CLIFF McNISH

LILY'S MONSTER

Fox & Ink Books

Lily's Monster is a Fox & Ink Books book

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
Fox & Ink Books
University of Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

Text copyright © Cliff McNish, 2025
Girl cover photograph copyright © Cavan Images
Additional photographs copyright © istock.com

978-1-9167-4770-8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The right of Cliff McNish to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 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;
or be used to train any AI technologies without the prior permission
of the publishers. Fox & Ink Books expressly reserves this work from
the text and data mining exception subject to EU law.

Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Chloe Duckers. Art direction and editorial
by Chloe Duckers, Isobel Dixon, Kelly Ball and Estelle Retallick.

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

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For Aldous, Andy, Caron, Mike, and Paul.
And for Robert Stone, *excellentiam semper.*



1

ARRIVAL

Lurch, brake, accelerate.

OK, this is bad. Dad's doing his best, but these crazy roads are throwing us around in the back of the Citroen like frazzled yo-yos.

'Where're we now?' Jack moans. 'You're lost again, aren't you?'

'No,' Dad responds tiredly, wiping his face. 'I know exactly where we are.'

Frowning at the satnav, he guns the engine up another anonymous twisting dirt lane. He's been driving clueless along narrow tracks for over an hour.

Not that I mind. It's not as if I care where we're going.

My brother Jack's skinny ten-year-old ass keeps sliding across the seat. He's only avoided touching me by clinging to the car door like a monkey. Impressive, really. His heroic effort to evade contact, I mean. To be honest, though, I'm so tired I barely register his hostility today.

The car cruises through a landscape of stubbled, recently harvested fields. I like the cropped emptiness of it, all the corn heads shorn and bruised. Easing the curve of my neck against the seat rest, I open the window.

'What are you doing?' Jack blasts. 'Shut it!'

I pretend not to hear him. When his stare turns murderous, Mum says, 'That's enough,' shooting Jack a warning glance. 'Might be best to close it, though,' she mouths in my direction, reaching back between the seats to squeeze my hand.

I withdraw my fingers fast. No tenderness, please. I'm choking to death already with her and Dad's concern. The whole world is sending epidemics of caring vibes at me these days. Take the two texts that just popped up in bright green bubbles on my phone. Messages from friends back in Cornwall. Both asking how I'm doing – how I'm *feeling*.

'Holly, I'm here for you, babe.'

'Holly, we haven't heard from you in ages. Please just let us know you're OK.'

No, I'm not OK. I'm really not, guys. Why can't you all just leave me alone?

But I don't reply that. I'll only get endless follow-up messages. Seriously, what more do I have to do to get rid of everyone? Despite being a miserable freak-out for more than

six months now, some of my best friends still don't get the message. They genuinely seem to think that all I need to recover is a super-solid girly hug and a great big cry. Which I know makes me sound like a total bitch, and bitter as sin, but I can't help it. Because would they be reaching out so sweetly if they knew what had really happened?

Not a chance.

Eventually, Dad finds a rusted pole with a sign on it, and angles the car towards a knot of streets, houses and farm buildings. We're beyond them in less than a minute.

'I think we just passed through the only town in the area,' he says. 'Balcombe.'

'They call that a town?'

Mum tries to include me in her weak joke by flashing a smile in my direction. Doesn't work. I'm onto her strategies these days. She quietly slipped fifty pounds into my pocket just before we left the house this morning, hoping a few spends will pep me up. It won't.

I pretend I'm absorbed in Jack's iPad game. He's killing some blood-spattered zombies. What a surprise.

'Get your stupid, bald head away from me,' he growls.

'It's not bald,' I correct him. 'It's restyled.'

'Shut up, you nutter.'

Dad's fingers tense on the steering wheel. 'That's enough between you two. I mean it.'

He looks drained. So does Mum. My gentle parents. My wonderful, big-hearted, fiercely loving parents. God only knows what it's costing the two of them to hold it together given my

messed-up state and this war between me and Jack. It's not as if they're grieving any less than we are. I'd kiss them for how much they're trying if I had any warmth left inside me.

Jack rants on about me being on his side of the car seat again, but I tune him out. It was Mum's suggestion that the two of us travel together in the back for the five-hour drive here to Dorset. A chance to renew brotherly-sisterly affection and all that. Not her greatest idea.

