

THE SECRET TO NOT DROWNING

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Bluemoose

For Ingrid

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There are four people in the room but only one of them is me.

I am the only one flat on my back, legs in the air, knickers somewhere on the floor. I am the only one focusing only on the paper towels stacked in piles from the floor almost to the ceiling. Little green bundles, ready and waiting for all those doctors and nurses to wash their hands and dry them again afterwards. That's a lot of hand washing. How many bundles of paper towels are there? How many towels per bundle? If, on average, each person uses two paper towels to dry their hands, how many hand washes are there stacked up in this room? How long will they last then? And why are they in here and not in a cupboard? Have they been put here especially for people like me to help them concentrate on something else? To help me and them drown out the sound of the doctor telling me something I already know.

He squeezes my hand. He wants me to look at Him but I don't want to. I don't want to look at Him. I don't want to hold his hand. I don't want to be here. I don't want to exist. I want to pull my hand away and pretend that there's no-one but me in the room. Just doing a paper towel stock-take. But I just lie there, letting Him hold my hand. He's holding it too tight for me to pull it free. And, anyway, what difference does it make?

"It's not good news I'm afraid." The doctor is talking to me but looking at Him.

"The baby hasn't developed since we examined you last week. There's no heartbeat. If the dates you gave us are correct, it may have all been over for several weeks."

He pauses for some kind of acknowledgement. I say nothing. He says nothing. The woman just nods and gives me one of those anti-smiles, the kind you'd give a small child whose hamster has died. I'm not sure why she's here. Is she supposed to be making me feel better? Is she making sure the doctor doesn't abuse his position? I don't like her. I wish she'd just get out of the room.

"Can I get dressed now?" I say.

"Of course. Of course," says the doctor, and the woman helps me get my legs down from the stirrups. She draws a curtain for me but there are still three other people in the room. It's quiet though, really quiet, and no-one says a word while I pull on my knickers, zip up my trousers and slip my shoes back on. I put on my cotton jacket, even though it's boiling in here and I'm too warm already. I just want to go.

When I was very small, my grandpa had a greenhouse where he grew flowers. It was so full that they spilled over through the windows. And when I went to visit, he always picked the biggest most perfect flower and presented it to me like I was a special lady.

I don't remember my grandpa or his flowers, but the story was told to me so many times that it became my earliest memory.

And I don't even care whether it's true or not. Who knows whether he picked a flower for me every time we visited or just the once, or even if he ever did it at all? Memories like those aren't about what really happened, they're about what you want to believe. I want to believe it and I want to always remember it. Even when it seems totally far-fetched. Even when it's impossible to think of sunny days and flowers and friendly grandpas. That's why I wrote it down on the thickest, most expensive paper I could find, and folded it carefully and put it away somewhere safe.

I unwrap it and read it sometimes and remind myself that somewhere, close to the beginning of time, even if it's not completely true, there were perfect moments like that and I

was at the centre of them. And the paper is in the front pocket of my handbag now as He drives me home from the hospital. I take it out and read it again and He's so desperate not to be the first to speak that He doesn't even ask me what it is.

It's not that I don't remember what I was like before I met Him. I do. I was a cocky teenager. A little chip on my shoulder maybe, waiting for the world to pay up. Waiting for the world to sit up and take notice of me. And maybe it would have.

These days I look in the mirror and say to the woman I see: 'I am not you, I am not you, I am not you.' And she sneers back at me. She knows I'm lying.

Other memories of life before I met Him are much more concrete than the grandpa thing, verifiable even. I remember The Six Million Dollar Man and Charlie's Angels on the TV. I remember playing Charlie's Angels in the playground. I was always Jaclyn Smith. She was beautiful, but not the most beautiful because she was clever and tough as well. She wasn't the cleverest and the toughest: that was the short-haired one, Sabrina, the one that Julie the Weirdy Girl always wanted to be. But the thing about Jaclyn Smith was that she had everything – she could fight the bad guys in an evening dress while doing a crossword – and I planned to grow up to be her.

