

## David, 1965

'Don't do that, darling.' Mother looks so beautiful; it's hard not to touch the silk flowing around her knees. It's as if she is standing in a coffee cup. But getting mussed makes her cross, so the boy withdraws his hand.

'Where are you going, Mother?'

'Where are we going, you mean?' Mother smiles, and the boy's world becomes illuminated from within. She spins around and grabs his hands, a little too tightly. He won't complain; it's such joy to have her hold him in any way, at any time.

'I've met someone, darling. I've told him how wonderful you are, and how very handsome, and he wants to see you for himself. Now, you will be a good boy, won't you? This man is very important to us.'

'I'll be good, Mother. Is Father coming too?'

Her face puckers as a cloud of powder descends around it. 'Father doesn't understand, darling. You know how cross he gets. Now, run and get your sailor suit.'

'Can't I wear long trousers, Mother? I'm old enough, Father says.'

The slam of a silver-backed hairbrush. 'Sailor suit. And don't question my decision ever again, do you hear me? What Father says doesn't matter.' Suddenly she envelops the boy in her silken cloud of an embrace. 'I told you. He doesn't understand.'

For now, the boy decides not to care. He is swimming. Swimming in his mother's coffee cup. He could drown there, and die happy.

## Clare, 1982

It wasn't as if I'd never had sex before, or anything. Just not with a man.

God, that sounds terrible. I don't mean I was doing it with women – even though lesbianism was pretty popular at the time, I suppose. You know, trendy. Cool, even. Half the girls in the college halls in Cambridge were sleeping with other girls, or fumbling with other girls, or . . . okay, I don't know what they were doing. That bit was behind closed doors, for which I was very grateful. The other stuff – the marching and the protesting and the multiple-piercings-and-cutting-off-of-hair was all very evident though, and it wasn't long before the general man-hating seemed to transmogrify into general women-loving.

I never really worked out whether it was because they swung that way anyway, or it was just that their feminism had got a bit out of hand. There was no danger of me swinging, however: it took me two months after I'd gone to Cambridge to work myself up to having my ears pierced even once, and that was only because someone told me that jewels in the ears elongated the neck which is the most sensual part of the women's body (Girl with a Pearl Earring, I expect). I'd never in a million years have made it to nose studs, let alone furtive fumbblings down the corridor with Butch Barbara from Colwyn Bay . . .

So, no, all I meant was that David – Dave, once I'd got to know him – Osgood was the first man that I ever slept with. Over twenty-one. Well over twenty-one. The others were just boys, really. Though I was just a kid, too – barely nineteen when we met, as untainted as a stick of celery, amazingly stupid for someone who'd aced their A-levels and was considered to be a bit of a brain-box.

But yes, boys I had known. Two, at any rate, the second some barely-remembered tryst at uni. The first: Nathaniel Forsyth, in the bus stop near our village hall, before he leapt on the 214 to go home, still stuffing his damp bits back into his black drainpipe jeans and trying to sort out his make-up. He was into The Cure the time, and nobody had told him that black eyeliner smears when you cry, as he had at the moment critique.

Can't blame him, really. I wanted to cry too, frankly. What a sad disappointment that all was. I'd spent the best part of four years in tortured love with him, trailing round school in his wake, at a distance safe enough for me to observe him with creepy intensity while ensuring he never noticed me in return. Actually doing something about this overwhelming crush was never something I intended, enjoying far more the exquisite pain of his indifference. But after I'd stalked him through his sharp-tailored two-tone mod phase and his Simon Le Bon floppy sleeve and fringe stage, we suddenly found ourselves in the same A-level English tutorial, where our pretentious twattiness drew us inexorably together. Byron? Oh, yeah, love him. Echo and the Bunnymen? Yeah, them too, though I do think they're trying to be The Clash and not really making it, don't you? We'd laugh as a group behind hollow hands, and with the same hand I held back the vomit that burned up my throat with the sheer exhilaration – no, heart-stopping panic – of almost speaking to him for the first time.

Then, the beginning of something beautiful: Hamlet was the required text for English that year. God, how I loved it. Listening to the English teacher, whose name now escapes me, as he made sense of the twisted syllables, trying to keep my heart from stopping as Nathaniel read aloud.

'Paddling his roachy fingers in your neck,' he intoned, catching my eye quickly with a look that I could read far better than any Shakespearian piece. If anyone dared do that to you, I'd kill them, it said. Well. Shame he wasn't there a couple of years later, that's all I can say. The promise behind those burning glances might have been useful, might actually have meant something.

That was the first time he caught up with me after school. 'Clare,' he said, his thin chest bumping against my shoulder as we boarded the bus. 'Sit next to me.'

I stared. He didn't even get on my bus. What was he doing? Speak, Clare, you fool . . .

‘I need your take on that Ophelia piece for homework,’ he said self-consciously as the driver shifted in his seat.

I flashed my bus pass and nodded at Nathaniel. ‘Yeah, okay, it’s . . . interesting, isn’t it?’ Six words. Six whole words spoken directly to Nathaniel!

