

The Telling Error

Also by Sophie Hannah

Little Face
Hurting Distance
The Point of Rescue
The Other Half Lives
A Room Swept White
Lasting Damage
Kind of Cruel
The Carrier

SOPHIE
HANNAH

The Telling Error



First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hodder & Stoughton

An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 0 340 98075 0
Trade paperback ISBN 978 0 340 98076 7
Ebook ISBN 978 1 444 73675 5

Typeset in Sabon MT Std
by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

For my genius editor and amazing friend Carolyn Mays, who
has been the bright side of my dark side for nine years

MEN SEEKING WOMEN

IntimateLinks > uk > all personals

Reply: 22547652@indiv.intimatelinksUK.org

Posted: 2013-07-04, 16:17PM GMT

Looking for a Woman with a Secret

LOCATION: WHEREVER YOU ARE

Hello, females!

Are you looking on here because you're hoping to find something that stands out from all the dull one-line I-want-a-blow-job-in-my-hotel-room-type adverts? Well, look no further. I'm different and this is different.

I'm not seeking casual sex or a long-term relationship. I've had plenty of the first in my time, and I've got one of the second that I'm happy with. Actually, I'm not looking for anything sexual or romantic. So what am I doing on Intimate Links? Well, as I'm sure you're aware if you're clever (and I suspect that the woman I am looking for is very bright), there are different kinds of intimacy. There's taking off your clothes and getting dirty with an illicit stranger, there's deep and meaningful love-making with a soulmate . . . and then there's the sort of intimacy that involves two people sharing nothing more than a secret. An important secret that matters to both of them.

Perhaps these two people have never met, or perhaps they know each other but not very well. Either way, they can only establish a bond of common knowledge once the one who has the information has given it to the one who needs it. Think of the rush of relief you'd experience if you shared your burden, after the agony of prolonged silence with the secret eating away at you . . . If you're the person I'm looking for, you'll be desperate to confide in someone.

Sophie Hannah

That's where I come in. I'm your confidant, ready and eager to listen. Are you the keeper of the secret I'm waiting to be told?

Let's find out by asking a question that only the person I'm looking for would be able to answer. It will make no sense to anyone else. You'll have to bear with me. Before I get to the question part, I'll need to lay out the scenario.

Picture a room in a large Victorian house: a spacious, high-ceilinged first-floor bedroom that's used as a study. There are overstuffed built-in bookshelves in this room, a pale blue and brown jukebox with curved edges that has a vintage look about it and is much more beautiful than the kind you sometimes see in pubs, an armchair, a filing cabinet, a long desk with square wooden legs and a green glass top that has a laptop computer at its centre. The computer is neither open nor closed. Its lid is at a forty-five-degree angle, as if someone has tried half-heartedly to push it shut but it hasn't gone all the way. The laptop is surrounded on all sides by cheap-looking biros, empty and half-empty coffee mugs, and scattered papers: handwritten notes, ideas jotted down.

Pushed back from the desk is a standard black office-style swivel chair, and lolling in the chair, his head leaning to the left, is a dead man. While alive, he was well known and – though this might well have nothing to do with anything – strikingly attractive in a stubbly, cowboy-without-a-hat kind of way. If I were to include his name in this account, I think most people would have heard of him. Some of you might shudder and say, 'Oh, not that vile bigot!' or, more light-heartedly, 'Not that ridiculous attention-seeker!' Others would think, 'Oh, I *love* him – he says all the things I'm too scared to say.' Our dead body is (was) somebody who inspired strong feelings, you see. So strong that he got himself murdered.

How was he killed? Well, this is the interesting part. The murder process comprised several stages. First, he was immobilised. His arms were pulled behind the back of his chair and taped together at the wrists. The same was done to his ankles, which were taped together round the pole of the chair's base, beneath the seat. Then his murderer stood behind him and brought a heavy object down on his head, rendering him unconscious. The police found this object on the floor beside the dead man's desk: it was a metal kitchen-knife sharpener. It didn't kill our well-known man (the pathologist told the police after examining the body), though it would have made an excellent murder-by-bludgeoning weapon, being more than heavy enough to do the job. However, it seems that although the killer was happy to use the knife sharpener to knock his victim out, he did not wish to use it to murder him.

There was a knife in the room too, but it had not been used to stab the dead man. Instead, it was stuck to his face with parcel tape. Specifically, it was stuck to his closed mouth, completely covering it. The tape – of which there was plenty – also completely covered the lower part of the murder victim's face, including his nose, causing him to suffocate to death. The knife's blade, flat against the dead man's mouth, was sharp. Forensics found evidence that it had been sharpened in the room, and detectives suspect that this happened after the victim was bound to the chair and unconscious.

Above the fireplace, on the wall between two bookshelf-filled alcoves, someone had written in big red capital letters, 'HE IS NO LESS DEAD.' I imagine that the first police to arrive at the scene took one look at that and leaped to a mistaken conclusion: that the red words had been written in the victim's blood. Then, seconds later, they might have noticed a tin of paint and a red-tipped brush on the floor and made a more informed guess that turned out to be correct: the words on the wall were written in paint. Dulux's Ruby Fountain 2, for anyone who is interested in the details and doesn't already know them.

Sophie Hannah

Detectives examined the dead man's laptop, I assume. They would have found this surprisingly easy because the killer had red-painted, 'Riddy111111,' on a blank sheet of white A4 paper that was lying on the desk. This was the well-known man's password and would have led police straight to his email inbox. There they'd have found a new, unopened message from a correspondent by the name of No Less Dead, with an email address to match. There were no words in the message, only a photograph of someone standing in the room beside the unconscious, not-yet-deceased victim, wearing what looked like a protective suit from a Hollywood film about biological outbreaks – the sort that covers the head and body of the person wearing it. The killer's eyes would presumably have been visible if he or she hadn't taken care to turn away from the camera; as it was, the picture showed a completely unidentifiable person with one outstretched arm (for the taking of the photo), holding aloft a knife in his or her other hand, above the unconscious man's chest, in a way designed to suggest that a stabbing was imminent. The knife in the photograph was the same one (or identical to the one) that ended up taped to the murder victim's face, suffocating him rather than spilling his blood.

And now the question is coming up, so pay attention, ladies!
(Actually, it's questions, plural.)

The murderer planned the crime in advance. It was about as premeditated as a killing can be. It involved bringing to the crime scene a knife, a knife sharpener, parcel tape, red paint, a paint-brush and a bio-hazard suit. The killer obviously knew the deceased's computer password. How? There was no evidence of a break-in. Did her victim let her in? (I'm saying 'her' because that's my hunch: that it was a woman. Maybe it was you?) Did the well-known man say to her, 'Go on, then: bind me to my chair, knock me out and kill me'? That seems unlikely. Maybe the killer pretended it was some sort of erotic game, or maybe I'm only speculating along these lines because *Intimate Links* is the perfect

place to do so – the online home of sexual game-players of all kinds.

The most puzzling question is this: why arrive at the victim's house with a knife and a knife sharpener when you have no intention of stabbing him? Why sharpen that knife at the crime scene if all you're going to do is tape it, flat, against his face? For that purpose, the knife would work just as effectively if its blade were blunt.

Or, looking at it another way . . . if you've got a newly sharpened knife, and you've covered your clothing to protect it from blood splashes, and if, coincidentally, you also want to write a strange message in big red letters on the wall, why *not* stab the guy and use his blood to write with? Because you particularly want to suffocate him? Then why not do it more straightforwardly, with, say, a plastic bag over his head, taped round his neck to make it airtight? Why use a knife at all?

For some reason, you wanted to kill this man with a sharp knife, but you didn't want to stab him. Why not? And the photograph you emailed – what's that about? What are you trying to communicate? Is it 'Look, I could so easily have stabbed him, but I didn't'?

