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Written by Fionnuala Kearney

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You, Me & other People



All families have secrets. All families tell lies...

FIONNUALA KEARNEY

You, Me & other People

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PART ONE

They say best men are moulded out of faults,
And, for the most, become much more the better
For being a little bad . . .

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

Prologue

I should not be here. As sure as I know my name, my NHS number by heart and my daughter's date and time of birth, I know I shouldn't be here. Adam Hall . . . NC 100Z9T . . . The third of March 1994, 8.04 a.m., Meg Sarah-Louise Hall, born by caesarean delivery, firstborn child to my wife Beth and me. My head shakes of its own accord, my conscience nudging me, reminding me that I shouldn't be here.

I drive by the house. There's no parking, so I'm forced to keep going. On the passenger seat of my car, a gift sits boxed, wrapped. Today is someone else's birthday. I spent time choosing this gift, wanting to get it right. It's important to me, important that they know how I feel. I do a U-turn at the top of the narrow street, try again to get a nearby parking spot. About ten houses away, someone has pulled out, and I slip my car in their space.

Up ahead, there's a party going on, the house marked by the telltale bunch of balloons on the pillar. I glance at the box. When I wrapped it earlier, I doubled over the

Sellotape so that it's unseen on the outside of the paper. Beth showed me how to do it one Christmas. 'You have to hide it. Makes it so much neater,' she'd said. She's right. Hidden things are so much neater.

I open the window. Loud voices come from the house with the balloons. A woman passes by, a heavy-looking handbag slung high on her shoulder, a small package and a bottle of wine in her hands. I have no idea who she is, but she's walking quickly, as if she's late. Less than three feet from my car, just the width of a narrow footpath away, is a blooming jasmine plant. I inhale the heady scent, close my eyes, immediately cast back in time to my mother's floral perfume. My left hand grips the handbrake as a childhood nursery rhyme she used to sing about Dick Whittington sounds in my head. *Turn around*. I glance at the gift. My bottom teeth chew my top lip. I shouldn't be here.

I start the engine. I'll get rid of the box and I won't come back here. I promise myself I won't return. I say it out loud, address myself in the rear-view mirror and speak the words slowly, like my life depends on it . . .

And, on the drive back, I look forward to the Sunday evening meal that awaits me. I'll enter our home, kiss my wife. I'll choose to have a shower to wash away my morning of madness. I'll immerse myself in the life I love. I imagine it gift-wrapped, the outside wrapping seamless, double-sided sticky tape, or whatever it takes, to keep some of the inner content neat and tidy – hidden from the people I love.

Chapter One

'My husband is a philanderer,' I reply. She sits, her legs crossed, taking notes in her feint-lined legal pad. 'That's a four-syllable word for a cheating dickwit. How am I supposed to feel? He's screwing a waitress . . . ' The last word tastes like Marmite on my tongue. In my head, I apologize to all the nice waitresses in the world. Aloud, I reveal how I really feel as my right hand clutches my upper left side. 'I feel betrayed.' I lower my voice. 'And it hurts.'

Dr Caroline Gothenburg offers a sympathetic nodding motion. She has olive-coloured eyes, set in a wide face, flanked by titian curls; long, shapely legs encased in glossy tights – and I can't help wondering if she has ever been betrayed in her shiny life. Lots of qualifications set in pencil-thin chrome frames adorn her wall. Bright as well as beautiful . . . I find myself focusing on her rather than me.

'I'd like you to do me a timeline for the next session,' she interrupts my thoughts. I feel crevices begin to stack one above the other on my forehead. I'm an intelligent

woman. What the hell am I doing here? Glancing across her coffee table towards her neat, ordered frame, I swallow the panic creeping up my throat.

'It will help me get to know you,' she says. 'Who is Beth? What makes Beth be Beth? I'd like to understand who you are, where you come from.'

A siren sounds in the distance, as if to warn me of an impending emergency.

'Me too,' I whisper.

