Patience

Victoria Scott



First published in the UK in 2021 by Head of Zeus Ltd

Copyright © Victoria Scott, 2021

The moral right of Victoria Scott to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

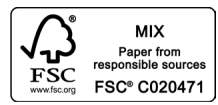
9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781800240889
ISBN (XTPB): 9781800240896
ISBN (E): 9781800240919

Typeset by Divaddict Publishing Solutions Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

1

Patience

July

'Ladies and Gentlemen! We're Gary, Mark and Howard. We're what's left of – Take That!'

The crowd erupts. The group sitting in front of me – demob-happy mums in their late thirties, bottoms berthed on royal blue plastic seats, all sipping overpriced Chardonnay from white paper cups – suddenly thrust their bulk heavenwards, spraying lukewarm wine onto my feet as they do so. But I say nothing.

All I can see now for what seems like miles is a sea of waving hands; all I can hear is a cacophony of catcalls; and all I can smell are the combined fumes of booze, cheesy nachos and sweat. Through the hubbub, I can just make out the early strains of 'Pray', which is one of my favourites. I start to sway along as it ramps up both in volume and beat. Music always makes me move; it's like my body doesn't know how to do it until it's been given a rhythm.

I close my eyes so that I can ignore both the drunken ladies and the two bored husbands I've just spotted a few metres to my left, arms crossed, faces like thunder. What a

waste of money it was bringing them here. Why would you even bother? A night off from those charmers would feel like a jail break, surely?

I open my eyes so that I can check up on Gill. She's standing up like most of the audience, waving her dimpled arms in the air, the loose flesh beneath them flapping around like a net curtain, a beat or so behind her hands. She has long since forgotten I'm here. The atmosphere and the music have carried her away.

That makes two of us.

Gary Barlow's voice is so familiar, it's etched into my childhood like declarations of undying love on a school desk. 'Pray' was released in 1993, when I was four. It's a perfectly ordinary pop song really, with a catchy chorus and soaring vocals, but it means so much more to me than the sum of its parts.

Now don't tell Gary this, I think it would hurt his feelings, but I'm not here for the music. Or even the totty. The boys – lads – men, whatever term you prefer, are lovely to look at, but in all honesty, it's the memories that go with their songs that have brought me here. Take That's music is the soundtrack to my life. And when you can't be the main actor in what's happening to you, your memories form a parade in your head, as if you're a film director assembling a storyboard.

Listening to music is a trigger for me, a little bit of magic that allows me to jump right back into pictures from the past, like the children in Mary Poppins launching themselves into those drawings on the pavement. First drawing: Eliza and me wallowing in the paddling pool in the garden, surrounded by parched grass on an idyllic

summer's day. Second drawing: her crying because she didn't win the running race at her ninth birthday party. Third drawing: she's practising plaits on my hair in our bedroom. (Both of us got chickenpox in the same week and she experimented on my hair to pass the time. Whenever someone tries to tame my unruly blonde mane into plaits now, I still feel the itch.)

I am pulled back from my memories by a change of song. It's louder this time, one of the band's new singles. The bass is so strong that the floor beneath me is vibrating with the beat, and both the repetitive rhythm and the musky aroma of the assembled mass of bodies are overwhelming.

I notice that Gill has finally decided to stop dancing and look my way. I don't think she likes what she sees. I possibly look a bit green. Or red, maybe? I'm definitely a bit hot and I feel slightly dizzy, now that I think about it. I don't want fuss, though. I hate fuss.

'Are you OK, Patience? Do you have a bad head?'

Gill is sitting down next to me now. I notice that a sweat-tsunami is forcing an inexorable path southwards from her armpits – she's not accustomed to exercise, our Gill – and the resulting odour, both ripe and rampant, makes me nauseous.

Piss off, Gill. Please. I want to enjoy this by myself. This is time I will not get back.

Through the waving arms of the women in front, I can just about make out the band gyrating suggestively with some lithe female dancers. Strobe lights shine out into the crowd, flash-flash-flash in quick succession. Hundreds of thousands of tiny pieces of ticker tape are then blasted into the air, falling down slowly, gracefully, like ash.

It starts to feel stifling in here, airless. Lights emitted by thousands of mobile phones begin to blur. And then there's a cloud above my head, a swirling cloud that seems to be made up of dust, glitter, dry ice, smoke and baked breath. I'm floating now, and Gary Barlow is beckoning to me.

