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Opening Extract from...

Flesh Wounds

Written by Chris Brookmyre

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**CHRIS
BROOKMYRE**

**FLESH
WOUNDS**



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

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For Grace and Jack

Mortal Thoughts

'Td best be getting a shift on,' Stevie announced, for perhaps the third time. 'There's none of us getting any younger.'

He glanced at the clock behind the gantry. The first time he'd said it had been around half ten. Now it was just after eleven, and he was half an hour older but no nearer the door. He'd have to watch that: he could be sitting here all day if he didn't get his arse in gear.

Sheila wouldn't allow that, though. She was opening for business in an hour. It was just that the seat felt that bit more comfy on this particular morning, the craic that bit more engaging. When he got to his feet the spell would be broken and he'd be impatient to get on with his day, but for now it was tempting to stay in the moment just a wee bit longer.

It looked like a lock-in, and it wasn't even noon. Nobody was drinking anything stronger than espresso, and they did this five or six days a week. It started off all business, Stevie's way of making sure he was up to speed on everybody's operations, but once the important stuff was out the way it could degenerate into blethers, everybody too comfy to get up, too full of breakfast to want to leave their seats. Some days the patter was better in the morning over teas and coffees than on late nights when everybody was half pished. At such times he was inclined to tarry, just sit in his favourite seat and take in what was around him rather than holding court; or maybe that truly *was* him holding court: everything playing out for his benefit and no pressing need to remind everybody who was in charge.

He had turned forty-nine that day. He didn't doubt Sheila had something planned for later, but this morning nobody had brought it up, and that suited him fine. Folk talked about taking stock on

birthdays, but Stevie had seldom done so. In his experience, there were other watershed events in life that more naturally precipitated moments of reflection, though truth be told he was usually too busy living it to stop for photos. It was a sign of getting older that he occasionally found himself wishing he had taken a step back here and there in order to appreciate what he had. You always heard the older football players saying that: the young guys in the team don't appreciate what it is to be playing in a cup final, because they think it's always going to be cup finals.

He was sitting at his usual seat, his usual booth, up at the back wall of the Old Croft Brasserie, as it was known these days. It wasn't his name on the licence, and since POCA he had made damn sure there was no documentation identifying it as his property, but it was *his* place, and had been indisputably his place in many other ways long before he'd had the money to own it.

It was all about the food now. Even the cocktail bar where the snug used to be had fallen victim to the last re-fit, as it let them seat up to a dozen more covers. It was simple economics: they did okay with the scan, but the mark-up on the wine list made it look like the cocktail bar had been giving drink away. However, as Stevie surveyed the Old Croft from his favoured perspective, he could picture everything as it was when the place was still the Bleachers Vaults, and the only wines behind the gantry were Buckfast, El-D and Lanliq. In his mind he could still see the yellow walls, stained by decades of nicotine, the faded photos and press clippings in their cheap frames, the narrow range of generic spirits upside down above their optics, the peeling Formica and chipped wood panelling that coated the bar, and the frosted lavvy-window glass that let in the only natural light during the day but principally served to let passers-by know they should keep on passing by, whether they fancied a drink or not.

No matter how many changes it went through, there was nonetheless a permanence about being in this place, a way in which it could put him back in touch with how he'd felt at different stages in his life. He could still see the wee shaver he once was, fronting up at sixteen and hoping to get served; still see the cracked plaster

on the ceiling as he lay bleeding on the lino, waiting for an ambulance the first time he got stabbed; still see the faces at the bar of boys long since dead: including some by his own hand or, more latterly, by his word. Times like this, he found himself missing even some of those guys, or at least missing the guys they once were, before they made themselves his enemies.

Stevie was one of Scotland's top gangsters. Had to be true: he'd read it in the *Daily Record*. Like there was a league table or something, or a chart. Up two places this week, it's Steeeeevie Fullerton! As for 'gangster', what kind of patter was that? The only folk who still used the term in this country were the sweetie wives in the press and wee daft boys kidding on they were darkies. Nobody who could reasonably be considered fitting of the term would dream of applying it to themselves.

