

From The Blindness of Being

Sunday 14th January 2010

There are days when she doesn't think about the stuff. She has these tools and techniques that help her block the stuff out, learnt years ago, on a course for therapists. That's what she does now for a job, she's a therapist.

She tells me these things. I'm her best friend. I'm her only friend.

That's because she's dishonest.

Which, to be fair, isn't really her choice. It's more of a personal coping strategy.

I can read her like a book. Like when she's angry – her pale cheeks, the pink flush on her chest that turns red as it works its way up to her chin. The way she flexes her fingers, stretches them out, then makes a fist. The pacing about.

Oh, yes, her body gives her away every time.

She doesn't use her full range of emotions. *I can't believe I've just said that.* And that other thing, *personal coping strategy* – where did that come from? Those books I bet, those she reads, self-help ones, I must be taking it all in.

She blocks thoughts out by *busyness*. That's my word for it. I made it up. It fits perfectly, she's *Miss Busyness*. She rushes here, there, here. Finds jobs to do. Cleans things – cleans clean things. That's what you have to do to keep that dark stuff out. Even though it hurts her hands. He broke three of her fingers that night too. All that scrubbing must hurt like hell.

You'd imagine she'd know better really. You'd think she'd look it up in one of those self-help books that line the shelves in the back bedroom. Don't try to cure yourself of one thing by developing another – you'd think they'd tell you that. I'd give it a chapter all to itself.

Talking of cleaning, I think it's time I came clean. To be honest, she didn't tell me any of those things. I'm just surmising. I'm not her best friend – I'm more of a soul mate.

She feels old today – I can tell. It's the way she wakes up. She pushes off the bedding, sits still for a moment, leans forward as though to pray. Gathers her thoughts. Then stretches out the bones in her spine, one by one. Even her jaw hurts. She's been grinding her teeth at night again.

Her knees are sore too – it's arthritis. Not helped herself has she? All that running, concrete pavements, rarely going off-road. Like she says though, it's always handy to be able to run as fast as you can. I wish I'd done that, when I was younger, learnt to run fast.

She says it's a way to create something positive out of something negative. Says it's good for your mental health. Says she started running ten years ago and hasn't looked back since.

That's not true – it's a lie – she's always looking over her shoulder.

'You can run away from your problems and run towards a better future.'

That's what she tells her clients. Which is ironic. It definitely is.

Miss Therapist runs four miles before work, Monday to Friday. Two circuits of the local park, then down Parliament Street, turns left at the lights, picks up speed all the way down to the *Give Way* sign. Runs as fast as she can – sprints across the road like it's the finish line. Thinks she's Paula Radcliffe. Nods her head weirdly and everything. Eight-minute-miling the whole way. She says she's good for her age.

Her office is 400 yards along on the left. A Victorian mid-terrace turned into two flats. She owns both. She's in the door like a flash. Pearl-white shutters keep secrets in and prying eyes out. You need that when you're a therapist. She rents the top flat out to someone else. Someone never seen and never heard. Odd that, don't you think? She says she's very lucky to have a tenant like that.

Miss Therapist has started running on Saturdays too.

So yesterday, Saturday, should have been like all the other Saturdays. She should have run four miles and gone home. Instead she ran twelve miles and four yards and she had no idea where she was, how she got there or how to get back.

Good job those people helped her, those hikers. She'd never have found her way home by herself. Good job she had her iPhone too, tucked into the pocket of that neoprene water-bottle holder wrapped around her waist. Without it God knows what would have happened. They would definitely have taken her to the police, or a hospital. That's the problem, you can run as fast as you like but when the past catches up with you ...

By the time she got back the lamps on the street were lit – it was half-four in the afternoon. The temperature had dropped to -2°C. It said so on her iPhone.

She wouldn't let those hikers in though, the ones that helped her. Just snapped the door behind her, clothes soaked, she didn't have a bath, not even a shower. Just peeled them off, left them on that nice cream carpet, and got into bed. Her skin red raw with cold. She even forgot to take her painkillers for once.

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Outside everything is covered in snow. I've been awake for ages. She's sitting on the edge of her bed, been there for nearly thirty minutes – hasn't moved. Not said a word. I wouldn't want to mislead you though – she lives on her own. She's no one to talk to but herself anyway.

Whoops, no, she's decided to get off her arse. She's gone into the bathroom – stares at herself in the mirror. Oh my, look at how swollen her face is – look at the red rims of her eyes. She's pulled clumps of her hair out. I've not seen her in a state like this for a long time. I can't remember the last time she cried. She says she doesn't do tears – says tears are a waste of time. That's why she cleans, she can put all her emotions into something – make it productive, that's what she says anyway. She's been scrubbing the past for years. It's like cat piss though, on a carpet, you can scrub as much as you like, the smell never truly goes.