I'm coming, Gary…

Then the sound of the band starts to dull and all I can see is darkness. I feel a thump as I hit something. There are heavy, frantic footsteps. I can just about make out what someone is saying.

'Call an ambulance, quick! Some girl in a wheelchair is having a massive fit.'

2

Louise

July

As Louise pulled into the hospital car park, she registered a flash of pink and red in her peripheral vision and slammed on the brakes. Her tyres screamed in protest and came to rest just a few centimetres from where two small girls stood, as if frozen, blinking in disbelief at the car bonnet which now loomed over them. They wore pyjamas and flip-flops, and each clutched a small plastic unicorn. The girl in pink's left arm was constrained by a sling.

After a few beats of Louise's now frantic heart, the girls sprang back into action and continued to run across the car park, their short legs pumping hard, mischievous smiles returning swiftly to their faces. And then their mother sprinted in front of Louise's car, her arms stretching out to grasp at invisible hands, her mouth fixed wide and open in a silent scream.

Breathe.

Louise put on the hand brake and took a moment to focus on inhaling and exhaling, trying to rid herself of the extra adrenaline.

Beep. Beep-beep-beeeep.

The driver in the car behind her apparently wanted to pass. Reluctantly, she put her car back into gear and swung into a nearby space. After she had turned her engine off, she closed her eyes and lowered her forehead, resting it on the steering wheel.

Thud.

Thud. Thud.

Louise raised her head. The woman who'd just run in front of her car was now banging on her window.

'Do you hear me, you stupid old cow?' the woman shouted, the glass distorting her voice, so it sounded as if she was underwater. *'You almost killed my kids.'*

Louise inhaled deeply once more and opened her door, forcing the woman and her two wide-eyed, chastened children to back away towards her bonnet. Instead of rising to the bait, however, she remained silent.

'I said. You. Almost. Killed. My. Kids.' The woman took several steps forward, invading Louise's personal space.

'So, what have you got to say? Anything?'

Louise raised her eyes and looked directly at the woman, whose two girls were now attempting to hide behind her ample, dimpled, Lycra-clad thighs.

'You should have been holding on to them,' she said, quietly.

'What?'

'You should have been holding on to them more tightly,' she repeated, louder this time.

'I'm sorry. I must have misheard you. Are you blaming *me*?'

'If you had been holding their hands, they wouldn't have

been able to run off. I had a split second's warning. It almost wasn't enough.' Louise had lost control of her breathing pattern completely now.

'You were going too fast,' the woman spluttered. 'It *was* your bloody fault. This is a car park, not a racetrack. And there are sick people here. My daughter has broken her arm!'

'Then you have no idea how lucky you are,' Louise said, her hands now scrunched into two angry balls.

'What?'

'You have no idea how lucky you are.'

'Yes, I heard. I just couldn't believe it. Are you saying I'm lucky that you didn't run my kids over? It's the opposite, you bitch – you're bloody lucky you're not in a police cell.'

'No,' Louise answered. '*You* are lucky. Those girls – those girls, they can *run*. They can run away from you. They have legs that work and arms that heal. You are *lucky*.'

'And you're a nutter. *Insane*.' The woman shook her head, a look of disgust rendering her face a caricature.

'I have to go now,' said Louise, swallowing hard to suppress tears of anger and grief. She reached into the car for her handbag, turned away from the woman and began to walk away. 'Sorry,' she said, as an afterthought, not looking back.

Louise sped up as she approached the hospital entrance, almost breaking into a run as she made her way along the labyrinthine grey, scratched and scraped corridors of the ageing building, greeted as she went by the familiar twin smells of disinfectant and dinner. Her speed masked the fact

that she was shaking. It was not the first time she'd had a similar row with a stranger, but each time it happened, she was deeply disturbed. And it was far worse when she was tired.

Louise had been up for hours. She had watched the dawn arrive through her thin curtains, the pole hanging on by a thread on one side, its struggle against gravity almost over. She'd heard the dawn, too; the intense summer heat had forced her to open all of her windows wide, and the birds, such as there were in suburbia, were rejoicing in the rising sun. Lying uncovered in her sweat-soaked sheets with a growing headache, Louise had felt no such emotion.

Pete had finally worn her down on the subject of respite care a few years previously, but she had never reconciled herself to Patience's fortnightly visits to Morton Lodge. Her two-day stints there were supposed to give Louise a break, but, in reality, they just created a void that sleep always refused to fill. Caring for an eternal child meant that her circadian rhythms had permanently reset to accommodate frequent night-wakings and early rises; she lived perpetually in the twilight zone of the new parent. Even at the age of sixty-one, with nobody to care for but herself.