I realise I've slipped into using 'you' when I talk about the murderer, rather than 'she', or 'he or she'. I'm sorry. I'm not accusing you of killing anybody. Maybe you're not the murderer of the well-known man. You might be someone who wishes he were still alive, someone who loves him, or once did – a lover, a close friend. I'm really not sure. All I know is that you're reading this and you know the answers to the questions I'm asking. You desperately want to tell someone what you know.

I'm the person to trust with the information. I've taken a huge risk in sharing so many secrets, in the hope of eliciting a reply from you.

Sophie Hannah

So, please, contact me. I'm waiting, and I promise I won't judge you. Whatever you've done, you had your reasons. I am ready to listen and understand.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

C (for Confidant) x

- Location: Wherever You Are
- It's NOT OK to contact this poster with services or other commercial interests

Posted: 2013-07-04, 16:17PM GMT

I

Monday 1 July 2013

It can't be him. All policemen wear high-visibility jackets these days. Lots must have sand-coloured hair that's a little bit wavy. In a minute he'll turn round and I'll see his face and laugh at myself for panicking.

Don't turn round, unless you're someone else. Be someone else. Please.

I sit perfectly still, try not to notice the far-reaching reverberations of every heartbeat. There is too much distance trapped in me. Miles. I can't reach myself. A weird illusion grips me: that I am my heart and my car is my chest, and I'm shaking inside it.

Seconds must be passing. Not quickly enough. Time is stuck. I stare at the clock on my dashboard and wait for the minute to change. At last, 10:52 becomes 10:53 and I'm relieved, as if it could have gone either way.

Crazy.

He's still standing with his back to me. So many details are the same: his hair, his height, his build, the yellow jacket with 'POLICE' printed on it . . .

If it's him, that means I must be doing something wrong, and I'm not. I'm definitely not. There's no reason for him to reappear in my life; it wouldn't be fair, when I'm trying so hard. Out of everyone sitting in their cars in this queue of traffic, I must be among the most blameless, if I'm being judged on today's behaviour alone: a mother driving to school to deliver her son's forgotten sports kit. I could have said, 'Oh well, he'll just have to miss games, or wear his school uniform,'

but I didn't. I knew Ethan would hate those two options equally, so I cancelled my hair appointment and set off back to school, less than an hour after I'd got home from dropping the children off there. Willingly, because I care about my son's happiness.

Which means this has to be a different policeman up ahead. It can't be him. It was my guilt that drew him to me last time. Today, I'm innocent. I've been innocent for more than three weeks.

Drew him to you?

All right, I'm guilty of superstitious idiocy, but nothing else. If it's him, he's here on Elmhirst Road by chance – pure coincidence, just as it was last time we met. He's a police officer who works in Spilling; Elmhirst Road is in Spilling; his presence here, for reasons that have nothing to do with me, is entirely plausible.

Rationally, the argument stands up, but I'm not convinced.

Because you're a superstitious fool.

If it's him, that means I'm still guilty, deep down. If he sees me . . .

I can't let that happen. His eyes on me, even for a second, would act as a magnet, dragging the badness inside me up to the surface of my skin, making it spill out into the open; it would propel me back to where I was when he first found me: the land of the endangered.

I don't deserve that. I have been good for three weeks and four days. Even in the privacy of my mind, where any transgressions would be unprovable, I haven't slipped up. Once or twice my thoughts have almost broken free of my control, but I've been disciplined about slamming down the barriers.

Turn round, quick, before he does.

Can I risk it?

A minute ago, there were at least fifteen cars between mine and where he's standing on the pavement, a few hundred metres ahead. There are still about ten, at a rough guess. If one of the drivers in front of me would do a U-turn and go back the way

they came, I'd do the same, but he's more likely to notice me if I'm the first to do it. He might recognise my car, remember the make and model – maybe even the number plate. Not that he's turned round yet, but he could be about to. *Any second now . . .*

He'd wonder why I was doubling back on myself. The traffic isn't at a standstill. True, we're crawling along, but it's unlikely to take me more than ten minutes to get past whatever's causing the delay. All I can see from my car is a female police officer in the road, standing up straight, then bobbing down out of sight; standing up again, bobbing down again. I think she must be saying something to the driver of each car that passes. There's another male officer too, on the pavement, talking to . . .

Not him. Talking to a man who, please God, isn't him.

Inhale. Long and deep.

I can't do it. The presence of the right words in my mind is not enough to drive away the panic, not when I'm breathing jagged and fast like this.

I wish I could work out what's going on up there. It's probably something dull and bureaucratic. Once before, I was stopped by fluorescent-jacketed police – three of them, like today – who were holding up traffic on the Rawndesley Road as part of a survey about driver behaviour. I've forgotten what questions they asked me. They were boring, and felt pointless at the time. I remember thinking, My answers will be of no benefit to anyone, and answering politely anyway.

The car in front of mine moves forward at the exact same moment that the policeman with his back to me turns his head. I see him in profile, only for a second, but it's enough. I make a choking noise that no one hears but me. I'm embarrassed anyway.

It's him.

No choice, then. Driving past him is unthinkable – no way of avoiding being seen by him if his colleague stops my car to speak to me – so I'll have to turn round. I edge forward and swerve to

the right, waiting for a gap in the oncoming traffic on the other side of the road so that I can escape. *Please.* I'll feel OK as soon as I'm travelling away from him and not towards him.

I edge out further. Too far, over the white line, where there's no room for me. A blue Toyota beeps its horn as it flies past, the driver's open mouth an angry blur. The noise is long and drawn out: the sound of a long grudge, not a fleeting annoyance, though I'm not sure if I'm still hearing its echo or only remembering it. Shock drums a rhythmic beat through my body, rising up from my chest into my throat and neck, pulsing down to my stomach. It pounds in my ears, in the skin of my face; I can even feel it in my hair.

There's no way a noise like that car horn isn't going to make a policeman – any policeman – turn round and see what's going on.

It's OK. It's fine. Nothing to worry about. How likely is it that he'd remember my car registration? He'll see a silver Audi and think nothing of it. He must see them all the time.

I keep my head facing away from him, my eyes fixed on the other side of the road, willing a gap to appear. One second, two seconds, three . . .

Don't look. He'll be looking by now. No eye contact, that's what matters. As long as you don't see him seeing you . . .

At last, there's space for me to move out. I spin the car round and drive back along Elmhirst Road towards Spilling town centre, seeing all the same things that I saw a few minutes ago, except in reverse order: the garden centre, the Arts Barn, the house with the mint-green camper van parked outside it that looks like a Smeg fridge turned on its side, with wheels attached. These familiar objects and buildings seemed ordinary and unthreatening when I drove past them a few minutes ago. Now there's something unreal about them. They look staged. Complicit, as if they're playing a sinister game with me, one they know I'll lose.

Feeling hot and dizzy, I turn left into the library car park and

take the first space I see: what Adam and I have always called 'a golfer's space' because the symbol painted in white on the concrete looks more like a set of golf clubs than the pram it's supposed to be.

I open the car door with numb fingers that feel as if they're only partly attached to my body and find myself gasping for air. I'm burning hot, dripping with sweat, and it has nothing to do with the weather.

Why do I still feel like this? I should have been able to leave the panic behind, on Elmhirst Road. With him.

Get a grip. Nothing bad has actually happened. Nothing at all has happened.

'You're not parking there, are you? I hope you're going to move.'