In the car, my smart phone tells me I have three missed calls. One from Josh, my agent, and two from Adam. If my phone was really smart, it would delete Adam's number. I've thought about it – but erasing him from my phone will not remove him from my brain. I switch on the Bluetooth, return Josh's call and head to the nearest supermarket.

Twenty minutes later, I unload the contents of my wire basket and watch them move along a conveyor belt. Navel oranges, tuna, sweetcorn, trashy mags, a dodgy chicken wrap and two bottles of chilled sauvignon blanc.

'Is Your Man a Love Cheat?' screams a headline from one of the moving magazines. There are four, all with similar revelations, to reassure myself that I'm not alone, that there is in fact mass treachery in the world.

'Points?' a young girl with coffee skin and almond eyes asks from behind the till.

'Points?' I reply.

'You got a points card?' she says, stifling a yawn. I notice a tiny yin and yang tattoo on the back of her wrist.

I find I want to shout at Miss Points Yin-yang. I want to scream at her, tell her not to ask such a stupid question; ask her whether or not she noticed the vital subject matter of the magazines in my basket; tell her, if she didn't, that she receives nil points for customer service today. I want to hurl a stream of nasty words at her – they're already formed in my head. Then I remind myself she's no older than Meg, my nineteen-year-old daughter, and as such, she should not yet know what betrayal tastes like. I breathe deeply – it really isn't Miss Yin-yang's fault that my husband is a shit . . .

So instead, I shake my head at her. No, I am all out of points. I am trembling all over by the time I'm back in the car. Silently, I count to a hundred, and push the facts that he has really left me and that I have just spent an hour in a therapist's office to the back folds of my mind. I still my hands by sitting on them for a moment, then shake them out, start the ignition and point the car towards home.

Our home is a beautiful, three-floor, semi-detached Edwardian house in a sycamore-lined avenue in Surrey's commuter belt. We bought it as a wreck fourteen years ago. Red-bricked, with original bay windows, inside we knocked walls down, built new ones – a bit like our marriage really, except today the house looks like something from *Homes & Gardens* and I, one half of our marriage, look like a 'before' picture in a plastic surgeon's office.

As the gravel crunches under my wheels, I stare at the building I love, wonder if it will have to be sold, if I'll end up in a tiny cottage-ette somewhere called nowhere. My hand massages my churning stomach and, not for the first time, the waitress flashes across my mind. She's an incomplete

image, blurred around the edges. I'm unaware if she has long or short hair, blonde or dark, curly or straight. Is she thirties or forties? Not twenties, please. I'd find that hard to take, not to mention how Meg would cope. The idea of her beloved father screwing someone who buys her clothes in Topshop would be too much.

A sudden image of them having sex ambushes me. Does she cry out like me? Does he hold her hair at the nape of her neck the same way he does mine? Silent tears fall. I have to stop this . . . I wipe them with my sleeve, staying a while to stare at Adam's garden. Quite quickly, I come to one conclusion. He is not selling my home. He'll have to take me out of here in a pine box.

Inside, I dump the shopping and head upstairs to my workspace in the loft. Flooded with natural light from three angled Velux windows, it is where, opposite my two large screens displaying notes and melodies, I sit to handwrite the requested timeline. Within a minute, six hastily written lines and I'm already a convent-educated, only surviving child of an eccentric mother and a drinking father. I continue, silently praying that Dr Gothenburg is good at her job, my hand scrawling my past onto the page. Very soon, I'm a child who loses her father to his love of alcohol, a wife whose husband has already notched up a previous one-night stand and a mother who feels guilty about wanting more than motherhood alone.

Staring at it, spaced over two sheets of paper, it's not a spectacular life. Nor is it the stuff that keeps the Samaritans busy, but will it help Dr Gothenburg get to know me? Will the existence of a baby brother who died when he was three and I was six divulge something I'm not aware of?

Does my ambition to succeed as a songwriter help frame me as a person? Josh assures me regularly I'm the next best thing to hit country pop. It's me who's not so sure. What I *am* sure about – what screams at me from the second page – is that my husband is a cheat. Considering he's been offside at least twice, that makes him a serial cheat. It's there in black and white for Dr Gothenburg to read. The words, confirming his failure, might as well be sticking out on stalks.

