



*There's Something Wrong with JJ*

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Stigma & 'Madness': Understanding the Development  
of Mental Health Themes in Young Adult Literature  
and the Impact Upon the Novelist's Creative Process

A Thesis Submitted for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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## Title of Proposal

*There's Something Wrong with JJ*

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Stigma & 'Madness': Understanding the Development of Mental Health Themes in Young Adult Literature and the Impact Upon the Novelist's Creative Process

## Abstract

This practice-based PhD consists of two elements:

Part 1: A YA novel titled *There's Something Wrong with JJ*, depicting the development of depersonalisation disorder (DPD) in a seventeen-year-old boy. The novel is intended to be a fictional yet realistic depiction of DPD drawn from an understanding of the condition through educational literature.

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Part 2: Stigma & 'Madness': Understanding the Development of Mental Health Themes in Young Adult Literature and the Impact Upon the Novelist's Creative Process – a research piece seeking to analyse and evaluate various portrayals of mental illness in Young Adult fiction, with a focus on depression, anxiety, dissociative states, and detachment. The thesis will look at the development of YA fiction with regards to such illnesses, considering how awareness of such illnesses has risen, more disorders have been labelled and stigmas have been broken. YA fiction often deals with these illnesses and their development through events such as, but not limited to, death, divorce, drug use, abuse during adolescence and other traumatic experiences. Therefore, YA is the primary genre within this research, though brief exploration into cross-genre works will also benefit the analysis. An investigation of the term 'sick-lit' and the genre will be given to understand its role in literature, the consideration of mental health subject matter by the writer, and the representation presented to a YA audience including those who are suffering with mental health conditions. The purposes of fiction will also be investigated, with consideration of profitability vs social responsibility. Self-reflection on the writing and researching process will be included at the latter stages of the research piece.

## Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my supervisors at Brunel University – Dr. Sarah Penny and Dr. Hannah Lowe – for their expertise, guidance, and invaluable insights into my research. I am grateful for the time that they have spent assisting me over the last four years, for the analyses they have provided for my work, and for seeing the value of my project in the first place.

The researchers who have come before me and feature in this thesis have also been integral to this project. Without their hard work and knowledge, I would not have been able to develop my own research in this field to the degree that I have. I hope my project can provide the same value to future researchers.

I would also like to thank my girlfriend, family, and close friends who have only ever encouraged me to pursue my academic goals, supported me unwaveringly throughout, and have kept me calm during a very busy period of my life.

Lastly, owing to the subject matter of this work, I would like to make mention of those throughout the world who suffer from mental illness, particularly through the challenges of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Much of my work is about fiction, but the subject itself is far from this. Continuing to have open discussions about mental health and shedding light on the unknown aspects of mental illness is essential for progression. I would encourage anyone suffering to reach out for help, and I hope that ongoing research can improve the knowledge and stigma surrounding this subject.

I. *There's Something Wrong with JJ* by Brady Clark

There's Something Wrong with JJ

by

Brady Clark

Now

## Prologue (2018)

It has a few names – depersonalisation, derealisation, dissociation. Apparently, anything beginning with D. At its most basic – depression. Detachment. Destruction. Deprivation. Most settle for DPD – a terrifying acronym that simplifies a hellacious existence into three letters.

It is a fog. One that has never really disappeared since its inception. But DPD doesn't allow for confidence in even that suspicion. It oozes self-doubt and lacks any form of grounding but never quite tears you from reality itself. You know what is real and what isn't. It just doesn't feel like either of those things. I can't help but suspect that ridding me of common sense may have been the mercy I needed, fully withdrawing from reality.

I speak as though I am an expert. As though I hadn't heard the name of it a few weeks ago. The doctor didn't sound all that sure about it either. The name doesn't matter. If it is real or not, it doesn't matter. There is little hope.

I am nearly twenty-five, returning to London for the first time in six years.

My key enables a green flash on the card reader under the handle.

I stop sweating the second I get into the hotel room, as though my body is determined to sell me out in public but keep my secrets so long as it is just us. I go to the window and pull the curtains shut, blocking the view of the Thames I had once unconsciously dipped my legs into in the dead of night. Back when it was all so new. So innocent and non-defining. Before it was this.

The flight had been long and torturous. The Valium barely touched the sides and I didn't even ask the flight attendant for a second whiskey at risk of being restrained or thrown off of the aircraft altogether. The shaking and tapping must have been suspicious enough.

I throw my rucksack onto the bed and tend to the plastic bag now placed on the table. Two bottles of cheap bourbon clink together. I take one out and spin off the cap. There are two glasses next to the coffee machine. I pour the whiskey out into both and touch one with the other before pouring the drink down my neck.

I pull out my phone and send the same text to three people, praying one of them would still work. But there were too many variables after so many years. Changed number, out of business, different location...

I have two Valium left in the front pocket of my rucksack. I take them out and use the empty tumbler to crush them on the table. I put my nose to the surface and sweep it all in with two sniffs.

The fog in my eyes wavers for a moment before reforming.



I catch my reflection in the tall mirror. My hair is thick and greasy, partly tucked behind my ears. It hasn't seen a brush in weeks. It doesn't feel like it is on my scalp. My grey t-shirt is torn at the bottom and my blue jeans dirty with blackish stains. I can barely feel the clothes on my body. I tear the top sheet from the bed and throw it over the mirror. I am sick of looking at my own reflection and seeing a stranger.

