THERE'S BEEN A LITTLE INCIDENT

THERE'S BEEN A LITTLE INCIDENT

ALICE RYAN



An Apollo Book

First published in the UK in 2022 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Alice Ryan, 2022

The moral right of Alice Ryan 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): 9781803284071
ISBN (XTPB): 9781803284088
ISBN (XTPB special): 9781804546116
ISBN (E): 9781803284057

Typeset by Divaddict Publishing Solutions

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



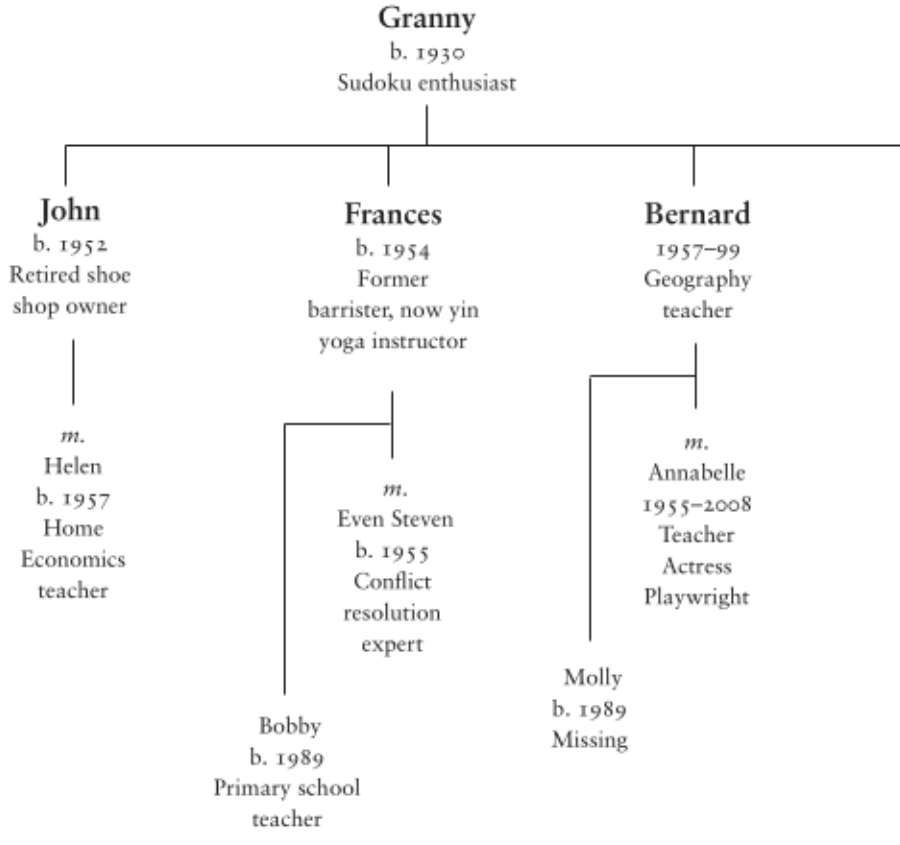
Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

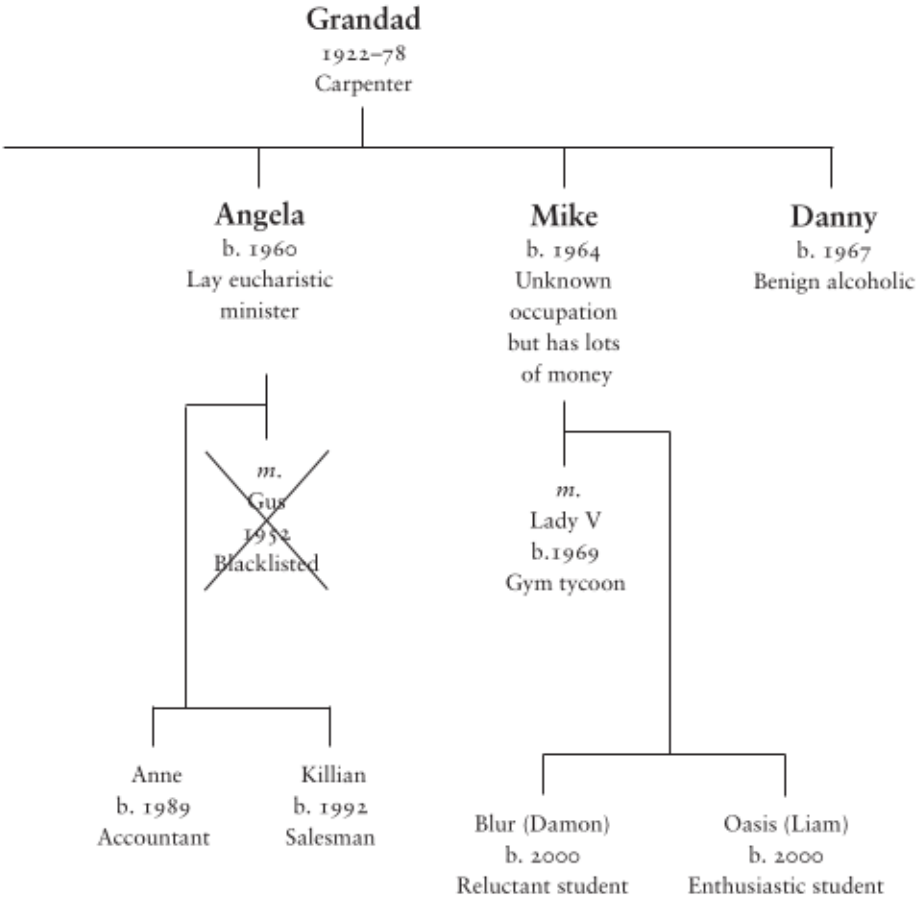
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