I look up. A young woman with auburn hair and the shortest fringe I've ever seen is staring at me. I assume the question came from her, since there's no one else around. Explaining my situation to her is more than I can manage at the moment. I can form the words in my mind, but not in my mouth. *I'm not exactly parking. I just need to sit here for a while, until I'm safe to drive again. Then I'll go.*

I'm so caught up in the traumatic nothing that happened to me on Elmhirst Road that I only realise she's still there when she says, 'That space is for mums and babies. You've not got a baby with you. Park somewhere else!'

'Sorry. I . . . I will. I'll move in a minute. Thanks.'

I smile at her, grateful for the distraction, for a reminder that this is my world and I'm still in it: the world of real, niggly problems that have to be dealt with in the present.

'What's wrong with right now?' she says.

'I just . . . I'm not feeling . . .'

'You're in a space for mothers with babies! Are you too stupid to read signs?' Her aggression is excessive – mysteriously so. 'Move! There's at least fifty other free spaces.'

'And at least twenty-five of those are mother-and-child spaces,'

I say, looking at all the straight yellow lines on the concrete running parallel to my car, with nothing between them. ‘I’m not going to deprive anyone of a space if I sit here for another three minutes. I’m sorry, but I’m not feeling great.’

‘You don’t know who’s going to turn up in a minute,’ says my persecutor. ‘The spaces might all fill up.’ She pushes at her toothbrush-bristle fringe with her fingers. She seems to want to flick it to one side and hasn’t worked out that it’s too short to go anywhere; all it can do is lie flat on her head.

‘Do you work at the library?’ I ask her. I’ve never seen a Spilling librarian wearing stiletto-heeled crocodile-skin ankle boots before, but I suppose it’s possible.

‘No, but I’ll go and get someone who does if you don’t move.’

What is she, then? A recreational protester whose chosen cause is the safeguarding of mother-and-child parking spaces for those who deserve them? She has no children with her, or any books, or a bag big enough to contain books. What’s she doing here in the library car park?

Get the bitch, says the voice in my head that I mustn’t listen to. *Bring her down*.

‘Two questions for you,’ I say coolly. ‘Who the hell do you think you are, and who the hell are you?’

‘It doesn’t matter! What matters is, you’re in the wrong space!’

‘Read the sign,’ I tell her. To save her the trouble of turning round, I read it aloud to her, “These spaces are reserved for people with children.” That includes me. I have two children. I can show you photos. Or my C-section scar, if you’d prefer?’

‘It means for people who’ve got children with them *in the car*, as you well know! Shall I go and get the library manager?’

‘Fine by me.’ I’m starting to feel better, thanks to this woman. I’m enjoying myself. ‘She can tell us what she thinks the sign means, and I’ll tell her what it says, and explain the difference. “People with children” means “parents”. Those with offspring, progeny, descendants: the non-childless. There’s nothing in the wording of that sign that specifies where the children need to

be, geographically, at this precise moment. If it said, “This space is reserved for people who have their kids with them *right here and now in this library car park*”, I could see a justification for moving. Since it doesn’t . . . I shrug.

‘Right,’ Short Fringe snaps at me. ‘You wait there!’

‘What, in the parking space you’re so keen for me to vacate?’ I call after her as she stomps towards the library. ‘You want me to stay in it now?’

She makes an obscene finger gesture over her shoulder.

I’d like to wait and argue with the librarian – all the librarians, if possible – but the return of my normal everyday self has brought with it the memory of why I left the house: to deliver Ethan’s sports bag to school. I should get on with it; I know he’ll worry until he has it in his hands.

Reluctantly, I slam my car door shut, pull out of the library car park and head for the Silsford Road. I can get to the school via Upper Heckencott, I think. It’s a ridiculously long-winded way of getting there, involving skinny, winding lanes that you have to reverse back along for about a mile if you meet a car coming in the opposite direction, but you generally don’t. And it’s the only route I can think of that doesn’t involve driving down Elmhirst Road.

I check my watch: 11.10 a.m. I pull my phone out of my bag, ring school, ask them to tell Ethan not to worry and that I’m on my way. All of this I do while driving, knowing I shouldn’t, hoping I’ll get away with it. I wonder if it’s possible, simultaneously, to be a good mother and a bad person: someone who enjoys picking fights with strangers in car parks, who lies, who gets into trouble with the police and nearly ruins her life and the life of her family, who thinks, Fuck you, every time anyone points out what the rules are and that she’s breaking them.

I blow a long sigh out of the open window, as if I’m blowing out smoke. Ethan deserves a mother with no secrets, a mother who can drive to school without needing to hide from anyone. Instead, he has me. Soon he’ll have his sports kit too.

It could be worse for him. I'm determined to make it better, to make myself better.

Three weeks and four days. A verbal scrap with a self-righteous idiot doesn't count as a lapse, I decide, at the same time as telling myself that I mustn't let it happen again – that I must be more humble in future, even if provoked. Less combative, more . . . ordinary. Like the other school mums. Though less dull than them, I hope. Never the sort of person who would say, 'A home isn't a home without a dog,' or, 'I don't know why I bother going to the gym – forty minutes on the treadmill and what do I do as soon as I get home? Raid the biscuit tin!'

As safe and honourable as those women, but more exciting. Is that possible?

I like to have it both ways; that's my whole problem, in a nutshell.



As soon as I arrive at school, I am presented with an opportunity to put my new non-confrontational manner to the test. 'We discourage parents from going into classrooms,' a receptionist I've never seen before tells me, standing in front of me to block my way.

Since when? I've been into both Sophie's and Ethan's classrooms many times. No one's ever complained.

'It's emotionally disruptive for the children if a parent suddenly pops up during lesson time,' she explains. 'Some of them think, Oh look, Mum or Dad's here – they can take me home, and get very upset when Mum or Dad disappears again, leaving them behind.'

'I promise you Ethan won't be upset.' I smile hopefully at her. 'He'll just be pleased and relieved to have his sports kit.' *And, obviously, since he wants it for games this afternoon, he won't, on having it handed to him, expect to leave school immediately and miss the PE lesson that he needs it for, you stupid cow.* 'There's really no downside to letting me take it to

him myself, honestly,' I add in what I hope is a wholly positive tone of voice. 'It'll save you a job too.'

'Nicki!' a high-pitched female voice calls out, one that would be better suited to a cheerleader than a head teacher. *Correction: headmistress.*

I sag with relief, knowing that everything is about to be all right. Kate Zilber is here: five foot short, petite as a ten-year-old, the most indiscreet person in professional employment that I've ever met. Kate refuses to be referred to as 'principal' or 'head'; 'headmistress' is her title, prominently engraved on the sign on her office door, and she insists that people use it. She once described herself to me as a megalomaniac; I soon discovered that she wasn't exaggerating.

'Is that Ethan's PE kit?' she says. 'It's OK, Izzie, we can bend the rules on this occasion. Actually, I can bend them whenever it suits me, since I run the place – perk of the job. We don't want Nicki worrying about whether the kit was safely delivered, do we?'

Izzie shrugs ungraciously and returns to her desk.

Kate pulls me out of the office and into an empty corridor. Once we're alone, she says, 'And the chances of it being safely delivered by Izzie are slim. She's a lobotomy on legs.'

'Really?' I must stop questioning everything she says. I keep assuming she's joking, but she never is. I'm not used to people who work in primary schools speaking their minds in the way Kate Zilber does. Still, Freeth Lane is well known to be the best independent school in the Culver Valley, and Kate's the person responsible for that. She could probably pelt the parents and governors with rotten eggs and get away with it.

'Quick pep talk for you.' She gives me a stern look. 'If you want to take Ethan his sports kit because you trust no one else to do the job properly, fine. But if there's an element of wanting to get a quick glimpse of him to reassure yourself that he's OK . . . not so fine.'

'Why not?' I ask.