Stevie knew a lot of criminals but precisely no gangsters. There were boys you worked with, boys you did business with and, very rarely, boys you trusted, but none of them had been in a gang since they were about fifteen: daft wee shavers out looking for mayhem, easy scores and, if they were really ambitious, their hole. Maybe the papers should name 'Scotland's top daft wee shaver', perhaps as part of a 'ones to watch' list of future gangster contenders.

He looked at the rattle-taggle assembly before him in the Old Croft Brasserie: Doke, Gerry, Haffa and himself. Stevie thought of the strange loyalties and improbable allegiances that had brought them all under one roof. To call this a gang would be to ignore greater levels of complexity than they had to cope with on an average shift at the UN.

Sheila gave his cheek a rub as she walked past, picking up his empty cup and saucer. It was part gesture of affection and part reminder that he hadn't shaved yet. He was planning to wait until he came back from the gym so he'd be smooth this afternoon and into the evening. It was growing back so fast lately that his five o'clock shadow tended to turn up at lunchtime. Used to be he liked having the old designer stubble; used to suit him, make him look just the distinguished side of rugged. These days, although he could dye the grey out of his hair he couldn't hide the salt-and-pepper

when it came through on his jaw, which meant that if he missed a couple of shaves he just looked like a jakey. So did wearing the sports gear he used to favour. He kept himself in good shape, was never out the gym and arguably as fit now as when he'd been in his twenties, but the gear didn't work on him any more. Past forty, the only folk you saw wearing tracky bottoms outside the gym were bin-rakers and big fat heifers. As a result, it was suits all the way for him now. Bespoke ones, naturally, always the best, but though they made him look smart they couldn't make him look younger.

Why did it bother him so much, he wondered? It didn't seem to trouble Sheila that he was looking older, although maybe she just loved him too much to say. He knew for sure it didn't bother him that Sheila was getting older. Though he could see the changes in her from when they first got together, it always felt like the latest version was an improvement. He'd always liked the fact that she looked older than him: it was one of the things that attracted him in the first place. She had seemed like a woman who had seen plenty of the world and knew what she wanted as a result. That was why he must have been one of the few men of his means ever to leave a wife near-on a decade his junior for one three years older than him.

He gazed at her, heading for the kitchen to discuss tonight's menu with Angus, the chef. The place belonged to Stevie, and it was Angus's talents that had all the trendy types venturing out to the wilds of Croftbank, but Sheila ran the show, like she always had.

She was working behind the bar here when they first met, another reason this old place felt like a portal to the many ages of his life. His eye drifted to the store room next to the toilets, just past where the swing doors now granted access to the kitchen. That was where they used to sneak off to on her breaks, sometimes with her first husband Donny working through in the snug. He could picture it, feel it, smell the mixture of perfume, cigarettes and drink. Her on her knees, giving him a gobble like nobody ever had before. Christ, he was getting hard thinking about it. He could fair go shagging her right now, in the store, up against the shelves like old times.

Better than old times. He fancied her more now than he ever had. The years were not diminishing Sheila, they were improving her; improving him too in so many ways, in the life he led, the things that were within his grasp, the freedoms that were now open to him. And yet, and yet . . .

Look at this place. Haffa was in raconteur mode, recalling the time a team of Gallowhaugh boys had organised an ambush inside Stevie's first nightclub, Nokturn, and they turned the place into something out of a John Wayne movie, utterly wrecking the joint. 'Wild West George Street,' Haffa described it, eliciting a laugh all round as it did every time he used the phrase, which he did every bloody time he told the story.

The downside of that anecdote, always unspoken, was that it was also the night Jazz got slashed, which set in motion the chain of events leading to his death.

Before that, they'd been sharing bittersweet reminiscences about Glen Fallan, the old stories given a sharper edge these past couple of years since it emerged that big Single wasn't quite as unthreateningly dead as everybody had previously believed.

