

The Death of Us

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For Richard,
with love

PART 1

Isabel

LET ME TALK AGAIN, then, about the night you came to our house. You won't know this, but there was a period in my life when I talked about it all of the time. All I seemed to do, in fact, was talk about it. I talked about it to the police, when I still hoped that they might find you. I talked about it in interviews. I talked about it to therapists and psychologists and psychiatrists. I talked about it to my friends and to my parents, and, awfully, to a woman in a bathroom at a party. And people wanted to hear it, of course. There was a greed in the way they listened, in the widening of an eye or the inclination of a head, although at the time I was nicer, more patient, and I tended to entertain them well enough. Over the years, I became less forthcoming – you'll realize that yourself, soon enough – and eventually, I refused to talk about it at all.

You: you must never have talked about it. But did you come close? Were there moments when you sat down at your kitchen table, dark oak, beige tiles, with your wife at the stove and the telling in your throat? I've seen your kitchen, now; the world has. Your kitchen is ugly, and believe it or not, it felt good to find this out. Did you rest your hands on one of those twee place mats, decorated with woodland fauna of the British Isles, and swallow it back down?

The police tell me you gave your plea and nothing more. They think me a fragile thing, and they manage my expectations accordingly: I should not expect you to talk now. It's a pity. I would like to hear what you remember. I would like to know if your memory accords with my own. Who's to tell who's right – after all of these years? In my memory, it was the beginning of summer. The days were stretching, nudging away at the darkness.

Edward and I had worked hard, that year. On Fridays, we would unburden ourselves of the week, talking over cold wine, bowls of crisps, Edward's cooking. There had been irregularities in the weeks before, things that had unsettled me at the time. You had left us a few deft clues which Edward had shrugged away; which I thought of only on my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

I did not think of them, then.

We stood in the kitchen, softening into the weekend. We were talking about an intern at Edward's firm, immortalized, I suppose, by having wept in his office that day. Her name was Ellie, and every now and then, I still think of her. Good luck, Ellie. May you have learnt to cry in bathroom stalls and darkened rooms, just like the rest of us. Edward was saying, in the way he had, that he intended to help her out. That he would talk to the partners on Monday morning and tell them she was flailing. Edward: the great mediator. He mediates real disputes, these days, the kind consisting of thousands of documents and hundreds of millions of dollars. But of course you know. I imagine you've checked in on us, over the years. I imagine you like to know how we're doing.

Edward and me, with our successes. I don't suppose we've ever been difficult to find.

Edward rarely talked about his day in this manner, without me prising it open, and I remember the satisfaction of it, how close he felt. It was one of the things I liked the best, that he was not somebody who disclosed things to any old person; that he felt, at times, like the courtyard parties we used to pass walking home from work through Temple, which let so few people in. You might have seen the happiness in my face, captured in the kitchen window, the subject of some warm, comfortable painting framed by the dusk.

I found out that they had you the day after my fifty-fifth birthday. I had spent the prior evening alone on the terrace at Midsummer

The Death of Us

House, which I had booked diligently three months before. The maître d' knew my name and what to bring to me, but when she asked if I was here for a special occasion, I shrugged. Nothing in particular. And it was true, that fifty-five seemed little to celebrate.

My phone rang at eight a.m. I was still in bed. I had been thinking self-pitying things, that it would be nice to hear clatter in the kitchen, the slothful steps of a shared hangover, the promise of coffee in bed. When the phone went, I suppose I hoped that it might be Edward, apologetic that he hadn't called the day before. Instead: George, typically funereal. Edward christened him many years ago, George as in Smiley; George had never once smiled in our presence.

George needed me at Cambridge Police Station.

No, I had done nothing wrong. A car was on the way.

The police station in Cambridge looked like a dungeon a child might design, chain-link fences and concrete slabs, the kind of building one wouldn't expect to leave. I was met by a woman called Claire, who smiled and offered me tea. 'Happy birthday,' she said. 'Was it yesterday?' Bravo, Claire, reader of files. She led me past desks to a room with soft furnishings and boxes of tissues. The window was open and the blinds chattered in the breeze. 'Well, then,' Claire said, and sank into a sofa. 'Here we are. I have very significant news.'

I had been in enough of these rooms to know, already, that this was the case.

'We believe,' Claire said, 'that we have identified the man known as the South London Invader.'

She leant forward, with her hands on her knees.

'That man is now in police custody,' she said.

I'll confess to you that I had imagined this moment before. Imagined it a lot, if truth be told. This was not how it played out. I pictured myself at the scene, for a start. I recognized you

on the street. I knew exactly who you were. I wore the clothes I wore to run in. You looked up at me, eyes pleading. I stood over you in your bed and tied you like meat. You were withered and pitiful. You begged. I had prepared a box of tools, and I unpacked them without hurry and lined them up on the mattress beside your head.