To James, Caroline and Matt for a wonderful beginning.

And to James and Matt for beginning again – and for all the wonderful times since.

BLACK FAMILY TREE




Grandad
1922–78
Carpenter
Angela
b. 1960
Lay eucharistic minister
Mike
b. 1964
Unknown occupation but has lots of money
Danny
b. 1967
Benign alcoholic
m.
Gus
1952
Blacklisted
m.
Lady V
b.1969
Gym tycoon
Anne
b. 1989
Accountant
Killian
b. 1992
Salesman
Blur (Damon)
b. 2000
Reluctant student
Oasis (Liam)
b. 2000
Enthusiastic student

PART ONE

PROLOGUE: MOLLY

Islington, London, Friday March 1st 2019

Someone opened the back door to the roof. It wasn't really a door, but a big window that people were climbing through, spilling onto a damp tar surface, grasping the opportunity for fresh air. For days, it had poured from the high heavens; pelleting pavements, battering umbrellas and flooding roads. The rain pounded at a rate that made Molly's pulse accelerate. She loved a mild crisis like dramatic weather, which upended everyone else's beloved routines and temporarily shifted people to the space she operated in: reactionary, improvised, spontaneous.

But she didn't feel any of those things tonight. Tonight, she felt like the last person at the party even though things were just getting started. Even though shots of tequila were being handed around and previous attempts at being quiet for the neighbours were losing ground, she felt like something was slipping away.

A piercing yell emanated from the roof. Someone was attempting drug-fuelled parkour. As B sprinted through the

living room to stop the impending catastrophe, Molly made for the front door. Despite the booming party, when she closed the door behind her, the street was quiet. She sat on the wet doorstep and tried to breathe.

Molly thought about grief like a cut. When you accidentally grazed your finger with a knife there was a moment of grace where no blood emerged. All was white and it looked like you had made it out OK. But when Molly stayed still, the blood began to rise to the top of her finger. Grief was always coming for her. Waiting until she couldn't move. Until there was nowhere to hide.

So, she ran. She ran from boyfriends she accidentally acquired, from religions she accidentally joined, from laws she accidentally broke, but mainly, she ran to keep ten steps ahead of her grief. And for the most part, she had managed to escape it. She had waitressed in Manhattan, picked fruit across Australia, changed sheets during the day and skied at night in France. But all that time, she was never truly alone. Up until now, she had always had B. Now B was moving in with his boyfriend and for the first time in a long time Molly would be on her own.

She'd glimpsed it at Christmas. During her ill-judged, mismanaged, sick-as-a-dog grey London Christmas, the grief had caught up with her and since then it had sprouted shoots, a springtime bonanza of loneliness. She'd been struggling to sleep, losing weight – losing her footing. It was beginning to feel as if, despite all the adventures and all the friends, at the end of the day, Molly didn't really belong to anyone.

She counted upwards in fives, and for a while, she was not spiralling. For a while, all she could feel was the wet

from the step seeping into her jeans and the sound of her quiet breath.

Dublin. She didn't know if she could still call it home but that's where she would go. Her aunts and uncles had been busy lately, her cousins too, but they'd be there for her, they always were. And if the grief caught her there, then at least there was a safety net to keep it from engulfing her.

She stood as the rain started again, the respite brief this time. At the other end of the street a couple were arguing. Their muffled voices rose as the rain quickened. The girl draped her arms around her boyfriend's neck pleading forgiveness for something. As they stumbled under a streetlamp, light shone fleetingly on the man's face and Molly realized who it was.

