognise a whore when I see one. I just look in the mirror.

Anyway, I guess that’s not why she’s so, like, popular, though. so ‘awesome’. Or as Kim would say: ‘Assome’. Talking of asses. Kanye. Another narcissist nightmare. I follow his Twitter account just for a laugh. For if ever I’m feeling bored or want to be a spectator to someone with the biggest God complex in the world. I wonder what gems he is espousing
I decide to log in and find out. I am tempted to log into Tinder or OK Stupid too. Every day, I tell myself not to look and then I look. But today I haven’t got time.

I enter my username: RacheyRach_ and my password Rachel2626. Then I go on Twitter and type in Kanye West in the search bar. Only need to type Kanye really, I mean how many other Kanyes are there? One is enough, in fact one is too many. The first post I see says:

KANYE WEST @kanyewest Nov 30

What if Kanye made a song about Kanye

It has 57k retweets and 65k likes.

It is written in the third person.

The musings of a madman, just like TrumpBum. Even though I know I am a bit nuts, I always feel more sane when I read his posts. Saner than the 120,000 people who have liked these eight words. Actually, maybe it’s not 120,000 people. Maybe some of the same people who liked it retweeted it also. So maybe if I halve it. Then add a bit more. That’s still 60-100,000 people.

I think about all the petitions about refugees that need 100k signatures to get into parliament. I think about if all the people who liked and retweeted this profound statement by Kanye had put their name to something that could help and feed real people instead of help feed Kanye’s ego. I open my ‘favourites’ on my computer until I find the page. I click on it and a picture of a little girl appears. She is running, running away and running to. She is crying, her eyes scared, her mouth open. Around her are other children, other people, walking in a line across a windswept road, remote. The message below tells me she is a refugee and we need to help her. We need to donate. I touch her face on the screen twice and close my
eyes and count to 16. I look at the digital clock in the bottom corner of my screen 10:22. Then I swallow six times and close my computer.

******

I realise, because I have been messing about for so long, I am not going to have much time to make myself look decent. I finish my toast, leave the plate on the side and run upstairs to brush my teeth. I brush them in time, in my head, to the Blue Peter theme tune. I step into the shower singing as I scrub myself. No time to wash my hair, it will have to do. I think I hear a noise and turn the shower off. Nope, I must’ve imagined it.

When I get out of the shower, I notice I forgot to open the window and the bathroom mirror’s all steamed up. Drawn onto it is a heart. I look at it in confusion. How did that get there? Jake! He must have snuck back in, why didn’t he say anything though? Oh well, I’ll ask him when I see him.

Once I’ve towelled dry, I go into the bedroom to get dressed. I open my drawer and pick out a black top and black leggings. Then I put them back in the drawer and close it, then I open it and pull them out again. I do this four more times. I choose black underwear but I don’t bother with a bra. I only wear those when I go out to… never mind.

I pull my knotted hair into a ponytail, put on my watch and glasses, tap them both twice, grab my bag and go back downstairs, stretching to miss the last one. Hopefully I won’t see anyone I know. If I do I will just pretend I’m French or something and don’t understand them. Maybe they will think they’ve confused me with someone else.

I check my reflection in the hallway mirror, then check it in the lounge one, then upstairs to the bathroom one and then the bedroom. I do this two more times. I put on my shoes, remove them, put my trainers on, then take them off and pull on my boots. I shout
goodbye to Ronnie and Ralphi, my cat and teddy respectively, then grab my keys to open the door but it is already unlocked. Jake?

I walk through the door and then come back in take my boots off and do the mirror thing three more times. All this has made me out of breath so I find my asthma inhaler, take two puffs, put it down and go outside. I come back to touch the door handle just twice as I am running late. It is only when I am halfway down the road that I realise I forgot to take my meds. Again. That’s three days in a row now. Not only that, but I didn’t put the empty toilet roll in the recycling, it’s still by the bathroom door. Also, I have forgotten my phone. But I can’t be bothered to go back for them now. Plus, if I go back I might miss my bus. And if I miss my bus, my rituals will go into overdrive.

*****

After an uneventful bus ride, with me thinking about my meds and the toilet roll and hoping every time someone gets on that they don’t want to sit next to me or, God forbid, talk to me, I arrive at Asda. I check my watch: 10:49. Shit, I’m really pushing it now.

I grab a basket and run down the aisles until I find the food for Dave. I spend four minutes deciding which to get, pretty good for me. I choose the orange box. I put it in my basket, then take it out and put the next orange box in and head to the nearest checkout. One with an actual person on it. Those self-help checkout things are crap, always breaking down or asking for assistance. Self-help. That’s probably what I need in general, in life, I think. Maybe I should scan myself, see how much I’m worth. Big fat zero, that’s what the machine would say. Ha! I wonder if people can tell there’s something wrong with me.

As I am waiting in line, I look at the magazines on the rack next to the queue. The world’s most beautiful man and woman grace the cover, although I have never understood his appeal, hers yes, but not his. Brangelina. What a glorious portmanteau. I pick it up and add it
to my basket. I think about mine and Jake’s potential combinations. It pretty much boils down to Rake. I mull over the word ‘rake’ and ponder its connection to the past and hot coals.


******

I feel that familiar rising panic. That feeling where on the surface I am like a swan, gliding along, serene. But underneath the surface, the webbed feet are going ten to the dozen to keep afloat. This is what I am like, every day of my life. It comes in waves, flows and ebbs. Right now, it is worse. I know why. I know but I don’t want to think about it, don’t want to deal with it. But someone needs to tell that to my subconscious which keeps peeping its persistent face through the grey clouds again and again. So much repressed fear, pain and regret. And right now, it’s manifesting itself into a stupid, pointless, futile, but very real panic as all I can think about is that I should have got the other food that’s back on the shelf. The box I put back.

Whilst I am debating whether to run back and swap it and lose my place at the front of the queue, I glance down at my feet and see a small piece of paper, rectangular in shape, lilac in colour, with butterflies on it. Someone must have dropped it. I am compelled to pick it up. It’s stiff. It’s a business card. It’s hard to read the small script on the card but I scan it all, even the phone number and then again twice more:
I look at the number again. Two fours, two twos, one six.

I put the card in my purse. I don’t know why, but just holding it has given me this...feeling. Significant but I don’t know why. Made my heart race, but in a good way. I finish paying, tap the conveyor belt six times when no one is looking, stick the food in my bag and walk towards the exit. Just as I feel like I am home free out the door, I hear:

‘Rachel? Rachel McKay, it is you ain’t it?’

Oh God, I would recognise that shrill cockney voice anywhere. Marla. My ex-nosy neighbour from hell. Slowly I turn around and force a smile at the same time as I am greeted by the sight of her in all her chav glory. Marla is in her forties and she dresses like a woman in her twenties. From the nineties. The first thing I notice is her marker-pen eyebrows. Today she is wearing Ugg boots and a Juicy tracksuit zipped low to reveal a surgically-enhanced, sun-damaged cleavage. She has gold earrings and long red nails. Red. A sign of impending danger. Her blonde hair is piled on top of her head, showing dark roots, and her face is caked in make-up; brown contouring, fake lashes, too much blush. I find myself strangely transfixed by her wonky eyeliner as I say:

‘Oh, hi Marla. Fancy seeing you here. This isn’t your neck of the woods. How have you been?’ I sound casual yet every inch of me is on alert. She smiles and then feigns concern.
‘Well, love, never mind ‘ow I’ve bin, ‘ow ’ve you bin since all that, well, you know, all that business? Heard you went a bit, you know, funny, after.’ Her eyes dart up and down and all over me before settling back on mine.

Beam me up Scotty. I’m a celebrity get me the fuck out of here. How am I going to get out of this one? I compose myself, swallow twice, slowly and deliberately, and then lie through my teeth:

‘Oh, I’m fine, Marla, that was a long time ago, over two years in fact. Never even think about it now.’ Liar. ‘How are you, how are the kids?’

Marla looks at me, still checking me out, like an overly made up lie detector.

‘Well the kids are OK Rachel, you know. Jayden’s bin allowed back into school now, Hollie-Mai, well she’s just a terror as usual and our Kyle’s just come out.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know he was gay?’

‘Oh, he ain’t bent. Euch. I mean prison. The nick. Been in eighteen month.’ Her accent makes the word month sound like manff. ‘Weren’t his fault though, he was stitched up. He was—‘

As I watch Marla’s mouth move, I zone out, she can talk forever that one, doesn’t pause for breath. I nod politely at intervals but all I am thinking about is the word nick. Prison. Where he is, where Dan is.

‘You know he’s out din’t ya?’ She’s saying to me.

‘Kyle, yes, you said, that’s great,’ I say.

‘Nah, not Kyle love…’
She pauses and I can see she cannot wait to tell me whatever she is about to say. I feel a sense of doom in the pit of my stomach, which works its way up to my chest. I try to count to six but she is too quick.

‘It’s Dan, love. Dan’s out. He was released last week.’

Her mouth is still moving but I don’t hear anything else she says as I push past her out onto the street. My ears are rushing, my heart is pounding, my legs are shaking and I feel sick. I lean my head against the wall.

One, one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, check

One, one thousand, two one thousand, two one... three one thousand...

It’s no use, I can’t complete it, my head is spinning, none of my counting can save me now. I’m too late. It’s too late. He’s back.
Two

‘Rachel…. Rachel, love, you OK?’

I’m breathing fast. Shallow, hollow little breaths, it feels like someone is squeezing my chest— or standing on it. I’m panting, like a thirsty dog.

‘Rachel!’

I open my eyes and look up into a pair of heavily-lined clumpy mascaraed ones peering back at me. Marla. Ugh, she must’ve followed me out here. I reach for my inhaler in my bag, then remember it’s still sitting in my kitchen drawer. I reach for my phone and remember I forgot that too.

‘Your phone?’ I croak. ‘Can I borrow it?’ I take six deep breaths. One...

‘Course you can, darlin’,’ says Marla, handing me a silver phone.

Two... It has a pink cover with a picture of Britney Spears on it, pre-head-shaving melt-down. Three... The screensaver is Marla squinting and pouting to the camera. Four... Marla. Selfie Queen extraordinaire. She looks like a constipated Barbie. Five... on crack.

‘Are you phoning the doctor darlin’, you don’t look too well, is it your asthma?’ Six.

‘Yeahhh,’ I exhale. I was always taught to focus on something during a mini attack. Marla’s phone did the trick. My deep breathing is working and my panting is subsiding. ‘Could you give me a minute?’

‘Oh right, yeah, sure, I’ll just wait over ‘ere,’ she says, stepping away reluctantly and lighting up a cigarette.
I turn away from her, open my bag, get the number I need and call it. I know it will help me. I know it’s what I need. A woman answers and I hear the words I have been waiting for.

‘Dis is Juliana Da Silva. How can I help?’

*****

Ten minutes later and I’m in a taxi, en route to a woman I have never met before, hadn’t heard of an hour ago, but who I feel can help me. Why do I think this? Am I losing my mind? I clutch the card tightly in my lap with both hands fixed on it even though the card is small. I stare at it, at her name, over and over, then I close my eyes and allow myself to think about what Marla has just told me, I think about Jake. I think about me and how fucked up I am. I think about everything that is whirling through my mind.

By the time I arrive at Juliana’s address I am a confused wreck and wondering what the hell was I thinking? I’m in half a mind to tell the cab driver to turn around, but I don’t. I am here now. I must be here for a reason. I need help. Clarity. Something.

As I step out of the taxi and pay the driver, I look up and see, for the first time, my destination. Juliana Da Silva’s house. It’s old and Victorian with large bay windows and an unkempt front lawn with steps leading up to the door. Number 14. Hmm. There’s a gate leading from the pavement, straight onto a short path through the garden.

I open the gate, it creaks and I pause. It’s no good, I have to do it. I walk back out and then back through the gate, tapping it twice. Then I do it again and hope to God no one is
watching me. As I think this, I am aware of a curtain moving in one of the windows to my left. When I turn my head, the window looks empty, I don’t see anyone there.

I look at the steps— four. Shit. I walk up them slowly, counting each one, and take a deep breath as I reach the door and raise my hand to knock. With my hand in mid-air and before I have time to fully compose myself, the dark red door opens inwards, making me jump. I don’t think my heart has stopped racing since I left the store. I am about to high-tail it out of there, thinking maybe this old gaff is haunted, when I see her and, when I do, I know I have come to the right place. To the right person.

‘Ms Da Silva?’ I say.

The petite face peeking round the door looks at me with kind brown eyes and breaks into a wide smile and, as she speaks, I am instantly hooked. There is something about her, an aura, I can’t explain it. It’s strange. I feel like I have met her before, like I know her.

‘Juliana, please,’ says the face, accenting the last two syllables. ‘Come in.’

Her voice is husky, her accent sounds Spanish, maybe Italian. Latin. Exotic, silky, warm, inviting. She has olive skin and masses of sun-kissed, curly brown hair.

I step inside and see that the face is attached to a petite woman in her thirties who is wearing white jeans and a goldish-green-coloured Indian-style top, with silver and gold embroidery threaded through it. Around her neck is a gold crucifix pendant and patterned, multi-coloured beads: red, yellow, green, blue, white, pink. She is wearing lots of silver bracelets and ethnic looking earrings. She smiles again.

‘Please, follow me.’ I notice she has a silver stud in her nose.

I follow her down the echoing hall, painted a dark cerise colour, passing a small table covered with a tablecloth on top of which are some miniature crosses, a Virgin Mary and
some weird-looking figurines, together with unlit candles and beads like the ones around her neck.

We turn into a room on the left. It’s small and cosy, with a carpeted floor, dimmed lighting and a large round glass table in the middle with high-backed silver-coloured chairs tucked neatly under and around it. I don’t know what I was expecting, maybe a room full of salt lamps and candles, a black cat sat in the corner, but the room just feels cosy and…normal. Yet I still feel a sense of unease. It’s not Juliana, I don’t know what it is.

I hover awkwardly just for a second, fiddling with the strap on my bag, shifting from one foot to the other. I feel scruffy and self-conscious and realise it is months since I last cared about how I looked.

‘Please, Rachel, sit,’ she says. Or commands. She is so softly spoken, yet there is something about her that makes me want to obey. I pull out the chair nearest to me, it’s quite heavy. I sit down, place my hands together on the table and smile self-consciously. Then I start counting.

With a light movement, Juliana seats herself opposite me. She reminds me of a bird the way she moves, effortless and graceful, soundless except for the jingling of her jewellery. She smiles back at me. I widen my smile. I’m still counting, if I can just make it to 26…

Twenty-two, twenty-three-

‘Rachel…’

Her voice breaks my count and my concentration. Today is not my day. *You can say that again.* I am going to have to do a lot of extra counting today to make up for this, to make up for what Marla told me. As I think this my heart starts racing again. Juliana continues, her eyes watching me.
‘From your call, you say it ees urgent you see me. What ees it dat you need to ask me Rachel? Why are you here?’

She pronounces the word ‘you’ like ‘jew’. Her questions sound abrupt, brusque even, but her eyes and smile soften the directness. I don’t know where to start. Juliana smiles and then furrows her brow. She looks like she is about to say something and then changes her mind. She smiles again.

‘OK, well let me tell you a bit more about me, OK?’

I nod.

‘Like my car’ say and as I mention on dee phone, I am qualified counsellor and hypnotherapist and I also have dee gift of foresight. I like to combine one or more of dees element in my session. Anything dat we speak of today is confidential unless I feel dere is risk of harm to yourself or another in which case I have duty of care…’

I can feel myself starting to sweat, beads of perspiration forming on my upper lip. I am tempted to count but she is so watchful, her eyes locked on mine, that I almost feel like she would be able to hear me, hear inside my head. Instead I blurt out:

‘Do you have some water, please?’