I found out later how it actually took place. Your children were at your table, and their children played underneath it. There was a leg of lamb in your oven, roasting for Sunday lunch. They got to you before the lamb was cooked. I feast on this detail. I wonder. Did your family protest? Did they wring their hands, and talk of some mistake? Did they encourage care, discretion – dignity? Did they press your medication into the officers' hands?

'I can only imagine what a shock this must be,' Claire said. 'And the questions you may have for me. I want you to know, Isabel, that we're here for you. And that we'll do all that we can to answer those questions.'

I looked out of the window. I could see another wall of the police station, row after row of windows reflecting the block where we sat. In truth, I could think of few questions. I had instead the sense of feeling very, very tired.

'Can you tell me his name?' I asked.

'Nigel Wood,' she said. 'He's seventy years old. He is a retired policeman, living in Dorset.'

'Nigel?' I said, and Claire nodded. I couldn't help but laugh at that. For a moment, she seemed sure I was crying. She pushed the box of tissues in my direction and I waved her away.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'It's just—'

She made a note of something. What the note said, I can only imagine.

'I apologize,' I said. 'I don't know why I'm laughing.'

'That's absolutely fine. You take your time.'

'How was he caught?'

The Death of Us

‘You’ll know that we had a very small quantity of his DNA,’ Claire said. That polite acronym. This I knew: that you were not quite as careful as you believed. On our carpet, you left a pubic hair without a follicle. You left your semen in the Bosko mother, and skin beneath Etta’s fingernails. ‘It wasn’t much,’ Claire said. ‘And it’s useless without a match. As you know, we didn’t have a match for a very long time.’

The story was learnt by rote. I contemplated dozens of Claires, stationed across the country, sitting before the people you had chosen. At least I didn’t have to hear it from George, a man who could dry out the ending of a quarter-century manhunt.

‘As you know, we shared that evidence with law enforcement agencies in the US. That was in the aftermath of the attack on DCI Etta Eliogu. And the US authorities recently uploaded that DNA to a big ancestry database. And it was there, for the very first time, that we found a match. Not the Invader himself, to be clear. But a close relative. That relative has been extremely cooperative, Isabel. And over the last six months, we’ve been able to narrow down the pool of that person’s blood relatives to a single suspect.’

‘Wow,’ I said. And, because there was only one word of this explanantion I remembered: ‘Who was the relative?’

‘I can’t disclose that at this moment in time.’

‘He has a family, though?’

‘Yes,’ Claire said, quietly. ‘He has a family.’

I found out later that it was your nephew. He left Bexleyheath for Silicon Valley after university and never looked back. His wife gave him a year’s membership to FindYourFamily for his fortieth birthday. He went eight months without bothering to send in his saliva sample. And then – for reasons I suppose neither of us will ever know – he did. Your nephew conducted a series of interviews when your arrest was made public, and I’ll confess that I found him self-aggrandizing and strangely triumphant considering

the bit part he happened to play. I would smile, imagining you watching; of all the things to catch you, it was that sanctimonious little shit who'd once supped at your table.

When I got home, I sat in one of the armchairs looking out to the garden, making little pilgrimages for wine and toast. I sat there into the evening. Thinking of you, I suppose. Gulliver sat in the other armchair, fat and happy.

'We should go to bed,' I said.

I lay for a while in the darkness, listening to the cat settle beside me. I wondered where they were keeping you. After two hours, I reached for my phone and called Edward.

'Hello,' he said. He had been asleep. Edward is diligent about sleep. He has an alarm that mimics sunlight, an alarm I detest. His phone reminds him to go to bed at a particular time, as if he couldn't possibly remember this himself. My number is one of only three that is not blocked overnight, and I imagine that he's contemplated blocking it, on more than one occasion.

'Hello,' I said.

'You heard, then.'

'Yes. Today. Can you talk?'

'For a moment,' he said. I heard him rise from the bed, the shift of his body leaving pillows and duvet. I heard Amy, not what she said but the worry in her voice. 'It's just Isabel,' Edward said, away from the phone, and I thought, petty as hell: Just.

'He's called Nigel,' I said, reaching for Gulliver's ears.

'So I hear.'

'I wasn't expecting that. You have to laugh. Don't you? Nigel.'

'What were you expecting? Adolf?'

'I don't know. Something with a little more pizazz.'

'It's very late, Isabel.'

'How do you feel about it?'

The Death of Us

'About what?'

'About Nigel, of course.'

'Christ. I don't know.'

'It's feelings, Edward. It isn't something for rumination.'

He said nothing.

'What did they tell you?' I said.

'Very little. His name. That he was a policeman.'

'They told me he has a family,' I said, and though some part of me wished he was there, beside me, a bigger part was glad I was alone, because my eyes were filling with tears. We were quiet for a long time.

'They took their time,' I said. 'Didn't they?'

'We were asleep, you know,' Edward said, 'when you called.'

'I wish that Etta was here,' I said. 'I miss her.'

It was unfair, I suppose, to use Etta to keep him on the line, although I was sure she would have forgiven me. If anything, it was the kind of behaviour she would have encouraged.

