Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Accidental Father

Written by Greg Williams

Published by Orion Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Accidental Father

GREG WILLIAMS



First published in Great Britain in 2009 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Greg Williams 2009

The moral right of Greg Williams 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.

All the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons living
or dead is purely coincidental.

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

ISBN (Hardback) 978 0 7528 7430 2
ISBN (Trade Paperback) 978 0 7528 9201 6

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural,
renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

Prologue

I had no idea what time it was when I got to the high street. I guessed that it was around eight thirty. The schools had yet to open their doors, but there was plenty of traffic on the roads; mums en route to drop off their precious offspring, I expected. Stumbling along the drenched pavement in a daze, my legs shaky and my feet unsure of themselves, I kept my head down. I didn't want to engage anyone, although I imagined that my dishevelled, careless appearance was the subject of speculation by passers-by.

I was a wreck.

I had barely slept in three days; my bed was a twisted nest of discontent. I'd tried all the tricks – a couple of glasses of Scotch, keeping the bedroom cool, getting up to break the relentless churning inside my skull – but the mental bustle continued. It was unstoppable, obstinate, implacable. No distraction was enough to throw it from its orbit. Everything else was inconsequential, senseless.

I looked down at my feet – leaves carpeted the pavement. They had lain there long enough to decompose slightly and then be turned slick and sticky by the rain that had been falling on and off for the past couple of hours. Cars hissed by, their windscreen-wipers moving back and forth metronomically.

I noted the slapping sound the wipers made as they moved from side to side. Some people might have heard a thunk-thunk, but I heard something different. The noise echoed with my thoughts, conjuring a name that I kept repeating to myself:

Cait-lin
Thunk-thunk
Cait-lin
Thunk-thunk
Cait-lin.

It had been two days since she'd gone. Two days of checking my phone in case she'd called, two days of hoping that the footsteps in the front yard might be hers, two days of gnawing regret. I looked up to cross the road. The rain made the people on the other side indistinct as they hurried about their business beneath hats and umbrellas.

But wait: within the haze there was someone I recognised, someone who attracted my attention, her walk as familiar to me as my own. As I focused on her it was as if my sight had switched from black-and-white to Technicolor. Everything about her was intrinsic to my own identity. It was Caitlin. It was my daughter.

I called to her, but she didn't respond, picking her way through the raincoat-clad passers-by.

'Caitlin!' I called again, but she carried on walking as I hurried along my side of the street, calling over the noise of the cars and the downpour.

'Caitlin!'

We walked in parallel. I was waving to her now, trying to catch her attention.

And then she stepped towards the road, making to cross it.

'Caitlin!'

She looked through the rain at me, her face doubtful as she stepped from the kerb.

Even as I did it, I knew that I had distracted her.

There was a pulse-quickening squealing of breaks, a hollow thud and a sickening, hissing silence.

I ran across the road to see my daughter, her limbs twisted

in rag-doll shapes, the rain diluting the blood spreading across the road.

She lay there, perfectly still. My love, her face undaunted.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

My desire to enter the commercial realm began innocently enough. I was eating a poached egg on toast (surely the most inoffensive meal known to mankind) one Thursday morning when my wife Amanda crashed into the kitchen. At times like this she was not so much a person but rather an amalgam of hair, perfume, breasts, heels and haste. She tore a packet of Pop-Tarts open with her teeth.

'Shit,' she exclaimed.

'What?' I asked.

She ignored me. This was not unusual.

'Is that the mouthwatering new flavour of Pop-Tarts?' I asked, looking up from the sports pages.

'Smudged my bloody lipstick,' she snapped back.

Amanda devoured the Pop-Tart, taking small bites and washing them down with a cup of lukewarm tea that I had made an hour earlier.

'Ugh.' She winced, clearly disgusted.

'I take it you're not going to bother toasting that delicious, nutritious breakfast.'

'MmMMMMmmmMMMMMM,' Amanda said.