'If you indulge your own anxiety, you'll make Ethan's worse. He needs his sports kit; you've brought it in – problem solved.' She squeezes my arm. 'There's no need for you to see him, Nicki. You'll only read unhappiness into his expression, whether it's there or not, and work yourself up into a state. If he smiles at you, you'll worry he's putting on a brave face in front of his new friends. If he doesn't smile, you'll imagine he's in the grip of a powerful inner torment. Am I right?'

I sigh. 'Probably.'

'How about I take him his sports kit instead?' she suggests. 'I'm the most reliable person on the planet. You know that, right? I'm even more efficient than you.'

'All right.' I smile and hand her the bag. For some reason, this tiny, shrewd, girly-voiced woman I barely know has a talent for very quickly making me feel ten times better. Every time she does, I can't help thinking of Melissa, who has the opposite effect and is my closest friend.

'Thank you.' Kate turns to walk away, then turns back. 'Ethan really will be fine, you know. He'll be as happy here as Sophie – you wait and see. Some children take longer than others to form emotional attachments and adapt to a new environment, that's all. The other kids are really rallying round, looking after him – this term even more than last. It's sweet. He's made so many new friends.'

'Ethan's always been more sensitive than Sophie,' I say. 'He doesn't handle change well.' *And his mother, knowing this, took him away from the school where he was happy. Two terms later, he still tells me at least once a week that he'll never love this school as much as his old one – that however many friends he makes, Oliver-who-he-left-behind-in-London will always be his true best friend, even if he never sees him again.*

'Nicki.' Another stern look. 'Ethan's *fine*. He occasionally gets anxious about things. Lots of kids do. It's really nothing serious. Your anxiety, on the other hand . . . You should take yourself to a head doctor, lady,' she concludes affectionately.

‘Kate, I—’ I break off. What am I thinking? I can’t tell her anything. I can’t tell anyone, ever.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Bugger “nothing”. You can’t start and not finish. Tell me or I’ll expel your children.’

‘I’ve . . . been under a lot of pressure recently, that’s all. I’m not normally so twitchy.’

Kate raises a plucked eyebrow. ‘Don’t fob me off, Nicki. That wasn’t what you were going to say.’

The urge to tell her – something, anything – is overwhelming.

‘I lied to you.’

‘Ooh! This sounds promising.’ She moves closer, rubbing her hands together. No one else I know would react so enthusiastically to hearing they’d been deceived. *If only they would.* ‘Lied to me about what?’

‘First time I came in to look round,’ I say, ‘you asked me why we wanted to leave London and move to Spilling.’

‘And you said what so many London offcomers say: better schools, bigger garden, cleaner air, perfect rural childhood, yada yada. Whenever parents tell me that, I think, Ha, just wait till your fourteen-year-old’s roaming those big green fields you prize so highly, off his tits on illegal substances because there’s no Tube to take him anywhere worth going, and sod all to do in his local idyll.’

I laugh. ‘Are you this frank with all the parents?’

Kate considers my question, then says, ‘I tone it down a bit for the squeamish ones. So, come on – the lie?’

‘My real reason for moving here was entirely selfish, nothing to do with fresher air and bigger gardens. I wasn’t thinking about my children, or my husband. Only myself.’

‘Well . . . good,’ says Kate.

‘Good?’

‘Absolutely. It’s when we imagine we know how others feel and presume to know what’s best for them that mistakes are

made. Whereas no one knows our own needs better than us.' She glances at her watch. 'Looking after number one's not as daft a policy as it sounds: make the only person happy that you can, let everyone else do the same and take care of themselves. So why did *you* want to move to Spilling?'

I shake my head, look away. 'It doesn't matter. It stopped being relevant shortly after we got here anyway. Sod's Law. I just wanted you to know: that's the reason I get anxious about Ethan.'

'I get it,' says Kate. 'His suffering is your punishment. You don't believe you can avoid retribution for being as selfish as you've been, therefore Ethan must be suffering horribly?'

'Something like that,' I mutter.

'I wouldn't think that way if I were you. Women need to be ruthlessly selfish. You know why? Because men are, and so are children. Both will turn you into their skivvy unless you give back as good as you get on the selfish front.' I find myself looking at her left hand to see if she's wearing a wedding band; I've never noticed, and her name gives nothing away: she's Dr Zilber, not Miss or Mrs.

She is wearing a wedding ring. A thin one – either white gold or platinum. The skin around it is pink, chapped and flaky, as if she's allergic to it.

'Listen, Nicki – much as I'd love to pry further into your secret reason for moving here, I'd better get on. There are people still on my staff who belong in the dole queue.' She nods towards Izzie. 'I can't rest until that's rectified. But first stop: Ethan's kit.'

I thank her, and return to my car feeling more optimistic than I have for a while.

Maybe nothing all that terrible has happened to me. Maybe I'm not the guiltiest woman in the world. If I told Kate, she might laugh and say, 'God, what a story!' in an appreciative way. I'm so used to Melissa's harsh glare and pursed lips and, more recently, her refusal to listen, but she is only one person. *The wrong person*

to try and share a secret with, if the secret's anything more controversial than 'This is what I've bought so-and-so for their birthday – don't tell them.'

The conclusion I've been strenuously trying to avoid reaching glows in neon in my brain: I need to give up on Melissa and find myself a new best friend. I can't get away from her – she's managed to tie us together forever, even if that wasn't her intention – but I can demote her in my mind to 'acquaintance'; she'll never know I've done it, if I'm still friendly on the surface.

Is there a website, I wonder: newbestfriend.com? If there is, it's probably full of people trying to turn it non-platonic, looking for 'fuck buddies' or 'friends with benefits'.

Kate Zilber wouldn't have let a run-in with a policeman stop her from doing what she wanted and needed to do. She wouldn't have been doing it in the first place unless she'd decided it was OK, and she wouldn't have been terrified and ashamed if caught. I doubt she'd have disappeared from Gavin's life with no word or explanation, as I did.

The fairest thing to do, for his sake and my family's – that's what I told myself.

Liar. Coward.

I owe him an explanation. For whatever reason, however stupid and crazy it was, he was significant to me for a while. He mattered. I think I mattered to him too.

I drive along the Silsford Road with the window open, thinking about the possibility of contacting him now. Could I extend my definition of being good to include emailing him just once more, to tell him that my disappearance wasn't his fault, that he did nothing wrong?

No. It wouldn't be only once. He'd hook you again.

Cutting off from Gavin took all my willpower; I might not have the strength to do it a second time.

I decide to allow myself the luxury of not deciding immediately. I want to cling to the possibility – not of going back to how it was, but of one last communication, to end things in a

proper way. I know better than anyone that sometimes a possibility is enough to keep a person going, even if it never becomes a reality.

Will Gavin still be checking, three weeks and four days after he last heard from me, or will he have given up by now? If it had been the other way round and he'd suddenly stopped emailing me, how soon would I have stopped looking to see if he'd written?

The phone's ringing as I pull up outside my house. I grab my bag, lock the car door and fumble with the front-door key, knowing the call will be about Ethan. Something's happened: he's sobbing, locked in a toilet cubicle. Or there's a problem with his sports kit – part of it's missing. How sure am I that I put all the right things in?

Let him be OK and I swear I won't email Gavin, or even think about it any more.

I run into the lounge and grab the phone, wondering why I persist in offering God these phony deals. If He exists, He must be reasonably intelligent – maybe not the academic four-A*s-at-A-level kind of clever, but powerfully intuitive, and with a deep understanding of people. He must have spotted the pattern by now: I never stick to my side of the bargains I make with Him. Time and time again, He goes easy on me and I think, Phew, and forget about what I promised I'd do in return, or invent a loophole to let myself off the hook.