'I miss her, too.'

'Perhaps she knows,' I said. 'Perhaps she's opening the champagne, as we speak.'

'Well. Perhaps.'

'You could entertain me, at least. Tonight, of all nights.'

'I'm sorry. I'm tired.'

'Can you stay on the phone, though? A little longer—'

'Are you all right?'

'Yes. I'm all right.'

'I have a call early tomorrow. I can't speak for long.'

'Sometime soon, though. It would be good to talk.'

'Yes. Definitely. And I meant to say. Happy birthday, for yesterday. I was in the air.'

'Where were you?'

'I was in Qatar.'

'What was the hotel like?'

'It was very gold. It was very gold and very ugly. I'm going to have to go, Isabel. But I'd like to talk soon.'

'Shall I call your PA?'

'If you would like. Or you could text me.'

'Perhaps. Perhaps I will.'

'You're all right?' he said, again.

'Yes. I'm all right.'

George came to the house in Cambridge a few months after you were charged. I wonder if George questioned you, and, if he did, whether you found him equally humourless. He came sighing up the garden path with a briefcase in his hand and gave an officious little rap on the door. When the doorbell broke, I did not replace it. I could tell a lot more about somebody from the way they knocked.

'You have a very beautiful home,' he said, standing in the hallway. He said this as if it was something I should apologize for. I led him past the staircase, down the wooden steps, into the kitchen. The back of the house is made of glass, and beyond the glass is the lawn and a great willow tree that brushes the windows in the summertime. When Etta first visited the house, she looked from the glass to me, her eyebrows posing the question, and I explained that my architectural tastes had been pitched against my trauma and triumphed. Standing there at the kettle, with George taking up too much of the kitchen, I missed Etta terribly, cataclysmically.

'As you know, the sentencing's fast approaching,' George said.

It approached at the same speed as everything else in the time after they caught you: slowly, at first, and then with me before I knew it. It was why I had started to miss things, openings and dinners. They took me by surprise. On the days themselves, I would stand in my bedroom for hours, looking at the clothes on their hangers, unable to select the right item. Or else I would

The Death of Us

begin drinking too early, in the middle of the afternoon, and by the evening I would be content to sit alone at my desk, glad not to have to talk to anybody. I could sense old weaknesses returning, the discomfort of ailments I liked to think I had recovered from. I had missed the opening night of *Frail Deeds*, which had, my agent reported, garnered me even greater mystique. I had been on the sofa, eating a microwave lasagne, watching a documentary about penguins.

‘We’d like you to prepare a victim personal statement,’ George said.

‘An impact statement?’

‘That’s the American terminology.’

He had espoused this fact before, and would espouse it again.

‘Don’t you prepare a personal statement for university?’ I asked.

He looked bored of me. ‘It’s your opportunity to describe the effects the crime has had on you,’ he said.

I laughed, then.

‘I’ll be sure to make it brief.’

‘You can write whatever you would like. There are options. You can choose to describe the physical or emotional effects, for example. Any financial toll. Victims take very different approaches. It’s entirely up to you.’

I poured his tea into the ugliest mug I could find, flowered china with an infuriating child-size handle.

‘You’ll be able to read it aloud in court,’ he said. ‘If you want to.’

That was the problem with tea, that after the boiling and the pouring, there was still the drinking to go. George sat contentedly at my kitchen table. I stood, watching him.

‘There’s one more thing,’ he said. He opened the briefcase. From it he took three clear plastic bags and set them unceremoniously beside his mug. ‘I believe these belong to you.’

I did not wish to open them in front of him, but I could see what they held. In the first was a ring, carefully chosen, an Art

Deco sapphire set among diamonds. In the second was a huge pair of Bose headphones. In the third was a teddy bear wearing a navy blue jumper. You must have kept the items carefully. They were as good as the last time I had seen them. I longed to take the bear from his plastic, but I was aware of George's scrutiny, that it was just the sort of thing he expected me to do. I left him where he was.

'Will you be asking Edward?' I said.

'About the personal statement?'

'Yes.'

'We'll be asking everybody.'

'Oh, you should,' I said. 'He loves talking about his feelings.'

In truth, I prefer the phrase impact statement. When George left the house, I sat in my study with the bear on my desk and opened the *Oxford English Dictionary*. A favourite, of course. The origin of the word *impact* is a Latinate verb. To press closely, to fix firmly. I thought, then, about your body. A close pressing: that was not so inaccurate. I could not see you, lying on my front, but I felt every part of you. The knife seemed like an extension of your hands, and it was a while before I realized that this was also inside me, stuck cumbersome somewhere around the collarbone. I had displeased you, you said, and this was the consequence. I can still feel the exact weight of you, fixed to me firmer than friends' embraces, than the bodies of lovers. Was this the kind of material George wished us to share? The violence seemed such a small segment of it, all these years later, though it was the part people usually wanted, the pulpy little heart.

Was this really it, Nigel? Was this where I was supposed to begin?