I looked up at her expectantly. 'I'm not entirely sure what you just said. Did you tell me that you saw a unicorn in the garden?' I looked out at the well-tended lawn and herbaceous borders (courtesy of, I hated to admit, my wife) behind our red-brick Victorian semi. The day was strangely bright, despite the blanket of grey cloud rolling rapidly overhead.

'I'm late,' Amanda said impatiently.

'Oh, really?' I returned to my paper. 'Holy shit.'

Amanda clucked her tongue in disapproval, clearly irritated that I'd failed to acknowledge her frenzy of urgency.

'You could at least have made me a fresh cup of tea.'

'I did,' I replied, chewing my toast slowly. I was distracted by the preview of that evening's Champions' League games. 'An hour ago.'

'It's cold, Alex,' she said reproachfully. She moved towards the breakfast bar, still fussing with her blouse. 'What's that?' she asked, picking up a brochure that was at the bottom of a pile of post.

'Nothing you're interested in. It's research,' I explained.

'But what is it, though?' persisted Amanda. The concise answer was coffee-making porn, but I chose not to engage with the subject as Amanda quickly flipped through the pages of espresso makers, roasters and bean grinders.

'Whatever, Trevor,' Amanda said – I had no idea where she picked up these seemingly up-to-the-minute sayings – before lighting a cigarette and puffing furiously at it. Amanda smoked curiously thin menthol cigarettes that she ordered online. I had always been told that menthol cigarettes made you sterile, but I wasn't sure if that was just a myth: menthol cigarettes were popular with rappers, and rappers had *tons* of kids.

'Sorry,' she said, clearly not that remorseful.

'Can you open a window or something?' I complained, wafting the smoke away from my eggs.

'I'm in a rush, sweetheart,' Amanda said in between drags. Her use of the word 'sweetheart' didn't fool me. As far as she was concerned, it could mean anything – least of all that I had a sweet heart. I didn't have one, and I doubted whether my wife thought that I did. I stood up and opened the back door. Cold morning air rushed in. It was too much. I pulled it closed. By

the time I had turned around Amanda had put the cigarette out, crushing it on a saucer on the breakfast bar.

'Bye, sweetheart,' (again with the sweetheart!) she said without a backwards glance – she was busy walking for the front door while digging in her bag for breath-freshening gum. All that remained of her was a trace of vivid-coloured lipstick on a mashed, still-smoking butt.

I caught the 8.27 to Waterloo and, as per fucking usual, I had to stand. I watched a woman nodding off to sleep, her mouth open, her double chin wobbling beneath her rouged lips, and felt faintly nauseous. I was sure that, if the woman could have seen herself, she would have fled into the sulphurous embrace of veganism and some radical form of yoga involving overheated rooms and strangely youthful middle-aged 'gurus' sporting unitards. Within the carriage, as it rattled through the ratty edges of London, there was a feeling of malaise, of compulsion. It felt like no one was bouncing through suburban London voluntarily, they had all been taken captive. In one corner a man in a poorly ironed shirt and shiny, ragtag jacket read through his post before shredding the portions containing his address and stuffing them in a Styrofoam coffee cup that rested on a narrow tray just below the window. He surreptitiously stuffed the rubbish under his seat, believing that he hadn't been observed. I had half a mind to expose him – litter lout! – but was convinced that I'd look like a bigger tit than him. Still, if you allow people to get away with that kind of thing, there's no telling where it might end …

God, I was bored.

I used to read the newspaper. I used to read books. Anything to make it seem like I was doing something useful, like the time wasn't being stolen from me. Now I didn't bother. It was too hard trying to wrestle the paper with its sections and supplements;

and anyway, the journey blurred into the office, which blurred into lunch, which blurred into the afternoon …

It was all tedium, all the time.

I muscled my way off the train at Waterloo and through the migrating herd of commuters to the Bakerloo Line. I just wanted to bellow, '*Mooooooo*!' A short march north to a grimy street just off Leicester Square brought me to the strip-lit and carpet-tiled offices of Knowles & Strauss, the travel agency where I had scaled the upper canopy of the corporate jungle and been appointed chief accountant almost three years ago. It felt like ten.