As she strode along the network of anonymous corridors, she tried to subdue her anger, despite knowing that it was a battle she would lose. She had too much to be angry about, and that woman's rant was the least of it.

Like, why the hell hadn't Morton Lodge called her last night? Patience should never be left alone for that long. She'd have been so frightened. And, crucially, it would also have meant that she could have cancelled the job interview

she had arranged for that morning at least twelve hours beforehand, leaving her with a semblance of dignity and the possibility it could have been rescheduled. They'd never take her seriously now, would they? They'd give it to someone else, who didn't have caring responsibilities that lasted a lifetime.

Also, she thought, why had Patience been able to fall out of her chair in the first place? Why hadn't she been wearing a seatbelt? Bloody Gill! She was lax, that one. She had been a fool to trust them to take Patience to that concert. She had let her guard down and that mustn't happen again. Louise filed the issue in her mind to deal with, firmly, later. What really mattered now was that Patience was still alive. That was the only thing that ever mattered.

Louise came to an abrupt stop and stood back against a wall to let a porter pass. He was pushing a hospital bed and in the middle of it, swallowed up and almost camouflaged by sheets, was a child who couldn't have been more than six. The little girl had no hair and her skin was almost translucent. Following behind were, Louise presumed, her mother and father. Both of them looked like they hadn't slept for weeks; their faces ashen, their eyelids leaden, their clothes crumpled. As the bed trundled further down the corridor with the parents part-walking, part-stumbling behind, Louise knew that she wasn't alone in wishing that she'd never set foot inside a hospital.

When she reached ICU, she recognised one of the nurses, Jayne.

'Good morning,' Louise said, forcing herself to pause and be pleasant, even though every cell in her body wanted to propel her forwards, towards Patience.

'Hi,' replied Jayne, with a smile of recognition. 'How are you?' Louise made a grimace and Jayne, nodding her understanding, gestured down the hall.

'She's down here. Shall I take you?'

Louise did her best to return her smile, despite her intense anxiety. She followed her.

'How are you doing?' she asked the nurse, out of politeness.

'Oh, well, thanks. Henry is weaning now. He's a little tyke.'

Louise now recalled that Jayne had just returned to work after the birth of her first baby. Over the years, Louise had got to know a great deal about the lives of the staff on this ward; there had been engagements, emotional breakups, illnesses, marriages, pregnancies, divorce. In return, they had witnessed her darkest moments – when she had been pared down, monosyllabic, raw. They had looked into parts of her soul even Louise didn't want to see.

'Ah, really? They grow so quickly, don't they?' Louise replied, robotically. This ward was a theatre for life's dramas, all right. And she had stage fright, as ever.

The nurse guided her into a side room. Patience was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, her piercing blue eyes and alabaster skin making her look like a doll. Her long, curly blonde hair was piled up on top of her head in a messy bun. Her roots looked dirty, almost black in parts and Louise grimaced. She washed Patience's hair every day when she was at home.

Patience's hands were clasped firmly across her chest, but they were both still, as if frozen in place. Her knees were bent, sticking up like Toblerone triangles under the thin

brown blanket. Her legs were almost always stuck in that position now; it took hours of massage and warm water to persuade them to retract. Louise could also see significant bruising on her arms and upper chest. She must have fallen hard, she thought. They'd put a drip into Patience's left hand, and an oxygen monitor chirped intermittently beside her.

Louise approached the bed and manoeuvred herself so that Patience could see her face, and then smiled. She waited for the usual response from her daughter – a glint in her eye, a small smile, or even, on occasion, a laugh. In the absence of any other communication, these fleeting expressions had become their language. But there was nothing coming back from Patience, not even a flicker of recognition. Louise's heart began to race. Wasting no time, she walked out of the room and marched up to the nurse's station.

'I need to speak to Patience's doctor,' she said. '*Now*, please.'

'Mrs Willow,' replied Jayne, her earlier smile slipping, 'Patience was seen by a duty doctor only an hour ago. They said she was stable. They'll check back on her in a couple of hours.'

'Right. I'm afraid I disagree,' said Louise, her hands now placed firmly on her hips. 'This was her first ever seizure and there's something not right. She's disappeared within herself. I think she's in pain. Can you call a more senior doctor? Maybe a neurologist? Is there one on shift?'

The nurse sighed.