I planned to grow up to be her, but I never had much of a plan. I was going to get invited to all the best parties, have flings with pop-star heart-throbs, then stoically leave them in tatters because our lifestyles were simply incompatible. Then somehow I'd meet the man of my dreams and live happily ever after. Things were supposed to just fall into place.

Julie the Weirdy Girl had a plan. First of all her plan was to have a horse, and in the meantime she was quite content to gallop around the playground on her imaginary horse, neighing at people as she went past and leaping over their carefully drawn hopscotch. Some people assumed she thought she actually was a horse, but that would just be stupid. She was weird, no doubt

about it, but she wasn't nuts. She planned to do well in her exams and go to university. She planned to be top of the class and be snapped up by the best law firm who would train her to be a hotshot so that she could make sure justice was always done, just like on TV. She was going to be champion of the downtrodden and friend of the needy. She didn't care what she looked like and she made no big plans for romance. She just wanted to be clever and make her cleverness count.

These days Julie the Weirdy Girl has a house and a car but no wedding ring. I see her sometimes in the supermarket, choosing wine from the top shelf where there's nothing under £10 a bottle.

When I see her I want to ask her, "Why didn't you warn me?" I want to say to her, "Why didn't you tell me to be Sabrina?" I want to ask her if it's too late to change my mind. But I don't speak to her.

She probably doesn't see me. She probably wouldn't recognise me anyway.

He's not looking at me, just at the road, as though He's not sure of the route back from the hospital and needs to concentrate. He doesn't know what to say, which is good, because I don't want Him to say anything. In fact, I don't care if He never says anything ever again. I know what He wants to say. He wants to say "I'm sorry" and fix it all. And then He wants me to say "It's OK." He wants me to say "It's not your fault." But it is his fault. How could it not be his fault?

We get home and He still doesn't know what to say and He hovers while I hang my coat up. Maybe He's waiting for me to cry. Maybe He's waiting for me to ask Him how He is.

"Are you OK?" I ask.

"I'll be OK," He says. "Will you?"

"I'm going for a bath," I say. How am I supposed to answer a stupid question like that?

“Good idea,” He answers. Sure it is. Genius. He gets to escape from trying to find something to say and I get to go upstairs and spend some quiet time with the dead baby that’s still inside me. Tomorrow they’ll get rid of it.

I have never been a water-baby but in the bath I sink my head under the water and hear my heart beat thumping in my head out of my ears and into the water and I feel like I am the water and it is me. We are singing, me and the water, getting to know each other. “Keep me here with you, Water”, I say inside my head.

Is this what it was like for my baby?

I’m thinking about what it would be like to be water all the time. To flow quickly in and out. To find holes to seep into. To part and reform when solid things got in my way. To trickle and drip in different directions at once. To know I could be ice, or steam or water. I’m thinking myself into water.

His hand grabs me by the neck and pulls up so that I can’t breathe and I can’t hear my heart in my head any more, I can only hear it banging in my ears.

“For fuck’s sake Marion,” He shouts and scoops all of me out of the bath like I’m seaweed.

On Mondays I swim. He knows I've been swimming because He can smell the chlorine on my skin. He knows how long it takes me to drive to the pool, pay myself in, get changed, swim forty lengths, wash my hair, get dressed and come home. He hears my key in the door and shouts hello from the living room.

"Good swim?" He says.

"Yes," I say. "The pool was busy tonight though," I say. Or something like that.

Then he watches me as I take my wet towel and swimming costume out of my swimming bag. He gets up from the sofa.

"I'll put that in the washing machine for you," He says and comes over and takes them out of my hand. He checks to see that they are wet. He kisses me on the cheek and checks for the smell of chlorine on my skin.

"See anyone you know?" He asks. He means, "Did you speak to anyone?"; or "Did you meet up with someone?" or "Have you been fucking someone in the changing rooms?" I know what He means, He doesn't need to say it aloud. And I find myself feeling guilty and wondering if maybe I have looked at someone with a bit more interest than I should have done. Perhaps He's had someone go to the swimming pool to check up on me and make sure I'm not having some sort of aquatic affair that survives on a one-hour poolside liaison a week. But I know I've just been swimming and thinking and counting the lengths and watching the clock and taking note of my fellow swimmers – the regulars and the once-in-a blue-mooners. I know I've done nothing that even He could reproach me for. But still I panic that I won't be able to justify myself.