He removed the girl's lithe arms from his neck like he was letting her down gently. Molly watched her ponytail swing as they disappeared around the corner. The girl walked like she weighed nothing, almost bouncing, and Molly wondered when she herself had stopped bouncing. Why her feet suddenly felt like lead; why what was once possibility all around her had suddenly started to feel like traps for grief to catch her. The blood was rising to the top of her finger; it was time to run again. She'd catch the first flight to Dublin in the morning.

She turned on the step and slipped into the pounding rain, safe in the knowledge that although she was running again, this time it was towards home.

1. THE FAMILY

Ten days later, Dublin, March 11th 2019

'There's been a little incident.'

Uncle John stared at us gravely. We had attended enough family meetings to know that the incident could be that he'd discovered a small bomb at the underpass of the dual carriageway. Equally we could have run out of mini-quiches.

He ushered us into the den. A map of Europe stretched across the wall. Red thumbtacks marked Molly's movements like the Allies' progress during the Second World War – if the Allies had moved between damp flats in North London. At the centre of a corkboard was the note she had left her best friend B. The note didn't say where she was going, just that she loved us, but she had to run. Maybe a romance had escalated inconveniently. Maybe she was just bored. Either way it seemed as if – this time – the incident was that Molly had disappeared again.

Uncle John called for silence, but we couldn't help groaning as all thirteen of us squeezed in on top of each other. Oasis and Blur's endless limbs sprawled across the

floor like delinquent daddy-long-legs, and we all craned to avoid Blur's athlete's foot. Angela's rosary beads almost strangled her daughter Anne, who no one realized was huddled under a table.

Somehow in the midst of the chaos, Lady V luxuriated on an armchair in her exercise gear, her eyebrows arched like a Tasered cat. Her nails were painted a lovely pink like she was friendly and fun, and not a villain from a 1980s movie about a gymnastic competition gone too far.

The rest of the aunts were perched on each other's knees like schoolgirls and Granny sat on the printer. Blur was sending documents to print from his phone and the tangle of limbs on the floor erupted into laughter when curse words appeared from under Granny's layers. Between that and the fact that Uncle John was wearing a pair of strange military boots for the operation, it was hard to take the whole thing seriously. Besides, half the people in the room were jealous of Molly's jaunt and the other half were happy to see the back of her.

'Does everyone present understand the distinction between strategy and tactics?'

Uncle John was short, so he shouted loudly across the tiny room, fearful of losing our attention. Spit landed on the front row. Halfway through his explanation of the extraction plan he got worried that we would see how much he was enjoying himself, so he bashed the map of Europe and shouted, 'This is serious. Our Molly is missing.'

'Our Molly is off her face, having the time of her life in London, while we are planning black ops with a sixty-seven year old former shoe salesman in suburban Dublin.' (Lady V)

'Is off her face the same thing as mindfulness?' (Aunt Angela)

'Off her face means on drugs, Angela. I'm actually trying a mindfulness course myself but last night half the class fell asleep. What I want to know is: why did they sign up for the class if they find it that easy to fall asleep? Some of us have genuine anxiety issues.' (Cousin Bobby)

Uncle John detested the hecklers and glared at them accordingly. He started bashing the map again even though the rest of us were much more interested in cousin Bobby's anxiety. He was such a tall strapping former rugby player, it was hard to visualize him meditating. A delayed quarter-life crisis would certainly explain the revolting moustache he was cultivating.

'It all started with Brexit.' (Even-Stephen)

Even-Stephen wore those shirts with no collar that made him look non-threatening like an acupuncturist or a sculptor. He was a conflict resolution specialist so that was probably part of the ploy, like when therapists smile politely at you but they're actually frantically writing in their notebook how crazy you are.

'It started when she didn't come home at Christmas. We should never have allowed that.' (Uncle John)

'It started when she killed that squirrel in Bushy Park when she was five.' (Uncle Mike)

'That rock was much more powerful than expected, and you know it. Molly is a rare being. She isn't cut out for this relentlessly commercial world.' (Aunt Frances)

Aunt Frances used to appear on the news as an expert on criminal law. Now she wore a cape. She used to smell like she bathed in Diorissimo. Now she smelt like grass left to

fertilize too long. She updated you on her aura and told you what kind of energy you were giving off (not as positive as hers). Half the family thought this was 'fantastic – good for you, Fran!' (Angela and Helen). The other half thought it was a total charade (Bobby and Mike).