‘Off course, here you are,’ and with a jingle she pushes a glass of water towards me that was already on the table. I hadn’t noticed it.

I take a sip and put the glass down. Then I pick it up again and do the same. I do this one more time. I can see Juliana looking at me with a serious expression, so I put the glass down, swallow twice and leave it there. Then I take off my jacket and drape it over the back of the chair but can’t resist tapping it just twice. Juliana takes a sip of a green, herbal looking mixture next to her. It looks pretty gross. She must be a health nut.
‘OK.’ She starts a lot of her sentences with OK.

‘Here’s what we gonna do. After you call, I bring out dee cards for you. So, I gonna read your cards for you and then maybe we try a little hypnosis. After that we summarise the session with some counselling OK?’

‘OK.’ I say.

‘I have cleared and charge dee deck.’ She motions to the centre of the table and it is only then that I see a pile of cards, tarot cards I’m guessing unless she is wanting a game of Bridge. Shut up. I say to myself.

‘Excuse me?’

Oh nothing. Did I say that out loud? I try to quieten the random thoughts flying around my mind and focus on the cards. But as I glance to my left, I see some cards already laid out. I know immediately without counting them—there are six cards. I am like Dustin Hoffman in Rainman, I can guess numbers and nine times out of ten I am right. I used to do this with decks of cards, cut them and then look at each pile and guess accurately how many were in each. I count them anyway just to show my mind that I am right. One in the centre, then four around it like a square formation and one above the centre one, so that’s one, two, three, four, five, s- I knew it.

‘Dis is dee star formation. What ees your star sign?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Your sign of dee zodiac, what ees it?’

‘Oh, sorry. Libra.’ I realise I say sorry a lot.

‘Libra, OK. Dat explain it.’
That smile again. It really lights up her whole face and I see she has a dimple in her left cheek. I wonder if that is good or bad in tarot readers’ eyes. Libra, I mean, not dimples. I know one of the main Libran traits is indecision so have always felt it fitted me quite nicely.

‘What do you mean?’ I ask.

Juliana hesitates, then gestures to the array of cards next to me.

‘Well, Libra is air sign. I did quick reading of minor arcana for you before you arrive and…’

‘Yes?’

‘Well… Rachel I… I have never seen dis in all my years of doing dees.’

‘What?’ I ask, my uneasiness turning to a mild panic.

‘De Minor Arcana,’ she explains, ‘is a set of four different type of cards, suits if you will: wands, cups, pentacles and swords…. I shuffle dee card’ as I always do and yet…’

‘And yet?’

‘And yet when I dealt dem, every single card that came out was a card’ of swords.’

‘And is that a bad thing?’ I ask.

‘It is just very, very unusual.’ She says ‘very’ like ‘berry.’ ‘However, you tell me you are Libra and dee sword represent dee air signs. Libra is air sign. But…’

‘But?’

Juliana sighs.
‘Rachel, each suit has fourteen cards, including swords, yet every card’ I dealt had a similar meaning. I had decided not to do dees reading and to just do dee Major Arcana reading for you.’

‘Is it ok if you just give me a quick overview?’ I ask. ‘Seeing as I’m here.’

‘Rachel, I don’t want to dwell on dees card’ but I w ill give you quick overview OK, then I will do proper reading with dee Major Arcana. Look at dee cards.’

I look at them and read the names of them at the top—or bottom as some of them are upside down.

**TWO OF SWORDS**

‘Indecision.’

‘Indecision?’ I repeat.

‘Indecision. Too many choices, confusion, supressed emotion, information overload. Sound familiar?’

I nod almost imperceptibly and look at the next card.

**FIVE OF SWORDS**

‘Dis,’ Juliana taps the card, ‘dis mean conflict, strife, strain, stress, calamity, harm. It mean misadventure defeat, betrayal. If it was reversed it would mean receptive to change, but either way it shows past resentment. Understand?’

*Stress, harm, misadventure.*

I understand. I look at the next card.

**SIX OF SWORDS**
'And dis. Dis is a regretful but essential transition, a rite of passage if upright, but it is reversed so means you or someone in your life cannot move forward, or is carrying psychological baggage.’

Wow, I think, as Juliana points to the next card, which is kind of off-kilter.

SEVEN OF SWORDS

‘Now, dis card’ upright mean betrayal, deceit, getting away with something, clandestine. If reversed it mean challenges for dee mind, freedom and escape.’

Betrayal. That’s twice. I barely have a chance to digest this before Juliana is onto the next card.

EIGHT OF SWORDS

‘Dis card… Rachel, I see isolation, self-imposed constraints, imprisonment, leading onto dees card:’

Imprisonment.

NINE OF SWORDS

‘Rachel, either way dis card mean depression, nightmares, anxiety, it means torment and despair. Dee Suit of Swords symbolise de connection between intellect and power. It show how dees two components can be used for good or evil. If dee card’ are reverse ees very bad. It can mean anger, guilt, bitterness, harshness, a lack of compassion and verbal and mental abuse.’

Abuse. Nightmares, torment, despair.

Juliana pauses and I try to collect my thoughts. I feel like I am in a dream. Everything feels surreal.
‘All of dees cards, are very dark, very black. In other words, Rachel, I can see that you, or someone you know, have been to hell and back.’

I recall going to a tarot card reader years ago, I wasn’t impressed. I think she was a charlatan, nothing made sense or came true. In just a few sentences, Juliana has practically described my life.

Juliana picks up the other cards and asks me to shuffle them and concentrate. I ask Juliana if I can just have a moment. I need to calm my nerves. She duly obliges which gives me the chance to do my super-count. This is where I count to 26, then 20, then 16, then 6, then 2. Just as I finish she looks up. She has laid out five cards in the shape of a cross, not a crucifix, with a vertical line of four cards to the side of it. I remember this. The Celtic Cross.

‘OK Rachel,’ she smiles, ‘here’s what we gonna do. I want you to think about why you here today, why you came to see me. I want you to think of a question, something you want to know, something you need to know. Then we gonna ask the cards and they will give us our answer, OK?’

I feel my stomach twist with a mix of nerves and anticipation. I nod and smile weakly. There is only one question, one thing I need to know.

‘Rachel…’

‘Yes?’

‘Dere’s just one thing I need you to do, OK?’ Her eyes seem to look right inside me as she pauses and then says: ‘I need you to clear your mind.’

‘OK.’

‘And, by dat, I mean I need you to stop counting.’
What? Whilst I am still processing this, she looks at me, then at the cards and for the first time since I arrived, the smile is gone.

‘Rachel…Are you ready to hear what dee cards have to say?’

I am still in shock at Juliana’s apparent mind-reading that it takes me a second to realise the room has gone quiet and all I can hear is my breathing.

******

The lights are turned down low. Incense sticks burn sweetly in the corner of the room. There is no sound coming from either of us, yet I can feel… an energy. Juliana closes her eyes, inhales, then exhales slowly. When she opens them, they are fixed on the cards. She asks me to touch each one and think of my question. I am tempted to tap them all twice but I resist the urge and blink twice instead every time I touch a card. When I have finished, she is looking at me intently and says:

‘Focus only on the question, OK. Only on the question.’

It’s like she can hear my mind working. Or not working as the case may be.

I think of a question.

I don’t know if I am imagining it or if it is real, but the light, warm, friendly person who greeted me at the door less than ten minutes ago is gone and in her place is a serious figure with a sombre expression, sitting so close to me but yet she feels a million miles away. I stare at her, mesmerised. She seems like she is in a trance, she is so still. I can’t even see her
breathing. Her chest looks still. Her eyes are closed again. Just as I am about to ask if she is okay, she flicks open her lashes.

Juliana stares at the cards then turns the first one over. She inhales through her nose then closes her eyes. As she does, I sneak a look at the card. It is dark with a starry sky and a large white orb in the middle of it with the word MOON printed at the bottom. Juliana exhales.

‘Dis first card, this tell me about your present situation,’ Juliana says. She pronounces situation like sitooashon.

‘Dis car’ is dee Significator.’

Her accent seems to have got more Spanish. She studies the card intently, then looks at me. There is a long pause before she says:

‘You are afraid.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘You are afraid. Afraid of yourself, afraid of another, afraid of your life, afraid of something. Perhaps dis is something that has happen or something you fear will come to pass.’

My heart starts up again. Shit. What is she going to tell me? What can she see?

And she’s right. I am afraid.

‘Fear, anxiety, insecurity. What are you afraid of Rachel?’

Myself?

I look at her impassively, despite my mind whirling and my heart pounding. After a moment’s hesitation, she moves onto the next card, turns it over then nods as if
comprehending something invisible to me. What is she seeing that I can’t see? What is the card telling her? I look at the card. It says EMPEROR. It is what looks like a king, with a long white beard, sitting on a throne and holding something like a staff. I move in for a closer look and, as I do, my sleeve brushes the edge of the card so that it spins round at a 90-degree angle.

‘Dis car’, she smooths her finger over the card, ‘dis is called dee Crossing.’ She looks at it and then at me. ‘Dee thing is, Rachel, it is now neither upright nor reversed so I will have to give you dee meanings for both position of dee car’ OK?’

‘OK,’ I say, not understanding at all but feeling that I don’t want to ask for clarification as Juliana seems deep in concentration, making me think the question was rhetorical and not actually a question.

‘Rachel…’

‘Yes?’

‘Dere is something in your way, always in your way, something which opposes you. A strong influence on your life, always dere, always present.’

I shiver and, suddenly, my head goes quiet. A face appears in my mind’s eye but I push it away.

‘I see authority, a father-figure, structure, changing to domination, rigidity, control. Excessive control. Inflexibility. Rachel does dis make sense?’

‘Rachel?’

I realise she is waiting for a response but it is all I can manage just to remember to breathe.

‘Rachel what dis mean to you, you know someone like dis?’
And there it is, the 64-million-dollar question.

‘Yes,’ I venture, ‘I do. I mean did.’

‘So, dis person is no longer in your life? Dis person relate to your past, yes?’

I pause and think how best to answer this question.

‘My past and, in a way, my present,’ I say.

‘And your future?’

‘I am hoping not,’ I say and my eyes involuntarily fill with tears.

‘Rachel, dis car’ can relate to somebody, an external person, but also Rachel, de control, de rigidity…’

‘Yes?’ I ask as I tap my feet together six times underneath the table.

Juliana pauses then looks at me. I feel like she can see right through me.

‘This control and rigidity…’

‘Yes?’ I try and hold my breath for six seconds.

‘It can relate to yourself.’

I feel like the room has become very quiet, very still. For some reason my apprehension is replaced momentarily by embarrassment. She knows. About me. About my habits. My obsessions. My self-imposed suffocations. But how? How does she do this, how does she know? What else does she know?

‘How…’ I begin

‘Indigo Chile.’

‘Indigo child?’
I repeat the random words floating in the air, not sure I have heard them correctly.

Juliana gestures to herself, sweeping a hand in the air.

‘Me, dis is how I know. I was and am an Indigo Child. Someone with supernatural gifts and abilities, dee ability to see and to know things others cannot. I have been dis way since I was a child. Many people have gifts dey are not aware of Rachel, many people have strengths dey do not see. Do you understan’?’

She is looking at me that way again. Like I am transparent. I feel a bit like I do in dreams when I am not wear

‘I’m not sure wha—’

‘Rachel, I am saying dat dee mind can be a wonderful thing. But if you allow it you can become its slave— or its master.’

The word master sends chills through me. I try to focus on what Juliana is saying.

‘It is dee same in life, Rachel. People can control you or you can refuse to allow dem to do dis, whether dis is from yourself or another person.’

_Another person_. The face comes back into my conscious again and I push it away. But I notice recently that, each time I do this, it doesn’t go far and comes back again with greater frequency— and greater intent. God, I think. I am the perfect example of that saying: ‘You can take a horse to water but you can’t make it drink’. Here I am drawn to this woman, to coming here today. She is telling you what will help you in life, about yourself and you’re not even listening, not even paying attention.

‘Rachel, dis next car’…”

I snap my attention back to the table as Juliana turns over card number three.
‘Dis car’ is the Foundation card and is all about your question.’

‘My question?’

‘Dee question you ask dee car’, de reason you came here today, de reason you call.’

And then the strangest thing happens. The image, the face, the person I have been trying to banish from my mind appears clear as day in my head, in front of my eyes via memory and imagination. As I try to sweep him from my vision by looking at the card, his face becomes the face on the card and the only word I can see is:

DEVIL

I start shaking uncontrollably. All I can see is his face and that word. The two are inextricably linked, interchangeable. I think about as a child being afraid of monsters under my bed, then later being afraid of the monster in my bed and now the monsters that have taken residence in my head, imprisoned there, yet evading capture. Am I losing my mind?

‘Rachel.’

It’s Juliana touching my shoulder. I shudder, but then my shaking subsides.

‘Rachel, ees OK. You OK. You safe here. Is OK…I know you are seeing something other dan dis card. Someone. I see it too. A dark energy, a negative energy. Dis car’ it can mean bondage, addiction, sexuality, but if reversed it can mean detachment, breaking free, reclaiming power. Rachel, dis card is reversed. Dis is a good thing. You have dee power, dee power to take back your life.’

As Juliana says this, I feel my eyes fill with warm tears that spill down my cheeks. If only she knew. But she does know, I tell myself, she knows. I think back to the words she used in the first reading: nightmare, torment, confusion, control. Can she see what’s in my mind? I hope not.
‘Rachel. I feel your pain. Trust me, I feel it. But listen to me, you need to break dose chains from dee past, break dem, cut dem, set dem—and yourself—free.’ She looks at me and pauses. ‘Sometime dee devil take many form. Sometimes, we invite the devil into our lifes and then we are surprised when dey make it hell.’

With that, Juliana indicates the next card. I look at it and see the word TOWER. I don’t know much about Tarot but I know this is a bad thing, a bad card. My brief moment of optimism is quashed by these five letters and the picture of a dark fortress with a storm behind and around it. The scene is creepy and ominous and fills me with dread. It conveys one word: doom.

‘Dis,’ Juliana taps the card, making me realise I haven’t done any of my tapping or rituals for a while, ‘dis is your past. I see disaster, I see change, I see upheaval. Dis was not a good time for you. It was a very dark time. A bleak time.’

An image flashes in my head and I push it away.

‘What happens now,’ Juliana points to the next card, ‘is up to you.’

I look down at the card, it takes me a second to work out what the image is of. Then I see it and as I look at the name of the card I see the words HANGED MAN. It’s a man suspended upside down, hanging from a tree by his foot with his arms behind his back.

‘Dis card is the Crown card and is concerning present and future events that may or may not come to pass depending on how you address issues in dee here and now. Whatever you do now will create your future which is dis card.’

Juliana motions to the next card.

I am trying to calibrate in my head everything Juliana has told me so far: fear, domination, excessive control, rigidity, inflexibility. What else? Addiction, power, breaking
free. Pretty much bang on the money so far. A gust of wind blows through the open window, flapping the curtain and lifting me out of my reverie.

‘Again,’ Juliana is saying, ‘dis card is now neither upright nor reversed because de air just move it, only dis card. Dis is a sign.’

I look at the card and see WHEEL OF FORTUNE. *Oh good*, I think sarcastically, *finally some good luck.*

‘As with all de cards they have polar opposite meaning depending on if they are upright or reversed. Again, dis card is neither one nor de other so both meanings apply.’

‘What is the upright positive meaning?’ I hear myself ask.

