For anyone who ever looked back and wondered: 'what if?'

‘I am glad it cannot happen twice, the fever of first love. For it is a fever, and a burden, too, whatever the poets may say. They are not brave, the days when we are twenty-one. They are full of little cowardices, little fears without foundation, and one is so easily bruised, so swiftly wounded, one falls to the first barbed word.’

Daphne du Maurier | *Rebecca*

April 2022

4.57 p.m.

It's a hotter day than anyone anticipated for April and he's sweating, but not just because of the heat.

The backpack, so carefully laden with its components just a few hours ago, is sticky against his back. He's wary of the crowds jostling him as he strides towards the stadium. He has been here so many times before, he knows the place as intimately as he knows his own home.

Today he has feigned illness and, for the first time in years, missed the game.

They are spilling out now, a swarm of ants in red and white striped vests, buoyed by their unexpected win; 3–2 at home to a worthy opponent. Collective euphoria electrifies the air.

It's a sickness. An epidemic. And soon they'll be cured of it.

His face burns red with the effort, the weight of the bag, the internal countdown in his mind.

Not too much longer. Seconds, literally seconds before it will all end.

His heart is hammering; he realises he has been holding his breath. A hand flies to his forehead as if to steady himself, and the sea of people – mostly men, mostly three pints or more

down – coming towards him, those red and white worker bees, starts to blur and merge. Homogenous people, almost indistinguishable from one another: 52,000 of them. It's impossible to see them as anything but one mass, a moving entity. Nothing individual about them at all.

Collateral damage.

But then, one stands out to him; a girl, no more than six, held high on her father's shoulders, waving a scarf. Hair in bunches. Grinning from ear to ear.

It's almost too much. He sucks air into his lungs, turns away, head down, keeps walking. Bigger strides, to put distance between himself and the girl.

He mustn't think of them as individuals.

The stadium is just a few feet away now. Security on the doors, making sure everyone gets out safely. This is the side where the VIPs go after the game. He knows he'll be in there, celebrating.

He has planned it all so carefully.

His fingers fumble for the detonator. He says a short prayer to no one in particular that he has got it right.

And then: a second's pause.

He looks down at his free hand, turning it over and marvelling at his skin. The lines across his palm. The blue-green of his veins.

Someone bumps against his shoulder as they pass. He is at the entrance now. As close as it's possible to get.

It's time.

In the end, it's no more difficult than letting go of the string of a balloon.

He presses the button, and then he is gone.

PART ONE

April 2022

5.02 p.m.

Clara

The woman next to her in the ladies' loo is staring down at the row of handbasins in confusion.

'It's on a sensor,' Clara says, smiling. 'Just wave your hands underneath, see?'

She flicks her own hand back and forth underneath the tap spout until the water begins to spurt. For some reason, it's too hot – always has been – but there's no way to control the temperature.

'Thank you,' smiles the woman. 'And the soap?'

Clara gestures to the underside of the mirrored wall in front of them.

'Under here,' she says. 'Also automated. And the hand towels are here too. *Not* automated.'

The woman smiles at her again. She looks familiar, but Clara can't think why.

'First day?' Clara says. She's been away from her desk for more than fifteen minutes now, but sod it. It's a Saturday afternoon. Slow news day.

'I'm freelance,' the woman says, holding out her hand. 'Holiday cover. I'm a sub. Nice to meet you. I'm Natasha.'

'Clara,' Clara says, shaking her hand. 'I'm…'

There's a beat, where she forgets that she's not the social media editor any more. Not since she gave it up to go part-time, to focus on her novel after she was signed by a literary agent.

'I work in the Audience team.'

'Oh wow,' Natasha says. 'That must be interesting.'

God no, it's duller than dull, Clara thinks, but instead narrows her eyes to examine this Natasha, her deep brown eyes and neat frame. Where has she seen her before? Clara wonders how old she is. Impossible to tell.

'I love your ring,' Natasha says, and Clara realises she has let the silence stretch for too long.

'Oh,' she says, bringing her hand up slightly towards her chest. The large purple sapphire sparkles under the soft toilet lighting. 'Thanks. I've always thought it was a bit big, to be honest. My husband's a jeweller.'

'It's amazing,' Natasha says, taking a step closer and peering down. 'The setting is so unusual.'