So I think of something to tell Him. I say “The old woman with the tattoo was there today. People should think about what their tattoos will look like when they’re all old and wrinkly before they have them done.” Or I say, “There was a pair of fat women there who swam about two lengths then just chatted at the side of the pool. What’s the point of that? They could have just walked to the pub and got more exercise!”

And as I dry my hair I do think about the people I saw at the pool this evening. It’s not a huge crowd – it’s a Monday evening and a pool that’s seen better days, so it’s never going to be top of the ‘exciting nights out’ list – but it’s a small private world that He knows nothing about, just the odd alibi I drop in here and there. Of course I don’t know the people, not even the diehard every-weekers: they never say hello to me and I never so much as smile at them. But I know them well in a strange sort of way, their physical peculiarities, their swimming pool routines, what time they will leave. And I wonder about where they live, who is at home waiting for them and what they’ll do when they get back there.

I wonder whether, for them too, the pool is as much a place for thinking as for swimming. Is that why they go? The bald guy with the dodgy leg that just drags behind him as he swims. The skinny girl with the goggles who just swims and swims and swims, expecting everyone else to get out of her way like she’s some sort of Olympic champion. The old tattooed woman. The pervy old fella that showers for as long as he swims, gawping at the rest of us while he soaps himself over and over. The couple with ginger hair who stop for a chat between lengths. What do they think about while they swim up and down?

For me, each slow, deliberate stroke is like the ticking of a clock. A clock that replays the week in slow motion. I am not a swimmer. My technique hasn’t progressed since, aged eight, I was awarded a certificate for the earth-shattering achievement of completing the 25 metres without drowning. But I can draw back the water with a strong, purposeful rhythm that’s automatic

enough that I needn't think about it. So while my body moves my mind rewinds and replays. It remembers what was said, it records a picture of where I was standing, what I was wearing, what His face looked like. It sets out a complete guide to what I felt like, how I responded to every detail and how I wanted to respond but didn't. And as I swim and count the lengths and check the clock to make sure I don't outstay my curfew, I let myself drift off into a parallel universe where things happen differently, I can make them happen differently, and alternative endings become part of the plot. I can invent scenarios that fit straight into my swimming pool diaries like the real thing. In this place, where sound is distorted and I am weightless in the water, who's to say what's real and what's not?

Then when I get to forty lengths, or sometimes forty-two in case I've lost count without realising it, I climb out of the pool, wash my hair, and climb back into my own skin in the changing room.

On Tuesdays He buys me flowers. Every Tuesday without fail. No matter what's happened in the day. No matter what's happened the day before. It would be nice to think that it's because he missed me on Monday evening. It's not. It's because we met on a Tuesday. He's kept up the Tuesday flower tradition ever since.

The flowers are often roses and are always pink. He says red flowers are vulgar. He says it's pink for nice girls. He says pink to make the boys wink. He pulls them from behind his back as though He were trying to surprise me, as though He didn't give me flowers every Tuesday. And He winks and says pink to make the boys wink. And He holds them out towards me and grins as though He were the first person ever to think of giving a girl flowers, as though these were the only flowers on earth.

And every Tuesday I smile back at Him and take the flowers. I hold them up to my nose and look at them and then at Him as I sniff them. I sniff them theatrically. And He grins in approval.

And I say, "They're beautiful. I don't know where you get them from. You always find the most beautiful flowers." Or something like that. I say "I must put them in water while they're still fresh." I go in the kitchen to put them in water. Sometimes He suggests a vase and follows me into the kitchen. And sometimes He doesn't.

Then I bring them in the living room and put them on the mantelpiece so that we can see them from anywhere in the room. And I stand back and say "lovely," or "gorgeous" or "perfect". And He repeats my word, whichever word I choose. Then He wanders up to them and re-arranges them in the vase, just one or two here and there. They look no different to me after He's finished. "That's better," He says.