‘Good luck, karma, life cycles, destiny, change,’ says Juliana.

‘And the reverse?’ I say, although I already know the answer.

‘I’m sorry, Rachel. It mean bad luck, negative external forces, loss of control. At dis point I don’t know which your future hold.’

Fucking great, I think. I came here for reassurance and guidance and at this point I’m no clearer than when I walked in here, and probably just as anxious. Again, Juliana, as if reading my mind, which she probably is, I think wryly, says:

‘Rachel, you are stronger than you think you are. Look at dis card.’

I look at it and for a minute I’m not sure what it depicts. Then I see the word STRENGTH.

‘That’s not me,’ I mutter.

‘Rachel, dis car’ shows me your emotional state right now. It shows strength, courage, patience, control, compassion. If reversed, it shows powerlessness, self-doubt, lack of self-restraint.’
‘And which is it?’ I mumble. ‘Is it upright or reversed?’

‘Rachel, from where I am sitting, it is upright, from where you are sitting it is reversed. Dat tells me a lot. You need to start to see what I see, to believe in yourself. You need to have a good relationship with yourself before you can have a good relationship with others. Do you see?’

In a literal sense, I cannot see as everything is blurred now. I nod, feeling foolish for the tears running down my cheeks once again. I blink fresh ones away and as I do I become aware of my blinking. Should I do a set of sixes? But for some reason, I don’t want to, I don’t feel that it’s...necessary. I look around the room, it seems smaller somehow than when I first walked in. I have no concept of time or how long I have been here. Juliana’s voice breaks into my daydream:

‘Dis next card, dis is about external forces and influences in your life and about your relationships with others. Dere is someone who is a positive influence on you and your life.’

I think of other relationships in my life. The only person I can think of is Jake. I smile involuntarily as I picture his face. But my smile drops when I see the word on the card: FOOL. A familiar paranoia grips me. Who is the fool, Jake for wanting to be with me, or me for trusting him to love me unconditionally? Would he love me if he knew?

‘Rachel,’ says Juliana immediately. ‘Do not take dis card literally. Dee person in your life who helps you, he is not a fool. Dis card represent beginnings, innocence, spontaneity, a free spirit. Don’t turn this person away, OK.’

I think of Jake. My Nurofen. My pain relief. Although the two aren’t always mutually exclusive. Pain and relief. But thinking of him recently only fills me with guilt and shame. I think of his warm smile, his cheeky grin, his knowing, twinkly eyes and his love, patience and kindness towards me. I am so lucky. And undeserving. If he knew he might not love me
anymore. Not if he knew everything that happened. Everything in my mind. Everything I do when he’s not there. How since it happened I can’t bring myself to sleep with any decent person, like Jake, who I love, but I will sleep with anything and everyone else. I know I put myself in dangerous situations. I don’t know why I do it. I hate myself but I can’t stop.

Juliana’s voice prevents my negative thinking from spiralling.

‘Rachel, do not make a fool out of someone who cares for you, OK?’

‘OK,’ I whisper as I think of how hurt Jake would be if he knew. How I couldn’t stand to see him in pain. Lying to the one you love. It’s like taking a secret trip somewhere you don’t want to go but don’t know how to get back. Yet you booked the ticket.

‘You need to get rid of these other men. One man in particular. But not de man you are with.’

Get rid. I take a deep breath, hold it and slowly exhale. Wow.

‘Dis next card’, Juliana hasn’t even paused for breath as she motions to the second to last one, ‘dis is all about your hopes and desires you have for the outcome of your question.’ I look at the card. It says CHARIOT. By now I have the hang of this and notice that the card is facing the right way.

‘Upright…’ I murmur.

‘Yes’, says Juliana, ‘if dis car’ was reversed it would mean lack of control and direction, aggression. But it is upright so this card is all about control, will power, victory, assertion, determination.’

I think of my question. As if reading my mind, Juliana says:

‘De thing is, Rachel, what I don’t yet see, is victory for whom.’
My blood runs cold as I formulate my question once again and, as I do, it becomes several questions merging into one. I hear Juliana pointing to the next card and telling me this is the outcome to my question but that the future is not predetermined.

*What will happen now Dan is out of prison? Will he come looking for me? Will he try to kill me?*

I look at the card and my heart shoots into my mouth.

It is Death. The card that holds all the answers to my one big question is the card of Death.
I’m falling… falling, falling, slowly through the air.

I feel the wind lifting my hair as it blows gently around my face. I sense the sun on my skin and I feel so relaxed, so happy, so free. I can hear a voice in the distance, no, near to me, but muffled. I feel a great sense of peace. I look around. I am on a beach. The sand is white and soft, my feet gently encased in the fine cool powder. I hear the faint cries of people calling to each other, children laughing.

Your safe place, says a voice from a person I sense but cannot see. Your happy place.

I feel an urge to walk into the water. I’m gliding forwards, one foot in front of the other, then I am dancing on my tiptoes until I no longer feel the sandy floor beneath me. The sun’s rays bounce in sparkles off the ripples of the waves. I tilt my face towards the brightness and close my eyes. Heaven. I can hear that voice again, but I can’t fathom where it’s coming from or decipher what it’s saying. It is a nice voice in tone, calm, reassuring.

I hear the faint hum of a glider plane somewhere in the distance. I tip onto my back and breathe deeply. My ears are underwater, so all I can hear are the deep inhales and exhales of breath through my nose. It sounds womb-like, comforting, like there is nothing else in the world, just me and my breathing, the sun and the sea. I think I hear someone saying my name, low and soothing, unobtrusive, and even when I tip my head up and put my fingers in my ears to unblock them I am still aware of it. I see a building in the near distance, a high rise, but I have no desire to count and recount the floors or balconies. I just want to relax.

Good girl. Okay, time to come out now, says the voice.
I want to stay in the water, yet, as if compelled, I push away from the waves and find some shade on a sunbed near the shoreline, underneath a palm tree. I love palm trees. They always seem so majestic, so strong. No matter what life throws at them—storms, typhoons, hurricanes, they may bend over almost backwards, but they always unfold back to their standing position. They could have a force ten gale blowing in their face but they still take it, they remain standing, elegant but defiant, in the face of adversity. They are vulnerable but strong, resilient, withstanding everything.

Ahhh…

That’s it, I hear, that’s good. Just relax.

Bliss…

I flop back onto the bed, one leg bent, one extended, my arms hanging down either side, fingertips skimming the sandy floor. My hair like damp twisted ropes beneath my head. I am feeling tired after my swim.

‘So tired,’ I hear myself murmur

‘I’ll just have a minute,’ I tell myself, ‘just a minute,’

I’m murmuring again and then my eyes are closing, closing and then nothing. It’s dark, black, I see nothing, feel nothing. Then I hear the voice again as if coming from a long way away. I can only make out certain disjointed words: ‘Trust’, ‘safe’, ‘nothing to fear’, ‘let go’. I have a sense that someone is standing over me, a silhouette, a presence in the sun and then it is gone and I am dreaming again. Dreaming, dreaming.

I am walking home from work. It’s dark. Within me is a sense of dread. Not for who may be walking behind me but for what is waiting in front of me, at home. Except it’s not a home. It’s a house. A holding place for two people with nothing in common. The front door
an entrance to a secret world of pain. I tried to stay as late as possible because I didn’t want to come home. But then the phone calls started, the accusations.

‘Where are you, why aren’t you home yet, who are you with?’

The voice on the other end getting more slurred with each call. Sitting next to the phone so that no one else answers it and has to deal with this embarrassment. My embarrassment. Working alongside people day-to-day, saying hi to neighbours with a fake smile. Like looking through glass. A bell jar. They are so close but yet a million miles away. No idea of my hell, the parallel world I am living next to them. Not waving but drowning. Help me, save me. But instead I smile and tell them I’m fine and talk about nothing.

I reach the corner from where I can see my flat. Our flat. Our. Ugh. Three letters that link me to that man, that thing, that person I despise yet am unable to leave. Bound by fear and hate. I contemplate turning back around, running, escaping, but as I look up to the top floor, our ‘loft apartment’, I see that the window is open and, ‘though I can’t see the face in the darkness, I know I’m being watched.

Self-consciously now, I cross the road and, hands shaking, I fumble for the keys in my bag. I feel my mobile phone. I know he will want to check it when I get in. I reach the entrance door. The gateway to my own private hell. I take a deep breath, like an athlete about to compete in a race. An event. Psyching himself up, mentally preparing. Focus. Concentration. One wrong move and it’s all over.

You can do this, I hear. I look around but there is no one there.

I open the door and shut it behind me and immediately feel trapped. Like I do every day. Lamb to the slaughter. But a willing one.

Not willingly says the voice. But willing for something to change.
I prepare for the climb. Four flights of stairs. Ascent into the unknown. A long way to climb for tired legs and a heavy heart. Or is it the other way around. A long way, but not long enough. I trudge up the stairs, my heart rate increasing as I get to the top of each set. Like Jack climbing the beanstalk, not knowing until he gets to the top whether the giant will be snoring, fast asleep or lumbering around, bellowing with rage. Will I have a lucky escape tonight?

Climbing, climbing. Until I’m there. I’m here. Outside my front door. I listen for a moment as if doing that might allow me to hear inside the madness of his mind, to know what might be waiting for me. What’s in-store from his goody-box of sick-tricks? The puppet-master and I’m his marionette.

You can do this, I hear again. Face it. Face him. Face your fear.

Breathing. All I can hear is my breathing. Inhaling anxiety, exhaling fear. Trying to calm my nerves. Deep breaths. In through the nose out through the mouth. Whhhhhh. I feel light-headed, sick, butterflies in my stomach, my chest tight and slowly becoming tighter. I look at the wooden door with the brass numbers on it: 44. I fixate on one 4 and then the other.

Breathe, I tell myself.

Breathe says the voice.

It’s time.

I go to put my key in the lock but as I press on the door it falls open, already unlocked. Nerves really kicking in now, I push it open, it squeaks quietly and I nudge inside.

It’s OK. That voice. Not his. That other disembodied voice. It’s dark inside. There is a candle lit on the windowsill on the far side of the room. I stop and listen. Nothing. Maybe he has fallen asleep.
I slip my shoes off for quietness, stealth, protection and tiptoe around the flat in my socks, looking all around the living room first, nothing. Then the bedroom, the spare room, kitchen, bathroom, nothing.

There are wide, wooden stairs leading up to the office room, it’s a duplex apartment. There are no lights on up there though. I must have imagined him watching me from the window. The window where the candle is, I hear a small voice say but I push it away. He must have gone out.

A wave of relief is flooding into my adrenaline as I climb up just to make sure. Hopefully he has gone out and I can get into bed and pretend to be asleep before he comes back. I go from one step to the next, gingerly climbing, my socks sliding on the stairs’ slippery surface then, as my confidence grows, convinced he is not home, I move faster, another step, one more and then—

I make contact in the dark at speed with what briefly feels like a rope, like one of his camping ropes, cordoning off the top of the stairs, like a tripwire, but waist-height, sending me ricocheting off it, sliding backwards, slipping on the top step then tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, then nothing.

Nothing.

Blackness.

Darkness.

******
I can hear someone whispering my name. I open my eyes. It’s still dark. My head is pounding and my ribs hurt. My chest feels tight and my knee is throbbing. I blink a few times to get my bearings and realise as I look around I am still in the flat. It is still quiet, but this time I know, I feel it. I am not alone.

I scan the flat, my neck moving stiffly one way and then the next until I come to rest on the front door. It’s still open, I mustn’t have closed it. And then I see it. Standing in the corner behind the open door, in the shadows, in the darkness is the figure of a man and I know, I just know, he has been there all the time.

‘Hello, Rachel,’ says Dan.

He emerges out of the shadows, a simpering, insincere smile smeared across his once good-looking face. Years of alcohol abuse have left him looking older than his years, tired, mean and ugly. Instinctively, and from experience, I know this pretend smile is worse than immediate aggression. This means he wants to play games with me. He thinks he’s funny. That warped mind of his wants to confront me in a different way, passive aggression, the waiting game, the guessing game. I have been here too many times before. An anxious countdown until he finally shows his cards and plays his hand, usually across the side of my face.

I know he set that trap for me. I know he knows I know. I am sick of his fucked-up games and his messed-up head. But I play along because I know what he is capable of. My heart is thumping, my mouth is dry, I can hardly breathe and I am sweating. My pain is, for the moment, forgotten. I mustn’t let him know that I am afraid. I know he gets off on it. I can hear the blood rushing through my ears and something else, a soothing voice, but it’s not his. I prepare to give another Oscar-winning performance.
'Hiya,' I say, forcing a smile on my face that makes my lips hurt. Acting as though he hasn’t been hiding from me in the dark, hasn’t watched me fall down a flight of stairs without saying anything, wasn’t right next to me, right behind the door, standing there in the dark when I walked in. ‘You OK?’ I try to get up. He doesn’t help me at first, watches me struggle, then wordlessly strides up to me, bends down and hauls me up.

*Oof.* I say, wincing as my pain returns.

He looks at me like a scientist looking at his new creation, intrigued, detached, amused.

‘You took quite a tumble there,’ he says, his eyes raking all over me, taking in my dishevelled clothes and hair, my newly bleeding knee, the bruise starting to appear on my leg. He looks almost…. *proud.* Of his handiwork or my resilience I am not sure. But I don’t have a choice. Today is the day I need to fight back.

Yes, that’s right, says that voice again.

I hobble over to the dining table and sit down. Dan busies himself lighting more candles, swaying as he goes from one to the next. I turn around and suddenly he is there, inches away from my face. I can smell cigarettes and the chemical stench of alcohol seeping out from his breath and his pores. I want to turn away in disgust, instead I hold my breath and screw my eyes shut whilst he lunges forward and kisses me. He pulls away and strokes my face. Then looks at me with disdain.

‘You’re late’, he says. ‘But it’s OK. I know you have people you’d rather spend time with than me.’ He starts talking wistfully now as if musing to himself. ‘I made you dinner you know. Us dinner. Us. Because we’re a family, a unit. You are my LIFE.’

‘I- ’
‘I did all this for us Rach. I made dinner, I got us some wine. Because I love you. Because I worship and adore you. Because you are everything I have in this world.’

‘Dan-’

‘You selfish fucking bitch.’ And just like that he turns, as he does every time. ‘You whore. I’m making you dinner and you’re fucking someone at work.’

‘Dan, what? Dan you’re being ridiculous.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I mean-’

‘Prove it.’

‘What do you mean prove it?’ I ask.

‘Take your clothes off.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me. Get undressed.’

‘Dan, I really don’t want to,’ I say, trying to sound firm but my voice belies my nervousness.


I do as he asks whilst he stands there watching me, his frown gradually turning to a smirk. I stand there in my underwear, bloody and bruised. Sore, aching and humiliated.

‘All of it.’

‘Dan-’

‘I said all of it.’
And with that he reaches forward and rips my underwear, pulling at it roughly until it is hanging off me in rags.

‘Lie down.’

‘No Dan I don’t want to, please. Let’s talk about this.’

‘Talk about what? I’m done with talking. I checked your laptop whilst you were at work. Not my fault. It was open. Who’s Andy?’

‘Andy? Andy’s the supplier at work, Dan. We have to send emails. It’s part of my job.’

‘You put a kiss at the end of your message.’

‘Dan, Andy is a woman.’

‘LIAR!’ He roars and I feel a rush of blood to my cheek and a stinging sensation where he has slapped me.

‘Is that what this is all about? Dan please.’

‘Shut up,’ he growls, ‘you lie about everything. You are a fucking whore. I know it. Andy knows it. Everyone fucking knows it. Rachel the office whore.’