'Mrs Willow, I really don't think—'

'*Please?*' Louise's tone and expression proved persuasive. The nurse paged the senior doctor on call and Louise went

back into Patience's room to wait. She sat down next to the bed and took hold of her daughter's hand.

'Patience, my love?' Her voice was so soft, she was almost whispering. 'Patience… It's Mummy. I know you're in there, somewhere. I think you're in pain. Am I right?' Louise waited for a squeeze of her hand, even though she knew that it would never come. Patience couldn't control her hands. And yet, she always waited. Just in case. She realised she had spent almost all of Patience's life waiting for a miracle.

'I'm so sorry I didn't come last night. I didn't want you to be here, all alone. Hospitals are scary, I know that. But they didn't tell me, Patience, *they didn't tell me*. But I'm here now – and I promise I won't leave you.'

She stood up and leaned over her daughter once more. Patience was still staring blankly into space, her eyes unfocussed, like an infant about to succumb to sleep. Louise planted a kiss on her forehead and smiled at her again, even though she knew that Patience was in no mood to give her one in return.

Turning around, she glanced at the clock, and realised she should be on her way to her interview by now. To distract herself from both her daughter's pain and her apparent unemployability, she walked over to the room's small window, which overlooked a tiny square. It was cast into shadow for much of the day by the wards and consulting rooms surrounding it but several patients – identifiable by the hospital gowns that were poking out from beneath their coats – were sitting on a garden bench, smoking. One was still attached to a drip. Imagine if your own actions were responsible for your disease, she

thought; imagine living with that guilt. It was bad enough living with something that people insisted you could never have prevented.

Louise turned away and returned to her chair. Noticing that Patience appeared to have dropped off to sleep, she switched on the small TV beside the bed and flicked through the daytime television options.

It was a fruitless search. No programme was engaging enough to numb her pain. She turned the TV off in disgust, stood up abruptly and began to pace around the room, tracing a crescent moon on the lino as she skirted purposefully around the bed, back and forth, back and forth. A few minutes and many fruitless steps later, she was interrupted at the cusp of the moon's shadow.

'Mrs Willow? They tell me you want to see me.'

Louise looked up to see a short, balding man in his late forties standing in front of her, his white coat stained with what looked like juice, but it may have been blood.

'Yes, I do,' she said, standing up. 'Are you a neurologist?'

'I'm sorry, no. But I'm a consultant in A & E. We saw Patience there last night.'

'Right. Well, my daughter is in a lot of pain – and the thing is, Dr…?'

'Ian. Call me Ian.'

'The thing is, Ian, you don't seem to be doing anything about it.'

'Mrs Willow, I understand you're upset.' He cleared his throat. 'It's a lot to take in,' he continued, after a pause, 'but I've had a good look at Patience and I think she's fine. She's recovering from the seizure very well. We're still not sure why she had it. It's possible—'

'She's not fine!' Louise snapped. 'I can tell. I know I don't have a medical degree, but I have been her mother for thirty years, and you're just going to have to take my word for it. You need to do something to help her, *please*. What painkillers can you give her?'

'You can *tell*?' There was obvious reservation in his voice. He thought she was nuts, clearly. People generally assumed that being non-verbal meant that Patience was a closed book, but over the years, she had developed an instinct about how she was feeling. It wasn't foolproof and she'd give anything to talk to her daughter properly, but most of the time, she knew when something was wrong. The powerlessness and guilt that came with not knowing exactly *what* was wrong gnawed away at her, however.

'Yes, I *just know*. Just one look at her tells me she's extremely uncomfortable. I don't think she's breathing right, either. I can't tell you exactly where the pain is, *Ian*, because of course I'm not psychic and I'm not a doctor. But I'm her mother and I'm telling you that she's hurting, *Ian*, and I want you to help her.'

'OK, Mrs Willow, fair enough. I'll chase up her test results, order some more and ask the nurses to start giving her some pain relief. It can't hurt.'

Louise began to breathe more easily. She managed to mutter a thank you before she collapsed back into the chair beside Patience's bed.

'It's going to be OK, Patience,' she said. '*Mummy is here*. Mummy is going to make sure you feel better. Don't you worry.' Louise took her daughter's hand again and closed her eyes. Her headache was receding now, but exhaustion, her constant companion, was not.

⋆

Jayne found Louise sleeping, her head lolling towards her chest, when she came in a few hours later to do her observations. She thought of waking her to let her know about the X-ray, the one that showed Patience had broken her collarbone. But she looked so clearly in need of rest, that she left it for the duty doctor to explain on his afternoon rounds.