The Other Half Lives

Sophie Hannah

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Extract

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I didn't want to go first.

Three seconds ago – four – I had said, 'All right.' Now Aidan was watching me. Waiting. I bit back the words Why me? You suggested it – why don't you start? To ask would have made him think I didn't trust him, and I didn't want to sully the moment by saying something petty.

The air around us felt charged, taut with anticipation. Energy radiated from our clammy, clasped hands. 'It doesn't have to be everything,' Aidan whispered. 'Just ... as much as we can ...' Unable to finish the sentence, he decided he already had. 'As much as we can,' he said again, stressing the last word. His warm breath settled on my skin every few seconds, like a tide of air that kept sucking out, then blowing back in. We hadn't moved from our spot at the foot of the bed, in front of the mirror, but it seemed, suddenly, as though everything was speeding up. Our faces gleamed with sweat, as if we'd run for miles, when in fact all our movements – through the hotel's revolving glass door, towards reception,

into and out of the lift, along the narrow spotlit corridor to the closed door with a gold '436' on it – had been slow and deliberate, a thousand heartbeats to the footstep. We both knew something was waiting for us inside the room, something that could only be put off for so long.

'As much as we can,' I echoed Aidan's words. 'And then no questions.'

He nodded. I saw his eyes shining in the dimness of the unlit room and knew how much it meant to him that I'd said yes. My fear was still there, sitting hunched inside me, but now I felt better able to manage it. I'd secured a concession: no questions. I was in control, I told myself.

'I did something stupid. More than stupid. Wrong.' My voice sounded too loud, so I lowered it. 'To two people.' Saying their names would have been impossible. I didn't try. Even in my thoughts I cannot name them. I make do with 'Him' and 'Her'.

I knew then that I was capable of giving Aidan no more than the bare bones, though every word of the whole of it glowed in my mind. Nobody would believe how often I tell myself the story, one unbearable detail after another. Like picking at a scab,

except it's not. It's more like taking a sharp fingernail and gouging out raw, runny pink flesh from a spot I've never left alone long enough for a scab to form.

I did something wrong. I keep hoping I'll find a new way to start, at the same time as knowing there isn't one. None of it would have happened if I'd been blameless.

'It was a long time ago. I was punished.' My head throbbed, as if a small, hard machine was rotating inside my brain. 'Excessively. I never … I still haven't got over it. The unfairness of it and … what happened to me. I thought I could escape by moving away, but …' I shrugged, trying to affect an equanimity I did not feel.

'The worst things stow away in the hold, follow you wherever you go,' said Aidan.

His kindness made it harder. I shook my hands free from his and sat down on the edge of the bed. The room we'd booked was awful: it had the tall, narrow proportions of a telephone box, and there were green and blue checks everywhere – the curtains, the bedspread, the chairs – with a grid of red lines separating each square from its neighbours. When I stared at the pattern, it warped in front of my eyes. I didn't need to

see all the other rooms in the Drummond Hotel to know they were identical. There were three pictures, one above the television and two on the hollow wall that separated the bedroom from the bathroom; three insipid landscapes that begged to be ignored, with colours that were as close to colourless as it was possible to get. Outside, through the thick, rectangular slab of multi-layered glass that made up one side of the room, London was a restless yellow-streaked grey that I knew would keep me awake all night. I wanted to be in the pitch black, blind and unseen.

Why was I bothering with this pretence of a confession? What was the point of telling the only version of events that I could bear to utter out loud – an abstract shadow, a template that could have applied to any number of stories?

'I'm sorry,' I told Aidan. 'It's not that I don't want you to know, it's just ... I can't say it. I can't say the words.' A lie. I didn't want him to know; I had wanted to please him by agreeing that we should tell one another, but that wasn't the same thing. If I'd wanted him to know, I could have promised to show him the file under my bed at home: the trial transcript, the letters, the newspaper clippings.

‘I’m sorry I’ve told you so little,’ I said. I needed to cry. The tears were there; I could feel them inside me, blocking my throat and chest, but I couldn’t squeeze them out.

Aidan knelt down in front of me, rested his arms on my knees and looked at me hard, so that I couldn’t look away. ‘It isn’t so little,’ he said. ‘It’s a lot. To me, it’s a lot.’ That was when I realised that he wouldn’t go back on the deal we’d made. He wasn’t going to ask me any questions. My body sagged, limp with relief.

I showed no sign of wanting to say more. Aidan must have assumed I’d reached the end of the non-story I had not quite told him. He kissed me and said, ‘Whatever you did, it makes no difference to how I feel about you. I’m really proud of you. It’ll be easy from now on.’ I tried to pull him up onto the bed. I wasn’t sure what the ‘it’ was that he thought would be easy; he might have meant making love for the first time, or the rest of our life together, all of it. I had left my last life behind, and now I had a new one with Aidan. Part of me – a big, loud, insistent part – couldn’t believe it.