Stevie thought Gerry was hawering when he said it had been more than twenty years ago, but when he did the sums it was right enough. No' real. It still felt like something that had happened recently: since the millennium, at least. Some folk cast a long shadow, and the period after they had departed always seemed shorter than the time you knew them, even if you had only known them for a fraction of the years they'd been gone. Glen Fallan: aye, there was a face Stevie missed, in spite of everything, though not from hanging round the Vaults. Not his style. Ever the lone gunman; often literally.

Stevie's cousin Doke then told the story about the Egan brothers going on the lam because they knew the polis were after them, and hiding out at their mammy's house two doors down. Aye, polis were never going to think of that. Fucking geniuses.

Doke was standing there in a two-grand suit, keys to an Aston Martin in one pocket, keys to a house in Thornton Bridge in the other, but like Gerry, like Haffa, like Stevie himself, it seemed all he wanted to talk about was old days, old faces, old streets.

Stevie had a Bentley Continental GT outside. He loved that machine like it was part of him: loved the growl of its engine, the gleam of its lines; loved what it said about him. It boasted more than six hundred brake horsepower, did nought to sixty in four seconds and its low-slung suspension was so smooth it handled like one of those lightcycles from *Tron*. But driving it had never given him a fraction of the excitement he had experienced behind the wheel of a stolen Escort XR3i when he was sixteen, his brother Nico riding shotgun, their cousins Doke and Jazz in the back, Stevie throwing the car around like it was the dodgems.

That thought was what finally gave him the nudge to get moving. It was one thing to miss your youth, but nostalgia could seduce you into thinking that the best of you lay in the past. To wallow in it was the same as staying here in this seat instead of going out to meet the day.

Fuck. That.

He climbed to his feet, giving Doke a phone gesture and receiving a subtle nod in response. He would be expecting him to call around teatime, and not to wish him happy birthday.

Stevie squinted against the late-morning sun as he opened the outside door. It was a cool and crisp November morning. Perfect for driving. He loved to see the metal glimmer of the Bentley's flanks in the sunlight, the solidity of the alloys picked out in a sharp contrast to the black rubber of the tyres. This was nicer than summer: the windscreen would stay clear without a thousand beasties kamikaze-diving it between the car wash and the health club.

He put the Bentley into drive and glided out towards the main road.

Stevie was aware that the older he got, the more he was vulnerable to thinking he had peaked and plateaued; that it was too late in the game for anything much to change, least of all the way he played it. There was a seductive instinct to stick instead of twist, to protect what he already held, and implicit within that was an acceptance that this was as good as he could expect it to get, as high as he could reasonably aspire to climb.

It was the death of Flash Frankie Callahan that had most fuelled this insecurity. A powerful adversary suddenly taken out of the picture, a supply line cut off, a very big slice of the market up for grabs: it should have been the start of a new era. Instead, Stevie had been squeezed in the aftermath, losing market share and watching, helpless, as someone else took over Frankie's operations.

The part of him that was still young and hungry was able to read a lesson in it, though. That it was Tony McGill who had been the phoenix from Frankie's ashes should have been a lesson to everybody.

Tony had a criminal career going all the way back to the fifties, running rackets and smuggling operations before anybody in Glasgow had ever had their first jag of brown or their first sniff of cocaine. Tony had watched as the logistics, the economics, the very nature of the game altered. He was a T-Rex caught in the teeth of a snowstorm at the onset of the Ice Age, an apex predator rendered suddenly vulnerable by a changing world. Different breeds had evolved to overtake him: breeds such as Stevie, once upon a time, and inevitably the once-mighty T-Rex was felled.

Tony was past sixty when he got out of prison a few years back, and after serving as long as he did, he must have stepped through the gates into a world he barely recognised. Nonetheless, Tony hadn't considered himself too long in the tooth to get back in the game, or thought that his most prosperous years were behind him. He had still run a decent-sized show from inside, despite the limitations of that chubby wee fanny Tony Junior.