Internet coverage vanishes right after we leave Balcombe. 'What's going on?' Jack barks. 'You're kidding! *No signal?* He throws his iPad across the seat in outrage. 'The house better have Wi-Fi. It has, hasn't it, Dad?'

'The website said it did,' Dad answers warily – and for the first time in weeks I feel a surge of hope. No internet means no possibility of contact. *Oh, please, please . . .*

For the next half hour, headphones tight over my ears, I manage to zone everything else out by burying myself in a YouTube clip. It's one I downloaded before I left the house, showing the slow death of a beached pilot whale in New Zealand. Twenty-eight well-meaning people attempt to save it. Over and over, they lever its bulk away from the coastal sands, hauling it back to the ocean. But it keeps returning. No one can figure out why. Marine biologists conclude at the end of the documentary that the whale's navigational senses must be screwed.

Here's what I think: *Whales are intelligent animals. Maybe it wanted to die.*

The film is just ending when the car brakes sharply and Jack's zombie-killing fingers jerk from his handle.

'Here we are,' Mum says, sighing with relief that the journey's over. 'Gant House.'

I glance up, expecting and wanting nothing, but guess what, the world is full of surprises, and our holiday home for the next week brings the first smile out of me all day. God, it's ugly. The Airbnb site made it look like an old-style cosy cottage, but they must have Photoshopped it like crazy because the pics were porky-pies. It's not a cottage at all, but a house. And not even a cute house. A standard, square block constructed across two floors, with dishwater-white walls.

A ray of autumn sunshine enters the car, only to die like a lost hope against Mum's cheeks. Dad tries to hide his dismay, but he's a hopeless emotion-faker. Jack, of course, flips straight into outrage-mode.

'What's this?' he shouts. 'It's rubbish! It's totally . . .'

A top-volume rant follows. He's on blistering form today. I remember when he used to be thoughtful and curious about stuff, not this permanently exploding grenade.

Dad puts on his best brave face. 'Erm, the holiday site said a residence based on a traditional nineteenth-century cottage.'

'*One bursting with rustic charm*,' I remind him. 'I wonder if there's even an inside toilet?' I can't resist winding Jack up for hassling me all the way here. 'A lot of these old country places didn't have them. We'll probably have to go outside at night. There'll be spiders everywhere.'

Jack doesn't know whether or not to believe me.

'What?' he squeaks. 'I won't have to wee outside, will I, Dad?'

'Of course not,' Dad answers. 'There's definitely an inside

toilet. The place has been, um . . . rebuilt and renovated this year, that's all. The rental agency did mention that. I think we're the first guests since it was done-up.'

Mum manages a faint smile. 'So we're seeing Gant House at its shining best, then.'

We grab a couple of bags from the boot while Jack tears from the drive towards the gate. There's no front garden. Just a huge hawthorn hedge, packed with thorns as prickly as he is.

Dad curses as he opens the gate for us. He's been cut – a trailing branch of the hawthorn snagging his hand. There's more blood than you'd expect. He winces, gingerly tweaking the branch aside.

'I'll, um, cut that back so we can get in and out more easily.'

Taking a deep steadying breath, Mum unlocks the front door with the heavy bunch of keys the letting agency sent her.

As we enter the hall, Jack pushes ahead of us, banging up the staircase like an ogre. I listen to him melodramatically flinging open bedroom doors, then listlessly join Mum and Dad in the kitchen. It looks like the low-cost option in an IKEA showroom. Any original cottage features like a fireplace have been replaced by white-on-white functional units.

'There's a microwave, that's handy,' Dad offers guardedly, watching Mum take in the tacky décor like some kind of bemused android. He's beginning to sound desperate, and it's my fault, not his. I was the one who persuaded him to bring us here for half term. Unable to take any more people praising me for being *so brave about your brother Adam*, I picked Gant House because it was the remotest holiday rental I could find. 'Really?'

Dad said when I'd shown it to him online. But he was so pleased I was showing an interest in anything at all that he jumped to book it. And Mum, consumed by her own grief, left it in his hands.

'There *are* still some nineteenth-century touches left,' Dad remarks, pointing at the wooden ceiling beams, mainly because they're the only thing in the room that doesn't look spanking new. I nod. I find I'm enjoying how un-cottage-like Gant House is. Lots of handy cloths placed strategically in case of spillages.