One Tuesday, He buys me pink gerberas. And we sit on the sofa watching TV and He explains the subtext of the news to me, as usual. I ask the odd question so that He knows I'm listening but He mostly doesn't hear the questions, He just tells me what He thinks. But then I ask a question that He says is facetious. I tell Him it's not. I tell Him I lose track with African politics but it's too late. He doesn't believe me. And suddenly I find myself eating the flowers He's so carefully rearranged for me and drinking the water I'd put them in.

He pulls off the petals, one by one at first, then three or four at a time as He starts to run out of patience. He passes them to me so that I can eat them. He passes me the petals, then the heads of the flowers and then sends me into the kitchen for a knife and fork. Then He puts the stalks on the coffee table and cuts them into pieces with the knife and fork. He feeds me the pieces of stalk off the end of the fork. And I imagine that they're delicious. I imagine that they're a delicious, vitamin enriched, strength-giving vegetable and chew them slowly so that He has to wait to give me the next piece.

He gives up before the end of the second stalk and tips the table over, sprinkling the rest of the pieces of stalk across the

floor. He leaves the house. I clear away the pieces of stalk and put the coffee table the right way up.

I don't feel sick; I don't even feel like crying. I just feel relieved that that's all there is, just a bit of indigestion maybe and some mess to clear up. Nothing broken, nothing that will leave a stain. Nothing that will leave a mark of any kind, permanent or otherwise.

And within an hour He's back. He has a fresh bunch of flowers, a perfect match for the ones I've eaten. He apologises. A bad day at work. "That fucking loser from accounts," He says. "Fucking jobsworth that just likes to make himself the big 'I am' by making everyone else feel small," He says. So I apologise for not asking Him about his day and sympathise about the loser from accounts.

And before I know it I have my nose against the mattress and He's telling me I'm a dirty bitch with a gorgeous arse.

On Wednesday nights He goes out. "To see a man about a dog," He says. He thinks a euphemism is better than a lie. Or maybe He wants me to guess. Or maybe He wants me to spend all night wondering and worrying what He's up to and if He's coming back. I've given up wondering. Instead I just use the time to do the stuff He doesn't approve of. I watch trashy TV, I eat toast with no plate, I bid for things I have no intention of buying on eBay.

3

There are other women. Don't ask me how I know, but I know. Where else would He be on Wednesday nights? What else would He be up to when He disappears off to 'visit friends' for the weekend and I'm not invited? They are the man He has to see about a dog.

Call it instinct if you like. Call it paranoia. Call it whatever you like, but I know there are other women.

There's a tall one. She's a blonde. A blonde in the old-fashioned 1950s sense of it. Blonde straight from the bottle and not at all bothered who knows it. She's high maintenance and He expects her to stay that way. Tells her off if her roots are showing. Loves to watch her put on her perfect make up and paint her filthy lips red like a whore. He has her stand naked in front of the full-length mirror while he watches her put her make-up on. And when she's finished creating a perfect red pout He has her kneel on the carpet, unzip his flies and smudge her perfect lipstick as He watches Himself come in her mouth. And He brings those red lipstick rings home with Him and makes sure I see them.

She's beautiful, there's no doubt about it. She turns heads wherever they go and He loves that. He keeps a close grip on her as other men leer at her and gives them a 'fuck you, she's mine' look as they pass.

She's beautiful, but she's not flawless. She brushes her peroxide hair forward to hide a mole on the side of her head. It's on a level with her eye, and He thinks of it as a third eye. It's like a kind of voodoo and He worries that she can see into his thoughts with it. She's careful to keep it hidden and most

of the time it is. But sometimes, when He calls her name and she turns her head suddenly, or when they're busy fucking and she forgets to think about how she looks, her hair falls back and there it is.

He tries not to wince when he sees it. He tries to pretend that He likes it. And sometimes He even kisses it because He thinks it'll make her happy to know that He loves even her ugly mole. But when He kisses her on the mole on the side of her face she hates Him for making her admit that it's there.