Clara holds out her hand obligingly, moving her hand this way and that so Natasha can see all its various angles. She is well-practised at this now. The ring is beautiful but the stone is huge and heavy against her skinny, inadequate fingers, and every morning when she puts it on a phrase floats into her mind that she can't quite get rid of: 'You're not wearing it, it's wearing you.'

'How many carats?'

Clara's eyes widen. A bit bold of her. She looks at Natasha's hands, but there's nothing on either ring finger, just a gold signet on her thumb.

'Four,' Clara says, embarrassed now. 'But sapphires are heavier than diamonds, so it's not as impressive as it sounds.'

'It's magnificent,' Natasha says. 'Your husband must love you very much.'

'It's our tenth anniversary in a month's time,' Clara says, pointlessly. Ten years of this ring sitting heavy on her finger. Neither of them have planned anything. These days, it's as though they live entirely separate lives.

'Oh, goodness, well, I expect you'll get an eternity ring to go alongside that then.'

'Perhaps.'

'I got divorced last year,' Natasha says. She looks down at her own naked left hand. 'Sometimes I think I miss my ring more than I miss my ex.'

The laugh that follows sounds forced. Almost a sob.

Clara doesn't want to tell her the truth; that she thinks engagement rings are patriarchal relics, and that if it weren't for Thom's job, she wouldn't even wear one.

'You can buy yourself a ring,' she says, instead.

'Not one like that. Not on a sub-editor's salary.'

Clara nods, offers her a sympathetic smile. They leave the toilet together, their feet in step.

Clara has worked for the newspaper for nearly twenty years, and she still hasn't got used to the shiny office building that now houses it.

After the paper was acquired last year by one of the biggest media organisations in the UK, they moved into the seventh floor of the tall glass column which houses its HQ. It's like working in a very echoey airport – complete with security guards on the entrance, who search your bags for bombs, and a tenth-floor restaurant with a roof garden that's bigger than her house and offers views stretching across the city.

'Subs desk is over there,' Clara says, smiling at Natasha, who has paused next to the bank of desks where Clara sits, as though she's forgotten where she's meant to be sitting.

At the far corner of the room, there's a commotion. Several of the reporters are gathered around a screen.

'Jesus Christ!' one declares.

Clara frowns.

'Oh, yes. I know,' Natasha says. 'Thanks. It was nice to meet you. Bit weird, but if you fancy lunch sometime – I'm here for a month. I don't really know anyone. It's the first time I've worked for a newspaper.'

'Really?'

'Yes, I've always been on magazines. Weeklies, of course. But still. The whole newsroom thing…' Natasha glances over at the huddle in the far end of the office. 'It's quite intimidating.'

All the men, Clara thinks. That's what she means.

'Here,' Clara says, scribbling her name and extension on a Post-it. 'I only work part-time, but I'm in Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Give me a shout sometime.'

Natasha clutches the Post-it note.

'I will, thanks.'

Clara sits down at her desk and taps the space bar of her keyboard. The screen lights up, and she obediently types in her password.

She frowns at the spreadsheet in front of her; this week's lifestyle stories which need scheduling across all their platforms. It is mundane, this work. Beneath her.

But that's OK. Or at least, it would be, if she was actually working on her novel on her days off, as she's meant to be.

She stares at the spreadsheet, the URLs blurring before her eyes.

Then she flicks onto her Twitter account. She uses the newspaper's scheduling platform for its accounts, but for her personal account she prefers the native browser version.

As always, her eyes land on the trending bar to the right. The words are like fireworks.

Bomb

Explosion

VintagePark

She clicks on the final hashtag, staring at the screen as it refreshes. Memories swim into her mind.

So many memories.

A blurry video is the first to load. People screaming, running towards the person with the camera.

'Holy fuck, holy fuck!' the person behind the camera shouts.

She clicks off the video, clicks back to the hashtag, scanning the tweets.

Oh my god, something just blew up outside Vintage Park. I swear.

Stay away from Vintage Park guys. Some serious shit is going down.

I think a bomb just went off a few streets away. I'm not joking. The whole building shook. Fucking terrified.

Someone just blew up the football stadium! Fucking hell!

Clara looks over at the news guys. They are on their phones already, one grabbing his jacket and heading out.