‘Dan please.’

‘I want to see that you haven’t been fucking anyone else tonight.’

He pushes me down onto the floor, removes the remains of my underwear and throws them to the side. He is looking down at me. I feel vulnerable. Exposed. Foolish. Scared.

It’s OK. That voice again. Rachel it’s OK.
I lay there stiff and still as he sniffs me, like a dog trying to pick up a scent. He sniffs everywhere, all over me. I feel embarrassed and ashamed. I close my eyes willing for it to be over.

‘OK. Satisfied. This time.’ And he smiles. A real smile, almost as disconcerting as his fake effort, one of ownership and relief. Then he pins my arms down to the floor.

‘Dan, no, please, I don’t want to!’

‘Quiet,’ he whispers. ‘That’s my girl, nice and quiet. Shhhh…’

‘Dan, please.’ My eyes fill with tears.

I turn my head away and continue to weep as he ignores me and carries on. I stay in that position the whole time, tears silently falling down my cheeks, my eyes tightly closed. This is what it feels like. I am detached from the situation. This is what it feels like to be raped. He is treating it no differently to any other time, he is just getting what he wants, whether I want it or not. I want it to be over but part of me doesn’t as I am afraid of what he will do next. I open my eyes and focus on one of the lit candles. I focus on the flame dancing, flickering. Everything that is happening to me, I block it out. It is not real, I am not here. He climbs off me and I lay there, still and numb, the tears still evident on my face.

‘Look at me.’

I am frozen, maybe in shock, I don’t know. I don’t want to move my body. I don’t want to move my face or turn my head. I don’t want to look at him.

‘I said look at me.’ His voice is hard, cold.

I turn my face partially towards his. I see him sweating, his hooded eyes and mocking expression. He scoffs, then looks contrite. His voice softens:
'Look at you, look at me. Look at what you did. Look at what you made me do. You’re my property, you understand?’ He doesn’t wait for an answer which isn’t coming. ‘Mine.’

He looks at me again with a leering expression.

‘Horny bitch!’ he laughs, before coming back and throwing a t shirt in my face. ‘Look at the state of you. Get dressed. Put this on. Go and get changed into something nice. Get dressed for dinner. It’ll be ready in five minutes,’ and he throws me what I guess he thinks is a tender smile. He makes me feel sick. Deluded sick fucking bastard. I wish I could leave him but he has told me so many times what he would do if I did. Threats to me I can live with, but not my family and friends. I had family and friends once you see, before they faded away or disowned me.

Slowly, stiffly and self-consciously, I sit up and pull the oversized t shirt over my head. It hangs off me as, recently, I have not been able to eat, my appetite gone. I am dreading dinner. I know he will be angry again if I don’t eat but I feel physically sick.

I run to the bathroom, my knee almost giving way beneath me and retch over the toilet. But nothing comes up. I have not eaten since this morning. I wipe my mouth and raise my head to look at myself in the mirror. I almost do not recognise the person staring back at me with haunted eyes and a gaunt face. Black under-eye circles merging into bruised skin and a cut on my nose. I look at my knee— it is swollen and bruised. I think I may have sprained it.

‘Hurry up in there, what you doing? No time to have a shower, come on, dinner’s ready, are you dressed?’
I feel dirty, disgusting, as I go to the bedroom and pull on a black dress and clean underwear over my bruised and soiled skin. At least I won’t have to endure a shower whilst he stands there watching me then towelling me dry afterwards.

I try and put heels on but as soon as I step down on my bad knee the pain shoots up my whole leg and I can’t. So I put my black ballet flats on. I feel sad as I place them on my feet. Wearing these always reminded me of being a little girl, going to ballet class, so innocent, untouched, my whole life ahead of me. Now that little girl is trapped with a monster and no way out. I feel sad for her, more so than for me. Sad for what has become of me. For what I have become.

Good, this is good. I hear that voice again. Continue.

I make my way over to the table. A salmon dinner is laid out, vegetables, sauce, potatoes. I start to feel nauseous again. He has changed into black top and jeans, brushed his hair, looks fresh, like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Like he’s on a date. Not like he just violated someone ten minutes ago.

‘Come on. Eat up.’

I look at the food in front of me with no appetite and a feeling of overwhelming apprehension, especially when I notice my phone next to him on the table.

‘Come on Bones, eat up.’

Bones, the name he has taken to calling me recently because of my weight loss. I swallow hard. I don’t want to eat anything. I feel sick to my stomach.

‘I said eat.’

I spear a piece of broccoli with my fork and lift it to my lips. He’s watching me intently. I know he’s itching for an excuse to start on me again, so I open my mouth and force
the food inside, then mechanically chew it before making several attempts to swallow. It may as well be made of plastic.

‘Addagirl,’ he says, handing me another forkful. ‘You need to eat, Bones. Look at you. Look at the state of you, girl. A bag of bones. You’re not even attractive anymore. Where are your tits? You had a great pair when I met you. You were fucking gorgeous when I met you. Beautiful. Now look at you. Fucking skinny bones. Seen more fat on a chip. You don’t make an effort anymore. I need you to make an effort, Rachel. Do you understand?’

I nod and reach for the water to wash down the lump of food that appears to be lodged in my throat.

‘I’m speaking to you. Fucking answer me bitch.’

Then I hear it, that voice again. Tell him. Tell him, take control, leave.

I try to swallow the water quickly so that I can speak, but in doing so the water goes down the wrong way and I start to cough and splutter.

Tell him

Coughing

Answer me.

Can’t breathe.

I SAID ANSWER ME!

I feel myself being lifted out of my chair and then everything goes black.
‘And you’re back.’

I open my eyes, even though I didn’t know that they were closed, and I am staring back up into Juliana’s. I look around, feeling disoriented. I am in a darkened room, laying on what looks like a chaise longue. Juliana is turning a switch at the side of the wall. There is a hint of light which slowly increases and expands until the room is brighter and I am snapped back to reality. I sit up and feel spent, woozy, like I have run a marathon or slept for days, a mixture of exhausted and drained.

The rest of the session is a blur. I feel like I am in a dream, dazed, not back to myself, feeling different somehow but I don’t know what it is. Nothing’s changed but everything’s changed. During the last part, the ‘counselling’ part I finally open up to Juliana and tell her what happened to me after the rape. I talk and talk and talk.

‘What happened dat night Rachel?’

‘I don’t remember all of it. He…I think he tried to kill me. Beat me up so badly I couldn’t move for days. Left me there, took my phone. I couldn’t call an ambulance. Couldn’t call the police. When I finally tried to escape, I realised he had locked me in. Me and Ronnie, my cat. He was in a bad way too.’

‘How did you get out?’

‘It was the cleaner that found me. I was drifting in and out of consciousness. Zlata her name was, she was Slovenian I think. Really nice, religious lady. She was quiet and discreet. Never said anything about the seventeen empty bottles of vodka I found hidden around the
house once when I decided to look. She must have seen them when she was cleaning on top of the cupboards. Never said anything just left them there.’

I picture Zlata’s face that time when I had a fresh bruise under my eye that I’d tried to cover with make-up, she said: ‘Are you OK my dear?’ and her eyes were searching mine with hidden questions. But Dan was there watching, listening and I couldn’t say anything, my eyes silently answering hers.

It’s strange how in your head you can be screaming at someone HELP ME PLEASE but outwardly there is nothing, not unless you are looking for it. Not unless one knows what to look for. Heathcliff was right, the eyes, they really are the windows to the soul, yet sometimes no one sees the invisible prison bars reflected back at them.

I remember the day, after that day, looking up into Zlata’s concerned green eyes, tears falling from them. She was tapping her forehead, her chest, then each shoulder. I was confused. I wanted to soothe her but I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. She was shaking and saying things in another language, one I didn’t understand. She was holding my hands and kissing them and stroking my hair which, I later realised, was matted with blood. I mumbled something to her and she called emergency services and they sent an ambulance for me. I remember falling in and out of consciousness, coming to and feeling embarrassed being wheeled out of there, my neighbour, Marla, looking on.

I picture Marla’s face. She had made no secret of the fact that she always fancied Dan, always pushing her boobs out and licking her lips when she spoke to him, and he didn’t help matters by flirting with her all the time. He was probably hiding out at hers for all I know. God if I even looked in the direction of another man—or woman—I was accused of having an affair.

‘Den what happen, Rachel?’
I think back to the hospital. The cold, sterile environment. The whiteness of the walls, the room, the lights, set off by my multi-coloured bruising. Sam visited from work but no one else came. No one else knew. I didn’t go back to work. No one else visiting except for the nurses to perform their various checks and the doctors to ask questions every now and then. They said I had bad head injuries. That it may affect me later down the line, with my memory, and my perception. Then the police officers came.

‘Miss McKay, tell us what happened, take your time.’

Again.

‘Miss McKay, we strongly urge you to press charges.’

And again

‘Miss McKay, Rachel…’ It’s Kelly, the female police officer with short blond hair, she’s soft and kind and empathic. ‘Rachel, I’m sorry. They can’t prove it was rape.’

And again.

‘Rachel, not good news, I’m afraid. We can’t go for grievous bodily harm, it’s been reduced to wounding with intent.’

I remember words floating around like ‘psychotic breakdown’ and ‘mentally unstable.’ I didn’t know whether they were talking about him or me.

He pleaded guilty in the end, a plea bargain, got some kind of deal. Five years, reduced to two for good behaviour. Good behaviour! I guess that’s because there were no women in there to taunt, terrify and torment for fun.
The police left and I laid there staring at the walls. Then at the tiles by the sink area. Then at the lines between the tiles. Then starting to count them. Then starting to count anything. And everything. Counting, counting, to keep myself safe.

‘You knew dat he was due out soon, it’s been on your mind. Dis why your counting was getting worse.’

‘Yes.’

Juliana leans forward and touches my ear. ‘Don’ think about de counting for a second. Tell me about afterwar’. What did you do?’

I rub my ear absent-mindedly as I begin to talk. ‘I had counselling, but I didn’t feel like it worked for me. They didn’t understand. I moved away. That’s why I was so surprised to see Marla at the store today and shocked by what she told me. I thought I had left all of it behind, that…’

‘Yes?’

‘That if I didn’t think or talk about it…’

‘Yes. Rachel?’

‘Then it wasn’t real.’

‘So you no talk about it with anybody? You need to talk to somebody.’

‘Nobody.’ Well not really. I had a lot of imaginary conversations to help me cope with what was inside my mind. I think maybe I went a bit mad for a while.

‘No your boyfrien’?’

I smile thinking about Jake, then frown.

‘Why you no smile, what is dee problem?’
It is then that everything that I carry around with me every day, the guilt, shame, worry, deceit, like a mood board of pain, all of it is released as I begin to cry. I think of all the other secrets I keep from Jake.

‘I can’t believe what I do to Jake without him knowing. I love him so much. Why do I do it?’

‘Only you can answer dat, Rachel,’ says Juliana, ‘and only you can stop it.’

I know she’s right. Juliana hands me a tissue. I wipe my eyes and blow my nose.

‘I don’t know. I just wish…’

‘What do you wish? Tell me.’

‘I just wish I would stop betraying Jake. I wish Dan wasn’t a part of my memories, my past, my life, my anything. I wish he would just disappear.’

Juliana looks at me. Her gaze is…intense. She says something in what sounds like Spanish and starts to touch the beads hanging around her neck. There is a long pause and I wonder what she is thinking. Then she says:

‘Rachel, anytime you are feeling vulnerable or unsure, I want you to think of these three words and say them in your mind, OK?’

She touches my ear again.

‘Strong, powerful, confident.’

‘OK.’

‘Repeat after me, please.’

‘Strong, powerful, confident.’
I say the words again and then I forget about them as I look at the clock on the wall. Shit! Is that the time? I must have been gone hours, I need to get back. Nights are closing in now, it will be dark by 4 o’clock.

‘Juliana, I have to go, I’m sorry, but thank you. Thank you for everything.’

I pay Juliana and thank her once more for her time. She is still clutching the beads around her neck. I feel like she has changed something within me, but I can’t put my finger on it. I feel like she has told me a secret but I can’t remember what it is. Like waking from a sleep and still having the sense of a dream yet not remembering what it was. Whatever I was worried about seems long gone, a distant memory.

‘Rachel,’ she calls to me. ‘Remember: Strong, powerful, confident, OK?’

I touch my ear and nod distractedly, conscious of the hour. I glance around the room one last time, my eyes flicking over the furniture, the lights, a flag that says Cuba on it and a book shelf I barely paid attention to coming in. I can make out one title in gold print on the spine: Santeria. It is only as I am leaving that I notice the crucifix hanging by the door. I saw it when I was coming in but it is different now. When I arrived, it was upright. Now as I’m leaving I notice it is upside down. It is only when I am half-way home that I realise I can’t find Juliana’s card. It has gone, disappeared. I realise also that since leaving Juliana’s, I haven’t done any of my rituals. Not one.
Novel Summary For Following Chapters

Additional or extended chapters may be required. Chapter Four may be extended.

Chapter Five

This chapter will show Rachel following Juliana’s advice to ‘talk to someone.’ She will attend counselling sessions and working through what happened in her past. She will be encouraged to write about her experiences. She will mention Juliana to her counsellor. He will check his records and will not be able to find her within the BACP framework. She is not listed. Rachel enquires about Dan to the police and is informed he has moved overseas. She will try to contact Juliana and go to her address but there is no one there, the house is vacant. A neighbour tells her no one has lived there in years.

Chapter Six

Rachel will have specific therapy for her OCD, which will dissipate. She will talk to her therapist about her promiscuity and be encouraged to close her online dating accounts, such as Tinder. He gives her some literature to read about personality disorders but she discards it. Rachel makes a pass at her counsellor, which is rejected. Humiliated, Rachel tells the counsellor she doesn’t need to see him anymore and will start to be even more promiscuous and reckless, going deeper and darker, taking increasing risks about who she meets and where. This leaves her feeling worthless and she decides that she will close her accounts. When she goes to do this, a message appears from someone wanting to meet her. She looks at his profile and is attracted to him and decides to ‘meet a stranger for sex’ one last time to get it out of her system. There is something about this man that appeals to her. His profile picture
is slightly obscured which intrigues her. She arranges to meet him. When she arrives, she is stood up. Yet she has the feeling someone is watching her. She looks for the man’s profile on Tinder again but it has been deleted.

**Chapter Seven**

Rachel is completing her university degree. One of her assignments is chosen for the university open day. It is a summary of what happened in her life with Dan. She will attend the open day and see someone who reminds her of Dan. She tries to find him but he has disappeared. Upon finishing her university degree, she will attend her graduation and, again, see someone who looks like Dan in profile in the distance. She loses sight of him and puts it out of her mind. She uses the restroom. When she comes out of her cubicle, there is a heart on the mirror in front of her and the word LIAR. Throughout the chapter, she will get feelings of disquiet, a sense of someone watching or following her.

**Chapter Eight**

Jake proposes to Rachel in the form of a hand-made card with a heart drawn onto it. She accepts. She receives an anonymous letter hand-delivered telling her that they know about all the men she has cheated on Jake with and they are going to tell him. After much anguish, Rachel writes to Jake and confesses everything. He breaks it off with her and leaves and she is left in the house on her own, feeling heartbroken and also uneasy. At night she wakes sensing someone was standing over her whilst she was sleeping. When she looks at the letter again, she thinks the writing looks familiar, a bit like hers.
Chapter Nine

Throughout the novel, Rachel uses writing as a form of therapy and release. Extracts of this will be shown. She successfully publishes a collection of six short stories, called ‘Six’, based on her experiences. She is invited to a talk to promote her book at a bookstore in a busy shopping centre. She tells the crowd that she may publish the collection also with an alternate ending for the last story in the collection, ‘Number Six.’ She thinks she sees Dan at the back of the store. She faints, when she comes to she cannot see the man.