The mobile sounds and this time I laugh aloud at the sight of his number. He genuinely thinks that if he keeps calling, one day I'll just stop being angry. Another part of me hopes he's right, because this anger is eating me up from the inside out. I can feel it coil itself around my very being, munching away; as if a sound effect is required, my stomach grumbles loudly. I head back downstairs, passing the photo-lined walls on the way.

Rogues' gallery . . . The fingers of my right hand hover above them, yearning to touch the baby shots of Meg, to tap into those younger grinning images of Adam and me. An old wedding shot, so full of hope and love. One of him taken at a barbecue next door – Adam posing like a catalogue model, his face looking at the camera, his chin tilted upwards; his long legs, tanned in Bermuda shorts, his dirty blond, close-cropped hair flashing in the summer sun. I take the stairs slowly, lost in years of memories. By the last step, I try to comprehend that if someone had asked me only weeks ago if we were happy, I'd have given them a rather smug, 'Yes, of course.' That's how good a liar my husband is.

In the kitchen, I grab a wine glass and fill it to the rim with cold sauvignon. Rummaging through one of the

shopping bags, I remove the chicken wrap and chew it slowly, obediently listening to the voice in my head that tells me I have to eat. I don't want to eat. I just want to drink. Taking a large swallow of wine, I feel the alcohol slide down, immediately hitting the spot it needs to.

Late-afternoon September sun slices through the bi-fold doors that back onto the rear garden. I walk in and out of its shadows, chicken wrap in one hand and glass in the other. One mouthful of food for each gulp of wine . . . In between, I hum the words of a song I wrote yesterday and feel the faint curve of a smile on my face. Thesaurus had obliged with a rhyme for bastard. 'Dastard' – a sneaky malicious coward. Adam the 'dastard'. The grin on my face makes it even harder to chew.

Needing to immerse myself in work, I start back upstairs, only to turn around and sit, motionless, on the fourth step. I stare into the living room opposite, unable to move. The cognitive part of my brain has switched off. My legs refuse to stand, my hands seem glued to my knees. Assailed by snapshot memories of places we've been, songs we've sung, moments we've shared, I'm numb with the fear of starting again. Where do I begin? If I just breathe in and out, will time just pass? I nod. Yes, that's what will happen. I just have to wait this out and suddenly it will be next month and this new beginning will already have happened without me even having to register it.

I only stir when darkness surrounds me. I step downstairs, switch on a light and carry the bottle of wine from the fridge to the living room. Thirty minutes later, I'm watching Adam's oversized, penile-extension plasma screen when the landline rings.

'You're fired!' Lord Alan Sugar fills the screen as he points an index finger at some underperforming female.

'Yeah, mate, I know how you feel,' I sympathize. 'Beth, you're fired!' I point my glass at Lord Sugar's evictee and pick up the phone, sure that it will be Meg at this hour.

'Meg?'

'Beth, it's me . . . '

It's not Meg, my precious girl. It's him, the bastard that provided half of her DNA, the dastard who, as soon as I hear his voice, I miss with every fibre of my being. My heart pulses loudly behind my ribcage.

'How are you?' he asks. 'Beth, don't hang up. Please, we need to talk?'

'I don't want to talk to you.'

He is silent.

'Are you with her?' I ask.

He remains guiltily silent.

'Do you know you're a dastard?' The wine speaks.

He sighs. 'Yes, you've told me many times.'

'No, I've told you many times you're a "bastard", now I'm telling you you're a "dastard" too.' No reply.

I can hear kitchen sounds in the background, like a dishwasher being unloaded. I picture the scene. How domestic. How very Jamie and Nigella. He speaks in a hushed voice, as if he doesn't want to be heard on the phone.

'Oh just fuck off, Adam.' I slam the phone down. I look at the bottle and my father's genes beckon.