She clicks on another video, but it buffers, the small white circle spinning before her eyes.

Vintage Park. Saturday afternoon.

Perhaps it was an away game this week. Perhaps the stadium was empty.

Her hands are shaking as she googles the fixtures list. And there it is, in black and white. Newcastle City against Norwich. A home game. He taught her that all those years ago. The team mentioned first is the one playing at home.

Which means he was there.

Of course, he was there. August to May, every Saturday afternoon for their entire relationship. Without fail.

He was there when the bomb went off, but where is he now?

March 2000

Benjamin

It was Tina who persuaded him to come out tonight. He wasn't keen, but she had no one else to go with and he likes doing things for people. He likes making them happy.

Having said that, he has a shift in the department store tomorrow. He's tired. As he stands there, he wonders whether university life is all he hoped it would be, or whether it's all simply too much for him.

Since his mam got sick, life has often felt too much.

But Tina's here, and life's not enough for her.

He likes the way she finds everything fun, and when she hands him a pint – his fourth of the night – he smiles gratefully and takes a deep swig.

'This place only opened a few months ago,' she says, nudging him in the ribs, yelling over the thump-thump-thump of the music. 'That's why the carpet isn't sticky yet.'

He looks down at the carpet. It's red and white, a swirly pattern, something like he imagines a far-off galaxy looking, streaking the night sky. It makes his eyes hurt.

He takes another sip of beer. He doesn't 'do' dancing. Not in a nightclub, not at a wedding, not even when he's home

alone. He isn't built for it. He read an article about it once. Tall people can't dance – it takes too long for the messages to travel from their brains to their limbs… or something. Good dancers are always short, like jockeys.

Tina is swaying slightly beside him, her eyes fixed over the rim of her JD-and-Coke, surveying the dance floor. In a minute she'll be off, once she spots someone she's interested in. She's a tiger on the prowl.

And that will leave him standing here, by the bar, alone. But that's OK. He's out, he's socialising, he's anaesthetising his feelings with pint after pint after pint. He's living the university experience. So long as he stands here, in this nightclub, drinking Stella, he is doing what he's supposed to be doing, and eventually it will start to make sense. Surely.

'Oh my god,' Tina says, slapping him on the arm. 'Is that Marcus Forbes?'

He looks across to where she's pointing.

Marcus Forbes is Newcastle City's newest signing. A nineteen-year-old striker who hasn't proved to be worth a penny of the insane amount of money they spent on him.

What a life Marcus must lead. One Benjamin might have had, if his life had gone differently.

'Nah. Too tall.'

'Yeah, you're probably right. Shame. I'd always fancied dating a footballer.'

She winks.

'Anyone you like the look of?' Tina says, her eyes sparkling as she looks up at him.

He likes Tina's company. He likes the uncomplicated way she views him. They met at the department store. She's blonde, pretty, his 'type' on paper and yet…

They went out after work a couple of times – just the two

of them – and he couldn't work out if they were meant to be 'dates' or not.

She treated him like a mate, but at the end of one of those evenings, after many drinks in the Hand and Spear, she reached up and stuck her tongue down his throat outside her house, before stumbling down the front path and coyly waving goodbye at her door, lingering for a little too long.

He didn't do anything about it and they never mentioned it again. He found her attractive and fun, but something told him that they weren't right for each other.

He wanted to be fun, but he found it eluded him.

'Earth to Benjamin!' she says, tugging his arm. 'Anyone here for you?' She's leaning close to him. He can smell her perfume – something floral and sweet. Forgettable and indistinct. 'I quite like the look of him.'

She points at a guy standing in a group of blokes who are all dressed the same. Hair parted neatly in the middle, baggy shirts over their jeans. The one she's pointing at is the tallest and has the biggest shoulders, of course. Benjamin has learnt that about her. She likes them big.

Perhaps that's why she wasn't disappointed he didn't take their relationship any further. He's tall, but he's slight.

'Go and talk to him then,' he says, swigging his pint. He's not in the mood tonight. The whole purpose of these evenings out – a kind of strange fishing expedition – leaves him cold. He doesn't want to meet girls on a dark dance floor. It feels too forced, too unnatural. How can you get to know someone properly when you can barely even hear or see them?