That appeared to be my full quota. The second I’d told him how absorbing I found it, I couldn’t think of a single interesting thing to say about Ophelia or anything else in the entire universe, but it didn’t really matter. Nathaniel brushed his thigh against mine all the way back to Stanton, and orated his worldly opinions on Ophelia. So grateful was I for his attention – lecturing me on his half-baked theories and stolen platitudes – that I didn’t even pause to consider my own opinions on the matter.

But then, I didn’t have many opinions back then.

It was always my downfall.

We reached Stanton, and I worried for a moment what I should do. Stay quiet? Let him carry on talking and stare at his beautiful mouth until I could imagine myself sliding Ophelia-like between those lips to a watery saliva grave and melting into nothingness? That was too pathetic, even for me.

‘This is me,’ I said, pointing to the little brick hut whose roof poked up behind the hedgerow.

‘Your house is small,’ said Nathaniel.

‘No, that’s actually my stop. The bus stop. Where I get off.’

Shut up, Clare. He was joking, surely? I knew it, but still came across all serious and earnest. But it was perplexing; I knew for a fact that Nathaniel didn’t need to stay on this bus – it only went to one more village that was tucked into a pleat in the Hampshire countryside, and then turned around again before it fell into the reservoir.

Nathaniel gazed out through the kohl-rimmed windows of his eyes. ‘Bloody hell,’ he said with a grin. ‘Have I been talking all this way? Christ, look, I’d . . . you’d better . . .’ And then he grabbed his bag and my hand in the same fluid movement and dragged us towards the doors. ‘I’ll wait for it to come back through.’

‘Okay,’ I squeaked, tumbling from the bus in a flurry of disbelief. Nathaniel Forsyth, black-eyed god, getting off my bus at my stop with ME! Jesus.

‘Stay here with me,’ said Nathaniel, patting the seat in the dingiest corner of the bus stop.

‘Okay.’ I flicked two cigarette ends and a crisp packet out of the way and squeezed myself in next to him. Gran would be expecting me. Cutting me a piece of cake, ready to hear what wondrous things I’d learned that day, waiting for the second when I walked intact through the door. Gran would be . . . I swallowed the thoughts.

‘Sorry, I got a bit carried away on the bus.’ To my horror, Nathaniel reached into his arty satchel and pulled out a packet of fags. ‘Favourite subject, Shakespearian heroines. Smoke?’

‘Okay,’ I said, having never even seen a complete cigarette at such close quarters before. Gran would smell it on me before I even got through the gate. And late – I’d never been late before, except when Hampshire had had its one incidence of snow in the entirety of the seventies, and the bus had been delayed after sliding into a ditch. Gran had nearly died of a heart attack then, dashing up and down the path in a frenzied pacing that melted the snow. Right now, she’d be having a fit. She’d call the police, probably, overreacting in her loving and fussy way, the same old way she’d looked after me for ten years since my parents were killed.

But the thought of not doing it, of not leaning in towards Nathaniel as he offered me the tip of his own lit ciggie, of not seizing this one chance to look and act and possibly even BE cool in front of this laconic, enigmatic youth, didn’t even occur to me. Like I said, no

opinions then. No ‘Jesus, no, have you seen what that crap does to your lungs?’ or ‘Why would you do that and then expect me to kiss you?’ or even ‘I’ll just try it once and make up my mind.’ No. I was in deep. And so was the poison of the little glowing stick of Benson and Hedges in my hand. I wouldn’t stop again until someone else’s opinion overtook mine, or rather, Nathaniel’s . . .

‘You know,’ said Nathaniel, squinting at me as I tried to suck like a pro while avoiding a coughing fit or, worse, up-chucking onto his anti-nuclear-stickered satchel, ‘it just occurred to me. You remind me of Ophelia.’ And he breathed in deeply, sliding his other hand along my little finger, across the bus-stop bench between us, in such a sensuous way that I couldn’t take my eyes off them, or think of anything to say.

‘Why?’ I managed to croak. Well, it was better than ‘okay’. ‘Because that’s not pondweed in my hair, honestly – my highlights turned a bit green. But it’s only because I’m ginger.’

I’d tried using Sun-In like the trend-setters at school, and ended up with a dartboard effect on my head – a burnt-orange circle on my crown and concentric circles of colours that didn’t even have a name but reminded me of a sheep’s eyeball, tripping down to the straggly ends of my side-swept bob. At least they were blonde. Falling off, but blonde.

Nathaniel laughed, puffing smoke into the bus shelter’s roof space. It hung over our heads like a speech bubble. ‘You’re deep, Clare. Clever and quiet and yet underneath all that, there’s passion and emotion and . . .’ He flicked his own jet-dyed hair out of his eyes and glanced at me coyly. ‘. . . you know. Stuff.’

Stuff. Oh, I know about stuff. Now I know so much about so much stuff that I’d like to offload it into a stuff-wagon and send it off to a landfill somewhere. Oh, maybe not a landfill, because they’re not good for the environment, and we’re supposed to have opinions about that kind of pollution these days, aren’t we? But stuff I know. Stuff in men-speak – or boy-speak in this case – means sex.