I pick up the phone. 'Hello?'

'Is that Mrs Clements?'

'Yes, speaking.'

'It's Izzie here, from Freeth Lane. We just met, when you came in before?'

'Is Ethan OK?' I resent the time it takes me to ask: endless stretched-out seconds of not knowing.

'Oh.' Izzie sounds surprised. 'I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know?' I snap.

'I assume he's all right. I haven't heard that he isn't.'

'So you're not phoning about Ethan?'

‘No.’

I exhale slowly as I fall into a chair. ‘Right. So what can I do for you?’

‘It’s Sophie.’

Sophie, who’s never problematic in any way, who I don’t need to worry about. I take her well-being for granted. I feel as if my heart has been lobbed at the wall of my gut, feel it sliding slowly downwards, flattened by dread.

The children of guilty mothers, hostages to karma, always in imaginary peril that feels so real, so asked for . . .

‘She’s been sick,’ says Izzie. ‘She seems fine now, and she says she wants to stay for the rest of the day, but it’s policy to let parents know.’

‘I’m coming in now to see her,’ I say. ‘Tell her I’m on my way.’ I’m not taking the word of Lobotomy Izzie when it comes to the health of my daughter; I want to check for myself if Sophie’s well enough to stay at school. Which means driving the round trip, yet again. And then again at home-time, either to pick up both children or, if I bring Sophie back with me early, to pick up Ethan. Fleetingly, I consider collecting them both now to save me having to drive back to school later for the fourth time in one day, but then I realise I can’t make Ethan miss games, not after I’ve taken in his kit; he’ll be looking forward to playing football or cricket or whatever it is, expecting the rest of his day to unfold predictably and without incident.

I decide that I’ll be brave and try the Elmhirst Road route again. Getting to Sophie as quickly as possible matters more than my fear. If the sand-haired policeman is still there, I’ll stay calm and pretend not to recognise him. Or maybe I’ll wink at him. I can imagine Kate Zilber doing that. Winking isn’t illegal. He wouldn’t be able to warn me or threaten me. A wink proves nothing, and in any case, there has been nothing to prove since I turned good.



The routine when Sophie and Ethan get in from school at the end of the day is always the same. Panting and groaning, they shrug and wriggle their way out of their coats and shoes in the hall, as if divesting themselves of chains that have bound them for decades, before making a dash for the lounge and slamming the door. They have an urgent appointment with the television that nothing would induce them to miss.

I am left to pick up the discards from the hall floor and throw them, in a big pile glued together by wet mud from the soles of football boots, into the coat cupboard; it's mess relocation rather than tidying up. Adam is patient and always waits until the cupboard's interior is indistinguishable from a compost heap before he complains. When he does, I either say, 'I know. Sorry – I'll sort it out tomorrow,' or I snap, 'If you don't like it, do something about it,' depending on my mood.

The CBBC channel starts to chatter mid-sentence. That's my cue to pour the juice and make the toast. Once they're on the kitchen table, I call out, 'Snack's ready!'

'Bring it in here!' Sophie yells. She is more vocally militant than her brother, who is happy to be represented by her in all parent-child disputes.

'No!' I shout back.

'Yes! Remember, I was sick! I feel a bit weak!'

'You *were* sick – you're not now!' Nor was she when I arrived at school to check on her; she looked at me as if I were crazy, told me she had no intention of coming home with me and turned back to her friends. I left empty-handed, a person-with-children temporarily without her children, just as I was this morning in the library car park. It was only on my fourth and final trip to school that I came away with what I wanted: Sophie and Ethan in the back seat, and an overwhelming feeling of relief. I can't fully relax unless they're under the same roof as me; that's been true since we moved here from London.

Kate Zilber's right: I should probably get some therapy. I'm too anxious. Once, waiting to collect the children at the end of

the day, I started to have palpitations because a man looked at me in a way that made me feel uncomfortable: a long-drawn-out superior smirk. He's one of the school's most pleased-with-himself Flash Dads. I often see him leaning against his expensive-looking blue BMW in the part of the playground where the showiest parents always wait. His hair is subtly streaked. It looks deliberate, which I know I shouldn't disapprove of, but I do. There are some things men just shouldn't do, and streaked hair is right up there alongside cosmetic pubic-hair removal. Though I've never seen his child or children, I enjoy imagining them as rebellious teenagers, covered with tattoos and piercings that spell out, 'My dad's an utter cock.'

'Please, Mum!' Sophie yells from the lounge.

I could refuse again, but what's the point? I'll give in eventually; I always do. I don't know why I bother going through the daily ritual of putting the plates and glasses down on the table in front of two chairs. I think it's because I like the idea of my children coming into the kitchen and chatting to me, so I create the conditions that will make it possible. Seeing the toast and juice neatly laid out on the table makes me feel like a proper mother.

We don't have many rules in our house. The few we do have – like no eating in the lounge – are broken every day. Adam thinks it's stupid and inconsistent to ban things we disapprove of and then allow them to happen anyway. I'm torn. I admire people who don't allow themselves to be constrained by rules, and cheer inwardly every time my kids demonstrate that they have no intention of obeying me.

If I believed myself to be a fine, upstanding pillar of the community with a strong moral code, I might feel differently. Who am I to tell anyone how they ought to behave?

I take the toast and juice into the lounge. Sophie tells me to 'Shh' before I've said a word. Her eyes are glued to the television screen, as are Ethan's. I say, 'Thank you, darling mother,' loudly before leaving the room.

‘Yeah, thanks, Mum,’ says Ethan. Three whole words. Amazing. He and Sophie tend to lose the ability to speak for about an hour and a half after they get home from school. They find their voices again at supper-time, after which we usually can’t shut them up until bedtime.

Having delivered the snack, I pull the lounge door closed behind me and hover in the hall, not sure what I’m going to do next. I have a strong suspicion, but that’s not the same as being sure.

I should get to work in the kitchen. The dishwasher needs unloading and reloading before I can start cooking.

I shouldn’t, definitely mustn’t, email Gavin.

But you will. You’re about to.

Breaking other people’s rules might be commendably independent-minded, but breaking your own, which you made willingly, to protect yourself and your family? What kind of fool does that?

I want to continue to believe in the fantasy that I have a choice, but it doesn’t feel true. The decision has been made, in the shadowy part of me that logic never reaches, where a force far greater than my willpower is in charge.

I look at my watch. Adam will be home in about half an hour. If I don’t do it now, I won’t have another chance until tomorrow.

Too long to wait.

As I run upstairs to our box room, which houses the family computer, I wonder how I’ve managed to resist doing this for so long. Three weeks and four days. Until I saw that policeman again today, I was finding it easy to be good. The shock of my first meeting with him was all the motivation I needed. I don’t understand why a second almost-encounter with him has driven me in the opposite direction.

You can still do the right thing. Sending one quick explanatory email for politeness’s sake isn’t the same as starting it up again.

It's what I should have done all along, instead of my cowardly vanishing act.

I close the box-room door behind me, making sure I've shut it properly and not just pushed it to, and sit down at the desk. This will be the first time I've opened my secret Hushmail account since my first run-in with the policeman. I've been scared of discovering that Gavin's emailed me, scared I wouldn't have the strength to delete his message without reading it.

I type in my password, my heart beating like the wings of a trapped bird in my ears and throat, and prepare to confront my greatest fear: an empty inbox. What if he hasn't been in touch for the whole three weeks and four days that I haven't contacted him? That would mean that he was never as keen as I thought he was.

Good. It's good if he's not keen. It's good because we're over.