Still, he can't get that girl from last week out of his mind. It was at a different nightclub when he was out with his housemates – a motley crew if ever there was one – and their eyes had locked across the dance floor. At first, he thought it

was just a mistake and looked away, but every time he glanced in her direction, she would stare directly at him, and he realised she was trying to tell him something. To signal her interest.

But by the time he had plucked up the courage to walk over to her, there was another boy by her side, his arm around her waist, his lips at her ear.

Later that night, when he lay in his uncomfortable single in the box room of the three-bed student terrace, he turned over the memory of her in his mind. He thought afterwards that she was perhaps the most attractive girl he had ever seen.

But it could have been the lighting, or the beer.

Just at that moment, as if on cue, the DJ changes the track. A whoop fills the air before being drowned out by the sound of a deep trance beat, and the lasers come on. The group of boys Tina has been staring at turn into black silhouettes as the lasers scan their bodies in time to the music.

It's disorientating. It's loud.

It's the reason people come to this club.

He looks around as a laser lights up the space around him but Tina has vanished into the dark of the dance floor. He takes another sip of his pint. He tries to enjoy it.

The song seems to last for an eternity, but when it ends and the lasers stop, Tina is in the middle of the dance floor, her arms wrapped around the boy's broad shoulders, her head tilted up towards his, their faces blending in the darkness.

That's it, then. He's lost his wing-woman for the night. He finishes his pint and then leaves it on the bar. A voice rings in his ear: his father's, during half-time at the match last week.

You're not to spend your whole time at university drinking and having sex, do you hear me? This is an opportunity you've been given. Make the most of it.

Well, he is not drunk – not tonight anyway.

And he is not having sex. It bothers him sometimes, that he is nineteen and pretty much a virgin – that time with Kat from the year above didn't end well – when demonstrably everyone around him is very much *not*.

They are having sex all the time. So much sex. Tina will go home with this man probably, and he won't linger by the end of her front path, hoping to be let off the hook.

He has been in the city for nearly six months now, and Tina is the only girl he has kissed. He feels under pressure, and under pressure, he is at his worst.

He'll go to the toilet, then tell Tina that he's leaving. He doesn't like leaving girls alone in nightclubs with strangers but the last time he expressed concern about this she told him he was being sexist, that she could take care of herself and, then eventually, she told him to 'get to fuck'.

She was drunk when she said it though, so he's not quite sure if she meant it.

He makes it to the other side of the dance floor before the DJ puts another trance song on and plunges the place into darkness again.

He takes a deep breath in the corridor. It's brighter here, strip lighting flickering above his head. The toilets are opposite, but as he heads towards the men's, he notices something out of the corner of his eye.

A girl is sitting on the floor, slumped over her own knees. The foyer is busy with people, drunk and oblivious, chatting or making their way from the toilets. A couple are snogging aggressively up against the entrance to the cloakroom.

A chain of girls holds hands as they writhe their way towards the laser show, mouths wide with laughter.

The girl on the floor isn't moving.

He pushes past some lads who have had too many and they

gesticulate in his face but he ignores them. He crouches down to the girl. Her hair is the brightest yellow, spilling across her shoulders, and her arms are bare and slender, resting on her jeans.

He hesitates for a second but then he touches her lightly on the arm and leans down towards her ear.

'Are you OK?' he says. 'Can I get you some water?'

She looks up, her eyes wide and tear-stained, and he sees, before she looks directly at him, that it is her.

The girl from the other club.

She smiles at him. And in that moment, he feels a shift, and the strange, thudding realisation that his university life will make sense after all.

March 2000

Clara

She cannot believe it is him. That she has seen him again.

'Are you OK?' he is saying, but she can only stare at his beautiful face. His pleasing nose. His immaculate forehead, the curls of hair carefully framing it.

'Can I get you anything?' he says, and she notices he looks worried now. As though he feels some sense of responsibility for her – for her wellbeing – already.

'I'm…' she says, wiping her eyes, realising what a state she must look. 'I'm sorry, I lost my friends…'

He helps her to her feet and she smooths down her tiny black top, brushes the dust from her jeans, and wrenches her handbag back over her shoulder.

'I can help you look for them?' he says, and she registers for the first time an accent.

Northern, but not Manchester or Leeds. He sounds local. She's surprised.

'No, it's fine,' she says, smiling at his offer. He's still holding her arm, ever so gently, and she hopes he will never let go. 'I was just… it's fine.'