But I didn’t know that then. Back then, I didn’t know much at all – only what was in the books I read so assiduously and self-consciously for school and for show, ploughing through Thomas Hardy and Austen and Proust with a naivety bordering on the preposterous. ‘Stuff,’ I should have repeated to Nathaniel bloody Forsyth, blowing disdainful smoke straight back into his pocky face. ‘Stuff? You mean hormones, lack of sense and an overactive imagination as glutton-fed on the classics as a foie-gras goose? Or possibly low self-esteem, or, rather, no self-esteem, no sense of self at all really, just a pale mimicry of the cool heroines that you’re so bloody pompous about at aged sixteen, for Christ’s sake? That kind of stuff, Nathaniel? Is that the kind of stuff you think I’m filled with?’

But of course I said nothing at all. Because the truth was, I wasn’t filled with anything. There was very little inside me, and I know now that nature first abhors and then fills a vacuum. Back then, nature filled my vacuum with yearning. Yearning for connection and understanding, and probably, if it came down to it, a bit of ‘stuff’ too. Even then, having never had it, I would inevitably mistake sex for love.

To my dismay, the bus was already trundling back down the road, and Nathaniel grabbed his bag. ‘We still haven’t talked about this homework! Shit. When’s it due in?’

I knew the timetable like the back of my hand. Here I could excel. Here I could be good. Cool, deep, Ophelia-like Clare. ‘Friday after lunch,’ I told him.

‘Two days,’ said Nathaniel with a quick nod. ‘Well, how about I catch the bus with you tomorrow night too, and we can discuss it more then. What’s the title again?’

Haven’t you just been talking about it for the last fifty minutes, I wondered fleetingly. And if not that, then what? But hormones naturally shoved those stirrings of independent thought out of the way, back onto the 214 with Nathaniel. ‘“In your opinion, is Laertes justified in telling Ophelia to avoid falling in love with Hamlet?”’

‘What do you think?’ Nathaniel took in one last drag on his cigarette and tossed the butt into the hedge. ‘Tell me tomorrow,’ he added as the bus drew to a halt beside him. He disappeared through the slit in the doors like a shadow, and I captured in my heart, where it fluttered like a finch, the minutest memory of him glancing back through the narrow pane at me, nodding seriously. He wanted to know. He really wanted to know what I thought. And for the first time I felt as though I might actually be capable of independent thought, of capturing someone’s imagination and interest.

A couple of years later, I discussed this with him. With Dave Osgood, I mean.

‘So what did you think?’ he asked gently.

I tucked my hair behind my ears. It was long enough now and properly highlighted, differentiating me from the lesby-feminists and proving my womanliness. And besides, I wanted to show off my sensuous swan neck now it was offset by a pair of fake diamond studs. ‘Well, David . . . Dave, I’m older now.’ Two-and-a-half years older. Wow-wee. ‘Back then, I didn’t think. The only thing that was in my head was that this cool guy seemed to fancy me.’ I smiled, hoping to convey ‘oh, how naïve I was!’ through the set of my teeth. It seemed to work.

‘So he was right, then. You were Ophelia.’ He gave that little wry smile which intimated he was playing gently with me. Teasing. Giving me the chance to express myself as the callow Nathaniel would never have done.

And finally it struck me. ‘Of course I was,’ I said. ‘I was innocent, lost. He was full of testosterone and basically after a shag.’ I smiled again. I could be so . . . so grown-up with David. Dave.

‘The strange and paradoxical misogyny of Hamlet,’ said David with a nod, his moustache curling up at the corners.

‘You are so right.’ I took another drag of my cigarette. ‘He was Hamlet. I was Ophelia. What I should have been saying to him, what I should have been thinking, for crying out loud, was: “Of course Laertes is fucking justified”.’ God, it was so liberating to swear like that in front of a grown-up. Another grown-up, I meant. ‘Hamlet is a bad boy. You’re falling for a bad boy. Don’t do it.’

David cocked his head on one side, and I knew I had done well. ‘Good,’ he said at length. ‘I think this is worth exploring further, don’t you?’

How much further, David? Dave? Dave the Rave Osgood? Surely not down each others pants? Or to the extent of realising that if I was Ophelia, and Nathaniel was Hamlet, then you were Polonius, for Christ’s sake? Telling me what to think, to feel? No! No, and a thousand times no! We will investigate nothing!

‘Okay,’ I said.

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Soap actor Dane Isherwood, recently nominated 'Most Beautiful Man in the World' by Women, Not Girls magazine, has been found dead at his Bel Air home.

Sources close to Isherwood describe how the star, whose rise to fame as patriarchal tycoon Howard Dynman in daytime drama Living for Now brought him legions of fans, had become increasingly withdrawn in recent weeks. 'I was really worried about him,' says new co-star and alleged love interest Pam-Ella Bryant, 'but he kept insisting he was fine. He pushed away any help,' she added, before breaking down and being led away by her publicist.

Isherwood's body was found in his pool after a call from his housekeeper in the early afternoon on Friday. Police are ruling out foul play. 'We believe this is just a very sad case of depression not being noticed in time,' commented Detective Sandy Barrett. 'There won't be any need to involve anybody else in the investigations.'