Though we never agreed it in so many words, we operated a strict 'turns' system throughout our correspondence, both of us always waiting for a reply before emailing again. No exceptions. Did Gavin stick to the pattern and take my lack of response to his last message as a sign that I was no longer interested? Would he give up on me so easily? Surely he'd have wondered, after I didn't reply for a whole day – and then another and another – whether his last email went astray. I would have, in his position.

My finger hovers above the 'return' key. If I press it, I'll know within seconds.

I can't do it.

I push my chair back from the desk, afraid that I'll press 'return' by mistake, before I'm sure I want to.

You don't have to look. Ever. Turn off the computer, go downstairs. Forget about him.

No. I won't take the coward's way out, not this time. I've done that already today, more than once. Despite vowing that I wouldn't, I avoided Elmhirst Road when I went back to school to check on Sophie; I went via Upper Heckencott again, there and back. I did

the same both ways when I went to collect Ethan and Sophie at the end of the day, though on each of the four journeys I lied to myself right up until the second before I chickened out.

I slide the wheels of my chair closer to the computer. The eleven asterisks that represent the hidden letters of my password are still sitting there, in the box. My password is ‘~~11asterisks~~’. I’m still proud of myself for thinking of that: the password that in attempting to conceal itself does the opposite – reveals itself so brazenly that no one would ever guess.

Wincing, I press the ‘return’ key before I can change my mind.

I gasp when I see my inbox. There are seven unread emails from Gavin. Seven.

Thank you, thank you.

No point pretending this surge of excitement is anything else. Even a talented self-deceiver like me wouldn’t swallow that one.

I’d have given up before I wrote the seventh email, however distraught I was. Gavin didn’t.

This is it: why I lie, and keep secrets, and take crazy risks – for this feeling. No chemical could give me the same buzz: the thrill of being so wanted, so sought after.

I start to open the messages, one by one. They were all sent within four days of my decision to break off contact with Gavin: four on the first day of my silence and then one on each consecutive day after that.

Hi Nicki, I’m writing to check that my last email to you didn’t go astray. Let me know. G.

It’s pathetic, isn’t it, me worrying because you haven’t emailed me for a few hours? Don’t want you to think I can’t last a day or even several without hearing from you, but you know what it’s like – once a pattern’s been established, any disruption to said pattern causes concern. And did you realise that we’ve emailed each other **at least** twenty times a day since we started? G.

PS – in case you've forgotten when our exchange started, it was 24 February. You made a reference once to deleting all your emails from me, for security. I deliberately kept shtum (not wanting you to think I'm careless about security, which I'm not) and I don't know if you assumed that I delete all your emails after reading too, but I don't. I keep them. I reread them. They mean a lot to me. I hope that's OK with you. That's why I wasn't upset by the idea of you deleting your side of our conversation, because I'm keeping it safe at my end. Don't worry. I promise you no one but me will ever see it. G.

PPS – feelings, eh? They complicate things, don't they? I hope I haven't freaked you out by writing about what can only be described as non-carnal matters. I won't make a habit of it, I promise. Let me know you're OK and aren't sick of me yet, and I'll go back to talking mainly about your nipples, I promise. (Well, I might cover a few other parts of your body, to be fair. In my emails and, in due course, with my own body – I hope.) G.

No, no, no. This is wrong.

I feel dizzy, disorientated. I want and need words from Gavin, but not these words. This doesn't sound like him. This sounds too much like a real person, someone I might know or be friends with. Gavin has always sounded like . . .

What?

Like something automated. Short toneless sentences, short paragraphs. Like an android giving erotic instructions. The kind of written voice that disembodied words on a screen might have if they had a voice.

And that was exactly what you wanted, wasn't it? What does that say about you?

In due course with his own body? Did he really mean that? Do I want him to mean it?

Gavin and I arranged to meet once, in May, after agreeing we were ready to take things to the next level. Then he had to

cancel; he didn't say why. After that, neither of us mentioned rearranging. I didn't mind. Secretly, I was relieved. If we didn't meet, that meant that what I was doing wasn't as bad. If I thought of him as unreal, one-dimensional, a computer program generating words designed to elicit a specific physical response, then I could almost persuade myself that I didn't really have another man in my life, one who wasn't my husband.

Still wrong.

Not as grievously wrong as a physical affair, though. Maybe. And the emails were enough. God, they were so much more than enough: endless, detailed, graphically descriptive orders from a man I'd never met, whose face I'd never seen, not even in a photograph. None of my real-life lovers has ever been so uninhibited in the words he used or the things he asked and expected me to do – and nor was I ever so . . . pornographic, for want of a better word, with any of them. Gavin swept away all my inhibitions by ignoring them completely, refusing to acknowledge they existed and simply repeating his demands. Eventually, I stopped bothering to mention that I was too shy and simply did as I was told.

And loved it. Craved more and more of it.

All I know about Gavin is that he's English, in his mid-forties, married with no children and works from home. That's what he's told me, anyway. I suppose any or all of it might not be true. I didn't and don't really care. All I cared about was the way he made me feel. On two occasions, his insistent explicit words alone were enough to push me over the edge – just the words and my imagination, and not even a brush of a fingertip. No other man has ever had that effect on me.

Not even King Edward.

Whom I swore I wouldn't allow into my mind again. That's why Gavin: to block out King Edward. Amazing, really, how well it worked.

Until now.

I am gasping for breath, though I've done nothing physically strenuous. I grip the desk to steady myself.

Think about Gavin. Not . . . anybody else. Gavin.

The blank tonelessness of his words was an important part of the attraction. So different. And yet three of the four new messages from him that I've just read – all but the first one – don't sound like him at all. Did my abandonment panic him so much that his online persona slipped?

I promise you no one but me will ever see it . . .

I won't make a habit of it, I promise . . .

I'll go back to talking mainly about your nipples, I promise . . .

Feelings, eh?

A shudder rocks my body. I don't want Gavin's feelings or his promises. King Edward gave me feelings and promises, and they counted for nothing in the end. And I don't want amusing banter and wordplay from Gavin either. Adam jokes around. So did King Edward. I love witty men, normally. I mean, I used to.

You still do love Adam. Never forget that.

Gavin has never been funny, warm or affectionate before. It's the reason I felt safe in my dealings with him. I wanted and needed him to be avid but not caring, never emotional. I can't stand to think of him as a vulnerable man whose heart I might have broken.

I don't want to think about him any more today – it's already too much – but I can't log out, not without reading everything.

I open message number five:

Nicki, seriously, are you OK? I'm starting to indulge in paranoid worst-case-scenario delusions here. Has your husband found out about us? Have you found out something about me? Are you in hospital, with no access to email? G.

Nicki? Where are you? G.

Do you want to hear my latest theory? You always sign your emails 'N x'. I always sign mine 'G'. You've decided I'm a cold,

emotionless husk because I won't sign off with a kiss. That's why you've gone missing from my cyber-life. Right? For your information, I've never signed emails with an 'x' and I don't think I ever would, however I felt about someone. It's fine when women do it, but from a man it would look somewhat effeminate, I think. Also, I can't believe this would bother you suddenly when it never has before? Or maybe it has, and you've been waiting and hoping . . . ? Look, I'm a big boy. I can handle honesty. Will you tell me what I've done wrong? G x (just this once, for strategic effect, because . . . well, because I'm rather fond of you, Nicki. Perhaps I should have said so before.)

No. No. This is unbearable.

Kind, sincere, affectionate words. Of all the things to become phobic about. *Fuck you, King Edward. You're to blame for this.*

I'm glad there's no mirror in this room. I would hate to see what I look like.

A disaster area. There's not a person on the planet who wouldn't be better off without you in their lives, not even your children.

Instead of shutting the computer down and running away, I force myself to read all seven of Gavin's emails again – not once but several times. By the time I've finished, the words seem less threatening and my hands have stopped shaking.