Chapter Ten

Rachel goes to the doctors and is informed she is pregnant. She contacts Jake to tell him and to assure him that she knows it is his. Jake decides to give her another chance because he still loves her. He asks her if there is anything else she is keeping from him. She tells him everything about Dan. She decides to come off her medication (which is often alluded to but never specified). She has a strange dream about Juliana. Juliana is holding a baby and saying words from Rachel’s reading, such as ‘conflict, stress, harm, misadventure, defeat, betrayal.’ Juliana’s words echo as she wakes up: ‘There is nothing to fear but fear itself.’

Chapter Eleven

Jake and Rachel get married in a registry office. Rachel says she wants it to be in secret/low-key. On the day of the wedding, a bunch of black roses arrives with no note, just a small card with a black heart printed on it. Jake puts them in the bin. Rachel tells Jake she has received a card from Juliana. Jake asks who Juliana is and how did she know when and where they were getting married. Rachel says she doesn’t know.
Chapter Twelve

Rachel and Jake go on honeymoon, somewhere hot and sunny. She draws a heart on the sand on the beach. Rachel daydreams in the sun, like she did at the beginning of the book. She has a dream where she, Dan, Jake and Juliana all merge into one, before turning into the blond policewoman at the hospital who is repeating the words ‘psychotic breakdown’. Then all the people in the dream ask Rachel who she is. Jake says she was talking in her sleep, asking ‘who am I?’ Rachel speaks Spanish to a waiter. Jake says he didn’t know she could speak Spanish. There is some tension on the holiday. Rachel is not sure if Jake has truly forgiven her. When they go home, Rachel looks at their photos, there is a woman on them in the background who she doesn’t recall seeing. Rachel thinks she looks like Juliana. Jake can only see Rachel in the picture. Rachel receives a call from her doctor to discuss why she is no longer picking up her medication.

The next chapter, Thirteen, is the final chapter and the end of the novel.
Thirteen

I am walking home. Actually, waddling might be a better description. I catch a glimpse of myself in a store window. A healthy, happy looking woman smiles back at me, with a big round bump protruding from her coat. I am so happy, I think. And so hungry. God, ever since the day I found out I was expecting, I have done nothing but eat! I’m not eating for one, or two, more like three! I go to phone Jake and then remember I forgot my phone. Again. I was always forgetful. Now, with ‘Baby Brain’, I am a lost cause. I think about everything that has changed in the last few months and how sane I feel in a world that’s gone mad: Donald Trump is president, Kim K came off Twitter, Brangelina got divorced, Kanye had a breakdown. It was only a matter of time.

It is dark by the time I get home. I let myself in. All the lights are off. Jake mustn’t be home yet. I flick the switch but the light doesn’t come on. That’s strange, bulb must’ve gone. I’m sure Jake replaced them all recently. I take my coat off and grab the flash-light which Jake prudently keeps on the kitchen countertop. A beam of light projects from the silver torch as I move it around the kitchen. I feel like a burglar in my own home.

As I think that, I hear a noise, very faint, but out of place none the less. Maybe it’s the cat. I must be the only person with asthma that owns a cat, I think. Asthma, God, yes. I haven’t had my inhaler all day and my chest is feeling tight. I scrabble around in the kitchen drawer where I always keep it. Funny. It’s not there. Well, where would I have put it then? At the same time, I remember about my forgotten phone and look for that too, to no avail. What is going on? I must be tired. I go in the living room, torch in one hand and bag in the other and flop down onto the sofa. These lights aren’t working either. Must be a power cut. Bang goes my plans to surprise Jake with a meal, I think. He’s not been himself recently; distant,
detached. Although, with my dire culinary skills, it’s probably a blessing in disguise. I smile.

I shine the torch on the clock on the wall: 18.26. I don’t know if that’s the time now or the
time it stopped. As I sit forward, I notice a scrap of paper on the coffee table in front of me. I pick it up and shine the torch on it to read.

_Hi Babe_

_Where are you? Hope you’re OK. I popped home to see you, ended up getting food for_ 
_Dave as knew you would probably forget, so he’s all fed. Remember it’s work’s do_ 
tonight and I’m at Dad’s after so will see you tomorrow OK. Have a nice relaxing_ 
evening. Love you xxx_

_Ps Next time remember to take your bloody phone, I’ve been trying you all day._ 
_Scatterbrain._ 

_J x_

Dave! Bloody hell I forgot. It’s a good job Jake remembered otherwise he would have
been a goner just like Lee and Roth, the last two that I forgot to feed. I’m always forgetting to
feed him!

I go over to the fish-tank in the corner of the room, torch in hand and realise that the
tank is still lit up so it can’t be a power cut. Then what is it? I smile as I look in on Dave. He
must be asleep. He’s not moving. His golden-orange scales look strange, paler, not as vibrant.
I look closer. He is on the surface of the water, lying on his side. It is then that I see the
crumbs surrounding him, tens and tens of crumbs, fish-food, tons of it, everywhere, all over.
He has been overfed. He’s…he’s dead. I gasp in disbelief. No! But how can he be? Jake
would never overfeed him. But if not him, then who-
I hear another noise, making me jump and at the same time I spot something in the tank that shouldn’t be there. I roll up my sleeve and reach down and grab it. It’s white. I can’t make it out. I pull it out of the tank and, for a second, I can’t work out what it is. Then I see, it is a keyring, a dangling skeleton with a word underneath it in cartoony looking writing. I brush the fish-food off the word and then see it clearly.

**BONES**

It looks like it has blood on it. I drop the keyring and it clatters to the floor. As it does, I hear a phone ring. It is playing *Funeral March* by Chopin. Then abruptly it stops. But the ominous tone is left hanging in the air. It is the ringtone Dan changed it to when he first hacked into my phone when we were together. And then I smell it. The faint unmistakable scent of chemicals. Of alcohol. Of danger. Of Dan. I know he has been here. Maybe he is still here. My heart freezes. Jesus Christ, I have to get out of here.

I run back to the door with the torch and shine it on the counter top where I left my keys. My hands are shaking so much I nearly drop it several times. The keys are gone. Someone has moved them. I am petrified, rooted to the spot, frozen in fear. He’s here. He’s watching, waiting. He’s going to hurt me. He’s going to kill me. I look up to the window and then I see it a heart shape drawn into the condensation, just like when I was in the shower that time. When Jake said it wasn’t him.

My chest closes and tightens and I get that horrible familiar feeling of my airwaves closing and compressing. Someone standing on my chest squeezing it. I try to take a deep breath but I can’t. I can’t get enough oxygen in my lungs to fill them. I feel the panic starting to rise alongside the fear. He’s been here before and now he’s here again.

I lean onto the table taking shallow breaths my eyes full of panicked tears whilst my mind whirrs and adrenaline rushes through my body. I remember my doctor telling me how
important it was to always have my inhaler with me, how three people a day die from asthma attacks. I imagine the statistics are probably that much higher with a psychopath roaming around your house. I need to get out. I reach up to the window and at the same time I hear something and I know he’s right behind me.

‘Hello, Rachel.’

That cold, quiet, mocking voice. Am I imagining it?

‘Looking for this?’

No, it’s real. I stand there panting in terror, not wanting to turn around but through the window’s reflection I see him, six-foot-tall and dangling my inhaler in his gloved hand.

‘Rachel,’ he says again. His eyes are dark, even in the darkness, they are abyssal—and abysmal.

‘What are you doing here, what do you want?’ I whisper.

He sneers. The time and darkness has done nothing to hide his grotesqueness, his ugly character and his menacing presence.

‘Come to take what’s mine of course, Bones. Although looking at you now, Bones doesn’t seem somehow appropriate. Maybe whale-bone is a better name. Or just whale.’ And he laughs that horrible, hollow, forced laugh, snorting as he does, wiping his nose with the back of his hand and then smearing the contents onto his jeans.

Even in the height of my fear, I am disgusted. He repulses me. He snorts loudly and then spits the contents from his mouth onto the floor. It is only when I look up from the floor that I notice what is in his other hand. Even in the shadows, I can see that he is holding a solid metal object, black, his hand gripping it. The light from outside lands on it and confirms my fear. He is holding a gun. I know he knows how to use one of these. He had a collection
of them, locked in his cabinet at home. Always there, always threatening. Until the local authorities took them away when he got in trouble with the law. When they had concerns about his mental health. After the anonymous phone call. I guess it’s not difficult for someone newly out of prison to acquire one, with the company he’s been keeping for the last two years.

I look longingly at the blue inhaler. So near and yet so far. It might as well be a million miles away, I know he won’t give it to me. And what’s the point if he is just going to shoot me anyway.

He sees me looking at my inhaler, my medication. The only medication I take since the doctor advised I come off my meds again when I found out I was expecting.

‘Why don’t you come and get it?’ He leers, waving it at me. ‘Get your breath back and then I’ll knock it back out of you again.’ He laughs.

I try to speak but I can’t find the breath. I can’t take a breath in. My lungs are failing me. I picture my airwaves narrowing, constricting. I’m going to die. I can’t breathe. I need help. I can’t— I try to turn around to face him, I feel myself slipping to the floor. Dark shades are coming down over my eyes. Then everything goes black.

*****

I hear a voice. It sounds like it’s coming from a long way away. I can’t make out what it’s saying, but the tone…the tone is mock ing, child-like. I can hear my breathing, raspy, wheezing. I open my eyes but everything is black. Where am I? Is it night-time? The air feels
heavy and dense. Why can’t I move my arms? Why can’t I move my body? The voice speaks again and this time I hear the words, spoken in that soft, menacing, sing-song tone.


Oh God, NO. Please no.

I try to scream but a gargled, muffled sound comes out. I try to run but I stay rooted to the spot. I hear sniggering, laughing and then I sense him right next to me, looking at me, breathing on me. The smell of stale cigarettes. Every inch of me tenses. I try to close my legs and wrap my arms around myself but I can’t. It is only then that I realise I am tied to something, my arms behind me, a gag in my mouth.

I hear the air between us change and I sense he is going to touch me. I freeze, my heart pounding. I daren’t even breathe. I see a small glimmer of light and then a brightness swirls around in front of me. Something is being lifted from my eyes and it takes me a moment to adjust to my surroundings. I am in my kitchen still, in the middle of the floor, tied to a kitchen chair. He is sitting in a chair opposite, shining my silver torch at me. It is still dark outside. My whole body is trembling which is making the chair I am tied to rattle against the wooden floor

‘Peep-oh!’ he says in that mocking tone. I screw my eyes shut. I don’t want to look at him and the brightness is hurting my eyes, then it goes. I open one eye. He shines the torch under his chin, so that his face is lit up in a weird, demonic way, casting ghostly shadows around his face.

‘Had a good sleep, little girl? Or should I say big girl. What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?’
‘Pff dd hhhh mmmm…’

‘Sorry, what was that? Speak up, bitch.’

‘Mmmffff!’

I want to plead with him, beg him. I am willing to say anything so that he won’t hurt me or worse, but no words are coming out. Tears of fear and frustration pour down my cheeks. My chest starts to tighten again and I begin to cough.

He is laughing now.

‘Here!’ he holds my inhaler in front of my face. ‘Here, take it, what you waiting for?’ He laughs again and then abruptly stops. He sneers at me.

‘You’re such a failure, do you know that? Even your lungs don’t fucking work. You can’t even breathe properly.’

I barely hear him as my coughing is getting more and more out of control. I can’t stop.

He is looking annoyed now. ‘Stop coughing.’

All I can do in return is continue to cough. I can’t breathe, can’t stop. It sounds like a dog barking. I can see it is getting on his nerves.

‘Fucks sake.’ He roughly pulls down whatever is in my mouth and shoves my inhaler between my lips. ‘Breathe,’ he commands.

I gratefully suck on the inhaler as he presses the top of it and releases the steroids into my lungs. Once, twice, three times, four. My breathing starts to regulate, my coughing subsides. As this is happening, I get a moment of clarity. He could have killed me already if he wanted to. Maybe he does want to kill me, maybe he wants to make me suffer first. But
somewhere inside there must be a part of him that still loves me, otherwise I would be dead already and he wouldn’t have just come to my aid. Maybe I can remind him how he used to feel about me. How I used to feel about him. Maybe I can use that to my advantage.

‘Thank you,’ I say to him. He stares at me impassively. ‘You always were my knight in shining armour,’ I say, ‘once upon a time.’

A flicker of confusion crosses his face. I know him well enough to recognise it. He takes a swig of beer from the bottle in his hand. I notice there are six empty bottles on the table next to him. I try to control my breathing and shaking and muster a smile.

‘You were my everything once, you know that?’ It’s not a lie. He once was. When everything was new and fresh. Before I really knew him. Before the drinking. Before I witnessed how unhinged he really was, he was the man of my dreams, not the stuff of nightmares. Instead of my saviour, he became the one I needed rescuing from most.

‘Yeah, once. Before you got that posh job and forgot about me,’ he slurs bitterly. ‘Working with all those other men. Screwing them.’

Now I need to be my own salvation. My own white knight to rescue my own damsel in distress.

‘I only ever had eyes for you. You…you were my Danny Bear.’ I haven’t called him this since we first started seeing each other. I’m hoping he remembers. I am still shaking.

For a moment his bitter expression dissolves and his face softens.

‘And you were my Little Princess. I remember…’ Then as quickly as it came it is gone and in its place a brooding scowl. ‘Not so little now, are you? With child, am I right?’

He leans forward and runs his hands over my swollen breasts, pauses then rubs his hand slowly and deliberately over my bump. My baby, my child. I am barely breathing now. I
feel my pulse thumping through my body. I need to wrap my arms around my baby. I need to protect her. I have to make him untie me.

‘I always thought we would have children one day,’ I lie.

‘You never wanted kids. Too busy fawning over that stupid fucking cat.’

Ronnie, I think. Where is he? I hope he’s OK! Dan always hated my cat and my cat always hated him. Who could blame him? Cats, they have that sixth sense.

‘Well maybe not then. But I do now. Maybe we could try again. Raise our own little f-family.’ My teeth are chattering now. I must stay calm. I have to make him believe me.

He takes another swig from his bottle. His eyes are hooded now, that familiar glazed look overtaking them. This could go one of two ways. I need to use his drunkenness to my advantage.

‘I’ve, I’ve missed you,’ I whisper.

‘How much?’

‘I-well, if you untie me, then I can show you.’

He looks me up and down and drunkenly raises an eyebrow.

‘You always were a horny little bitch.’ He traces a finger over my mouth. I flinch. ‘Anyways, I don’t need to untie you for you to show me that.’ He starts playing with the zipper on his jeans. ‘I never did buy the paragon of fucking virtue act.’ He gives me a lascivious wink.

Jesus, no. My mind is spinning, I have to distract him.

‘I’m sorry. You know, about…about what happened.’

He looks at me in surprise, then frowns.
'You should be.'

'I wish I could make it up to you.'

'You can.'

'How?'

He takes a slow and deliberate swig of his bottle, drains it and slams it on the table. It rolls off and smashes, leaving broken glass all over the floor. The noise makes me jump. He belches then leans back in his chair and reaches behind him. All I can hear is the pounding in my ears. My mouth is dry and I can barely swallow. When he tips his chair forward again, and brings his arm back around, he is holding something which glints in the moonlight. It’s a knife. My sharpest kitchen knife.