He pauses, waiting for her to continue. But she doesn't stay anything. She only stares at him.

'Listen,' he says. He blinks at her. 'This might sound crazy, but by any chance were you in Sound Barrier last Tuesday? I thought…'

'YES!' she says, her voice coming out louder than intended. So he had seen her, he had noticed her. She wasn't imagining it.

'Why do you say it like that?' he asks, letting go of her arm.

'Because… I was waiting,' she says, looking down. She swallows. 'I was waiting for you to come over, but you never did.'

'I thought you were with someone… there was a lad with you…'

'No,' she says. 'I… he was no one. I was hoping… for you.'

As soon as she says the words, she prays they will be lost to the shrieking in the background coming from a bunch of girls outside the ladies'. But he smiles and so she leans forward and puts her arms around his neck.

The last rush of vodka courses through her bloodstream.

'Better late than never,' she says, and before she has the chance to chicken out, she closes her eyes, reaches up and kisses him.

March 2000

Benjamin

He's so taken aback by the kiss that at first, he fails to respond. But then his body overtakes his brain and he finds himself lost in the sensation of her lips on his.

He feels he could kiss her forever but after an indeterminable amount of time, they break apart and she looks up at him.

'Shall we go?' she says. 'Are you with someone?'

He's momentarily stunned.

He thinks about Tina, about the fact that he was heading for the toilet, about the fact that he doesn't even know this girl's name yet, and how none of it seems to matter.

'I…' he says. 'I was about to leave myself.'

'Great,' she says and she takes his hand and slots hers into it and tugs him slightly towards the door.

Before he has fully assimilated what has happened, they are standing on the pavement outside the nightclub.

'Who were you out with?' she is saying. 'Those guys from last week?'

He swallows, thinks of Tina.

The girl starts to walk away from the club, up towards the high street and the bus stop. Pressure bears down on him.

'Hang on,' he says. 'Sorry. It's just, I should…'

'I cannot believe my flatmates. Bitches,' she says, staring down at the ground.

He notices that she's wearing tiny strappy sandals, that her toes are white with cold. She's smaller and slighter than he thought, standing next to him. He feels an overwhelming urge to take off his coat and put it around her shoulders.

'I just need to tell my friend,' he says, feeling already like he has failed her. He's not cool nor impressive nor any of the things he so wants to be. But it's the right thing to do. 'Tell her that I'm leaving.'

'Her?' The girl's blue eyes widen. 'You were out with a girl?'

'Yes, Tina,' he says. 'We work together at Gordon's. The department store. But she just met a lad… she'll not be bothered I'm leaving. Will you wait here?'

'OK.'

'My friend left her jacket,' he says to the bouncer who nods and lets him back inside.

Once in, he scans the dance floor until he spots Tina, her arms still wrapped around the muscular boy.

He swallows, then thinks of the girl, hopes she's still waiting for him outside.

He still doesn't know her name.

'I'm off,' he says into Tina's ear as loudly as possible. She pulls her head away from the lad's shoulder, looks up at him puzzled. He makes a gesture with his thumb.

'I'm leaving,' he says, louder this time. 'Is that OK?'

Tina nods.

'See you,' she says and she folds back into the boy's shoulder.

He hurries back outside, sick to his stomach. But the girl is still there. She stamps her feet up and down and pulls her arms around herself as she waits.

'Sorry about that,' he says. Tina will be fine. She wasn't even that drunk.

The girl smiles at him and loops her arm through his.

'What's your name?' he says.

'Clara,' she says, not missing a beat. 'What's yours?'

'Benjamin.'

'Benjamin? Not Ben?'

'I don't really mind,' he lies. 'But my friends call me Benjamin.'

And with that sentence he realises he has done it again. He is dull. The spark has gone. They are standing in the cold grey evening on a cold grey pavement in a cold grey northern city and he is not sparky or fun or interesting and this girl will soon realise and leave.

'So, Benjamin,' she says. 'What are you doing in this awful city?'

'Getting a degree?'

'Funny,' she says, and he thinks, *was it? Oh, good*. His throat is dry. 'What are you studying?'

'Computing for Business.'

'At Northumbria?'

He nods. She wrinkles her nose. Unimpressed.

'How about you?'

