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.

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

Bloody Women

Helen Fitzgerald

1

'I just need you to say if this is him,' the man in the white coat said, lifting the sheet that covered the lump beneath.

I looked down at the metal bench.

'Take your time,' the man said, which I was already doing. I looked long and hard, holding back the tears, moving my head left to right, closer, further away, and then said,' Yes, that's Mani.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'You're saying that this is your ex-boyfriend, Mani Sharma?'

'It is. Yes. It had an unusually large slit at the top.'

The man in the white coat nodded and covered the small piece of flesh that was undoubtedly the circumcised penis of Mani Sharma, the very appendage I had refused to lick because the slit had made me queasy.

Poor Mani.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009
Published by Polygon
an imprint of Berlinn Limited

Definitely not the best time to giggle. Up there with funerals and rectal examinations. I'd been prone to this kind of inappropriate outburst. At the most God-awful times, noises blurted from my mouth, or gestures took control of my hands that made me bury my head with embarrassment afterwards. I'm sure my involuntary chortle at the sheet-covered knob was partly why they decided to arrest me two days later, why I was no longer viewed as the bereaved ex-lover of three men, but was accused of shagging, mutilating and murdering them, not necessarily in that order.

•

Jitters are a terrible thing. I had a bad case of them in the week before my wedding. Actually, not jitters, a tsunami, overwhelming me with the rubble of fears, tears, ideas. Reassuring Joe that he didn't need to abandon his surgery till the big day, I'd arrived in Edinburgh with a week to pack up and organise things myself. Almost immediately, the wall of water struck me. Who was I? What did I want? Was it a good idea to leave home forever? My mum? My flat? My friends? My language, culture, work, history? Square sausage? Desperate to fit into a size eight vintage wedding dress, I embarked on a nonsensical diet of very little food and lots of alcohol. I went through boxes of clothes and toys and letters and essays. I started to forget what Joe looked like. I cried. I sought the counsel of my mother.

'You have the jitters,' she said.' You need to tie up loose ends.'

Taking her advice, I raced around saying goodbye to old friends and colleagues, visiting favourite pubs, watching Braveheart, selling most of my belongings, listening to the Proclaimers, the Fratellis, Paolo Nutini, Franz Ferdinand and the bagpipes, going shopping, and getting rained on. But I was still tearful and worried.

'Your loosest ends are your exes,' my mother said.

I'd had four steady relationships, all of them fatally flawed, none of them neatly resolved.

I arranged to have a drink with each of them. Johnny was Sunday, Rory Tuesday, Mani Wednesday and Stewart Thursday. I wanted to look at them, talk to them, make sure I was right to let them go, and give everything up for Joe.

I didn't intend to sleep with them. That fuck-up of an idea came on the Sunday, when I was waiting for Johnny to arrive at the Hammer Bar in Glasgow and found myself dialling Joe's mobile number in Italy. He'd lived in Scotland till he was ten, so he spoke perfect Glaswegian.

'How's the shag-fest?' I was yelling. Some girls were laughing loudly at the bar beside me and Michael Jackson was blaring.

'It's not a shag-fest!'

'Okay, the piss-up with your friends?'

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

'We're not drunk.'

'You're being all distant.'

'Mum can't make it to the wedding.'

I was silent.

'Cat? You're breaking up. Her DVT is too dangerous for her to fly.'

'Well, she can drive.'

'Same problem . . . sitting still for so long.'

'Let's get married in Lucca then.'

'No. It's all organised. We'll have a party here with Mum when we get back.'

'Who's that girl in the background?'

'Nobody, the waitress.'

'Put her on.'

'Why?'

'Put her on.'

I could hear laughter. A girl. Maybe two.

'You're being daft,' Joe said.

'Fuck you.' I hung up.

Forty minutes later I straddled Johnny in the passenger seat of his Golf with no pants on. It was very uncomfortable, but it settled things in my head. Johnny and I had nothing in common except that our fluids had merged in our late teens, and – twenty years later – the passenger seat of his beloved black Golf was prematurely stained with some of them.

Johnny was no longer unfinished business. So, that night, after dialling Joe's number seven times, I decided to sleep with the others as well. It wouldn't harm anyone, I thought. It would tie everything up, make everything clear, and be jolly good fun into the bargain.

It wasn't a very good idea. Because of it, three men were now very loose ends indeed.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

2

While I was in Cambusvale Prison, Janet Edgely wrote my biography.

'Full approval!' Mum said. 'It'll help get your side across. She won't include anything you don't like. She promises. Don't you, Jan?'

We shook on it.