'I, for one, envy Molly. I would love nothing more than to abandon my life.' (Aunt Frances)

'That's good to know, Mum.' (Bobby)

'If only we could get her into the Sudoku.' (Granny)

'It wouldn't kill her to pick up a phone.' (Uncle Mike)

'Emotionally, it might. Technology is an insidious beast.' (Aunt Frances)

'Emotionally my arse. Look what she is doing to her poor aunts. Angela looks like she died and then came back to life but just barely, like your man Lazarus. Excuse me, Angela. I know that was harsh. Can the young people not find her on the internet?' (Uncle Mike)

Uncle Mike bashed his elbow into Bobby's ribs to make his point. Some of us worried that this might worsen Bobby's newly revealed anxiety. But Bobby took it well, probably out of sympathy, observing, as the rest of us did, that Uncle Mike hadn't realized that he wasn't one of the lads anymore and was far too large a man to sit on the floor. His whole body was squirming to keep upright.

'Apparently, she hates the internet.' (Uncle John)

'The internet has made young people cocky little nippers, hasn't it?' (Uncle Mike)

'I thought the internet was tracking us all whether we like it or not.' (Even-Stephen)

'It is if you use it, but I believe Molly has – as we call it in military terms – "gone dark".'

Uncle John was delighted to be at the centre of things again and he wasn't going to lose the floor. He started telling the aunts and uncles about the dark web, describing it like a place on the map just beyond the Dublin Mountains. Aunt Helen used the opportunity to unveil another round of miniature scones and miniature sandwiches and miniature buns that she had hidden under a bookshelf. A cucumber sandwich fell butter-side down onto Anne's pale clean hair, but she didn't make a fuss.

'Who will come with me to find her?' Uncle John got to the point of the meeting.

He was met with silence. When it came to Molly, there were no logical allegiances. The family was made up of new-aged hippies, religious nuts, alcoholics, former shoe salesmen, delinquent youths and Sudoku enthusiasts so it was hard to detect a pattern. There wasn't a split by gender or age. Hippy Aunt Frances? Pro-Molly. Raging capitalist Uncle Mike? Anti-Molly. Old but mysteriously liberal Granny? Pro-Molly. Leisure centre tycoon Lady V? Anti-Molly. Religious nut Aunt Angela? Prays heavily for Satan Molly. Even-Stephen? Fucking even. Oasis and Blur? Pro-Molly. Bobby and Anne who were closest in age to Molly? Mixed.

Molly had left both Bobby and Anne high and dry too many times to count. But before TV was seen as the lesser of screen evils, they had spent endless hours on the street playing rounders, setting booby traps and doing knick knacks. They remembered Molly in luminous cycling shorts. They remembered her hair tied in bright pink scrunchies and her teeth obscured by braces. They remembered her parents dying.

'When the time comes, that is? I realize we are not there

yet, but should this continue I think we should mount an operation to find her.' (Uncle John)

'How many times do we have to go find Molly? What about that time you had to spring her from that prison in Poland?' (Uncle Mike)

'It was a local jail cell, and it was terribly well appointed.' (Uncle John)

'Remember when she went to Mexico to liberate those strippers and the police wouldn't let her back into California?' (Blur)

'And she'd lost her shoes.' (Oasis)

'What if she's been abducted like that girl from Galway? Sheena something? God rest her soul.' (Aunt Angela)

Aunt Angela had been normal enough until uncle Gus left her. Then she'd drunk a pulpit of holy-water-flavoured Kool-Aid. Now she was one of those people at mass who is allowed to give you the cardboard snacks. When Anne and Killian had friends over, she used to make them close their eyes and sit in a circle holding hands saying the rosary. When they were one round in, Killian used to slowly disentangle his friends' hands and help them out the window without Angela noticing. One night he climbed out the window himself and went to Australia.

'Molly hasn't been abducted. She's on goddamn holiday.' (Lady V)

But Aunt Angela was already saying the rosary in the corner. We tuned her out like a radio station we wouldn't choose but tolerated because it was already on. Even-Stephen started on about how Molly was like all of us – a mixed bag. The rest of us wanted to vomit at how reasonable he always was. Uncle Danny let out a snore over

by the sustenance station. His face looked like an ashtray. Uncle Danny was an alcoholic. But a benign one. He was like the caramel barrel in a box of Cadbury's Roses – he bothered nobody.