'Guess.'

He pauses on the pavement and looks at her.

'English,' he says. 'I think you're studying English.'

She starts, opening her eyes wide and stepping back slightly.

'Wow, that's impressive,' she says. 'Unless… you're some terrifying stalker. Now listen, Benjamin, if we go back to my place now you have to promise not to kill me. I mean, I do have a rape alarm and I'm not afraid to use it.'

She fumbles around in the tiny handbag hanging from her shoulder and pulls out a small black keyring.

'See!'

He frowns.

'I…' he says, but she doesn't seem to want him to reply, because she shoves it back in her handbag and continues trudging up the street.

He supposes she's a little bit drunk, and that she's nervous too, and he decides not to read much into what she's saying. She's chatting now, about her flatmates and whether she should ask for a transfer because they all take too many drugs and she has nothing in common with them, and none of them are on her course, so she doesn't understand how she got placed with them anyway, and she wonders what kind of weird criteria must they use to decide who gets to live with who in the self-catering places, and how, if she's honest, she wishes she hadn't even come to this uni because all her school friends went to Exeter or Oxbridge or LSE, and she only came here because her sixth-form boyfriend came up the year before and she thought they'd be together forever. But then when she arrived she found out that he'd been cheating on her throughout the entire first year, *can you believe that?!*, and so they broke up and she feels stupid now, both that she wasted that opportunity and disappointed her parents, especially her father, who hasn't really forgiven her for not trying for Oxbridge, so now she feels she can't possibly tell them that she's not happy here after all.

He walks alongside her, strangely comforted by the fact this girl he has just met is treating him like an old friend, telling him all her thoughts and feelings without stopping to consider whether it's appropriate. She's filling the silence he hates and not in an obnoxious way. In an entertaining way. He can see she's nervous, but he admires how she's trying to cover it up.

She's an open book. One he wants to read.

'Listen,' he says, as they sit side by side at the bus stop. Her eye make-up has smudged under her eyes but he likes it. She looks unruffled, relaxed. 'Can I get your number?'

She blinks twice, tucking her hair behind her ear.

'Aren't you…' she says. 'Coming back to mine?'

'I have to work in the morning,' he says, looking down at his feet. 'I think I should get home.'

'Oh,' she says. 'Right. It's because… of what I said about my ex, isn't it? I don't see him any more. I'm over him, honestly. It's just embarrassing, that I could have been such a fool. I mean, following him up here like some lovesick teenager! Humiliating. But there's nothing…'

'No,' he says, feeling his neck redden. 'It's not that. I just have to get up early, and all my stuff is in my room…'

'Your stuff?'

'My uniform.'

'You have a uniform?'

'It's not a uniform exactly,' he says, feeling stupid. 'It's just a top. A polo shirt that Gordon's makes us wear.'

She nods.

'So, can I have your number?'

'Sure,' she says, sniffing slightly.

'Do you have a pen?' he asks.

'What? Does it look like I have a pen? Put my number in your phone.'

'I don't have one.'

'What?'

'A mobile phone.'

She stares at him.

'Why not?'

He shrugs.

'I just haven't felt the need.'

'Bloody hell, you really are some kind of psycho.'

He laughs, running his hand through his hair.

'There's a landline in my house share. I just use that if I need to call someone.'

He hasn't needed to call many people since he got here.

'Give me that then,' she says. 'I guess… I guess I'll have to call you.'

He notices her wince as she says it. He's picked up enough since he started at university to know that this is not the way it goes. He's meant to take her number, he's meant to call her, he's meant to do the chasing, the wooing… the making of the effort. She's the prey and he's the predator, except in this case it doesn't feel that way at all.

'I can go back in and ask at the bar for some paper and a pen if you like?' he says.

That sounded desperate.

'No, it's fine,' she says. 'I'm a feminist. Why shouldn't I call you?'

'Right.'

He dictates the number and watches as she types it into her black Nokia.

A bus pulls up alongside them and she stands.

'I'm gonna walk back,' he says. 'Will you get home all right?'

'This bus goes straight to my halls,' she says. 'I think I can manage.'

'Great. So, I'll see you then,' he says. 'If you want to call me… and we can… we can go out properly sometime.'

'All right Benjamin,' she says, reaching out and squeezing his hand. 'I will.'