For weeks I spent my precious visits telling her everything. I signed a piece of paper authorising her to speak to my doctor, my psychologist, my psychiatrist, my social worker, my best friend, the prison governor, teachers, lecturers, bosses, friends, colleagues, and, of course, Joe.

Janet never got my approval. She never even showed me the pages. Just before the trial was due to begin, she stopped visiting me. Around the same time, a scary prison officer delivered a package, already opened and checked by security. I took out the wad of A4 papers. On top was a note.

Cat,

Don't let her visit you again. She's a liar and a bitch.

Anna.

Underneath the note was Ms Marsden's manuscript thus far, and a print-out of the proposed cover.

CAT MARSDEN PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL MONOGAMIST

Janet Edgley

I put the manuscript on the hard bed in my cell and stared at the black background of the rough cover page, at the gold lettering of the author's name, at my bright red shoulder-length hair, at my pale Scottish face, my eyes staring from the blackness with pure green hate. Eventually, I walked to the metal mirror above the sink. My image was wobbly, but it was the same face. The face they'd called unwomanly. The face that had accidentally smiled once on the way from the court to the van – just once – but once was enough for the gawkers with mobiles to snap the 'smirk of evil'.

I wish I had a different face.

I wish I'd never shaken hands with Janet Edgley.

But I did. And during that first interview – with Mum ever-present – I threw myself into her questions. My heart picked up a little as she looked me in the eye – not so much because someone wanted to find out the truth about me at last, but because someone – a clever and intriguing someone – seemed to like me.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

I asked if we could start at the beginning. Chronology was the only thing that made sense to me. So we started at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

I recalled what I'd been told. That I hadn't wanted to come out. That I was quiet to start with. That it had taken Mum and Dad seven days to name me. In a last-minute frenzy, they'd asked a very tall man with glasses at the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 'Which do you like better? Catherine or Jacinta?'

'Catherine,' the tall man with glasses said. 'I like Katie, and I love Cat.'

Mum and Dad had looked at each other, apparently – Cat! They added a '–riona' for Scottishness and joked on the way home that my crying did indeed sound like an on-heat tabby.

Not long after I was named, Dad went offshore for his usual four-week stint. He'd worked on the rigs since leaving school. As a result, by the age of thirty, he had a large paid-for house, an on¬shore alcohol problem which he shared with seven thoughtless on-shore friends, and a wife who did not cope well with the bumps of his departures and arrivals. Mum said she never adjusted to a clothes-free floor becoming a strewn one, to a well-stocked fridge being rapidly emptied, to her social movements being suddenly scrutinised.

After Dad went back to work, Mum got mastitis and then a womb infection. She was all alone. Her parents had sold their cardboard box business to retire to Spain and her sister had long lived in London. Mum would have been all right, I explained to Janet, if I hadn't been the most difficult baby in the universe. I didn't latch on to her breast, despite the dedicated efforts of Mum, the midwives, the health visitors and two breastfeeding support groups. I had colic, shat korma non-stop all over the place, got mysterious rashes and temperatures, and generally set about giving my poor mother a really awful time. She got through it, but only because she was not too afraid to ask for help.

When I was six weeks old I was admitted to the children's ward for 'failure to thrive'. Mum stayed by my cot for days, watching the liquid drip into me, checking my breathing, fretting. Eventually, I fattened enough for the doctor to let us go home. We got a taxi, Mum told me years later, and when she carried me in the door Dad's arse was bobbing like a fiddler's elbow. Underneath was some woman he'd met at a pub. Of course, I don't remember the details. I was only six weeks old. But Mum does, clearly.

'What do you expect?' Dad had seemingly snarled over his naked shoulder.' That baby's turned you into a spiteful bitch.'

'So you see,' I said to Janet as the Freak roared 'Time's UP!' with a bloodthirsty scowl, 'from day one, I made my mum's life a misery.'

•

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

I'd been on remand for three weeks when Janet first came to see me. My trial was set for thirteen weeks later and it wasn't looking good. I'd been forthright from the start. I had been with the men just hours before their deaths, yes. And yes, I'd had sex with them. Then I'd gone home in a drunken state, fallen asleep, and woken with a sickly feeling of regret.

'I understand,' I told the police when they arrested me. 'It looks like I did it and I can't say for sure I didn't.'

I couldn't say I was innocent because I honestly didn't know if I was. Since my teens I'd had a tendency to black out in stressful situations, as well as a tendency to assume my own guilt. In fourth year, when a brand-spanking-new set of highlighter pens went missing in geography, Mrs Carrington said,' No one is going home until the culprit stands up.' I immediately stood up, not because I knew I had stolen them, but because I didn't know if I hadn't.