How can he care about me this much? He barely knows me. Correction: he doesn't know me at all.

And yet, not knowing him either, I care about him too. The way he rescued me from the brink . . .

Far from objecting to it, I like the little dot he always puts after his initial. I like his vulgar email address, mr_jugs@hush-mail.com, and his habit of putting two asterisks on either side of a word or group of words to convey insistence.

Have you found out something about me? What did he mean by that?

What should I do?

No one to ask, or answer, apart from myself. At one time, I'd have told Melissa. I told her everything, before she resigned from her position as my confidante.

There is no one I can think of – not one single person in my life – who would be interested in discussing the changeable writing style of a man who goes by the name of 'Mr Jugs' in order to seek anonymous physical gratification online.

If I ever did muster the courage to tell anybody, I would get no useful analysis, and plenty of soul-destroying condemnation: from my female friends, my brother, my parents; from Adam, assuming he'd speak to me ever again if he knew the truth, and not simply throw me out on the street in horror. And – though I hate to think about it – I would get shock and disgust from Sophie and Ethan too. They might only be ten and eight, but they understand what betrayal is even if they wouldn't use the word.

My children. Who are downstairs. Who believe I'm looking after them because all three of us are in the house at the same time and I'm the adult.

Tears fill my eyes as a violent internal current sweeps my breath away. This used to happen a lot before I stopped emailing Gavin, often when I was sitting here, in front of the computer screen: a sudden flood of realisation that something terrible is happening – something precious is being irrevocably destroyed – and, though it's my fault, I can't stop it. I have no control.

Four or five seconds later, my eyes are dry, and I can breathe easily. I couldn't recreate the doomed feeling if I tried; it's as if it never happened.

I press my eyes shut so that I can't see the computer in front of me, and wish that the Internet had never been invented. I tell myself that I absolutely mustn't – *must not* – email Gavin, for the sake of my family, but instead of hearing my own voice saying the words, I hear Melissa's, which blend with the sand-haired policeman's, though neither of them has ever said those words to me.

Their judgement, though I've conjured it out of nowhere, is too heavy a burden to bear. I can only escape if I defy it outright.

I should reread Gavin's messages once more before writing to him – allow their significance to sink in. There might be something I've missed . . .

No. No time. Adam will be home any minute. And Gavin has waited long enough to hear from me. I might still matter to him as much as I did when he sent those emails; by tomorrow, he might have stopped caring. I don't want to leave it too late.

I open his most recent message and press 'reply'. My fingers are numb, unreliable. It takes me three attempts to manage 'Hi Gavin' without typos. Then I delete it and write, 'Dear Gavin,' instead. 'Hi' is too casual.

I'm so sorry I haven't replied before now. Until today, I haven't opened my Hushmail account for more than three weeks. I decided I couldn't do what we were doing any more. It was nothing you did wrong, so please don't worry about that. I don't want to go into detail, but I had a minor skirmish with the police that was kind of linked to my involvement with you. It shook me up and I lost what little courage I had. I decided we had to stop before something irreversible happened. In an ideal world, I would love for us to be in touch again. You saved my sanity and brought unexpected pleasure into the darkest patch of my life. But it's just not possible. Once again, I'm so sorry. I wish you all the very best. N x

I press 'send', wiping away my tears with my other hand. There. I've done the right thing for once. I'm glad the urge to behave honourably doesn't seize me more often if this is how it feels: like hollowing out my heart and stuffing it full of greyness.

The darkest patch of my life. Was that an over-the-top way to put it?

In February, thanks to King Edward – King Edward VII, to give him his full alias – I considered taking my own life. For a few days I wasn't sure that even the thought of Sophie and

Ethan, motherless, would be enough to persuade me to stay in this world.

I'm about to sign out of Hushmail when a new message appears in the inbox.

Gavin. Oh God. Christ, God. Of course it's him: no one else knows I have this email address. I used to email King Edward from a Gmail account. I didn't know Hushmail existed until I answered Gavin's advertisement and he wrote back from a Hushmail account.

How has he managed to reply so quickly? Has he been sitting in front of his computer for three weeks and four days, waiting?

I hope he hasn't. Almost as much as I hope he has.

I try to grasp the mouse, aim wrong and knock it off the table. Having restored it to its place on the mat, I take a deep breath and click to open the message.

It's one line long:

More detail about your encounter with the police, please. G.

I type an equally short response:

No. It was horrendous. I want to forget it ever happened.

I don't sign off with my usual 'N x'. I hope this is a tactful way of demonstrating that we are no longer an item, insofar as we ever were. My replying doesn't mean I've entered back into a correspondence with him, and this exchange has nothing to do with sex. He's just being nosey; as soon as he sees that it won't work, he'll give up.

Another new email appears in my inbox. I open it.

All right, so you had a brush with the police and decided you couldn't write to me any more – fair enough (or I'm sure it would be, if I understood why). So what changed today? Did they only just let you out of jail? G.

I smile in spite of myself.

So, Gavin turns out to have a sense of humour. Is that so bad? Not all charming, funny men are evil. Adam, for example.

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I want to answer, but how can I justify responding a second time if I really want to break this off?

Does Gavin think that if he puts nothing sexual in his messages, I'll decide it's OK to write to him?

If we're not going to do the cyber-sex thing, what's in it for him? Or for me?

I don't want him as a platonic friend. That would be awful. If I have to choose between types of loss – and it appears that I do – I'd rather have the sudden dizzying kind, not a long-drawn-out diminishment.

I type:

No jail. I saw the same policeman again today. It reminded me that it was because of him that I'd stopped writing to you. I decided I owed you an explanation. That's all. Please stop emailing me. I don't want to be your pen pal. All or nothing for me, and it has to be nothing. Again, I'm so sorry. N x

I press 'send'.

All done.

Log out, Nicki. Why are you still sitting here, staring at your inbox? How devastated will you be if he doesn't write back immediately?

Then why did you order him not to?

His reply arrives within seconds.

I agree: you owe me an explanation. What happened with the policeman? First time and second time, please. All or nothing is a sound principle – and since you've already given me some of the story, you must now supply all of it. G.

This sounds more like the Gavin I'm familiar with: wooden. Giving me orders. Desire stirs inside me. I shift in my chair.

Should I tell him? If I don't, he'll never understand, not really. Can I bring myself to write what happened in an email? The prospect makes my skin prickle.

I click on 'reply'. Downstairs, a door bangs shut, making me jump.

'Kids!' I call out. 'Don't slam the door!'

'Not kids. Me. Sorry.'

Adam. *Shit.*

Terror floods my body, freezing me in place. It's a few seconds before I can move again. I grab the mouse. 'I'll be down in a sec,' I shout. *Please don't come upstairs.*

What will Adam do? I listen for clues, with the cursor hovering over 'Sign Out' in the top right-hand corner of the screen. *Please go into the kitchen, Adam. I need a few more seconds . . .*

I hear the creak of a door – the lounge, I'm guessing – followed by Adam trying unsuccessfully to talk to the children. He gives up after a minute or so. I hold my breath, listening for footsteps on the stairs.

Nothing. He must have gone into the kitchen, or to the loo.

You don't know that. Sign out. Don't risk it.

I type:

Need to go now. Might explain later. No promises, though. Bye. N x

I press 'send', then sign out. Then I go to 'History', click on 'Show All History' and delete all the Hushmail entries. I'm so grateful that I can do this. It's the online equivalent of saying a few Hail Marys and being absolved of all your sins. *Thank you, technology.*

What next? I can't think straight. Oh yes, I know: Yahoo Mail, my respectable email account.

Adam pushes open the box-room door as I'm opening a message from my mum. 'Hi, hon,' he says. 'OK day?'