I start to shake even more violently than before until I am practically rocking back and forth on the chair. He grabs my shoulder to hold me still. I close my eyes, waiting to die and feel him cutting something until my legs no longer feel restricted and my arms are not tight. At the same time, I feel something trickling down my leg. His expression changes instantly from lust to disgust.

'Fucking hell. Not the wet I had in mind. Ugh.'

I glance down at the floor and see the puddle at the foot of the chair amongst the remnants of cut blue camping rope.

'Go and get cleaned up.’ He motions to the downstairs toilet. ‘And do it quick.’

I grab the torch to light the way and try to run but my damp legs give way after being immobile for so long. I get back up quickly and stumble into the small toilet, locking myself in. Desperately, I look around for something I can use, anything. There is nothing. I reach up to the window. It’s locked and no key.
'Hurry the fuck up.'

I open the door. He’s right outside.

‘No soap or towels.’ I say to him. ‘I’ll need to use the bathroom upstairs.’

He looks at me, eyes narrowed.

‘I’ll be really quick, I promise,’ I say. ‘Why don’t you get things ready for us? Maybe open some wine?’

He pauses and runs a hand through his hair.

‘No funny business. Two minutes.’

‘OK,’ I smile sweetly, my lips trembling. I feel my baby kick and wrap my arms around my stomach protectively. ‘Two minutes.’

I watch him go back into the kitchen, looking back around once as he goes. I force a smile again then go up the stairs as quickly as I can. Except I’m not heading for the bathroom. I just need to get to the bedroom. There’s a panic button. I had Jake install it ages ago. Just in case. It’s behind the curtain by the window.

I look behind me. No sign of Dan. I walk past the bathroom and into the bedroom, where I see Ralphi, my childhood teddy, with his head torn off, white stuffing falling out of his neck. No time to grieve for that now. I pass my tarot cards scattered on the floor, my books on South America, my beads. I swish the curtain and see the white box with the green button. I reach my hand up finger extended ready to push it, when suddenly a large hand is on top of mine and pushing it out of the way.

‘I knew it. You fucking bitch!’
I raise my other arm and smash the silver metal torch into his face. I had forgotten I was still holding it. He loosens his grip on me and I run downstairs. Keys, keys, I need to find the keys. I scrabble over the kitchen counter, my hands frantically looking for them. I search on the floor. Then I see his coat. I reach in the pocket and feel a hard, cold mass of steel. My keys. Thank God. I run to the door. My hands are shaking, Dan is coming down the stairs. I can’t get the key in the lock. Jesus Christ!

I run back into the kitchen. He’s there already waiting. This time holding his gun, blocking the other door.

‘Come here, cunt.’

As I am standing there fighting for my breath, knowing in a few seconds I will be fighting for my life, I have almost an out-of-body experience. A spiritual epiphany. My life with him, everything he put me through, everything I have with Jake, and I am transported back to that candlelit room six months ago, the smell of incense, the sound of Juliana, and it is as if I can hear her voice in my head, giving me encouragement, giving me strength. Not in my ear like when I was under hypnosis, but in my memory, my conscience. I think about my reading. The words domination, control, torment, then love, recovery, power.

I touch my ear. I can hear her, Juliana, she is giving me confidence, giving me strength. I prepare to turn around and as I do I place my hands inside the still open kitchen drawer, then I turn to face my nemesis, my monster, my demon. Except he’s not mine and nor do I want him to be

I look at him and feel compelled to touch my ear and suddenly… I don’t feel afraid anymore. It’s weird. All this time I have been terrified of the thought of him and what he might do, the memory of him and what he did do. I knew he would come looking for me. Exact his revenge for what I did. But now that he is here and I am faced with what he could
do, I realise my fear is starting to dissipate. Like that saying, ‘what’s the worst that can happen?’ Well this is it, here, right now, this is the worst scenario I could possibly imagine so the fear of it has gone because it’s here.

Juliana’s words echo in my mind: ‘Strong, powerful, confident. The only thing to fear is fear itself.’ I look at his reflection in the mirror, except it’s not there anymore. Nothing is reflected back to me. I turn to face him.

‘No. You. Come. Here.’ I pant and see his expression change. Just like before. Just like that night. He opens his mouth. I close my eyes and try to take myself back to a safe place as I hear him say:

‘We’re going to have a bit of fun you and me, all night, right until your boyfriend comes back. Then we’re gonna have some more fun as he watches me fuck you senseless. Show him how a real man does it. Then you’re gonna watch whilst I beat the living shit out of him. How does that sound?’ I open my eyes. He lifts his hand, the one holding the gun.

‘There’s no way I’m going back there, Rachel. No way. Do you understand?’

I move my hand instinctively to my stomach. I realise now there is no way he is intending for me to live. That I can deal with. But I will not let him hurt Jake. I will not let him hurt my baby.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ I pant. ‘I said come here. Come here you stupid, ugly, dumb-as-fuck, piece of worthless shit.’

Dan’s expression changes from one of menace, to confusion and then rage. He roars as he lunges at me but his incandescent fury is halted in its tracks by Ronnie leaping on him out of nowhere and clawing his face. Dan lifts his gun up and points it in my direction and that’s when I whip my hand out from behind my back, the one holding the six-inch carving knife.
I plunge it into his chest: *One*

Then his torso: *Two*

His neck: *Three*

And his stomach: *Four*

‘*Bitch!*’ He collapses to the floor.

I touch my ear.


He lies on the floor blood pumping from the wounds on his body. I can smell it. Metallic. The sensation of plunging a blade into skin, muscle and bone. It is alien and strange.

I reach for my inhaler, hands trembling, and take a long breath and then another until my panting subsides. It’s surreal, like a dream, yet I have amazing clarity as I look at him. I wonder if subconsciously I have been planning this all along. Waiting for this moment.

He looks scared, weak, pathetic, ridiculous.

I feel nothing. No fear, no guilt, no regret, no remorse.

His gun has clattered to the floor. I kick it away.

Still panting, I kneel down next to him, knife in hand. I raise my arm. I see the fear and disbelief in his eyes. Good.

‘Rachel, please…no.’

*Five:* I stab him in his chest.

*Six:* Again, the other side.

I look at him.
‘No means no is that what you’re telling me? Didn’t seem to work for me, did it?’ I shudder as I think of his hands all over me.

‘Wh-what, what are you t-talking about?’ He sputters.

‘Sshhh,’ I say. I just want him to be quiet now.

‘Rachel,’ he spits, blood spurting from his mouth. ‘No one will ever love you like I did. No one. Even after everything you did to me.’

I look at him, writhing and contorted in pain and suddenly the adrenaline I have been running on subsides and the horror, the enormity of the situation, what he has put me through, what I have done, hits me. I explode with emotion.

‘Thank fuck for that Dan!’ I cry angrily, my breath stopping and starting as I begin to hyperventilate, my body going into shock, my shoulders shuddering, my whole body shaking.

He looks at me and I see a single tear escape from the corner of his eye and run outwards towards his ear, which is covered in blood. Then his breathing slows and he closes his eyes, spluttering, then gurgling like a baby, then nothing. I throw his coat over his face. I don’t want to look at him anymore.

I start to cry again. Sob. Wail. Large guttural sounds escape from my throat as my chest heaves and I try to catch my breath. I am not weeping for the man I lost, but for the me I lost. Well she’s back now. I look at his body lying dead on the floor. Blood moving all around him as he lies motionless. All that pain, all that misery coming from that small entity there, that one person able to cause so much destruction, all of it gone now.

He’s just a body. He never had a soul. He can’t hurt me anymore. He can’t hurt anyone anymore. Six feet of bone and muscle mass. Six strikes and it’s all over. Gone.
I think back to the last few months, the feeling that I was being watched, the sense of unease, despite all my positive affirmations. My therapist said it was paranoia. Was he planning this all along? His revenge? Well, he didn’t see that one coming, I think. The thought catches me off-guard. An unexpected giggle escapes my lips. And then another. I start to laugh. Soon I am snorting and wheezing with laughter, tears rolling down my cheeks. I laugh and laugh, uncontrollably. What the fuck is wrong with me? What isn’t wrong with me?

Borderline personality disorder. I read about it once. I have all the requirements: Unstable interpersonal relationships- tick; self-damaging behaviours relating to sex- tick; severe mood shifts- tick; lack of clear sense of identity-tick; chronic feelings of emptiness-tickety, tickety, tick. My doctor mentioned Asperger’s to me once. Sociopathic tendencies, that’s what the counsellor said. Who was he talking about? I can’t remember. Said I didn’t know fact from fiction, couldn’t differentiate the two. That’s why I stopped seeing him. What did he know anyway? That leaflet he gave me, I didn’t even read it.

What does it feel like to be normal anyway? I don’t know what’s real anymore. My whole existence is one of confusion. He said that I live in a fantasy world. That I make up scenarios in my mind. That I deflect all the negative aspects of my personality and behaviour onto other people. Did I write about my experiences or did I write and then they became my experiences? What else did he say?

“Promiscuity often expresses a need for constant love and attention from others in order to hold onto positive feelings about oneself.” Well, that didn’t work.

“The world of a borderline, like that of a child, is split into heroes and villains.” Which one am I then? I am both!
“Borderlines lack a core sense of identity and experience a painful loneliness that motivates them to find ways to fill up the ‘holes’.”

Hmm. Yes, admittedly I have kept myself pretty busy both within and outside my head. The police even said Dan said I set him up, that I caused all the injuries myself. That it was all in my head. My therapist said that rituals and counting, my ‘OCD’ was a sign of my obsessions, my madness, my mental illness, my control.

Finally, finally, I lose control as I laugh at the situation, the scenario, the outcome. I must look like a nutter. I am a nutter. Mentally unstable. Isn’t that what the psychotherapist said? PTSD? He told me that maybe Juliana wasn’t real. But she is to me. All of it’s real to me. I think of Sylvia and close my eyes:

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
I fancied you’d return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

I sit there with my eyes closed and think about the cards, the meaning, the inverse meanings, they all related to me. Every time. I needed to know what was going to happen, I needed to be prepared. I knew he might try and find me. Exact his revenge. Well his vengeful fantasy didn’t come true. But mine did. Jesus, I don’t know what Juliana said to me when I was ‘under’ but it fucking worked. No more numbers, no more counting. No more fear, no
more doubting. I think back to that first reading. Six cards, six swords. Six knives. Six, six, six. Did I dream it? Was it me? Am I really going mad?

I look at the body in front of me and lift up the coat. It’s my coat. The face looking back at me is Jake’s, what is going on? I blink and the face is back to Dan’s. I close my eyes again and when I open them I see the broken glass in my hands from the floor and my wrists bleeding. The blood, it’s all coming from me. I don’t understand. There is a heart drawn with blood on the tiles of the kitchen floor. I look at the body again. There is no one there, just broken glass and blood everywhere.

I close my eyes and touch my ear. Come on, Rachel, stay with me. Who’s saying that? I realise it’s me. I open my eyes again and look under the coat and see his face. Him.

For a moment there, I thought I was losing my mind. No.

No one knows what happened except me and him.

Well, I guess just me now.

I rub my belly then touch my ear. I feel my baby kick.

Me and Juliana.

Just me and you.

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END.

Introduction

There has been a plethora of damaged female protagonists in psychological thrillers recently, many with the underlying theme of the eponymous character’s imprisonment, freedom and escape, often in that order, meaning that even when the character is no longer confined, she may not yet be free psychologically or emotionally. My Creative Writing Masters by Research portfolio is a novel extract in the psychological thriller genre centred on the somewhat unreliable narration of a damaged female protagonist. The title of the piece, Six, is a significant number throughout for the protagonist, Rachel, and, in the end, for the antagonist, Dan. The premise of the story is Rachel living with anxiety and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). It begins by giving the reader an insight into her daily rituals and routines and foreshadows some causes of anxiety from her past. Rachel goes to see a psychic hypnotherapist and counsellor about her issues, which are explored in the middle of the piece through Rachel reliving some of what happened to her. The story ends with a confrontation between Rachel and Dan, with Rachel, metaphorically, facing her demons and, ultimately, the reader is left to decide whether she vanquishes her demons and emerges victorious or whether her mental illness claims her as its victim. This essay will examine mental illness and OCD in the contemporary novel and how this impacts on a novel narrative. The essay gives some backgounding to the understanding, or lack thereof, of women’s mental illness from the 16th to the 20th centuries, with examples of how this was depicted in literature. Key texts discussed include Pride and Prejudice, Wuthering Heights and The Yellow Wallpaper, followed by The Bell Jar and Girl, Interrupted. The essay traces the development of female mental illness in literature, focusing on OCD, and references, compares and contrasts contemporary works, including Six, The Betrayals, Gone Girl and
The Girl on the Train. It compares and contrasts the portrayal of rape and sexual violence towards women in contemporary literature including fictional works which have since been serialised, namely *A Game of Thrones* and *Apple Tree Yard* and goes on to discuss the psychological thriller genre in relation to the damaged female protagonist and the unreliable narrator. Ultimately, this essay will examine through a feminist lens how the damaged female protagonist has used her agency, however limited, compromised or oppressed, to emerge victorious and able to direct her own destiny.
Chapter 1

**A Brief History of Women and Mental Illness in Literature**

During the mid-16th century, in Europe, the word *obsession* came to be associated with *possession*. The concept of a literal devil was replaced by the notion of a devil within and any obsessive, sexual or blasphemous thoughts were attributed to being possessed by the devil or evil spirits. (Aardema & O’Connor, 2007, pp.185-186). It was thought that “the devil may interfere more effectively with a person susceptible to melancholy or hysteria”, namely women, or more specifically elderly or unmarried women (Carta, Fadda & Rappeti, 2012, p.112). ‘Hysteria’, from the Greek word for uterus, *hystera*, was believed to manifest itself in women with a variety of symptoms, including “anxiety, shortness of breath, fainting, insomnia, irritability, nervousness [...] sexual promiscuity and a tendency to cause trouble” (Maines, 1999, p.8). If a doctor could not diagnose the illness or affliction, it meant that it was “procured by the Devil [...] the woman feels persecuted and the devil himself is the cause of this *mal de vivre*” (Carta et al 2012, p.112). Based on this rationale, early treatment involved exorcism and, elsewhere, execution, in the case of the 1692-93 Salem Witch Trials and later treatment included committals to asylums and the performing of hysterectomies. In the 16th and 17th centuries, hysteria was linked to menstruation, “retention of fluids in the uterus, sexual deprivation, or by the tendency of the uterus to wander around the female body causing irritability and suffocation” (Carta et al, 2012, p.112). This idea persisted through to the 18th and 19th centuries.

Throughout the 19th century, the concept of hysteria was reflected in works of literature, some written by women, including Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847). During this time, doctors were still reluctant to associate the symptoms of hysteria with the psychological causes and “by professional article of faith,
and almost by way of reflex, equated sickness with the somatic. Many chose […] for their patients' peace of mind, surreptitiously to translate complaints into somatic ailments (nervous stomach, and so forth), believing this recourse optimal, for all concerned” (Gilman et all, 1993, p. 261). In light of this, women suffering from mental anxiety “often invented physical symptoms in order for their mental distress to be recognised” (Woods, 2011, www.nyu.edu).

This is exemplified in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) when Mrs Bennet “calls attention to the physical aspects of her emotional discomfort in order for her inner turmoil to be validated” (Woods, 2011, www.nyu.edu).