I swiped my ID card and pushed open the door to the office before greeting the thin-haired Scottish receptionist in the cheap shoes. I sometimes fantasised about her when I was getting it on with Amanda. That was how low I had sunk – a sordid crush on a workmate. Even my fantasies were clichés.

After significant amounts of bill paying, YouTubing and other forms of time-wasting, I settled down to take a look at a pile of vendor statements that needed my approval. Jesus. What a load of shit. Thank God that some smart arse had come up with a back-office software system that made my job something of a doddle. As long as I managed to stay awake for a few hours during the day (not including lunchtime) this was the kind of job that only an idiot could screw up. Which wasn't to say that I didn't consider it a possibility: the general tedium of the position could induce a coma in all but the most studious and ambitious of employees.

But I wasn't studious. And I was no longer ambitious, although I hated myself for surrendering to this shortcoming. As I munched my way through the latest 'sandwich of the week' from Pret A Manger, filled in my entry for the office Grand National sweepstake or collected my things before dashing out

the door to get to Waterloo for the 5.56 p.m., I could not deny the undeniable: I had become that which I had always wanted to avoid – a queue mutterer. A service whiner. An escalator stander. Who would ever have thought it?

My walk home from the station was usually the happiest moment of the day. The stirrings of summer meant that there was blossom on the trees, the laughter of kids in back gardens, the smoke of it's-not-raining-so-we-might-as-well-light-it barbecues. It was Friday, so Amanda would go out with a couple of her cronies from work, sink a few bottles of Chablis and then come home pissed as a newt, stumble into the bedroom, wake me up and demand sex.

Which was okay with me. As routine as the sex was, at least we were still having it, which seemed not to be the case for a number of my mates with kids. Anticipating this, I thought that I would be best advised to pay a visit to my local for a couple of nerve-steadiers. Having sex with a drunk person is no fun if you're sober, but plenty of fun if you're not.

'Evening, Geoff,' I said.

'Ah, greetings, Lamb Chop,' said Geoff, the landlord, who had a habit of bestowing monikers on his customers that bore absolutely no relation to their character or behaviour. These nicknames changed almost as regularly as the bar towels that were neatly lined up on the counter, ready for a Friday-night pounding (in much the same way that I was).

I ignored the Lamb Chop comment. I was pretty sure that the last time I came into the Royal Oak I was the Cappuccino Kid. There was clearly a culinary theme developing.

'What can I get you?' asked Geoff. He gestured at the rows of bottles behind the counter in a way that I had once seen a salesman in a Moroccan bazaar gesture towards his wares.

'I'll have a pint of Heineken please, Geoff,' I said.

'A pint of Heineken,' he repeated, as if announcing the arrival of a society couple at a ball.

'Bag of cheese and onion as well.'

'Pushing the boat out, are we?' said Geoff, pouring the pint. He placed it on the bar in front of me and leaned down to retrieve a blue packet of crisps.

'Well, it is Friday,' I said, ironically.

'That'll be fifty quid, please,' said Geoff, ignoring the comment. Geoff never gave regulars the exact price of drinks. It was his thing. He was as likely to ask for 23 pence.

I handed over the money and, while Geoff was still at the till getting the change, took my drink and the crisps over to a corner table. Coming to the Royal Oak was a bittersweet affair. I liked that the landlord was pleased to see me, but I didn't always want to get into a conversation with a man who seemed to model his manner and banter on a Radio 1 breakfast DJ from the mid seventies. It surprised me that Geoff had never called me a 'pilchard' or referred to the 'falling-down water' that he sold.

I returned to get my change from Geoff, who subsequently entered a spirited instructional discussion with his Italian and Polish chefs as to the ideal Yorkshire pudding recipe. It was soon evident that Geoff was the only one of the three who had a strong opinion about the subject. Friday-night bliss: a newly poured pint, the fresh evening paper laid out on the well-worn pub table and no reason to get out of bed the following day. The evening stretched before me with seemingly unending promise.