There is a stir behind me.

Dad is sat in the corner chair, the other tumbler of whiskey in his hand. He doesn't take a sip, but twiddles the glass around and around effortlessly whilst he stares from me to the curtains and then back again. I know he isn't there. It is the Valium, the withdrawal or the lack of sleep after a ten-hour flight fooling my mind. It is the disease sliding through my brain like a conniving viper, continually spreading damage as it moves, but never quite pouncing. The slow kill.

'Why did you come back?' Dad asks me. 'They won't want to see you.'

'I'm not here for that,' I say.

'Yes, you are. You can't lie to me, JJ.'

'Fuck off then.'

I turn to top up my whiskey. The other tumbler is on the side again.

The chair is empty. Dad is already gone. A brief and pointless stop in – perhaps his forte.

My phone buzzes.

*Give me address. £250.*

A surge of relief courses through me. Good old – I look back at my phone – Connor. I text him the address and get on to the bed, sitting cross-legged and rocking slightly to try and calm myself.

I try to remember the last time I had been in Kingston. Although I knew what had happened, although I knew it *had* happened, I just couldn't see it. It was real, but it didn't feel it. I could see Felix in my head. Alicia. Uncle Pat. They were all clear. But my existence next to them, in memories that I know to be true, is so foggy that I can't break through to accepting it.

Were they true? Truth and memory are a conflicting couple. I once read that a memory distorts each time you remember. So much so, that the next time, instead of remembering the event, you remember the memory, which is likely already inaccurate in some sense. Therefore, every time you remember, you're simply lying to yourself a little bit more. Drifting further from reality and into what you wanted to have happened in that moment rather than what did happen.

Memories are lies to even the healthy brain – what chance do I have?

I even struggle to remember the journey back to London, a memory not more than 24 hours old. I had been on the plane in body, but my mind was outside the aircraft, navigating the clouds. My voice allowed me to have a conversation with the old man sat next to me in the aisle seat, but it wasn't me talking to him, asking him about his recently passed wife who he had been with for over fifty years. It wasn't me who could see the water start to form in his eyes as he described her every beautiful feature and kind soul. I hadn't been there really.

A knock at the door. I pull it to, slipping the cash out and receiving the small paper bag without looking at Connor. I don't want to see him. It is just another face for the fog to consume. He is better off just being a number in my phone. I am also pleased to use up the small amount of English money I have. It doesn't look right to me after six years.

I tip the contents of the bag onto the table. Two grams of cocaine and two containers of oxycodone.

I take two pills of oxy and get to work crushing the first bag of coke into smaller powder. There is a dollar bill in my wallet – I roll it tight. The first line is a shot of relief and adrenaline to the body in equal measure. The fog mostly clears, in a lazy fashion, and I see the hotel room in full colour and dimensions for the first time. I am tempted to open the curtains but know it will only make things worse. Instead, I pace between the window and the door, one eye on the spot where Dad had made his appearance.

'Useless fucking prick,' I say to the empty chair. 'Useless *fucking* prick!'

I take another drink of whiskey. It tastes like shit. I throw the tumbler against the wall and the glass shatters all over the hotel room floor. I pick up the whiskey bottle and drink straight from it. For some reason, that helps. I take another line every quarter hour and another pill each hour.

I know the state I am in. But it is the most normal I can feel. Anger and loneliness are at least in good company in my mind. I don't mind *them* so much. The fog is worse. It is a different kind of loneliness; an incurable one. One no one else could possibly understand. The drugs, the booze – they keep it at bay. I know what I'm doing, how I'm abusing them. But a temporary cure for the fog is necessary in absence of a permanent one.

I didn't expect to live past 30, but it was better to burn out young than live old in the fog. It had been seven years, almost to the day, since the Doctor had told me that he had known my father.

I see that as the day that it began. Was it just a simple toke on a joint that started everything? Or was it always meant to have happened like this? Alicia's face comes back into my mind. Her black hair is as erratic as ever. I can smell the raspberry shampoo. And then I take another line and all I can smell is cocaine. Alicia vanishes from

my head. I pull the tv off of the stand and launch it against the wardrobe door, a mess of pulled wires, chipped plastic and screen fragments springing from the collision.

Then I am somewhere else. The leaves are blowing around everyone's ankles at the funeral.

There is another knock on the door which jogs me back. Perhaps I had shorted Connor for the drugs? Maybe the person next door had heard the telly smash or me shouting abuse at my dead father? It would be the hotel staff, ready to throw me from the building, tearing me from my newly formed and expertly trashed pit of despair.

I pull the door back with the chain still on. At first, there is no one there – the fog is too thick to see through. But after a moment, as the next line of cocaine kicks in and clears the weather, the face of my brother Felix comes into focus, a little more lined and beardy than I remember.

Then

## One (2011)

The fog first appeared inside Alicia's room, the same day the Doctor called me into his study.

It washed over my vision like a lowering blind, steadily misting the cream walls and purple duvet set. It wove its way around my head and sent wisps up my nose. There was a blackness in my mind. A pulsating rage somehow equalled out by a determined calmness, the ensuing battle making my chest feel as though it might explode. My right arm was shaking. It wasn't the weed.

'You okay, JJ? You're looking a little pale.' Alicia was lying on her side on the floor next to me. Her eyes were red and vacant. She looked even prettier in her intoxication, her white vest and flowery skirt combo hugging a well-toned figure as she took another drag. I wanted to run my hand over her smooth arms but I was shaking. I didn't want Alicia to realise.