'Is this like the stint in Greece with the one-armed carpenter where it will sort itself out, or more like what happened in Poland with the mayor where intervention is required? What does B think?' (Even-Stephen)

'B is busy with his new book and his new boyfriend from Galway who is a billionaire from selling imaginary money on the internet.' (Uncle Mike)

'He isn't a billionaire, and for the last time, Dad, Bitcoins aren't imaginary.' (Oasis)

'That might be what set Molly off – losing B and to a billionaire.' (Aunt Helen)

'I will get a mass said for her in Glenmalure.' (Aunt Angela)

'Is mass still a thing? I thought we had a referendum and got rid of it.' (Blur)

'Is Molly missing? Or is she looking for attention as usual?'

But nobody heard Anne's quiet question because Granny took a tumble and activated the printer. It beeped like NASA preparing a rocket for lift off. Paper flew high into the room. Her children jumped to help her. John in his army gear, Angela clutching her rosary beads and muttering novenas under her breath, Frances in her cape, Danny smiling serenely and Uncle Mike groaning, unable to get up off the floor. Granny used to say that if she hadn't given birth to all six of her children, she wouldn't have believed they were related. Eventually they settled her down.

'When was the last time anyone actually saw or talked to Molly?' John's voice was low.

The room turned quiet. No one seemed to remember. At the time, the rest of us hadn't thought much about how Molly hadn't made it home for Christmas but maybe Uncle John was right; maybe something had been building and we'd missed it. Maybe if we'd seen her then, we'd know whether or not to take her latest vanishing act seriously.

'I want everybody to go home and look through your last texts from Molly – see if there were any hints.'

Outside, a pale darkness lingered over the cul-de-sac. A car turned its headlights on and beams of yellow momentarily lit us up, crowded together in the den of the semi-detached house in Leopardstown. None of us had spent enough time in the den previously to notice the décor. The curtains were a furore of 1980s pastel and tassels that took up half the room. They were categorically disgusting but warm and cosy, and together with the slow drip of the radiators coming on, John and Helen's house felt infinitely safe. Standing in front of us eating a mini-quiche, Uncle John himself looked decidedly suburban and harmless no matter how much he shouted. It was hard to imagine London or missing people or anything other than the quiet safety of the den as we ate mini sandwiches together. Together except for Molly. Maybe the silence was because we were nervous. Not just for her, but for us too. Who were we without Molly?

No matter how exasperating she was, somehow Molly had a special connection to each of us. Molly and Blur shared a history of minor crime and rescued each other from dodgy situations without alerting the wider family. She and Oasis led marches to government buildings about

the environment. After babysitting late one Easter weekend, Molly accidentally got hooked on the Masters, and ever since, she and Uncle Mike compared notes on all the Majors – a more unlikely golf fan there never was. Molly indulged Aunt Angela by attending 7 a.m. mass, although unbeknownst to Angela, Molly spent the time alternating between meditating and singing the soundtrack to *Evita* in her head. Molly brought Anne to life, was more reasonable than Even-Stephen and ate Helen out of house and home. Aunt Frances approved of Molly's non-conformist walkabout lifestyle and, weirdly, Molly and Bobby both loved swimming in the rain. And there was a reason uncle John was so worked up – sometimes it seemed like Molly was the daughter he'd never had. Molly had a connection to each of us, but, more than that, she brought us all together – for good reasons and bad. Molly Black was like electricity – sometimes she lit up the world. Sometimes she electrocuted you.

'Did I really have to Zoom in from Sydney for this?'

We had forgotten Killian.

'It's 4 a.m. here and I had to call my family because someone has gone on holiday. I thought Uncle Danny had died. No offence, Uncle Danny.'

'None taken, son.'

Our intermingled limbs shuddered into inadvertent laughter, and we all began to move.

'WAIT, WAIT, DO NOT DISPERSE! What are we going to do about Molly?'

Uncle John held out his hands to stop us, but we were on the move.

'I'll call my pal in the Guards OK?'

Uncle Mike latched onto John's good chinos to try and pull himself up. Blur, Oasis and Bobby all pushed him from behind to help him gain momentum. There was a terrible moment when it looked like Uncle John's trousers might come down, but his belt clung onto his hips for dear life.

'It will be embarrassing when she rocks up in a week with a new hairdo and another tree-surgeon boyfriend, but the Guards will tell us what we need to do, OK?'

Finally on his feet, Uncle Mike put his hands on Uncle John's shoulders. At first glance he looked like he was reassuring his brother, but his copious panting indicated that he was just taking a rest.

'Now, I presume there is lasagne?'

Helen sprinted to the kitchen to take industrial-sized lasagnes out of the oven. Several of us followed Bobby into the lounge to ask him about his anxiety. Lady V pulled out of the driveway in her Land Rover like the house was on fire, Anne slipped out the front door without anyone noticing, and no one remembered to hang up on Killian.