•

Mum didn't know if I hadn't killed them either. She, too, had always assumed my guilt in the face of accusation.

'Do you think I did it?' I asked her after my arrest.

Her eyes said yes but her mouth said, 'I don't believe you're a dangerous person. You need people who love you to look after you. You can't spend your life in prison. You'll die in here, Cat.'

She convinced me to plead not guilty.

'You mustn't say anything to make this worse,' she said.

You see, there was something I could say to make my situation worse, something very important.

'Shhh! Forget about that,' Mum begged.' You never told me. I never heard it. Put it in a box in your head and shut it tight and tape it up. Never open it again.'

So that's what I did. And that's where it stayed, my secret. In a box in my head, the edges taped with Sellotape. Sometimes, if I concentrated hard, I could see that there was a small crack in the Sellotape, a very small one, but it was big enough for me to get a glimpse of what was inside.

'Shhh!' Mum repeated when I told her about the crack.' Tape it over or you'll die here!'

As long as my secret stayed safe, I had a tiny chance of getting off, Mum reasoned. A thorough going-over of all the corpses

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

– and their spare parts – had only found the fluids and fibres that one might expect following consensual sex. Also, there was no murder weapon. The hunt for a sinister pair of secateurs was still ongoing in the streets, houses, flats, rivers, cars, parks, bars, workplaces and cafés of central Scotland.

But it was only a tiny chance. I was the only suspect. I was odd. I had laughed at Mani's severed penis. I would almost certainly be found guilty and be forced to spend at least ten years in HMP Cambusvale, eating stodge in silence at an empty table for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and exercising in a fenced yard mid afternoon, weather permitting. I would endure over 3,650 nights of waiting in my cell to be escorted to the toilet before giving up and doing it in a chamber pot.

This was not Cat Marsden. This was some other creature – a shadow, a choice-less, love-less, personality-less, soul-less one, taking a long, long time to thin out and die.

It was already worse than death. The only escapes from my brick strait-jacket were visits from my terrified and sick-with grief mother, letters from my best friend Anna, and meetings with a mouse-like nurse and a prison officer about my suicide status.

It had been very high-risk to begin with, then medium, then high again, then medium, then very, very high.

The day Janet first came to see me I had just been moved back into the suicide cell. I hated the suicide cell. There was nothing in it at all, just walls. The standard single cells I was otherwise locked in on the ground floor, with a television and pencils and paper and photographs, seemed like paradise in comparison.

It turned out that the Mousey Nursey had just spoken to my mother on the phone and she was very worried. Said Nursey sat me down and questioned me while the Freak took notes.

'I know Mum's worried but I don't have suicidal feelings. What would be the point of killing myself?'

'What do you mean, What would be the point, Catriona?'

'I mean I don't want to kill myself.'

'You know, in my experience it's usually the ones who say they don't want to kill themselves who actually go ahead and do it. The ones who seem calm and collected.'

'Is that so?'

'You seem very calm, Catriona.'

'Okay, I want to kill myself.'

'Really?' The nurse had a mixture of panic and delight in her eyes.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

'No! Don't be stupid! I just don't want to go into one of those cells with nothing but concrete.'

'Is that why you won't tell me how you're feeling?'

'No! Yes! Oh God, what should I say?'

'You should say exactly how you feel.'

'I feel like smashing my head against the wall.'

Mousey Nursey nodded and smiled to herself then turned to the Freak and said, 'Sui' cell. Quarterly obs.' She exited triumphantly.

•

Some time after finding myself back in the death chamber, the Freak peeked in on me to say I had a visitor. I was overjoyed. Even more so when I saw that my mother hadn't brought the useless lawyer, but a nice lady from Morningside.

Janet and Mum visited every day for weeks. Janet was my lifeline. She would help me remember. She would help me hate myself a little less, help me stop wanting to be gone, to be nowhere, in oblivion, to stop longing for nothingness rather than prison and thinking terrible thoughts about probable guilt for unspeakable crimes.

Poor boys.

•

Sometimes at night I tried to think of my ex-lovers in specific ways, to recall the details about them. If I thought about specifics they became real again, and not unknowns who, like A-level history essays re-read years later, seemed surprisingly unreal considering how long I'd spent alone with them.

Sometimes I thought of their private parts, although they were no longer private.

Johnny's was the first I ever touched. I remember stroking it through his jeans in the movies. I thought he'd stolen a jumbo tube of Smarties and put it in his pocket. It was enormous, a terrible burden for the men I touched after him. Four years later, when Rory unveiled his five-incher, I couldn't help but show my shock and disappointment.