Stevie had often heard boys described as 'working for Tony McGill' when they had never come within fifty miles of where the man was securely locked up, and none of them meant that they were working for Teej, as his arsehole son was known.

They said beware the vengeance of a patient man. They also said the best revenge was living well. Tony could thus consider himself thoroughly avenged. After Flash Frankie went up in flames, it was Tony who took possession of a massive misplaced shipment of brown, before stepping in to replace Frankie and his crew as the Scottish outlet for a seriously major supply line. Not bad for a

guy who used to bask in the acclaim of being ‘the man who kept the drugs out of Gallowhaugh’.

It was an astonishing turnaround in fortunes, only a few years after his release from jail. Stevie wasn’t sure how becoming Glasgow’s primary heroin conduit sat with his parole conditions, but didn’t imagine Tony lost any sleep over it.

Tony had learned from past mistakes. He had adapted, proven an old dog could learn some new tricks. Nonetheless, when you analysed his success, you could see he was like one of those veteran football managers who replicated their success at each club by signing the same type of player and playing the same system. There were adaptations, sure, but at a fundamental level they always went with what they knew.

In Tony’s case, the linchpins of his strategy were bent polis. They had made him bombproof once upon a time, and they had played their part in putting him back on the map in jig time once his stretch was done.

However, those veteran managers could eventually get found out. They became too reliant on the tried-and-tested formula, and their recipe for success became their weakness. Something that predictable would eventually expose a vulnerability if you watched and waited long enough, though only if you had the means to exploit it.

Stevie hadn’t, until now.

He might have turned forty-nine today, but his birthday present had come early. Out of nowhere he’d been offered precisely what he needed to change the game in this city. And like all the best deals, the vendor didn’t have a clue as to the true value of what he was selling.

Unlike the others, Stevie wasn’t going to let his zest for the present become sapped by the soporific temptations of nostalgia. The future was opening up before him, and it was going to make his past look like a pre-match warm-up.

He drove the Bentley into the car wash, waved to a space between islands that once housed petrol pumps by a teenager in grey overalls and a Metallica T-shirt. He didn’t know the kid’s name but the

kid knew his. He signalled to his mate and they jumped to it, leaving the woman in the Ford Focus at the next wash station wondering what was the script.

Funny he should be thinking about Tony as he drove to use this place: in a way it was the first sign, way back when, that Stevie was outgrowing him, and that the rules were changing in ways Tony couldn't grasp. The older man didn't understand why Stevie was putting money into running a car wash, even after he had explained that it wasn't just cars that were going in dirty and coming out clean.

There was some heavy metal rubbish playing from a pair of puny speakers perched on the water heater that fed the cleaning lances. Stevie cranked up the Bentley's stereo and let the sub-woofer take care of the noise pollution. Bit of Simple Minds: *Sparkle in the Rain*. That didn't count as nostalgia; just a basic matter of it being better than any of the shite that was out nowadays.

The kid in the Metallica T-shirt knelt down and began squirting some stuff on his alloys, while a biker-looking bloke in what most closely resembled fishing waders hefted the lance. He gave the car a once-over with some hot water to start with, then began coating it in foam.

The windscreen got it first, then the entire vehicle was insulated in a layer of white bubbles. As always, this part made Stevie feel a little uncomfortable, blind and isolated in what suddenly seemed a cramped wee capsule. There was only a thin film between him and the outside world, but he felt suddenly very detached. It was easy to imagine what it would be like to be inside a car buried in an avalanche. He recalled a dream he'd had, two or three times in fact, about being engulfed in a different kind of snow. It piled up around him, higher and higher until he couldn't escape. That was before he quit sampling his own merchandise.

This bit never lasted long, however. They'd start with the brushes any second, though they seemed to be taking their time this morning. He considered rolling down the window a little to ask what was keeping them, but thought better of it, as chances were a brush would come right along it at just that second.

Instead he relaxed, deciding to enjoy the isolation, alone with his thoughts and his music.