'Evening, mate.' It was Mike Thomas, perhaps the only person in town whose presence did not make me sag from the sheer effort of engagement.

'Hello, Mike,' I said, relieved to be rescued from having to read about some TV company who thought that it would be

a marketing triumph if they broke the world record for simultaneously bouncing space hoppers. Some clown in marketing was getting a pat on the back for dreaming up schemes like that. It was what was wrong with the world.

'Fancy a pint, mate?'

'That'd be nice,' said Mike. 'Stella, please.'

I went back to the bar.

'Ah!' announced Geoff, 'the return of the prodigal customer. What can I do you for, sir?'

I returned with the pint and set it down before Mike. We knocked our glasses together.

'To Friday,' said Mike.

'Friday,' I said.

Mike nodded at the open paper. 'Did you see that story about the world space-hopper record?'

'Too right,' I said. 'What a load of bollocks.'

'Too right,' said Mike. 'Sums it all up really, this country. We've become a nation run by pricks in marketing.'

'And accounts payable,' I added.

'Sorry, mate,' said Mike, 'I'm not disrespecting the accounts department. Far from it.'

'You doing anything this weekend?' I asked.

'God forbid,' said Mike. 'Julie will probably have me mow the lawn. Might have to round the kids up and go to Homebase. Maybe lunch with her parents, if I'm lucky.'

'You've always got Sunday lunch with one of her lot,' I said.

'Big family,' explained Mike. 'Catholics, see. What about you, then?'

This took me a little by surprise. I had absolutely no plans.

'Oh, you know. Might take Amanda out for a meal tomorrow night.'

'Nice,' said Mike, not sounding particularly enthusiastic.

The two of us sipped our pints.

'Mike,' I asked, matter-of-factly, 'do you think I should get a divorce?'

This was the kind of question to which most people might express a degree of surprise or shock but, as I knew he would, Mike took it in his stride. He swigged his lager.

'Why would you want to do that?' he asked calmly.

'There are lots of reasons,' I said. 'A lot of reasons. But the main thing I'm thinking is, I'm thirty-six years old. This might be, you know, my last chance for a second act.'

Mike picked up a beer mat and spun it on its side.

'What's wrong with what you've got?' asked Mike. 'Nice house, your wife's fit … How's the sex?'

'It's always been good,' I said. 'Amanda has always been, you know, a sexual person.'

'Well, then, stop fucking moaning,' Mike said dismissively. 'Do you know the extremes you have to go to to get a fucking blowjob when you've got three kids? I reckon each one costs me a grand.'

I took a deep breath. It's not like I didn't care about the sex, but I was bored. Terminally bored. I was bored with Amanda, who I suspected was bored with me. Bored by my job, my commute, my routine; bored by being the epitome of dreary middle England.

'I just feel that if I don't change things soon, I'll never get another chance.'

'You're having a mid-life crisis, mate,' Mike said, like a doctor announcing a diagnosis.

'That's great,' I said. 'It's another fucking cliché to add to the list.'

A young couple walked in all done up for a night on the town. They looked good; hopeful, excited. I took a deep breath. Just the very *idea* of breaking away from the everyday, from the routine, was enough to raise my heartbeat.

‘Talking of Amanda,’ said Mike, ‘I thought I saw her earlier driving through town. I could swear that Nick Belagio was in the car with her.’

Nick Belagio. Hearing his name made me clench my fist. Nick Belagio, City success story, local hotshot and all round arse-wipe. Nick Belagio, who loved being the centre of attention so much that he showed up in fancy dress – as a Gestapo officer – to a fundraiser for the local children’s dialysis unit.

‘Doubt it,’ I said. ‘I don’t think she even likes the twat.’

‘Well, she’s in good company then,’ said Mike. ‘She might have been showing him a house or something.’

‘Maybe,’ I said, standing up. ‘Fancy another?’

‘Twist my arm,’ said Mike.