Yesterday a dirty great big black stain spread through our lives. Hers and mine. Guilt. No amount of cleaning will get rid of it.

This other life, the one she's lived for the last twenty-five years. The one bought from someone else, built on omissions and lies, the fake. It's crumbling down.

She thought she was safe. New town, new name, one therapy after another until – well, until she sort of mislaid her old life. Mislaid it somewhere between hypnotherapy and pentobarbitone.

I don't think those sessions of CBT will be of use right now.

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What I've just told you isn't the start of the story, it's somewhere near the middle. She'd say until yesterday, Saturday, life was better than it had ever been. I'd say, it depends on what you want from life.

She's always been complex.

Years ago, she bought a converted barn, four bedrooms, massive high ceilings, brand new fitted kitchen; top of the range, she said. With a garden that looks out onto the moors. No neighbours. I knew it wouldn't work. Three months later she rented it out.

Six months after that she bought a house, terraced, Victorian, in Harrogate. That's where we live now. Took down the net curtains, had wooden shutters fitted, she did. Had a posh security system installed, with cameras, she can access it online. Hasn't read the manual yet and still doesn't know how to set it – she's never turned it on.

She started writing down goals and making *To Do* lists. It sort of goes with her job. This year's list is on the fridge door, held there by a magnet that says *One Life Live It*. She's always happier with a goal. Something to aim at – something to work for. It passes the time. Makes it easier I suppose. A distraction from all that *stuff*. After that, she went online, booked herself onto a triathlon – a Sprint one.

Maybe she shouldn't have bought that fridge magnet.

I'm sure somewhere in those self-help books, all filed alphabetically, from Z to A for fun, there is a chapter on everything happening for a reason.

I'm sure in the future we'll see the good that came out of yesterday. We'll look back and think, thank God it's all over. Thank God, all that stuff has been dealt with.

Today though, like I said, she's a right mess.

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Yesterday, Saturday, started off as a good day. It was one of those chilly days, so cold that the rims of your ears feel like they're turning to ice. So cold that the tip of your nose turns pink and the skin on your lips goes tight. So cold that the churned-up soil in the fields turns rock solid. So hard you can't walk in a straight line. It was one of those wonderful crisp winter days that make you want to be outside being part of it. Sucking in that freezing air, breathing out warm mist. Your hands tucked deep into your pockets.

The sun was a huge lemon disc in a pale blue sky. The moon was still up there. Not side by side but near enough. Near enough to feel like magic. There were clouds, filled with snow, beyond the moors, hanging in the sky like white candy floss. Beautiful.

I know I'm getting lyrical, but yes, that was yesterday – before everything imploded. Imploded, that's exactly the right word.

She was outside Victoria Park, at the gates. Gone out for a run, one of those runs I told you about. Her name is Lily by the way. The name she uses now. I thought you might like to know that. I can't call her *her* and *she* all the time. Gran would turn in her grave if she heard me doing that. Manners cost nothing, she'd say. I've never forgotten that.

Lily was jogging on the spot, her face a picture of concentration. Kitted out in a long-sleeved, black merino wool running top, capris tights and a bright pink buff round her neck. A neoprene bottle holder wrapped around her waist.

Likes to look the part she does. She's got one of those expensive running watches too. A Garmin, Forerunner 310XT. Tells her how fast she's running and how far she's run. Multi-purpose – good for cycling and swimming, apparently. It was a Christmas present to herself. Just like all her other gifts. Except one. When I can get out, I always buy her something. Hide it under the tree. Half the time she can't remember what she bought herself anyway. I never put a gift tag on it.

It was day fourteen of a sixteen-week triathlon training programme. The one she typed up after reading that book, *Life Without Limits*. That was one of my gifts – a taunt of sorts – my version of irony.

So there she was, outside Victoria Park, jogging on the spot. Staring

at the wrought iron gates, a tug of disappointment stretched across her face. Sniffing air through her nose, blowing it out through pursed lips. Her temper simmering. Her usual route blocked by a large, white van, four hi-viz-clad maintenance workers, a burst water pipe and hydraulic digger with the bucket raised high as though to strike.

Having set out not expecting anything but burning calves and aching knees.

Her triathlon training programme scuppered by E&D Groundworks.
Her life at the mercy of random events.

Someone upstairs throws a dice. It skids right off the table.

I smile at the thought of it.