I wasn’t nervous about the sex, not any more. Aidan’s idea had worked, though not in the way he’d hoped it would. I’d confided

a little, and now I was desperate to do anything but talk. I wanted physical contact as a way of warding off words.

‘Wait,’ Aidan said. He stood up. It was his turn. I didn’t want to know. How can the things someone has done in the past make no difference to the way you feel about them in the present? I knew too much about the worst human beings can do to one another to be able to give Aidan the reassurance he had given me.

‘Years ago, I killed someone.’ There was no emphasis, no tone to his voice; it was as if he was reading from an autocue, each word appearing on its own and out of context on a screen in front of him.

I had a terrible thought: a man. Please let it be a man.

‘I killed a woman,’ Aidan said, in response to my unasked question. His eyes were flooded. He sniffed, blinked.

I felt my body begin to fill up with a new sharp sadness, one I was sure I wouldn’t be able to stand for more than a few seconds. I was desperate, angry, disbelieving, but not frightened.

Not until Aidan said, ‘Her name was Mary. Mary Trelease.’

1

Friday 29 Feb 2008

Here she is. I see her face in profile and only for a second as her car passes me, but I'm sure it's her. Detective Sergeant Charlotte Zailer. If she drives past the part of the car park that's reserved for visitors, I'll know I'm right.

She does. I watch her silver Audi slow down and stop in one of the spaces marked 'Police Parking Only'. I reach into my coat pockets, allowing my red-cold hands to rest in the fleecy warmth for a few seconds, then pull out the article from the Rawndesley and Spilling Telegraph. As Charlotte Zailer gets out of her car, unaware of my presence, I unfold it and look at the picture again. The same high cheekbones, the same narrow but full mouth, the same small, bony chin. It's definitely her, though her hair is longer now, shoulder-length, and today she isn't wearing glasses. She isn't crying, either. In the small black and white picture, there are tears on her cheeks. I wonder why she didn't wipe them away, knowing

the press were there with their cameras. Perhaps someone had told her it would go down better with the public if she looked distraught.

She hitches her brown leather bag over her shoulder and starts to walk towards the looming red-brick building that casts a long, square shadow over the car park: Spilling Police Station. I instruct myself to follow her, but my legs don't move. Shivering, I huddle beside my car. The winter sun warming my face makes my body feel colder by contrast.

There is no connection between the building in front of me and the only other police station I have been inside – this is what I must tell myself. They are simply two buildings, in the way that cinemas and restaurants are also buildings, and I am never stiff with fear when I walk past Spilling Picture House or the Bay Tree Bistro.

Detective Sergeant Zailer is moving slowly towards the entrance: double glass doors with a sign saying 'Reception' above them. She fumbles in her handbag. It's the sort I like least – long and squashy, with a silly number of zips, buckles and protruding side pockets. She pulls out a packet of

Marlboro Lights, throws it back in, then pulls out her mobile phone and stops for a moment, jabbing the keys with her long-nailed thumb. I could easily catch her up.

Go. Move. I stay where I am.

This time is nothing like last time, I tell myself. This time I am here by choice.

If you can call it that.

I am here because the only alternative would be to go back to Mary's house.

Frustrated, I clamp my mouth shut to stop my teeth chattering. All my books advocate the technique of repeating encouraging mantras in your head. **Useless**. You can issue yourself with sensible instructions endlessly, but making those words take root in your mind and govern how you truly feel is another matter. Why do so many people believe that words have an innate authority?

A lie I told as a teenager pushes to the front of my mind. I pretended I'd said something similar to my father about the Bible, boasted to my friends about the terrible row it caused. 'It's only words, Dad. Someone, or maybe lots of people, sat down thousands of years ago and made

it up, the whole lot. They wrote a book. Like Jackie Collins.' The lie was easy to tell because those words were always in my head, though I lacked the courage ever to speak them aloud. My school friends knew Jackie Collins was my favourite writer; they had no idea that I hid her books under my bed inside empty sanitary-towel packets.

Disgust finally gets me moving: the realisation that I'm thinking about my father in order to dishearten myself, offering myself an excuse to give up. Charlotte Zailer is heading towards the doors, about to disappear inside. I start to run towards her. Something has found its way into my shoe and it's hurting my foot. I'm going to be too late; by the time I reach reception, she'll be in an office somewhere, making a coffee, starting her day's work. 'Wait!' I yell. 'Please, wait!'