A hole suddenly appeared in both the foam and indeed the windscreen itself, a spiderweb of crazing extending like ripples from its centre. The bullet that shattered the glass carried on through Stevie's chest, bouncing off a rib and spinning end on end through his heart. It was liquidised midway through its final beat, but his brain had still enough oxygen for him to look through the dissolving suds and glimpse a tall figure levelling a silenced handgun and pulling its trigger three more times.

He had a skull for a face: death incarnate.

It was the last thing Stevie saw.

Waves

Jasmine slipped her phone back into her pocket and climbed out of the Civic. People had been streaming out of the car park as she drove in, making her worry whether she would find a space so close to the theatre, but there were plenty in sight once she crested the hill.

She had just read a text from her friend Monica, apologising that she wasn't going to make it. The message had arrived while Jasmine was driving along the M8 half an hour back, but she hadn't heard the alert over the sound of the Honda's stereo, nor felt a vibration as her leather jacket had been draped over the passenger seat. Monica's own car had broken down somewhere around Cramond, and with the AA bloke telling her the alternator was gone, it wasn't going to be a quick fix.

This meant Jasmine was going to be on her own, which made her stop for a moment and consider her options. She felt perfectly comfortable going to the cinema by herself, or even, at a push, seeing a play, but this was a gig. Nobody went to a gig alone, did they? This was daft, though. There was no explicit social convention that she was about to violate; just the threat of her own self-consciousness, which in this case would be a mixture of insecurity and delusion. Why should she be conspicuous? Nobody was going there to look at her.

Besides, she had paid for the tickets and been looking forward to it: posted as much on Twitter and Facebook like an excitable wee lassie and had luxuriated in the prospect of *being* an excitable wee lassie for a couple of hours. So despite the doubting voice that was whispering how sad she would look to be sitting there like Nelly No-Mates at a rock concert, she decided it was profoundly sadder still to even contemplate driving home again.

I'm not sad, she thought to herself. I'm okay.

She walked down the slope towards the Alhambra, the road in front of which was teeming with excited people. That was when she deduced that she shouldn't have been surprised to find a parking space, due to the demographic. Only a very small proportion of this crowd would have turned up in a car as they were predominantly too young to be in the position to own one, or even to learn to drive. The fact that it struck her as unusual to be surrounded by so many people her own age or younger – and a clear majority of them girls – warned her she was becoming too accustomed to spending her time around middle-aged men.

She needed to get out more, even if it was on her own.

The support act was already on stage when she made her way into the stalls. She guessed they were local, or had a lot of pals who had made the trip, as they were being cheered with conspicuous enthusiasm by a portion of the crowd close to the front. The band were lively and enthusiastic, loving their time on a stage that was itself probably bigger than any of the dives they had played before.

Jasmine glanced around the place, taking in the venue. She had never been inside the Dunfermline Alhambra, and had assumed it would be a nightclub. Instead it turned out to be a grand old 1920s theatre-cum-cinema, a doughty survivor of the great bingo-hall attrition.

Whilst taking in her surroundings, her professional abilities also noted that somebody nearby was taking an interest in *her*, and thus she was reminded of another reason why she had her reservations about going to a gig alone. There was a guy leaning against a pillar about ten feet away, and she clocked him staring at her on two separate passes. Suffice to say, she was the better skilled at keeping her scrutiny undetected.

He looked like he might more usually be occupied outside the venue at this point, breaking into vehicles in the car park, but even if he'd looked like Sam McTrusty, she wasn't interested tonight. Okay, maybe if he actually *was* Sam McTrusty, but this chancer looked more like Ned Untrusty. It provided the impetus to swap

the standing-only stalls for a seat upstairs, and the chance to enjoy her favoured perspective of any proscenium-arch space.

Her ticket was for down below, she and Monica having been planning to get sweaty in the mosh-pit, but the bouncers weren't fussed. The circle wasn't full, and venues were always more wary of letting you into the standing area if you were supposed to be upstairs.