'Yes, I'm okay.'

I wasn't okay. Some sort of switch had flicked off inside of me. I held my right arm still with my left.

Alicia sat up and lit the spliff again. 'You want more?' She held it out but I declined. 'Suit yourself.' She started to nod along to an awful drum and bass track coming from the bedside radio. I longed for her tranquillity.

As she lay back down, Alicia put her head on my chest and entangled her legs with mine. I was scared my heartbeat would give away my unease. I didn't want her to think I was a lightweight, unable to handle a couple of puffs – we'd only been going out a few months.

I tried to blink the fog away, but the lowered blind couldn't be lifted. Everything was further from me than it should have been. The angles of the furniture and wall corners were off. Alicia's slicked curly hair was constantly changing below my chin as though it were blackened spaghetti gently wriggling in a saucepan. It definitely wasn't the weed.

I reached up to the radio and flicked through the pre-set stations until something resembling music found my ear. I didn't know the artist but I recognised the tune, the upbeat tempo, the lyrics...'*I ain't nothing but tired, man, I'm just tired and bored with myself...*'

As I laid back down, I focused on the ceiling shade directly above my head. That was purple too – the worst colour theme for a room. You could see the little black dots of all the dead bugs that had flown into the hot bulb on the other side and landed in the bowl. A graveyard of moths, flies and mosquitoes hanging above us. The thought of the tiny

little singe as they touched the surface of the bulb and joined their brothers and sisters in the pit below made me want to laugh and cry.

*'You can't start a fire...you can't start a fire without a spark...'*

'Did you read it yet?' Alicia asked.

It took me a moment to dispel the dead bugs from my thoughts and recall what she was talking about. I remembered her worn copy of Crime and Punishment on my bedside table.

'Are you kidding? It's like a thousand pages, you only gave it to me Friday.'

'It's not that long. Did you start it at least?'

I had barely read twenty pages. The Russian names threw me off. I couldn't wrap my head around who was who. I had only read two books before and that was through force for GCSEs. But Crime and Punishment made me miss the simplicity of Of Mice and Men and To Kill a Mockingbird.

Alicia was much better than me. She thrived at school, but not in a dorky way. The bookshelf downstairs, filled with classics, medicinal encyclopaedias and volumes upon volumes of legal history, was her playground as much as her father's.

'You'll enjoy it,' she said. 'It's about karma, and...redemption, and...power.'

'I'll get around to it.'

'Whatever you say, Jim-Joe.'

'If I promise to read it, will you promise to stop calling me that?' It was bad enough from Uncle Pat.

Alicia ignored me. She unbuttoned my jeans and pulled the zipper down before sliding her hand down my boxers. She nestled her face into my neck, closing her teeth gently on my skin.

*'You can't start a fire...sitting 'round crying over a broken heart...'*

'Can I call you Jim-Joe now?' Alicia asked.

I was about to take off her vest when the front door slammed shut below us.

'Shit!' Alicia said. 'I thought we had at least another hour. Shit, shit, shit.' She pulled her hand back from out of my boxers and jumped to her feet, flapping her hands at the smoke. 'Are you just going to lay there? Open the bloody window, would you?'

I got up, forgetting that my jeans were undone. They slid down to my knees, nearly tripping me as I hastened to the window. I pulled them back up and buttoned them before flinging the window wide open and attempting to usher the smoke out into the late afternoon heat.

I'd advised using the perfectly good shed at the bottom of the Beach's garden but I could only think that Alicia didn't mind being caught all that much. The panic was just an act for my benefit.

There was a thudding up the stairs, too fast to be Alicia's mother. For some reason I felt the need to turn the radio off, letting the sounds of Dancing in the Dark disappear as though our true crime was hidden in the song.

The door to the bedroom flung open and an animated twelve-year-old stood in the doorway, his chest heaving up and down as he tried to catch his breath again. He had a smile on his face, his teeth bared and eyes electrified with a menacing excitement.

'JJ's here!' Tom announced to no one in particular. The hockey stick brandished in his hands might have made him threatening to the unacquainted. Fortunately, I had maybe half a dozen experiences of Alicia's brother's excitement before this.

'Hockey practice?' I asked him.

'They had to cancel it halfway through. Jeremy Jeffcock hit Mr Rogers in the head with the hockey ball – there was so much blood! We had to go and get help. An ambulance came and everything,' Tom said. He looked thrilled and lacked any sympathy for his coach.

His nostrils flared and a curious look fell upon his face.

'Is that smoke-'

'Did Mr Rogers have to go to hospital?' Alicia asked, hurriedly.

The curiousness vanished. 'Yes. It means we'll have a sub for PE tomorrow!'

Mrs Beach appeared at the top of the staircase. 'Go and wash up for dinner, Tom. I told you not to dillydally!'

He rolled his eyes for mine and Alicia's benefit before disappearing down the hall to his bedroom.

'Hello Mrs Beach,' I said.

'Hello JJ. I've told you to call me Janet a million times.'

I only still called her Mrs Beach once in a while so she could reinstall my confidence that we were on a first name basis. I liked her a lot. Uncle Pat said that you weren't supposed to like your girlfriend's mother but I couldn't help it. She was so calm, kind and motherly. I wasn't used to that.