'It has good girth, doesn't it?' Rory said to my furrowed brow.

'Yes, girth is important,' I played along.

I've already explained about Mani's. Large slit. Not good.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

As for Stewart's, well let's just say that his hands were equally as crooked. A veiny, gruesome, skinless banana, it was, and usually just as squidgy. I'd arranged to see Stewart last, two nights before my wedding, but his flight from London was cancelled. A stroke of luck for his banana, as it turned out.

•

When I thought of my exes I inevitably thought about Joe. I thought I had finally got it right with him. Finally, after twenty years, four intense, long-term relationships, one pregnancy scare and one abortion, I had met the man who would take care of me, light a fire in our safe cave and hold me close.

'I'll hurt you,' I told him when we both realised it was more than a fling.

'You'll never hurt me,' he said.' I'm going to make sure of it.'

I would have married him, had I not been arrested at the hairdressers' a few hours before the service. I still dreamt of picking up the suitcases I'd packed the day before the police came. I imagined putting the cases in a taxi and getting on the Ryanair flight to Pisa to live with him forever as we'd planned.

I won't tell you about Joe's penis.

•

Janet Edgely was about fifty years old. She had a posh accent, long, straight dyed-brown hair and twenty-eight unnecessary pounds, many of which had settled around her breasts. She wore trousers and blouses and black court shoes and glasses which she fiddled with as she talked non-stop about her own life, over-using adverbs and over-emphasising certain syllables: 'An overwhelmingly humid day!' She was' desperately in love' with a woman whose name never escaped her lips, no doubt in case I should escape to kill her. She lived in a one-bedroom flat in Edinburgh's exclusive Morningside, with its large stone houses and neat tenements. She had gone to 'the disastrously posh' Mary Erskine's School (hence the English–Edinburgh accent). She ate fifteen almond biscuits for breakfast and always had several crumbs clinging for life at the corners of her lipsticked mouth. Before happening upon the most wonderful woman in the world she had resigned herself to being single for the rest of her life and was more than satisfied with being aunty to her younger brother's three, all under five, all 'totally hilarious!' She had devised a master plan that involved sunbathing, growing olives and eating tomatoes in Italy. I liked her plan. I liked the way she placed her papers in three neat piles on the desk and then patted each three times. I liked her. I decided to co¬operate fully so she could expose how 'preposterously' I had been portrayed.

The night after my first meeting with Janet, I asked the Freak for some paper and a pen. The following morning, I asked again.

'But how would I kill myself with pencil and paper? I asked Mousey Nursey at our daily meeting.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009

'Cut into your wrists with the paper a bit at a time, deeper and deeper, up the way . . . or scrunch the paper up . . .' She was acting out her ideas.' Shove it in your mouth and nose, down your throat . . . or . . . stab the pencil into your eye, temple, heart . . .'

'Okay, okay,' I said. 'I get it. Thanks for the tips!'

'What do you mean, Thanks for the tips, Catriona?' she asked.

Ten days, ten suicide meetings and one move to a non-sui' cell later, a piece of paper and a blunt pencil finally arrived. I wrote notes to give to Janet, putting, in chronological order, places, names, thoughts and feelings. At last, I thought, people will see the real me. Perhaps, I also thought, I will see the real me.

•

While the proposed title and cover-rough warned me that Janet's manuscript might not paint a sympathetic picture of me, I remained optimistic as I moved past her acknowledgements page. The 'authorised biography' was dedicated to people I'd never heard of: a dear and loyal friend called Margaret, 'who hears me when I need to be heard', a 'tireless, enthusiastic' agent, an editor, and Davina, 'the love of my life.' (So that was her name.) Finally, it was dedicated to my mother, 'Mrs Irene Marsden, without whose wholehearted co-operation this book would never have happened.'

Then came the:

FOREWORD

This book is based on a series of in-depth interviews with Catriona Marsden during her remand period awaiting trial in HMP Cambusvale, and with her mother, extended family, colleagues, friends, and the friends and families of the three victims: Johnny Marshall, Rory MacManus and Mani Sharma. I have also spoken with her fourth ex-lover, Stewart Gillies, and with her fiancé at the time of the murders, Giuseppe/ Joe Rossi. I have had access to diaries, letters and medical records as well as psychological, psychiatric, social work and prison-based reports. Where conversations at which I was not present are reported, I have on occasion used poetic licence, though this is always based on my thorough and detailed research of the people and events involved.

Terrified of what was to come, I turned the page and began the first chapter.

Copyright © Helen Fitzgerald 2009