She stops, turns. She has been unbuttoning her coat on her way up the steps, and I see she's wearing a uniform. Doubt stills me, like an invisible blow to the legs, then I lurch forward again, staggering. Detective sergeants don't wear uniforms. What if it isn't her?

She is walking towards me. She must think I'm drunk, swaying all over the car park.

‘Are you after me?’ she calls out.

Other people are looking at me too, those getting into and out of their cars; they heard me shout, heard the desperation in my voice. My worst nightmare, to be seen by everybody. Strangers. I can’t speak. I’m confused, hot and cold at the same time, in different parts of my body. I can’t work out any more if I want this woman to be Charlotte Zailer or not.

She draws level with me. ‘Are you all right?’ she asks.

I step back. The thing in my shoe presses into the skin between my little toe and the next one as I put my weight on my left foot. ‘Are you Detective Sergeant Charlotte Zailer?’

‘I was,’ she says, still smiling but more guardedly. ‘Now I’m just plain sergeant. Do we know each other?’

I shake my head.

‘But you know who I am.’

I have rehearsed what I will say to her countless times, but not once did I think about what she might say to me.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Ruth Bussey.’ I steel myself for signs of recognition, but there are none.

‘Right. Well, Ruth, I’m part of the community policing team for Spilling now. Do you live in Spilling?’

‘Yes.’

‘This isn’t a community matter, is it? You wanted to speak to a detective?’

I can’t let her pass me on to someone else. My hand closes around the piece of newspaper in my pocket. ‘No, I want to talk to you. It won’t take long.’

She looks at her watch. ‘What’s it about? Why me in particular? I’d still like to know how you knew who I was.’

‘It’s … my boyfriend,’ I say in a monotone. It won’t be any easier to get the words out once we’re inside. If I tell her why I’m here, she’ll stop asking how I knew her name. ‘He thinks he killed somebody, but he’s wrong.’

Charlotte Zailer looks me up and down. ‘Wrong?’ She sighs. ‘Okay, now you’ve got my attention. Look, come inside and we’ll have a chat.’

As we walk, I move my foot around inside

my shoe, trying to dislodge whatever's digging into the pad of soft skin beneath my toes. It won't budge. I can feel a sticky wetness: blood. **Ignore it, block it out**. I follow Sergeant Zailer into the reception area where there are more people – some in uniform, others in blue Aertex tops with the words 'Police Staff' printed on them. There's a lot of blue here: the herringbone carpet on the floor, two suede-effect sofas forming a right angle in one corner. A long counter of pale, varnished pine with a semi-circular end protrudes from one wall like a breakfast bar jutting out into the middle of a kitchen.

Sergeant Zailer stops to speak to a middle-aged man with a pot belly, a dimpled chin and fluffy grey hair. He calls her Charlie, not Charlotte. I press down on my coat pocket with my right hand and listen to the faint rustle of the newspaper, trying to remind myself of the connection between us – between me and Charlie – but I have never felt lonelier in my life, and only the pain charging up from my foot through all the nerves in my body stops me from running away.

After what I've told her, she would run after me. How could she not? She'd chase me and she'd catch me.

‘Come on,’ she says to me when she’s finished talking to the grey-haired man. I limp after her. It’s a relief once we’re alone, in a corridor with uncovered brick walls that looks much older than the reception area. There is a background noise of running water; I look around, but its source isn’t obvious. Along the walls on both sides, against the brick, are pictures at eye level. On my right is a series of framed posters – domestic violence, needle exchanges, building safer communities. Opposite these are framed black and white etchings of different streets in Spilling. They’re atmospheric in a jagged sort of way, conveying the narrow, claustrophobic feel of the interlocking roads in the oldest part of town, the uneven house- and shop-fronts, the streets with their slippery cobbles. I feel a pang of sympathy for the artist, knowing that his or her exhibition is displayed here purely for its local relevance; no one values these pictures in their own right, as works of art.

‘Are you all right?’ Charlie Zailer asks me, waiting for me to catch up. ‘You’re limping.’

‘I sprained my ankle yesterday,’ I say, feeling a flush spread across my face.

‘Did you?’ She turns and stands in front of

me, forcing me to stop. 'Sprained ankles generally swell to twice their size. Yours doesn't look swollen. It looks to me as if it's your foot that's sore. Has someone hurt you, Ruth? You seem very far from all right to me. Has your boyfriend hurt you, maybe?'

'Aidan?' I think about the way he kisses the straight line of pink scar tissue that starts below my ribcage and runs down over my stomach. He's never asked what caused it, neither on that first night in London nor since.

He is incapable of harming anybody. I know he is.

'Aidan?' Charlie Zailer repeats. 'Is that your boyfriend's name?'