The living room turns out to be just as cut-rate. The flowery sofa and lumpy stuffed chairs are obviously meant to look 'vintage', but just look cheap.

Jack reappears, deliberately barging into me as he scoots past.

'Is that our TV?' He studies the set warily, intrigued by how small it is. Then he's off again, elbowing me as he races back upstairs.

The dining room is basically a box with a pine table and four chairs. The lemon carpet is so new it smells of chemicals. The scent reminds me of a hospice I visited once when Gran was ill.

But the most surprising part of Gant House is definitely the back garden. All the main windows downstairs point at it, and God, what's happened? Surrounded by more of that nasty hawthorn hedge, the big lawn is so torn up it looks like the grass committed hara-kiri. Tufts are missing everywhere, as if some rabid dog's been playing here. A line of rose bushes on the left border have been trampled down, too. Even the lower branches of the single large beech tree have been hacked at. It

looks like vandalism to me. And recently, too. Who'd bother to wreck a garden in the middle of nowhere like this?

'Groovy,' Mum says, the squeak of a floorboard underfoot making her lips twitch.

To which Dad responds by . . . well, giving up, really. His shoulders slump, the smile he's been holding on to all morning guttering out like a candle.

'This is ridiculous,' he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'I'll ring the letting agency tomorrow. Get us a significant reduction. When did they last inspect the garden, for heaven's sake?' Then: 'Sorry, guys, I totally messed up booking this place,' he adds, as if it's his fault we're here, not mine. Typical Dad, letting me off, and, hearing the defeat in his voice, Mum grips his hand with a sudden fierceness.

'It's fine, it'll do for a week,' she whispers.

Which brings a lump to my throat, because she's right, isn't she? All that matters is that we're not *back there*. Anything is better than being stuck at home in Cornwall, with all its terrible, irreversible reminders.

'Should we take this one?' Dad says to Mum, motioning at the only bedroom on Gant House's ground floor.

'Sure,' she agrees, not really looking at it, but still holding his hand.

We walk upstairs together to the first floor. Jack's waiting for us, standing outside the largest bedroom like some kind of Nazi storm trooper.

'I want this big one,' he growls, and I sigh. His own bedroom at home is small and cosy. He's only nabbing the biggest here to

deny me it. I nod hurriedly, though, and so do Mum and Dad. The last thing we want to begin the week with is a flare-up with Jack.

Mum joins me as I shove open the door to the second bedroom. Ever since I re-shaved my head two weeks ago she's been shadowing me like a ninja. Her and Dad take it in shifts, worried I'm about to collapse or slit my wrists. They're probably right, but if I do, it won't be in front of them.

The good news is that the window has a great view over the devastated garden. The bad news? It's decorated for a child. Pink walls. A Paddington Bear bedspread.

'The charm blows you away, doesn't it?' Mum whispers in my ear, walking across to press the mattress. 'No expense spared.'

'Um.'

She's trying mercilessly hard to connect with me these days, but no way I'm letting her in. If I do the truth will leak out, and all hell will break loose. Anyway, who does she think she's kidding? She's only pretending to hold it together. She cries more than I do. So does Dad. Two days ago, I caught him weeping in the garage. It sounded like the end of the world. Even a reinforced steel door can't hide sobs like that.

The only other decent-sized room in Gant House is the bathroom. I look for a big hairy spider climbing out of the plug hole, but disappointingly there isn't one. Only floor tiles the pale yellow of a sick vampire.

'At least there's a shower,' Mum says conspiratorially. 'Don't worry, I brought some towels and bed linen with us from home,' she adds. 'We don't have to use what's here.'

'Great,' I say, my mind already beginning to drift. *Can I close the door now? Will you all please go away?* I badly need some space to myself. The effort to fend off Jack during the journey has left me exhausted, and now we're here I'm having trouble holding it together. Can't Mum see that? Can't Dad? What's the matter with them?

'This one, then,' Mum says, seeing me already walking inside. 'You want to get unpacked and have a nap? Have a bit of a rest?' And suddenly I'm so grateful she's letting me go that I can't even reply. I just nod, step quickly inside the bedroom and close the door on the world.