Janet's face turned and she slid her glasses down her nose to watch us from over the top of them. She had undoubtedly smelled the weed. She folded her arms and glared at Alicia who seemed to be trying not to laugh.

'Thought you'd be longer,' Alicia said, feigning guilt.

'Oh, you did, did you?'

A little snort escaped Alicia as her chest bobbed up and down. Her now complete lack of panic was a little too blatant. Mrs Beach seemed far less mad than what I suspected a parent should be.

'Dinner won't be long – you're going to be hungry. Alicia' – she turned back to face her daughter – 'best spray something before your father gets home.'

Alicia's face went red trying to hold in another giggle.

'And JJ...'

'Yeah?'

'Your zipper is undone.'

When we sat down for dinner, Alicia and I kept our heads low, only looking up to receive the large dish of steaming chilli in order to fill our plates. I was nervous not only because I was high for the first time, but I had never had dinner with the Beachs before and my foggy mind appeared to be turning to mulch.

'I hope you don't mind it too spicy, JJ,' Janet said. 'Might flush your system a bit too.'

'Why would he need to do that?' Tom asked as he shoved a large spoonful of rice into his mouth.

'Sounds a bit nasally,' Janet replied, quickly covering. 'Chilli is good for a cold.'

'Oh, right,' Tom said, completely oblivious.

The front door went once more.

'Mattie?' Janet called out.

'Evening all!' Dr Beach appeared in the lounge, shedding his grey blazer and throwing it over the back of the sofa before walking through the archway to take his place at the head of the table. 'How has everyone's day been? Oh, hello JJ. I didn't know you'd be joining us.'

'Yes, I hope that's okay?' I said.

'Yes, of course it is. Chilli is it, Janet?'

'Your observational skills astound me Doctor,' she replied. 'Pass me your plates,' Janet said to Alicia and I, so she could serve us seconds. It didn't seem as though she was going to rat us out and Dr Beach was oblivious, already tucking into his own chilli, a posh serviette hanging out of the top button of his formal white and light blue striped shirt.

'So, how were your days?' Dr Beach asked again.

Janet started listing through all of the shit someone called Madge had put her through at work that morning, before Tom recalled, in more detail than he had given Alicia and I, the hockey incident with Mr Rogers. I couldn't follow either story and was wondering how Alicia was going to get through describing her day, or how I would mine for that matter, when Dr Beach addressed me directly.

'Are your parents expecting you back at a certain time, JJ?' Dr Beach asked.



Janet shot him a look, but Alicia cut across before anyone could say anything.

'I told you Daddy, JJ lives with his Uncle.'

'Ah yes, yes of course. My memory escapes me. What does he do?'

'He works in IT,' I told him.

'That's...vague,' Dr Beach replied. But something else had taken his mind. He was staring at me more intensely. Had he seen the red in my eyes? Fuck, we were screwed.

'Daddy!' Alicia squawked.

'What? IT could be anything. It is vague.'

'It's okay,' I said, trying to calm Alicia. 'It's vague because I don't really know what he does. Only that he works in IT security.' I'm not supposed to say anything more. Not that I would know what to say – he's not really allowed to talk about it. He works a lot.

Dr Beach was still staring intensely whilst Janet looked from person to person and shuffled uncomfortably in her seat, making the situation scratchier than it actually was. Tom was playing with his hardly eaten second helping, in a world of his own.

'Me and my brother Felix manage to look after ourselves well enough,' I added, to escape the awkward silence.

'And Felix is older or younger?' Janet asked in a much less interrogative fashion.

'Younger by a minute or two.'

'I told you JJ was an identical twin, Ma. You two never listen to anything I say, do you?' Alicia started.

Alicia and her mother continued to bicker as they cleared the plates from the table.

They moved into the kitchen and I realised Dr Beach was still watching me. The intensity had vanished though – he was resigned in his mind. He knew I was high. My face prickled with heat.

'Tom, why don't you go and get ready for bed?' Dr Beach said.

Oh, here we go. I was in for it.

'But my bedtime is 9:30 and it's nowhere near!' he defended.

'Video games it is then.'

Tom zipped from the table, leaving behind the rest of his chilli, his excitement at the rare permission more than apparent. His parents had bought him a PlayStation 3 for his birthday, around about the time Alicia and I had started seeing each other. On one occasion before, he had managed to drag me away from my after-school studies, to get me hooked on the latest wrestling game. I wondered if I could get away with following him to the living room and taking the second controller...

'JJ, do you want a drink?' Dr Beach asked.

'That's okay, thanks, I'm still finishing.' I nodded to the plastic cup filled with squash in front of me, feeling like a child.

‘Does your uncle let you have a proper drink yet?’

The edges of his mouth curved slightly.

‘Come with me,’ Dr Beach said, rising from the table and going out into the hall, not waiting for an answer.

I followed him. We walked past Tom sitting cross-legged in front of the telly in the lounge, engrossed in his game. He made his wrestler spear another to the ground and then went to pick up a blue chair to hit him with whilst he was down.

‘In here.’ Dr Beach slid into the room opposite and waited for me to enter before closing the door behind us.

It was far more majestic than the rest of the house. A study of sorts, but comfortable enough to be a hangout for Dr Beach. There was no desk, only a couple of arm chairs and a small table, but all four walls were lined with perfectly measured tall bookshelves, every inch of which was filled. I had only seen the collections in the lounge, but now I realised that was a child’s assortment. One to be messed around with or scuffed up. Dr Beach’s study was a library, not to be touched by anyone but him. The sheer number of books was making the fogginess worse, melting my brain further.