> I am frightened out of my wits; and have such tremblings, such flutterings, all over me, such spasms in my side, and pains in my head, and such beatings at heart, that I can get no rest by night nor by day. (Pride and Prejudice, p.257)

In *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Catherine Earnshaw is, towards the end of the book, delirious, a condition possibly brought on by her refusal of food. Thormählen (1997) contends that Catherine “has a predisposition to insanity which duly develops into full-scale lunacy” (Thormählen, 1997, p. 189). He states: “Catherine becomes delirious following her quarrel with Heathcliff and Edgar and never recovers mentally afterwards is amply demonstrated with expressions such as ‘fits, rages, ravings, mania, insanity, delirium, derangement, madness. Catherine is left […] in a state of melancholy” (Thormählen, 1997 p.187).

This portrayal of mental illness plays into the patriarchal constructs at that time of female hysteria, diagnosed by male physicians in the male-dominated field of medicine. *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), published 45 years after the seminal works of the Brontë sisters, is considered to be one of the first feminist works of fiction, railing against this male dominance and patriarchal society, both in the realm of the medical world and in domestic, married life. According to Nadkarni (2012), Sandra Gilbert
and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1978), interpreted the short story as a “universal text of women’s struggles against the patriarchal structures that constrict them casting the narrator as a heroine who chooses to become mad rather than assume her proper place in the patriarchal order” (Nadkarni, 2012 p.219). Some see the female protagonist’s descent into madness as a failing for the woman and a victory for male-dominance and chauvinistic psychiatry yet, ultimately, the woman prevails as it is she who holds the power in the end, whether she is mindful of this or not. It is she who is metaphorically and physically stepping over her husband in pursuit of what she wants.

Throughout the centuries, women’s mental struggles had been viewed through a patriarchal lens and attributed to anything from witchcraft to menstruation to problems with the functioning of the uterus. However, in the early 20th century, hysteria was viewed as less of a physical ailment and more of a psychological one (Carta et al, 2012 pp.110-119). Psychiatrists such as Gregory Zilboorg “subsequently developed these retrospective diagnoses of early modern demoniacs as sick people possessed, not by the devil, but by disease, as people fit, not for the flames, but for the couch” (Gilman et al, 1993, p.231).

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) claimed that hysteria was not anything physical at all but an “internal, emotional affliction which was caused by psychological trauma or sexual problems” (Devereux, 2014, p.24) Sexual repression was synonymous with the Victorian era. Freud began to attribute other anxieties, such as obsessive–compulsive behaviour, to disquiet in the unconscious manifesting as physical symptoms. (Baer & Jenike, 1990, p.76). Despite early feminist criticism of his views as sexist, and described as outdated and invalid by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Freud theorized that both males and females could be afflicted. Charlotte Perkins Gilman never met Sigmund Freud but she but she was “scornful of him, his theories, and the movement he generated” and lectured on “the Fallacy of Freud.” (Davis and Knight, 2004, p.194).
In the 1950s and 60s, there was a feminist backlash against the Freudian way of thinking in terms of women’s mental health with works published such as Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous rejected “the notion that socially constructed femininities and hysteria are natural to being female” (Devereaux, 2014, pp.28-30) and saw it as a patriarchal apparatus to oppress, repress and exclude women in society. Some of the literature written in or set at that time reflected this. Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) tells of a young woman’s life experiences in a male-dominated society and looks at social identity and expectations. The female protagonist suffers from depression and suicidal thoughts. The novel sets out to highlight the problems with oppressive patriarchal society in mid-20th-century America (Bonds, 1990, pp.49-64). Yet the issues it deals with, such as physically or emotionally oppressive men and the expectation to be a housewife and fulfil all domestic duties could have been written 100 years prior and set in middle-class England, as were the novels of the Brontës, and Jane Austen, alluded to earlier. The difference here is that the female protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, Esther, despite her challenges with mental illness, is on a “quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be” (Perloff, 1972, p.508). This also applies to a later work concerning female mental illness, Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993). It is based on the author’s memoirs of when she was confined to a mental institution in the 1960s, at the height of the feminist movement and examines the damaging psychological effects to young women caused by the struggle against patriarchal oppression at that time (blogginggroup: *Girl, Interrupted: Mental Illness through the Feminist Lens*).

However, this does not account for current research on women’s mental health which indicates that issues of women’s health are “still related to matters of inequality and generalized oppression” (Travis & Compton, 2001, p. 312). Despite *Girl, Interrupted* being
written over two decades ago and 150 years after the Brontë sisters’ novels dealing with female mental illness, it remains to be seen how much has actually changed in terms of female equality, male dominance and oppression and other contributing factors relating to women’s mental health and the confines of a patriarchal society. In From Female Sexuality and Hysteria to Feminine Psychology: The Gender of Insanity in Literature (2011), Woods discusses that whilst Victorian female authors subscribed to “traditional images of insanity”, feminist writers of the late 20th century, such as De Beauvoir, “extended the definition of insanity to include any deviation from accepted social behaviour. For women this could include inappropriate behaviours such as being loud, uncouth or sexually promiscuous” (Woods, 2011, p.5). This is evident in the writings of Susanna Kaysen, whose central character in Girl, Interrupted, is admitted to an insane asylum for sexual promiscuity, amongst other things, and is later diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. It is interesting to note that, in the case of female mental health in Victorian literature, it is linked to sexual repression, and in feminist writings of the late 20th century, for example The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (1970) by Shulamith Firestone, it is linked more so to sexual freedom and promiscuity. Today, female hysteria is no longer a recognized illness, but different manifestations of hysteria are recognized in other conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). According to The British Psychological Society & The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2006, p.15):

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is characterised by the presence of either obsessions or compulsions, but commonly both. An obsession is defined as an unwanted intrusive thought, image or urge, which repeatedly enters the person’s mind. Obsessions are distressing but are acknowledged as originating in the person’s mind, and not imposed by an outside agency. They are usually regarded by the individual as
unreasonable or excessive […] Compulsions are repetitive behaviours or mental acts
that the person feels driven to perform. A compulsion can either be overt and
observable by others, such as checking that a door is locked, or a covert mental act
that cannot be observed as in repeating a certain phrase in the mind.

I have endeavoured to show these traits through the worldview of the central female
protagonist in *Six*: Rachel has intrusive, unwanted thoughts, for example about her abuser,
she is unable to make decisions and she uses repetitive behaviours as coping mechanisms, for
example tapping and counting; all indicators of OCD.
Chapter 2

**OCD in the Contemporary Novel**

Whilst much has been written about “melancholy” or as we now would call it “depression,” it is only in recent years that OCD has been featured in contemporary works of fiction. In *Mental Health in Literature: Literacy, Lunacy and Lucidity* (2005), Glenn Rohrer states that using literature to examine human behaviour has “many advantages over written case studies.” He says: “One of the major problems with case studies is that they are often written to illustrate a diagnostic point. They lack the vitality of writings designed to develop characters without the limitations of a predescribed [sic] set of behaviours (Rohrer, 2005, p.xi). One of the earliest literary representations of what we now know to be OCD is in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) when Lady Macbeth compulsively washes her hands as she is consumed by guilt and anxiety (Rohrer, 2005, p.165). Whilst some fiction was written in the late 1990s and early 2000s concerning OCD, for example *Kissing Doorknobs* (Terry Spencer Hesser, 1998) and *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (Aimee Bender, 2000), it is primarily within the latter half of this decade that OCD has been featured more prevalently in the contemporary novel, perhaps to illustrate or encourage more understanding and interest in this area. Most of the novels centre on female protagonists, including *Her Fearful Symmetry* (Audrey Niffenegger, 2009), *Compulsion* (Heidi Ayarbe, 2011), *Perfect* (Rachel Joyce, 2013) *Don’t Touch* (Rachel M Wilson, 2014), *Every Last Word* (Tamara Ireland Stone, 2015) and *Finding Perfect* (Elly Swartz, 2016).

In her 2017 novel *The Betrayals*, author Fiona Neill writes in her acknowledgements: “To all those OCD sufferers, I hope this shines some light on a much-misunderstood illness.” The opening lines of the book introduces the reader to Daisy and the secretive nature of [her] OCD:
Three is a good and safe number. I close my eyes and whisper the words three times so no one can hear. They sound like a sweet sigh. If Mum notices she might worry and the days of worry are over. I say this three times too, just to make triple sure, remembering how the words have to be spoken on the outbreath. (The Betrayals, p.1)

From this opening paragraph, the reader can deduce that the narrator, Daisy, seeks comfort and finds solace in rituals and repetition, yet her statement “the days of worry are over” is ironic and contradictory as the sole purpose of the act itself would appear to be to alleviate anxiety, which is clearly present. This gives a good insight into one of the primary motivations of OCD; that if someone repeats or does something often enough everything will be OK. Yet, like a gambler, once, twice, three times is never enough. The ritual is on a constant loop. Bressert (2017) elaborates:

Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder is characterized by a preoccupation with orderliness, perfectionism, and mental and interpersonal control, at the expense of flexibility, openness, and efficiency. When rules and established procedures do not dictate the correct answer, decision making may become a time-consuming, often painful process. Individuals with Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder may have such difficulty deciding which tasks take priority or what is the best way of doing some particular task that they may never get started on anything. (psychcentral.com)

This is demonstrated by Rachel in Six when she is unable to make decisions or constantly changes her mind:
I can spend half an hour in the biscuit section of the supermarket choosing between the McVities Digestives and the non-branded ones. I’ll finally choose one, walk all the way around the store, then come back and swap it for another packet (Six, p. 8).

In The Betrayals, the reader comes to understand that Daisy is in recovery from a serious bout of OCD which took full effect two years prior. This stemmed from a traumatic incident in her life, a betrayal, which resulted in psychiatric care and she appears to be on the verge of having a relapse. The story is told from four different perspectives: Daisy, her brother, Max, and each of her parents, both in present day and flashback perspectives. It is interesting to note how differently each person perceives Daisy’s illness and the onset of a relapse. From Daisy’s perspective, as is the case with many sufferers of OCD, she knows what she is doing is irrational, yet she can normalise and rationalise it, even as her behaviour becomes more extreme, both as a teenager and as a young woman:

Compulsions are only interesting for about three seconds, but mine involved six repetitions of actions that included checking the bedroom windows were shut, making sure there was no gap in the curtains, and tapping the wall in a triangular pattern in multiples of three [...] When this was finished I had to say the following nine times [...] If I made a mistake or it felt wrong I had to start all over again (The Betrayals, pp.132-3).

This also occurs in the opening pages of Six when Rachel is interrupted whilst doing her morning rituals:

*Just leave me alone to do this and then I can get on with my day. I’m going to have to do it six times now instead of three* (Six, p.6).

Rachel hides her OCD from others, whereas, in contrast, Daisy’s family are aware of her illness. Daisy’s brother, Max, as a child, sees Daisy’s rituals as her doing magic spells to
protect him and later as an annoyance. Her mother takes on the anxiety, by worrying about her daughter’s condition. Her father, who is often referred to by another character as patronizing, fails to understand and sees his daughter’s problems as affectations or dramas. This is a similar way of thinking to how men and doctors viewed ‘female histrionics’ and mental illness two centuries ago, showing that perhaps things have not moved on as much as they should have in terms of male attitudes to female mental illness. Yet, ultimately, it is the men who are shown as weak in the book: Nick, Daisy’s father, cannot remain faithful to his partner, as he did not to Daisy’s mother, and he is unable to forge a relationship with his children or garner their respect. Max becomes an enabler to Daisy’s illness and does not realise his girlfriend’s indiscretions are happening right under his nose. Her mother is preoccupied with reclaiming her identity in the book and refuses to let her husband and best friend’s betrayal break her. It is Daisy who ultimately helps herself in the middle of her relapse by contacting her former therapist and taking charge of the situation whilst the men in her life, including her boyfriend Kit, fall by the wayside, lose interest or become irrelevant.

In *Six*, Rachel’s OCD is also exacerbated by a traumatic event in her past and further triggered by reminders of this. Just like Daisy, as Rachel’s anxiety worsens, so does her counting and ritual checking. Daisy is certain that once the cause of her anxiety, her Dad’s mistress, is removed from her life, her anxiety disorder will be also. Whilst Daisy’s anxiety stems from a need to protect her family, Rachel’s stems from a need to protect herself from an abusive ex. *The Betrayals* opens with Daisy doing her rituals, a form of exposition, whereas *Six* leads up to this a little more gradually. In terms of storytelling, *The Betrayals* uses simple “Eight years earlier” techniques, whereas *Six* uses flashback in the form of hypnotherapy and tarot card readings. Both female protagonists seek out therapy for their OCD. Daisy uses Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which involves methods such as aversion and exposure therapy aka ‘facing your fears,’ whereas Rachel enlists the help of a
psychodynamic psychotherapist using more ‘Freudian’ techniques, although at the end of the novel, Rachel does indeed face her fears, however the agency for this is taken away from her. I have knowledge of both techniques having attended counselling sessions and previous training as a counsellor. OCD is mentioned throughout *The Betrayals* whereas in *Six* it is only ever alluded to; Rachel refers to the disorder as “it”, “this”, “my counting,” “my chants” and other euphemisms or observations such as: “They also say people like me are obsessively clean and tidy” (p.7). These stereotypes are alluded to in *Mad Girl* (2016) by Bryony Gordon, a non-fictional novel about her anxiety disorders including OCD and is told in a humorous way:

I am convinced I have managed to hide it from everyone. Not my mum, of course. She’s a mother, after all, her intuition finely tuned. And so one Thursday evening, after she has been to the cinema, she comes to my room and tells me about the film she has just seen, *As Good As It Gets*, starring Jack Nicholson as a man with something called obsessive compulsive disorder. “It’s more commonly known as OCD,” she explains. Please bear in mind that the year is 1998, and OCD has yet to become the celebrity illness du jour. It has yet to become shorthand for “I like to live in a clean flat”. This was before TV stars would sit on breakfast-show sofas and say, “Oh, I’m a bit OCD. You should see my sock drawer!” (*Mad Girl,* pp.56-7)

*Mad Girl* is told in retrospective narrative; therefore, the reader can see changes in the narrator since the events of the story transpired and there is an element of distance between past and present. In contrast, *Six* is primarily told in real time, therefore the reader does not know what is going to happen next or if the narrator is going to be OK. This adds to the dramatic tension, particularly in psychological thrillers.
Like Neill’s protagonist in *The Betrayals*, Six’s Rachel assigns good and bad qualities to colours and numbers: “Sarah is yellow. Becky is blue…I always wanted a green name, like Kate, but Rachel is a red name and I don’t like red. Fours are red.” Whereas Daisy in *The Betrayals* performs rituals in sets of three, Rachel uses the number six as does Catherine, the protagonist with OCD in *Into the Darkest Corner* (Haynes, 2011). Catherine’s OCD manifests itself in terms of her anxiety about her safety. Her obsession is her security, her compulsions is checking her flat. She painstakingly locks, unlocks and re-locks her doors and windows, spending up to three hours a day doing this. If she omits to do it, she increases the checking the next time:

I got back into my flat, sat down in front of the television and watched an hour and a half of a film before I realised I hadn’t even checked the flat. That little oversight cost me the rest of the afternoon and several hours into the evening. (*Into the Darkest Corner*, p. 32).