Jasmine loved just sitting inside these grand old auditoria. In her head she could hear Dot Prowis, her old lecturer at the Scottish Academy of Theatre and Dance, expounding with typical gusto on how 'any space can be a theatre, and a theatre can be any space', but Jasmine's idea of what a theatre should look like had been hardwired in toddlerhood, and this was it. It wasn't just the proscenium-arch (thrust optional) that defined a proper theatre, but the presence of at least one circle, and the more the better.

The Alhambra's stretched back from the balcony in row upon curving row of tip-up cushioned seats, saggy in the stuffing and infused with the fags and farts of close to a hundred years. Jasmine was in the fifth row, the steep rake affording almost as good a view over the rail as the first. She took in the painted plasterwork, the angels flanking the wings, and a part of her was transported to the place all such theatres took her: her mother's side.

It would have been her mum's birthday tomorrow. This was another reason she felt apprehensive about being out here alone, exposed, and yet also a reason she knew she ought not to go home either, stuck in the flat with nothing to distract her.

Someone had once told her that the pain and the sadness would come in waves. In the early stages, those waves would engulf her, crash against her so relentlessly that she might feel she could not possibly survive. However, as time went on the intervals would become longer, the waves a little smaller. Gradually it would get easier, but the waves would never stop coming.

This had proven true, but there were no guarantees, no absolutes. Now and again one of those waves would be higher than her head, though she was getting better at anticipating when. The anniversary, Christmas and birthdays – her mum's and her own – were always

going to be difficult, but sometimes it was the unexpected trigger that was the worst: the element that came at her sideways when her gaze was fixed ahead. The lead-up to these painful dates had proven harder than the days themselves, but so far on this occasion she was holding it together; feeling quite robust, in fact.

I'm okay, she told herself.

A girl of about fourteen shuffled along the row in front, accompanied by a bearded bloke in a Big Country T-shirt, presumably her dad playing chaperone. Jasmine resisted a twinge of self-consciousness as she looked around, feeling conspicuously the only person sitting unaccompanied. For all anyone knew, her friend was away at the toilet, or getting drinks.

More pertinently, nobody would be looking at her anyway, she reminded herself. It was an unfortunate side-effect of spying on people for a living that she could occasionally fall prey to an irrational paranoia about what unseen eyes might be trained upon her. Shaking this off, for a wee change she asked herself what anyone might see if they did happen to look at her right then, and decided to her surprise that she liked the answer.

She recalled a line in *Shirley Valentine*, one of her mum's favourite movies, which they used to watch together when the weather got them down, because it was like going on a ninety-minute holiday.

'I think I'm all right,' Shirley said. 'I think if I saw myself, I'd say: "That woman's okay."'

I'm okay, Jasmine told herself.

She'd had a good day at work.

She'd had a lot of good days at work, in fact. Over the past year or so she had become a great deal more accepting that this was what she did now; this was who she was. It was changing her. She had stopped thinking of herself as tragic, afflicted by circumstance and buffeted by the fates. She was good at what she did, and consequently Sharp Investigations was doing quite well, thank you. Certainly any evening spent in the company of her college friends still trying to eke out careers in the arts these days afforded her a different perspective from the previous one of having her nose pressed against the sweet-shop window.

It wasn't just the fact that they were permanently skint; the things that seemed so shatteringly important to them were beginning to strike her as petty and insubstantial, and she was becoming decreasingly shy of saying as much. She recalled with mischievous pride an exchange she had over dinner at her friend Michelle's place, where Michelle's flatmate and fellow dancer Gareth was unloading at quite unnecessary length about a review of a show he'd performed in at the Fringe.

'You're exposed up there: you lay yourself completely bare, utterly vulnerable. So when you read something like this you feel violated. These people know what they're doing: they aim to wound you. They want to see you bleed.'

'Oh for fuck's sake,' Jasmine had said, perhaps one glass too many of vino bringing forth veritas. 'Man up, it's only a review.'