Dr Beach opened a bottom cupboard under some shelves and pulled a decanter full of light brown liquid out, along with two tumblers. He pointed me towards the armchairs beside the fireplace.

‘Have you had whiskey before?’ he asked me.

I shook my head. Dr Beach poured out two perfectly even glasses and handed me one.

‘I don’t have ice in here, I’m afraid. And I’m not brave enough to go back into the kitchen with the girls. Unless you want to, of course.’

We clinked before sitting and I noticed Dr Beach was considerably shorter than me. The wrinkles in his forehead were far more prominent from a shorter distance and his thin, wispy hair apparent to me for the first time. All this combined with our shared fear of the Beach women – suddenly, his intelligence was the only intimidation.

‘You don’t have to drink it, if you don’t want to.’ He nodded to the untouched tumbler cushioned between my hand and my thigh.

‘You know I’m only 17, right?’

He smiled. ‘I guess I’m a little old-fashioned. But if you think your uncle won’t mind...’

I had only ever drunk beer and wine before, never spirits. I put the glass to my mouth and took a sip. The warmth and sourness were overwhelming. A fire spread through my chest but never quite made its way down to my stomach. The sensation was calming, but a dull ache immediately started in my tummy from the mixture of chilli, whiskey and marijuana.

‘Listen, Dr Beach-‘

He raised his hand.

‘Whatever you’re about to say is probably going to sound great. You love my daughter and you’re going to treat her with courtesy and respect, and everything else under the sun that I want to hear. And then I’m supposed to say how if you do anything to hurt her, I’ll chop your balls off or something or other. Is that right?’

He was grinning and I couldn’t help but do the same back. He was pretty far off but it didn’t matter. I took a second sip of whiskey.

‘Let’s skip that part. You can call me Matt or Matthew when it’s just us, but I’d prefer it if you continued with Dr Beach around the girls, if you don’t mind.’

‘Right.’ It seemed an odd way to be.

‘I like you,’ he said. ‘You seem like a good kid.’ The Doctor took a deep breath, seemingly intimidated about what he was going to say next. I thought that he might be about to ban me from seeing his daughter.

‘I’m sorry about your parents.’

I looked up from my glass, a chill running down my spine.

‘I didn’t put the pieces together until this evening,’ he said, answering my question before my voice failed to ask it. ‘You’re one of the Holmes boys? Why am I asking – I already know the answer. I can see it in your face now. I just wasn’t looking hard enough before.’ Dr Beach seemed to be aware he was starting to ramble, so he took a sip of whiskey and drew another long breath before speaking a bit slower. ‘I knew your father. I started at the hospital shortly before he passed. Kevin was a good man.’

I tried to get my head around it. The sudden connection to them. People I remembered more from stories than recollection. Faces I had tried to stop thinking about for years. His immaculate goatee. Her thick black glasses and warm smile. I stroked my chest where, underneath my chequered button-up, Dad’s wedding ring hung on a piece of string around my neck. I had gotten so used to it just being something I wore, I only just then remembered, the second he was mentioned, it being his.

I couldn’t say anything to the Doctor.

The study seemed to get a lot colder. I had sobered up but the fog was still there, perhaps worse. The shutters were down and the purple from Alicia’s room was somehow present in the oak and leather toned study that wouldn’t have dreamed of such a colour, stained permanently into my vision within the fog itself.

‘I wondered what happened to you and your brother – figured you’d left Kingston,’ Dr Beach continued.

‘Uncle Pat moved here. He was working in the city anyway.’

Their passing was a distant memory of someone else's story. The only part I really remembered was the bang as Uncle Pat launched the small table at the wall after he got off the phone. The first time he had agreed to look after us whilst they had been away, not realising the destined permanency of the job.

'It was a terrible thing that happened to them.'

I nodded again.

'What do you want to do, JJ? When you're older, I mean,' Dr Beach asked out of the blue, not caring of the effortless departure from difficult subject matter.

I shrugged. 'I've thought maybe about teaching.'

Dr Beach nodded; his lip curled upwards in a faux impressed expression. 'An admirable job.' It didn't sound like that's what he actually thought. He was looking at me as though I needed to be above such a profession, that he required more from a potential suitor for his daughter. The son of his dead friend, a well-respected doctor. Anger swelled in my stomach.

When I stayed silent, he opened his mouth again.

'No interest in medicine? Like your father?'

I shook my head. I should have realised we hadn't left the subject behind. I was still unsure of Dr Beach's exact agenda when there was a knock at the door.

'You or me?' he joked.

I took a final quick swig of whiskey and made to leave, knowing full well the knock was too angry to have been Mrs Beach. Dr Beach was standing as I placed the glass back down. He moved his hand to my shoulder.

'My daughter doesn't know what happened to them exactly, does she?'

I shook my head, unsure how he had guessed.

'Your secret is safe with me,' he said.

I forced a smile before stepping out of the study to a curious look from Alicia. Her hair was even more erratic in its curliness, the remnants of a stressful argument with her mother.

'What were you two talking about?' she asked.

The door clicked shut behind me, Dr Beach still hiding inside his study.

'You,' I said, mastering a fake smile as I tried to dispel the image of a flaming pile up on the motorway from my mind.