I nod.

'Has Aidan hurt you?' She folds her arms, blocking the corridor so that I can't pass her. I don't know where we're going anyway; I have no choice but to wait.

'No. I've got a ... a bad blister on my foot, that's all. It hurts when my shoe rubs against it.'

'Why not say so, then? Why pretend a

blister's a sprained ankle?'

I can't understand why I'm out of breath. I clench my teeth, against the pain in my foot and against her attitude. Knowing what she's been through, I expected her to be kind. Understanding.

'Here's what we're going to do,' she says in a loud, clear voice, as if she's talking to a small child. 'I'll settle you in one of our reception rooms, sort us out with some tea, see if I can find a plaster for your foot ... '

'I don't need a plaster,' I say. New beads of sweat prickle my upper lip. 'It's fine, honestly. You don't need to –'

'... And then we'll talk about your boyfriend. Aidan.' She starts to walk again. I have to half run to keep up with her. Is it a test? The pain is constant now; I picture a wide, weeping gash beneath my toes, with whatever caused it embedded in the wound, pushing its way deeper in with every step. The effort I'm making not to think about it is like a tight thread in my mind, winding tighter and tighter. My eyes ache to close. I'm aware of the sound of my breathing, of the air rushing out of my lungs and having to be dragged back in.

I follow Charlie Zailer round a corner and

we are in another corridor, colder than the last, with windows all along one side. No pictures here, only a row of framed certificates, all with some sort of official-looking stamp on them, but they're high up on the wall and we're going too fast for me to read the writing.

I stop when I see a pale green door ahead. I've done this before: walked down a long passageway towards a closed door. **Green. Dark green**.

'Ruth?' Sergeant Zailer is calling me, snapping her fingers in the air. 'You look as if you're in shock. What's wrong? Is it your foot?'

'Nothing. Nothing's wrong.'

'Are you asthmatic? Have you got an inhaler?'

Asthmatic? I don't know what she's talking about. 'I'm all right,' I tell her.

'Well, come on, then.' When I don't move, she doubles back on herself, takes my arm and, with one hand on my back, steers me down the corridor, saying something about tea and coffee that sounds more complicated than a simple either-or offer. I mumble, 'Thanks,' hoping it's the right

answer. She unlocks the green door, directs me to a chair, tells me to wait. I don't want her to leave me alone but I'm unwilling to ask her not to, knowing how pathetic I'd sound.

The room contains two chairs apart from the one I'm sitting on, a waste-paper basket and a table with a white-flowered cyclamen on it. The plant is too big for its pot. It must have been for some time, yet someone has been watering it regularly, or else its foliage wouldn't look so lush. What fool would water a plant day after day and not realise it needed re-potting?

Green. The door of our room at the Drummond Hotel in London was green. One night of my life, one night out of thirty-eight years, but part of me is still there, trapped in the night that Aidan told me. Part of me never left that hotel.

All my books say there's no point wasting your energy on 'if only's. They offer no advice about what to do if you're hooked on them. There are no patches available in chemists' shops that an 'if only' addict can stick on her arm to help break the destructive habit.

If only Aidan and I hadn't gone to London

last December, the nightmare I'm living now would never have started.

* * *

'My boyfriend told me he killed a woman, but he didn't.'

'I need the woman's name, and details of where we can find her,' says Sergeant Zailer, ready to write down whatever I say. When I don't answer immediately, she says, 'Ruth, if Aidan's beaten somebody up so badly that –'

'No! He hasn't touched her.' I have to make her understand. 'She's fine. Nobody's hurt. I ... He hasn't been anywhere near her, I'm sure he hasn't.'

'Nobody's hurt?' Charlie Zailer looks stumped.

'No.'

'You're certain?'

'Yes.'

She thinks for a few moments, then smiles at me. 'All right. Let's come back to your boyfriend and this woman later,' she says. 'I'm going to take a few basic details first, if that's okay.' Suddenly, she has an

entirely different manner; she is no longer impatient, suspicious. She's ditched her too-loud patronising voice and is acting as if we're friends; we might be at a pub quiz, on the same team – she's writing down the answers. 'Name? Ruth Bussey, right? B-U-S-S-E-Y?'

'Yes.'

'Middle name?'

Does she really want to know? Is she joking? 'Zinta.'

She laughs. 'Really?'

'My mother's Latvian.'

'It's a great name,' she says. 'I've always wanted a more interesting middle name. Mine's Elizabeth. And your address?'

'Blantyre Lodge, Blantyre Park, Spil –'

'You live in the park?'

'In the lodge house, just inside the park gates.'

'That funny little house with the black and white top?'

Timber-panelled gables. I don't correct her. I nod.