'Of course it's only a review *to you*,' Gareth retorted. 'You've never had one, so you wouldn't know. You'd need to have been up there on a stage to understand what I'm talking about.'

There had been a time when this might have crushed Jasmine, to have her former aspirations thrown back in her face. That time was over.

'Well, Gareth, you've got me there. But look at it from my point of view: once you've been shot at a couple of times, by somebody who is not aiming to wound, it kind of makes it hard to see what's so violating about some wee wank at the *Scotsman* only giving you two stars.'

She was developing – some might say cultivating – a reputation for being spiky and a little unsympathetic, and she had stopped worrying about whether this meant she was wounded and embittered. Instead she had decided to wear bitch and see how it fitted. It wasn't an everyday garment, but like the leather jacket she had on for the gig it felt just right now and again, when the context called for it.

She was okay. She was definitely okay.

Then she saw a ghost.

The support had finished and the seats began to fill up more while the road crew got busy dismantling their kit. People returned

from the bar bearing pints in plastic tumblers, while others, arriving in time for the headliners, scanned the rows for a free spot, the seating being unreserved. Jasmine felt a growing buzz as the roadies made the final preparations: taping set-lists, draping towels, checking pedals.

She watched a guy and a girl make their way along the row two in front, apologising cheerfully to the people having to stand up to let them past. They were around her age, both wearing T-shirts bearing the band's name, though not identical garments. They didn't look up as they progressed, only at the people they were shifting and occasionally at the stage, so they didn't see Jasmine, meaning she had no way of knowing whether the guy recognised her, but she definitely knew him. Having realised he was familiar, it took her a few moments of mentally thumbing through images until she could find a background against which he fitted, but when she got there it froze her.

His name was Scott, or possibly Sam. She didn't quite remember that part, but she remembered that he had still been in fifth year at school, although looked older. She could remember which school (Glasgow Academy); she could remember the drainpipe jeans and Diesel-logo belt he'd been wearing; and she remembered how he kissed. It had been soft and slow, each kiss all there was and all he wanted: no wandering hands, no impatiently thrusting tongue.

The reason the context took a while to come up was because it was so close to her current one. She had danced and chatted and eventually snogged with him the last time she'd seen Twin Atlantic play.

It had been just before her mum got the diagnosis.

They'd traded numbers and he'd phoned, leaving messages. She never called back.

The lights went down and the Queen track playing on the PA was silenced, replaced by a sudden upsurge of excited screams. The band took the stage rather modestly, walking to their instruments with quiet purpose, almost as though conscious they hadn't earned these cheers yet.

An electric guitar picked out its first notes with delicate

precision, rousing more screams of recognition, then Sam McTrusty raised his head to the mike and began to sing.

'Yes, I was drunk . . .'

It was her favourite song, one that always moved her, and the one she had most been hoping they'd play. Right then, though, it was more than moving her. She felt it wash over her. Felt a wave wash over her. Felt herself go under.

There was something intangible about watching a band play live, some quality that could not be recreated on any format, so that the most perfect recording, reproduced on the most sophisticated equipment, would never be more than a shadow on the cave wall. Despite having listened to both albums hundreds of times, it was as though she hadn't truly heard Twin Atlantic since that other gig, and it connected her to that time in a way she just wasn't ready for.

The ghost was herself, the person she had been that night.

And as the music played, the ghost possessed her. Suddenly she could see through that girl's eyes again, see everything she had back then, everything she imagined was still before her.

Everything she was about to lose.

This wave was swamping her, rushing in over her head. She was drowning.

She couldn't be here. She had to get out.

Jasmine shuffled along the row, her petite frame allowing her to squeeze past without asking people to stand up. She kept her head down, face angled towards the stage so that no one could see it.

We never want strangers to see we are crying. Why is that? She didn't know. All she did know was that she was so very, very much alone.

Her mother was gone. She had no father, no boyfriend, and tonight, no friends at all.

She was not okay.