## Two (2011)

Felix stamped on the accelerator and we zipped away from school, but came to an almost immediate halt as the afternoon rush on the Kingston town centre one-way system engulfed us. I had told him what happened at the Beach's house.

'She caught you and did *nothing*?' he asked.

'She just said to spray something. And for me to do up my jeans.'

'And her dad didn't care about the weed?'

'He didn't know.' Though as I was saying it, I struggled to believe he wouldn't have realised, sat less than a metre away from me in the study, eyes probably glazed and clothes stinking.

'Can you imagine if that had been Pat?' Felix said. 'He'd have slapped us silly.'

I wasn't so convinced.

'There's something else...' I said.

Felix looked away from the immobile road.

'He knew Dad.'

His face was stony and unimpressed at my big revelation. When he didn't say anything, I continued.

'Isn't that mad?'

Felix looked almost pitying before turning to face the road again as we edged towards North Kingston.

'I've heard madder,' he said, gently. 'What else did he say?'

'Nothing. Just that he'd always wondered what had happened to us. Alicia dragged me out of the room before I could ask anything.'

I hadn't realised it until answering Felix's question, that I wanted to know more from the Doctor. He held on to vital pieces of our history. Dad might have been totally different at work. What did he eat for lunch? Did he flirt with the nurses? Did his bedside manner stink? It meant something to us. Or me at least.

I wished to be back in the study and for Alicia's knock to wait five more minutes. Why couldn't she have bickered with her mother for just a little longer? Why had I freaked out as soon as Dr Beach told me he knew my parents, wasting precious time?

The fog had been heavier since lunchtime too. My feet, resting on the dashboard of Felix's car, seemed too far away. My chest was tight and terrible thoughts crossed my mind. Fires were tearing through the buildings that we passed. My bones were rattling and the sky was closing. Another flash of the pile-up. It was strange that it could all feel so real, and that I knew it wasn't, calmness somehow my ally.

'You alright?' Felix asked.

The fires subsided. My bones held still and the sky stayed above us.

'Yes, fine. Just had a bit of a headache last couple days.'

'You're a little pale.'

'I'm fine.'

Felix pulled right, off Richmond Road onto Kings and finally left onto Thorpe Lane.

There was a spot on the road nearly opposite the house.

'Perfect,' Felix said, before a BMW rounded the corner from Osborne Road and shot towards the spot with more pace than the Polo could muster. 'Oh, that really is fucking *perfect*.'

We ended up parking two roads over. On the walk back, I thought of the Beach's wide drive attached to their large house and envied their lack of a need to fight for a spot.

Perhaps if Pat wasn't so insistent on the driveway being his, it wouldn't be so difficult.

'When ye pay me some fucking rent, that's when we can discuss parking spots,' he had said to Felix the day after he had passed his test and bought the banged-up Polo from Freddie's dad's garage. 'I'm not searching for a fucking parking spot when I come back from work at gone midnight ye shit.'

As we came to number 14, to our surprise, Uncle Pat's old Chevrolet Chrysler was already there. It was a rare sight to see it in daylight during the week.

'Must have taken a half day or something,' I suggested, edging closer to the house, unsure if Pat had ever done such a thing in twelve years.

Felix put the key in the lock. He shouted for Pat before he had even stepped into the hallway.

'Boys, is that you?' Pat yelled back down the stairs from the landing in his gruff Yorkshire voice.

'Yeah, what are you doing here?' I asked.

'I bloody live here thank you very much!'

Felix and I went into the kitchen. He pulled a pepper and two chillies out of the fridge and grabbed a vegetable knife from the rack. I took both from him and began to dice the pepper on the glass chopping board. Felix crushed the garlic and poured oil in the pan.

A chicken fajita mix was sizzling by the time Uncle Pat made his way into the kitchen.

He was better groomed than normal. Cream trousers and polished brown shoes weren't unusual, but the brand-new white shirt, still suffering from store-folded lines, and overpowering cheap cologne gave him away.

'You've got a date!' Felix said.

'What you on about?'

'Please,' I added. 'Home before midnight? New clothes? You smell like a cheap barber. Your moustache is so trimmed your lip is shocked!'

Felix and I burst into laughter.

'Alright, alright, that'll do,' Pat said.

'Well, who is it?' Felix pushed.

'Yeah, tell us who!'

Pat grabbed the tea towel and threw it over my face.

'Just cook your dinner ye fucking shits.' Pat liked to swear at us a lot, but there was something about it that I found comforting. Felix wasn't as sure, often wincing when Pat shot an unfavourable name his way.

I stirred the pan but Felix stood in front of Pat, refusing to let up.

'Fine, fine,' he submitted. 'I met someone on Friday.'

'Who?' we asked together.

'Teresa.'

'Ooh, Teresa!' Felix mocked.

'Aye, Teresa.' Pat seemed resigned to his fate, face redder than the fresh peppers in the pan.

'Must be pretty important for you to show yourself in the daylight,' I said. 'Where did you meet her?'

'The train.'

'But you drive,' Felix said.

'Aye, well my car was in the garage on Friday wasn't it, dipshit.'

I found it hard to imagine Pat met anyone on the train. London trains were unsociable from start to finish and Pat would honour this in the fullest. There's no way he would get chatting with a woman. I wondered whether he was telling the truth.