‘Brilliant, thanks,’ I tell him. ‘You?’

‘Why brilliant?’

‘Well, actually . . . not *that* brilliant.’ *Come on, Brain, start working, for fuck’s sake.* I have nothing to be excited about, not officially. I must keep this in mind – for the rest of my life, ideally.

It’s a good sign that, after only three weeks and four days of being good, I am already much worse at lying.

I’m not going to start lying to Adam again. I can’t.

‘I had to go to school and back four times,’ I say. The email from my mother about when we’re next all going to get together is still up on the screen. Not at all secret from my husband, but still . . . I ought to feel more guilty about this ongoing correspondence than I do about the one with Gavin.

If I’m making a list of people to cut off contact with, my parents have surely earned their place at the top.

You’re not cutting anyone off, though, are you? You never will.

How did I not hear Adam on the stairs? He could so easily have caught me.

But he didn’t.

Being bad and getting away with it: there’s no feeling like it.

Who's a Bad Sport, Keiran?

Damon Blundy, 6 September 2011, *Daily Herald Online*

In *The Times* yesterday, Keiran Holland explained why he believes that disgraced sprinter Bryn Gilligan doesn't deserve a second chance, now or ever. Having read Holland's sermon and found it unpalatable, both conceptually and digestively, I would like to offer Holland one of the greatest gifts one human being can offer another. By coincidence, it's the very thing he seeks to deny Gilligan: the gift of a second chance. Keiran, you must be embarrassed about what you wrote, so why don't I take a week off to reread my Jeeves and Woosters, and you take my next column, with my blessing. Use it wisely. By which I mean, use it to lament the ethical cataracts that prevented you from seeing clearly in the bad old days (yesterday, this morning) when you were a hapless churner-out of received opinion.

My regular readers know all about Bryn Gilligan, since I've written about him more than once. Gilligan was found guilty of doping and, having first protested his innocence, eventually made a full confession and apologised. Later, he apologised more satisfactorily, for all the good it did him. Yesterday, his appeal to overturn his lifetime Olympic ban was rejected by the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Keiran Holland believes Gilligan's life sentence must remain in place because 'His contrition is plainly not genuine.' 'If that sounds harsh, it isn't,' Holland assures us. 'Bryn Gilligan is a liar and a cheat, and has admitted as much himself.'

There's a problem with this argument that I hope all proud owners of more than half a brain cell will be able to spot instantly. It was the lying and cheating Gilligan did that created the occasion for his apology. People who say sorry tend, on the whole, to be those who have made mistakes, often serious ones. If the fact of their having done something wrong dictates that we mustn't accept their apologies, doesn't that mean there's no point in anybody apologising for anything ever again? Should contrition be banned outright?

Keiran Holland doesn't think so. If he did, I might have more respect

for him. Personally, I'm a fan of the centuries-old tradition of acknowledging one has cocked up and resolving to do better in future, but I respect a man who can hold a consistent line on an issue, however outlandish. Keiran Holland is not that man. As usual, he simply hasn't thought it through. Indeed, what he claims to have wanted from Gilligan was a *better* apology, one that was less 'weaselly'. Holland wanted the pure, special stuff: contrition of the highest grade.

Would he have forgiven Gilligan and lobbied for the lifting of his ban if he'd got the abject grovel-fest he was after? No – as evidenced by his response to Gilligan's subsequent more fulsome apology, which can be summarised as 'He's only grovelling now because he saw that his original rubbish apology wasn't cutting any ice, therefore we must continue to haul him over the coals forever.' Forgetting that Inspector Javert is nobody's favourite character in *Les Misérables*, Holland omits to explain why a perfectly worded apology that follows cheating at sport plus a flawed apology is unacceptable, while arguing that the very same perfect apology after *only* cheating at sport would have been ideal. Logically, it doesn't stack up.

While I agree that Gilligan's use of the word 'oversight' in his initial statement and in relation to deliberately pumping himself full of banned substances before each race was an evasion at best – indeed, I said so here – what I find remarkable is that Holland seems to have no idea why Gilligan's first reaction to being exposed as a sinner might have been so inadequate. The apologies of disgraced celebrities tend to be, don't they? 'I'm sorry, but . . .' when there is no possible 'but'; 'I'm sorry for the part I played' when no one else played any role at all; 'I'm sorry if certain people were offended' when only those under general anaesthetic could fail to take offence, so unquestionably vile was the transgression. I hope I'm not the only person who has noticed that deficient apologies seem to be perennially in vogue. There's an obvious reason for this – so obvious that I'm not going to waste time explaining.

I'm keen to know why Holland is so lacking in compassion where Bryn Gilligan is concerned. What is it about the combination of drug-taking and cheating that he so objects to, when he has no problem

with either one in isolation? He cheated on his wife for at least six months with Paula Riddiough, former Labour MP and saboteur of her only son's education (though to be fair, any red-blooded male would be tempted by the luscious Paula), so it can't be Gilligan's prolonged dishonesty that bothers Holland. A cheat himself, one might hope he would show a bit of leniency towards his underhand compadres. I've had the misfortune to be married twice – to Princess Doormat and Dr Despot – and I cheated on them both with gay abandon of the heterosexual kind. It's a sad fact that however beautiful the woman you marry, you will always meet one who is more or equally beautiful, eager to wrap her limbs around you and possessed of the additional appeal of being not-your-wife. So . . . having said all that, am I shocked to the core that Bryn Gilligan broke the rules in order to win races? No. How could I be, as a rule-breaker myself? To paraphrase the well-known adage, I read news stories about the repugnant behaviour of famous people to know that I am not alone.

Is it the drugs, then, that Keiran Holland can't forgive? No, I can prove it's not that. Holland was one of the judges, in the Supernatural/Horror category, of this year's Books Enhance Lives Awards. The unanimously chosen winner in that category was Reuben Tasker for his novel *Craving and Aversion*, which begins with the line 'Every translucent love contains particles of rot-green hate.' Only if you're paranormally stoned, I'm afraid, Reuben.

Tasker's enduring devotion to cannabis is an open secret in the literary world, as is his belief that the drug expands his imagination. He's on record as saying he doesn't think he'd be able to write a book worth anyone's time without it. Assuming some or all of this year's other Supernatural/Horror contenders are tediously abstemious on the narcotics front, doesn't that mean that Tasker's drug-taking might have given him an unfair edge over the competition? Shouldn't he have to give back his prize money, arrange a head-hung-in-shame photo-shoot and sob within dampening distance of Piers Morgan?

Did this dilemma cross Keiran Holland's mind even for a fleeting instant? Did it occur to him retrospectively, as condemnations of Bryn Gilligan poured forth from his keyboard, that he was one of a panel

Sophie Hannah

of judges that awarded a prestigious prize to a law-breaking substance abuser?

Before everyone jumps down my throat: yes, of course I can see that the two cases are different – cannabis is not as unambiguously performance-enhancing as whatever it was that Gilligan took. One writer's prose might be boosted by illegal drugs, another's by instant Nescafé or the sugar rush from a packet of Minstrels. My own reaction to cannabis is to fall asleep within ten seconds of ingesting it, so it wouldn't do anything for my writing style, whereas a strong cup of brick-coloured tea is all I need in order to be able to produce the seamless brilliance you're reading now.

So, yes, it's different. But is it different in a way that matters, assuming one doesn't believe rules should be adhered to simply because they're there? I don't think it is. I think it's crazy that sports-people are subject to such different constraints from writers and artists when it comes to professional competitions. How can the discrepancy be justified? More interestingly, how can Keiran Holland's hypocrisy be justified?

'He's a liar and a cheat.' Yes, Keiran – you are, aren't you?