She managed to hide her tears until she reached the stairs, where she failed to stem the outpouring of huge, blubbing, abject, snottery and undignified sobs. She grabbed a banister for support, fearing she would collapse if she didn't have something to hang on to.

'You all right there wee yin?' said a voice.

She couldn't see properly for tears. It took a moment to focus once she had wiped her eyes.

It was Ned Untrusty. Christ, had he followed her up to the circle?

She wanted to tell him to go away, but she could hardly answer 'Yes, I'm fine.'

A dozen sarcastic replies failed to reach her tongue. She felt so weak and insubstantial that he could have mopped her up and wrung her out into a bucket.

She could hear other voices now, and became aware that house staff were gathering to enquire and assist.

'She just needs some air, I think,' said Ned. 'Mon outside for a second.'

He put a hand on her shoulder and she let him lead her because she knew that it would make the staff back off, and avoid turning this into a circus.

He had a Glasgow accent, which surprised her, as she had assumed he would be a local.

She felt humiliated by having to accept his help, but she couldn't say why. Was it because she'd caught him staring and subconsciously rejected him? Or would she have felt humiliated at this point, having to accept the assistance of any stranger? Her desire to settle for him over a clucking assembly of staff indicated the latter.

He held the door for her and escorted her out onto the pavement. The air did help. As soon as she stepped outside she felt an outrush of pressure, a dissipation of everything that had besieged her.

'Let me get you a wee drink,' he said.

'No, I'm okay.'

'Just some water,' he insisted. 'And maybe a hanky, eh?'

Close up she realised he was younger than she had assumed: maybe eighteen or nineteen. The age was right, but little else about him seemed to fit a Twin Atlantic concert. It was easier to picture him stopped at the lights in a souped-up Peugeot, moronic dance beats thumping through the rolled-down windows.

She didn't want to be fussed over, didn't want to be in any way

indebted to this chancer, but at least it would get her a moment alone while he went. She sniffed and nodded.

He returned after a few minutes bearing a bottle of still water and some napkins.

‘There you go.’

She accepted the water numbly with one hand and took the proffered napkins in the other.

As she mumbled her thanks she felt gratitude tinged with surprise at his solicitude. Disloyal as it felt to admit it, it was her mum’s fault. She had always been wary of guys who looked like they might be fly men or hardcases, especially if they had Glasgow accents. Growing up in Edinburgh, Jasmine had come to imagine the city along the motorway as being like some lawless frontier outpost, an impression her mother did little to dispel by never, ever going there.

She dabbed at her face, grateful she had decided against mascara. The tears had stopped, the sense of being engulfed lifted, like she had come up for air.

She took a few gulps of water, feeling a light breeze on her face and a pulse of bass in her body as the music throbbed from inside the theatre.

‘That better?’ her unlikely Samaritan asked. ‘You okay?’

He hadn’t said anything, hadn’t asked her what was wrong, for which she was grateful. He seemed a little distracted now though, perhaps impatient to get back to the show.

‘I’ll be fine now, thanks,’ she told him, but he made no move to return inside.

‘I think I’ll go to the Ladies, give my face a splash,’ she said.

It was somewhere he couldn’t follow her, a good way of breaking the connection. She just hoped he wouldn’t be hovering outside the loos, waiting for her when she came out. ‘Thanks,’ she added, by way of hinting that he was dismissed.

‘Nae bother. Look after yourself,’ he replied, remaining where he was.

‘You not coming in?’ she asked, trying to keep the relief from her voice.

‘Gaunny spark up, seeing I’m out here anyway. You want one?’
She declined and went back inside.

After her visit to the loo she returned to the circle and took a seat near the end of a row, where she didn’t need to disturb anyone to get past. Down and to her left she could see the guy she’d snogged, nodding to the beat. She didn’t experience anything weird this time, from seeing him or the band. The spell was broken. She could just enjoy the music.

Sam McTrusty was singing how it was ‘the end of our sweet universe’ but she wasn’t feeling anything cataclysmic any more. She’d been there and come out the other side. Besides, it was a song about getting stronger.

She was okay.