Pat went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water from the lowest shelf, not saying another word. He drank with his back to us, but I knew what look he had on his face. It was one of a man who wanted a proper drink and was settling for a much poorer, softer substitute. The plastic crushed loudly in his palm as he worked his way down the bottle. There was a line of sweat down the back of his white shirt, far from subtle.

I threw the tea towel at Felix and gave him a look to say that Pat had had enough teasing out of us. We finished cooking in silence, Felix heating the plates, grating the cheese and warming the wraps whilst I tended to the pan.

Pat brushed his teeth at the kitchen sink, a strange habit Felix and I had long since been used to. He rarely ventured upstairs at all, choosing to shower at the gym, sleep, what little he did, on the sofa and relax in the lounge. I couldn't work out if it was because staying in Mum and Dad's room had been too haunting for him, or if it simply helped, in

some sense, with staying sober. Either way, it just contributed more to the feeling that Pat was more like another Holmes brother than a guardian. A much older, often grumpy brother. Felix and I had feared him when our parents were still alive. He was fierce and unkind whenever we visited him in Huddersfield. Of course, he wasn't sober then. The stench coming from his flat was a mixture of smoke and stale booze topped off with a light dusting of shit and vomit. He was married before we were born – she left him because of the drink. We knew that much and nothing more other than not to ask.

He had been sober since 1999 – a year before Mum and Dad asked him to watch us so they could take a holiday.

'Right.' Pat snapped his hands together and forced an authoritative smile, smoothing over the ribbing. He made for the door.

'Isn't it a bit early to be going out on a date?' I asked, looking at the clock above the door that read 17:30.

'I need a few beers first...Dutch courage and all,' he said. Pat didn't enjoy the concerned looks on our faces. 'Kidding,' he added. 'She can't be out late.'

'Past curfew?' Felix suggested.

'Another date?' I added.

Pat rolled his eyes. 'Wish me luck.'

Before we had the chance, he was gone.

My phone buzzed and I entered a fast-paced text conversation with Alicia whilst Felix filled and rolled the wraps.

*Her: Dad was a bit weird this morning.*

*Me: Oh really? Weird how?*

*Her: He kept asking about you.*

*Me: Maybe he likes me.*

*Her: Do you know something?*

*What did you two talk about in his study?*

*Me: Nothing, don't worry about it.*

*He just asked me whether I was serious about you, that was all.*

*Her: And?*

*Me: And what?*

*Her: Are you?*

*Me: Sure.*

The three dots appeared, pacing up and down my screen like a marching band. They lasted for a while, the message refusing to appear.



Felix shouted through from the living room. 'You coming or what? It's getting cold.'

I took my place on the sofa next to him. He was reading a law textbook whilst shovelling a fajita into his mouth. A Friends repeat was on the telly, volume low enough that it wouldn't distract him but loud enough so he could class it as multitasking.

'Since when did that ugly git go on dates?' A small piece of food spat out of Felix's mouth onto the book in front of him as he spoke.

I shrugged. 'Could be good for him.'

Felix snorted. 'Not sure anything will stop him being a miserable dick.'

'He's alone,' I said, knowing Felix's scepticism, but disagreeing. 'Everyone should have someone.'

'The problem with that word is it's singular nature. Some-*one*? No thanks.'

'Wow...player.' I rolled my eyes and bit off more fajita than I had room for in my mouth.

'Calm your beans, Mr Monogamy. I'm just playing. Maybe we'll have a new mummy, eh.' Felix smiled sadly at his plate after he said it. He had tricked himself into thinking about her. He shook his head, finished the fajita and flipped a page of *Essentials of Criminal Law* by Child & Omerod. 'Anyway...I just mean we can't be tied down by one woman at our age JJ...there's too much potential at school. Don't tell me you've only got eyes for Alice when Sarah Westman walks down the hall in those shiny leggings.'

'You know it's Alicia. And I can't say I've noticed.'

Felix snorted and spat a little fajita onto the book as he chewed.

'Reckon he was kidding about the drink?' Felix asked.

'Of course.'

I took our plates to the kitchen and started rinsing the excess tomato sauce and cheese into the sink. My phone was still on the side. I pressed the centre button, ready to glimpse Alicia's long-winded rant but only found two words accompanying her name.

*Wrong answer.*

Despite his prediction of an early night, the lights on Pat's Chevrolet didn't storm the living room walls again until gone 1am.

Felix had gone to bed hours before. I had left the remote untouched, the telly trawling through old repeats of various panel shows I had no interest in. The lights were off and my head was a mess.

The fog had gotten even stronger.

My entire body had become paralysed the second Felix left the room. Sat upright on the sofa, eyes fixated on the screen yet unwatching, my cramping legs were impossibly

still in their right angles between my seat and the ground. I could feel the sweat trickling down my forehead and back. It was as though I was holding my breath, the blood vessels coming to the front of my skin, reddening my face, but I could still feel the air coming out. The room had gone 2D. How long before it went 1D? Or no D. I flicked my eyes to the left. The bowl of popcorn I had intended to munch on two hours prior was untouched on the table. I used every effort in me to try and move my arm and take a piece but it didn't leave my lap.

The front door creaked shut. Pat's footsteps in the hallway were light at first, until he heard the telly on and clipped his boots on the laminate floors as he came into the lounge.

'The fuck are you still doing up?' he asked.

My body broke free of the Rigor mortis just in time, as though the fog was scared of revealing its powers to anyone other than me. I hoisted my legs up onto the sofa just to be sure I could and wiped the moisture from my forehead.