Her name is Dorothy, after her grandmother. But she doesn't like the name or the grandmother and she insists that people call her Dee. So He calls her Dee nearly all the time. Nearly all the time, apart from when they're doing it. Then He calls her 'Dor-o-thee, Dor-o-thee, Dor-o-thee.'

Of course, she knows about me. She knows I exist, that is. She knows nothing about me though, only what He's told her, which isn't much and isn't even true. She thinks I'm a sap who doesn't understand Him. She thinks I'm some middle-aged frump that doesn't excite Him and forces Him to seek solace between her thighs. She's stupid, Dee for Dorothy. She doesn't even know Him. She doesn't even know that she's one of many. She has no idea that she's one in a long line. Not even the one of the moment. When He rings her to say He can't make it tonight she thinks it's me that's getting in the way, not some other deluded pretty young thing that's caught his eye.

She thinks He'll leave me one of these days. And maybe He will. But not for her. She thinks He'll leave me and they'll have a fairy tale wedding and babies and a perfect house with a kitchen-diner. She thinks He'll love her forever. But that's not what He does.

I wonder how I'd feel if He did want to leave me for her, or for any of them. I wonder what I would do. Maybe I'd be hysterical and rant at them and the neighbours would call the police. But I don't think so. I'd like to think that I'd just let them get on with it. I might even help Him pack. I might even make

her a cup of tea and dig out a packet of biscuits so that we could have a civilised chat about how we were going to work it all out calmly. That would piss Him off. It would be worth making myself look like the pathetic sap she thinks I am just to piss Him off that much. It won't ever happen, though. I try to imagine it happening but even in my head it doesn't seem possible.

With Dee for Dorothy I imagine her deciding that enough is enough, it's time to force the issue. There'd be no clever games involved, just a this-is-what-I-want-and-this-is-how-I-intend-to-get-it scene, something crass and obvious, like the red underwear she wears under her skin-tight jumpers.

It would be his birthday. He and I would be getting ready to go out. He would be helping me choose what to wear and telling me what jewellery to put on with it. And she would turn up at the door with a bottle of Champagne and an I've-come-to-take-your-husband-and-there's-not-a-thing-you-can-do-about-it grin.

I'd answer, and she'd say something like "I've come to see the birthday boy," and before I could reply He'd be there, pushing past me in the hallway in the hope of shooing her away before I worked out who she was.

But she's too quick for Him, old Dee for Dorothy. Way too quick. She'd be thrusting the bottle towards Him saying something like "happy birthday darling, I didn't think you'd mind!" But He wouldn't take it. He'd grab her arm and push her back towards the door and say something like "well I do mind you stupid bitch." So then she'd say something clichéd and impossible for me to misinterpret. She'd say "But I thought you wanted us to be together." And she'd sound pathetic and He'd hate her for it and be more angry than she'd ever seen Him. "Of course I mind, you stupid, selfish bitch," He'd yell at her and He'd hit her across the face so that she fell to the floor and dropped the bottle.

And He might even spit on her as He stepped over her and out of the house. And He wouldn't even look at me or say a

word to me the whole time. Then He could come back later and we could both pretend that I hadn't seen any of it and it had never happened.

But while He was out having a drink and deleting Dee for Dorothy from his mind, the house would be quiet and I would need to clear up the mess. So I'd pick Dee for Dorothy up off the floor and take her into the living room to sit down. I'd open her bottle of Champagne and bring two glasses and we'd have a drink together and she'd pour out her heart to me as though we were good friends, even though she'd still hate me and I'd still hate her. And she'd cry and we'd drink until the bottle was empty and I would pat her on the shoulder and get to be the smug one who knows everything and has seen it all before, for once.

When she was ready to go, I'd like to think I'd pack a bag, ring a taxi for us both, ring the speaking clock in New York and disappear off into the sunset with her forever, leaving Him with the empty Champagne bottle and no note. That'd be great. That'd be perfect.

But I know that's not what I'd do in real life. I'd ring a taxi all right, but just for Dee for Dorothy. I'd put the bottle out with the recycling, wash the glasses and get on with some ironing, or something like that. And when He arrived back an hour later, I'd be ready to pretend that nothing had happened.