As with Rachel in *Six*, Catherine’s anxiety stems from an ex-partner who physically, psychologically and sexually abused her. The similarities are interesting but coincidental as Rachel’s OCD and experiences were based on my own.
Chapter 3

**Sexual Violence in Contemporary Fiction**

As OCD is concerned with the control of oneself, the act of rape is about exerting control over another. In *Into the Darkest Corner* (2012), Catherine’s OCD develops after she is raped and almost killed by her partner. Following this, he (Lee) is imprisoned and she is sectioned. She becomes obsessive about safety and security and compulsively checks windows, locks and doors, waking up before 5am every day to do so before she goes to work. As with Rachel in *Six*, her anxiety and OCD worsens as her attacker is due to be released. Her story is told in flashback and present-day sequences and, like *Six*, from her point of view only. Each of the rape attacks are shown in flashback sequences. Catherine’s rape is graphic and brutal:

> He grunted and thrust into me, ramming himself into me again and again […] the pain all over from the weeping grazes around my wrists, my broken fingers, my nose, my head, my right eye, the split to the corner of my mouth that let the blood seep in […]”.

(*ITDC*, p.300).

In contrast, when Rachel is raped she has an almost out-of-body experience; still, calm, disbelief.

> I turn my head away and continue to weep as he ignores me and carries on. I stay in that position the whole time, tears silently falling down my cheeks, my eyes tightly closed. This is what it feels like. I am detached from the situation. This is what it feels like to be raped […] It is not real. I am not here. (*Six*, p.52).

the brutal rape of Catherine may make the reader recoil, the metaphorical sharp intake of breath, whereas the methodical examination and subsequent “quiet” rape of Rachel is, perhaps, shocking in a different way, due to its non-violence and her rapist boyfriend’s loving behaviour afterwards, in contrast to Lee’s open disdain. In each of the novels, rape is used as
punishment and control, not as an indicator of desire. At the end of each book, the female protagonists are facing the prospect of rape and attack again and each uses courage and skill to outsmart and ultimately defeat their attackers. This operates as an allegory that broken women can cut the men that broke them with their shattered edges without being sadistic or further hurt themselves. This is in line with DeKeseredy’s 2013 study which concluded that female violence was used mainly in self-defence or fighting back and male violence used primarily as a means of patriarchal control (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013, cited 2017). A more recent study, “Understanding Woman Abuse in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships: The Enduring Relevance of Feminist Ways of Knowing”, claims:

“There is no evidence of sexual assault, strangulation, assault during the process of separation or divorce, stalking, revenge pornography (also referred to by some as image-based sexual abuse), and homicide being sexually symmetrical. These behaviors [sic] are commonly part of abused women’s experiences, but are downplayed or ignored by those who assert that men and women are equally violent.” (DeKeseredy, 2017, pp.874-884)

As with Room by Emma Donoghue (2010), Hollie Overton’s Baby Doll (2016) deals with the premise of a young girl being kidnapped by an older man and held captive for years whilst being systematically raped. In both, the captor is outsmarted by the woman who is able to escape, despite risk of further punishment, which could include, according to Baby Doll’s protagonist and escapee, Lily: “Broken Bones. Rape. Starvation. More beatings. The abuse varied depending on his mood or, as he liked to say, “the severity of the infraction”.” (Baby Doll, p. 141). This would suggest that, whilst the female protagonists may be physically or psychologically damaged, they are mentally sound enough to challenge their situations and attempt to control their own destinies, which, ultimately, they do. However, Lily’s twin sister
Abby, is unable to get over what happened to her sister and attacks and kills her attacker, her teacher, Mr Hanson.

‘Victims’ outsmarting their attackers without using violence is an underlying theme in contemporary works of fiction that deal with sexual violence. Yet in one of the forerunners to these, Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005, original title in Swedish: *Män som hatar kvinnor*; in English: *Men Who Hate Women*) the female protagonist, Lisbeth, is a rape survivor who exacts her revenge on her attacker by torturing, blackmailing and humiliating him. Although she is damaged, she is able to remain focussed and in control. In other works of contemporary fiction dealing with sexual violence, the attackers aggression is matched, or even superseded, by their victim, as is the case in the final scenes of *Six* and *The Betrayals* and June Taylor’s *Losing Juliet* (2016). The premise of the latter is that a friendship is broken and a woman traumatised by something that happened when they were travelling in France together twenty years prior. It emerges that the titular character, Juliet, was raped in a hotel room, whilst her friend, Chrissy was in the shower. Chrissy comes to Juliet’s aid, attacks the attacker and intentionally kills him. The story traverses from present to past and back again and is primarily about forgiveness (of self and other) and redemption as opposed to revenge, which is the case with other works discussed. Juliet is held prisoner, metaphorically, for twenty years by her actions. Yet, by contrast, death signifies freedom for the other damaged female protagonists discussed earlier: The death of Lisa for Daisy signifies the end of her OCD, as with Dan for Rachel. In the case of Mr Hanson in *Baby Doll*, it is a clear exchange: “Abby’s freedom in exchange for Lily’s” (*Baby Doll*, p.344). This is similar to *Apple Tree Yard* (Louise Doughty, 2013), whereby the harrowing rape of the female protagonist, Yvonne, and the psychological and emotional consequences she endures lead to another man taking control of the situation which then leads to murder, death and, potentially, her loss of freedom. In general, the men in the works discussed are responsible for trapping,
imprisoning or damaging the women, including Daisy’s father in *The Betrayals* and Dan in *Six*, and the women are responsible for escaping or setting themselves or other women free, both literally and metaphorically. This is the case with two of Margaret Atwood’s novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000) which could be described as allegorical feminist misogyny, as could George R.R Martin’s more contemporary *A Game of Thrones* (1996) and the television adaptation (*Game of Thrones*).

In the novel and the television series, rape is prolific; many unnamed, faceless women. Yet the central characters who are raped, for example Daenerys and Sansa, emerge not unscathed but as a formidable force. In the case of Sansa, she exacts a brutal and violent revenge on her rapist and tormenter, Ramsay. Daenerys goes from rape victim to conquering ruler, from “pawn” to Queen (Churchill, 2017). In most of the fiction discussed above, the women who are victims of sexual violence effectively use the damage caused to construct a weapon and turn it back on the abuser using “strength and vengeance” (Churchill, 2017). The women may be damaged but they are not broken. Although they may be beyond repair. This is alluded to in *Six* in the closing scenes when the reader may not be sure of Rachel’s state of mind. This is a central theme in *A Game of Thrones* and also other works such as *Any Other Mouth* (2014) by Anneliese Mackintosh. The book is, according to the author’s disclaimer at the start of the book, a mix of fact and fiction, a frank account of a damaged female protagonist (‘Gretchen’)’s journey through life. It includes stark narratives of sexual experiences, including a harrowing account of a gang-rape. Gretchen uses promiscuity as a form of self-medication or escape prior to the rape. Afterwards, her promiscuity becomes reckless and even more extreme, perhaps as a way of regaining control of her mind and body, similar to how Rachel behaves in *Six*. However, because of the earlier disclaimer in *Any Other Mouth*, the reader is never fully sure what is truth and what is fiction. This is also an effect I strove to produce in *Six*. Throughout *Six*, there are hints placed as to Rachel’s reliability as a narrator.
so that the reader is unsure until the end if what Rachel is saying, seeing and believing is truly accurate.
Chapter 4

The Damaged Female Protagonist as The Unreliable Narrator in the Psychological Thriller.

The damaged, textured female protagonist is a popular trope in the psychological thriller genre. According to the definition, a psychological thriller is a gripping, engaging film or book that centres on the psychology of its characters as opposed to the plot. The characters are often vulnerable to danger mentally rather than physically, although sometimes both, as in the case of Rachel in Six. A common element is that the damaged female protagonist is also an unreliable narrator. Wayne C Booth (1961/83) introduced the term unreliable narrator in The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), and defined it as “those narrators who articulate values and perceptions that differ from those of the implied author” (Olsen, 2003, p.94). There are several contemporary novels which exemplify this, such as Gone Girl (Gillian Flynn, 2012), If She Did It (Jessica Treadway, 2015), The Girl Who Lied (Sue Fortin, 2016) and The Girl on the Train (Paula Hawkins, 2015). In the latter, the female protagonist, Rachel, is an alcoholic, using alcohol as a temporary means of escape from her issues, namely implied depression and anxiety. It could be said that she also exhibits a form of OCD, obsessing daily about a couple she sees on the train whilst compulsively drinking. However, because of this, her narration becomes unreliable due to memory blackouts and skewed perceptions whilst under the influence. Booth defines the unreliable narrator as “exhibiting a disconnect with normative values, as representing a child or an elderly person lacking full cognitive capacities, one having a criminal background or hiding the truth, and/or one possessing a psychologically impaired mind-set” (cited Hembrough, 2017). Rachel would certainly fall into the latter category, as would Rachel McKay, the protagonist in Six. Rachel (McKay) is psychologically damaged due to a previous abusive relationship. She has repressed bad experiences and memories, which later emerge through flashbacks and hypnosis. What is not
clear until the end, or possibly at all, is just how psychologically impaired, or damaged, her mind-set is. However, her unreliability is hinted at throughout: “That’s all I seem to do lately, reading, chanting, counting, lying…” (Six, p. 9).

Booth’s “model of narrator unreliability” has been criticized for “disregarding the reader’s role in the perception of reliability and for relying on the insufficiently defined concept of the implied author” (cited Hembrough, 2017). In The Girl on the Train, it is, no doubt, clear to the reader that Rachel is not wholly reliable in terms of her recall, and this is the main premise of the book, however it is not clear until the end that her unreliability also extends to her perception of events that had happened prior to the main crux of the story. Her “memories” have been manipulated and distorted by her ex-husband, who has taken advantage of her vulnerable state of mind whilst she is drunk and afterwards.

However, in Six, my intention is for the reader to never quite fully know who the threat is to Rachel: Dan, Jake or herself. Clues and red herrings are placed throughout the book. Rachel’s narrative and reliability starts to unravel at the end and it is unclear whether she is imaging what is happening and in a state of delirium or whether she is reporting what is actually happening. According to L Bernaerts’ (2009) Fight Club and the Embedding of Delirium in Narrative, when a fictional character is in a state of delirium, “his or her madness can coincide with an alternative architecture of the fictional world. In that case, a narrative delirium breaks into the text and narrative strategies direct[ly] present in the character’s delusional world view.” Whilst William Riggan (1981), describes unreliable narrators as “picaros, madmen, naïfs or clowns”, and looks at “the relation between a deviant or deranged mind and unreliability in recounting one’s own experiences” (Huhn, 2009, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de).
Nunning (2004) “updates Booth’s work” with a “cognitive theory of unreliability that rests on the reader’s values and her sense that a discrepancy exists between the narrator’s statements and perceptions and other information given by the text” (Huhn, 2009, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de). Phelan argues that narrators “perform three main roles—reporting, interpreting, and evaluating; sometimes they perform the roles simultaneously and sometimes sequentially (Phelan, 2005, p.50). This would be the case of *The Girl on the Train*, where the story is told from the point of view of three different women, all damaged or broken in some way and all with their own perceptions of the narrative of the story. In *Six*, Rachel McKay is the sole narrator, therefore the reader has only her version of events and internal monologue to rely upon. In *The Girl on the Train* the story is told from different viewpoints, all female and all damaged in some way, therefore all potentially unreliable.

Phelan identifies six types of unreliability which fall into two umbrella categories:

(i) misreporting, misinterpreting (misreading) and misevaluating (misregarding);

(ii) (ii) underreporting, underinterpreting (underreading), and underevaluating (underregarding) (Phelan, 2005, p.51).

In the case of the central female protagonist in *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel is unreliable because she is misreporting, misreading and misevaluating events. In *Six* it could be argued that Rachel is underreporting, for example, her mental state and the depths of her mental illness. Similarly, in *Gone Girl*, the female (and male) narrators are unreliable as they are not giving all of the information, as they do not have it (and are unaware that they do not have it). This is also similar to Lily, the unreliable narrator in Ross Armstrong’s *The Watcher* (2016), a psychological thriller that has been compared to *The Girl on the Train*, just as this was compared to *Gone Girl* before it. Through Lily’s observations and actions, which become more and more absurd and confusing, the reader begins to see that what is being portrayed is
the world through the lens of Lily’s evident but undisclosed mental illness. Whilst the narrative of *The Watcher* is often meandering or confusing it shares a common element with the aforementioned novels, including *Six*, in that it used flashback technique or switching from past to present. This helps to contrast different states of mind between the narrator of each and to show how or why the female protagonist is damaged or “broken.” *The Watcher* unfolds slowly, as does *Six* to a certain degree, whereas *The Girl on the Train* and *Gone Girl* are more fast-paced, which is often indicative of a psychological thriller. *Six* is concerned with Rachel’s mental health and inner voice and emphasizes her unstable psychological state. She is exposed to danger on a mental level but also potentially a physical one, as with *Into the Darkest Corner* and *The Girl on the Train*. Neubauer (2016) states that the latter introduced “a new style of psychological thriller that appears to have overtaken the *Gone Girl* motif in terms of popularity” (Neubauer, 2016, p.22). Neubauer states that, according to Miranda Jewess, fiction editor at Titan Books: “Readers enjoy having a female protagonist who shares some of their perceived failings and self-doubts,” and Jewess has noticed “a growth in narratives where we really see the darkest parts of the narrator’s personality, rather than having it hidden until the big reveal” (Neubauer, 2016, p.22).

With *Six*, the reader can see at the start of the novel that Rachel has issues, and these are alluded to throughout. It is only at the end when the reader sees how damaged she is. The question is, does Rachel ultimately triumph? Does she defeat her demons, whether imagined or real, or do they ultimately destroy her? Whilst it is intentionally ambiguous and the reader is left to make up their mind, in *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on The Train*, the message is clear. Amy (*Gone Girl*)’s evil triumphs over good in the end through manipulation, blackmail and deceit; Rachel (*The Girl on The Train*)’s innate flawed goodness triumphs over evil and adversity as she realises that her partner had been gaslighting her for years, which made her question her own sanity. As a result of this, Rachel regains clarity, a sense of worth and self-
belief. This enables her to defy her antagonist and fight back, ultimately killing him. According to Paula Hawkins: “Amy Dunne is a psychopath, an incredibly controlling and manipulative, smart, cunning woman — and Rachel’s just a mess who can’t do anything right […] Amy is deliberately unreliable, while Rachel is accidentally unreliable because she got so drunk” (Siegel, 2016, hollywoodreporter.com). This is similar to Six when Rachel says: ‘Now I need to be my own salvation. My own white knight to rescue my own damsel in distress’ (Six, p. 73).

In the novels discussed throughout this essay, it is interesting to note that all of the characters are psychologically damaged by the actions of men, whether through sexual violence or otherwise, and many of them look to eradicate the damage by damaging the men in return, either through physically harming or killing them or through revenge. Exacting retribution through ‘villainous’ actions seems to be a pathway towards redemption and peace of mind and, ultimately, emerging not unscathed but certainly victorious, whilst examining resistance and complicity. The difference with Six is that the ending is not neatly tied up and resolved. This makes it distinctive from other narratives in the genre. In other works discussed, the male antagonist is killed by the female protagonist. In Six the reader is not sure if Rachel is mentally sound or if Dan is actually dead. Or if it is even Dan at all. By resisting a near resolution, in the way that many contemporary psychological thrillers that feature damaged and unreliable female protagonists do, my intention is to provide an alternative female trajectory. One in which the female protagonist does not always have to vanquish the violent villain, or escape from her brokenness, for her to emerge victorious. In this way, I hope to provide a solution to the damaged female psychology which comes from the female protagonist’s agency in the narrative rather than that of the male antagonist. Over the centuries, women have contended with misogyny, patriarchy and power struggles. Now, the damaged female protagonist can assert her authority on her terms, however precarious they
may be. Rachel in Six and other female protagonists discussed here show that women can be remarkable and indelible in the face of adversity. Power can be protean and even the most submissive women can surface as survivors.

[Word count does not include quotations].
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