'Couldn't sleep,' I said.

'You alright?' Pat asked. 'You're looking a bit-'

'Pale?' I finished. Three times in two days. It was way past being a bad trip and my ability to hide whatever was wrong had become increasingly difficult.

'I'm fine,' I added.

'Alright, Jim-Joe. Well, I best get off. Didn't meant to disturb ye.'

It was a rare moment of calm from Pat. Not swearing at me or telling me to get to bed. Perhaps his date had gone really well. Or perhaps it hadn't and the self-pity had followed him home.

'How was Teresa?' I asked, catching his attention as he was about to walk back into the hall.

Uncle Pat, sighed, turned and undid one extra button at the top of his white shirt. There was a small orange stain by the collar. He took a seat on the sofa next to me.

'Aye, she was nice.'

'Good shag?' I asked.

He smiled. 'Wouldn't know. What are you watching?'

'I'm not. Don't change the subject. Why are you back so late? I thought Teresa needed an early night.'

'She just needed to relieve the babysitter by 10 was all.'

'So, it was a good shag,' I said.

He smiled again and I knew I was getting at something that didn't happen. But it was fun winding Pat up when he was in the right mood.

'How many kids does she have?'

'Two,' Pat said. 'Boy and a girl. Bit younger than you boys mind. Fancy some step-siblings?'

'Sure.'

We sat in silence for a while, watching Rob Brydon berate David Mitchell on *Would I Lie to You?*. I wasn't particularly listening but Pat laughed once or twice whilst he helped himself to the popcorn. His leg was twitching a little and I knew he was about to try to leave the room again. I took my opportunity whilst he was in a good mood.

'Pat...'

'Yeah?'

'Did you ever meet any of the Doctors...from the hospital? Dad's hospital, I mean.'

Pat shifted the second I mentioned Dad, edging further from me on the sofa.

'You don't remember?' he asked. 'We kept the funeral small. Family and close friends. None of them were from work.'

'So you never knew-'

'What are you looking for here, Jim-Joe?' He was on his feet walking towards the door, his calm mood in tatters. 'You should leave things alone.'

He whispered something that sounded a lot like '*Lord, give me a drink*' but I couldn't tell for sure.

'Alicia...my new girlfriend. Her Dad knew him. He's called Matthew Beach. Said he started at the hospital a little before Dad passed.'

Pat nodded. 'There's no big mystery here, kid. I know the name. Sure, he knew your dad. But, so what? It's nothing to do with me. Not your brother either. They're dead and we're not.'

The fog was taking control again. My chest felt like it was going to burst. Pat vanished into the kitchen. I knew he was waiting for me to go upstairs so he could sleep on the couch.

I was just about to do so when Alicia's name came up on my phone screen. She was calling.

'Hello?'

'JJ, I need you.'

She told me hurriedly about the Doctor's heart attack. I dashed to the hall, snatched a hoodie from the coat rack and took the Polo keys, before running out of the door.

## Three (2011)

The Doctor's funeral took place two weeks later, the day the weather turned and caught up with the fallen leaves.

He had survived the first heart attack but a second one took him the moment he left the ambulance at the hospital doors. The doctors couldn't explain it – he was a healthy man with a healthy heart. All in all, the explanation seemed to boil down to; *'it's just one of those things.'*

After Alicia called, I used Felix's Polo to pick up her and Tom from their house in Sheen and we weren't far behind when the call came through to Alicia's phone. I could hear Janet sobbing on the other end of the line. She didn't say anything audible but we got the message.

'Stop the car,' Alicia had said.

I pulled up to the curb, just off of the entrance to Old Deer Park, a stone's throw from Richmond Royal Hospital. Tom was looking confused in the backseat, watching his sister with trepidation.

'Alicia?'

She looked at him in the rear-view mirror. I leaned back to see him.

Tom looked as though he didn't understand. But soon enough, the realisation moved over his face like an eclipse. He got out of the car and started wandering in the direction of the pitch-black field.

'Please go and get him, JJ. Don't let him get far.' Alicia's words sobbed out of her. She was trying to control herself and the ensuing internal battle looked painful.

By the time I had caught up to Tom, he had planted himself down on the grass, just shy of the cricket pitch. I didn't know what to say so I didn't try. I just sat next to him, looking towards the stands. Alicia eventually joined us. It was clear from her eyes she had been crying in the car. We stayed in silence, ignoring the vibrations of our mobile phones. The only noise was the sniffs of the Beach children as they grieved, until light started to appear, revealing the rest of the green field bit by bit and distant bird chirps joined us.

Could it be my fault? Another dead parent. The Doctor died only one day after we'd discussed his dead colleague. Maybe I had brought a curse to the Beach's door. Selfishly, I couldn't help but think of all of the things he was yet to tell me about my Dad. He had only known him a short while, but it felt as though he would have understood Dad more than I ever could have, only knowing him when I was a young kid.

Two dozen people were stood over the hole in the ground at Teddington cemetery. The leaves had been swept into big bundles a few metres from the nearest graves, but occasionally the stack would blow a few towards the congregation, slipping into suits and tapping at the bottom of dresses. Some were falling and landing on or around us. Several vanished into the hole, two edges of a dark oak coffin just about visible to me at my place next to Alicia. Beside her stood Janet and Tom. They were all holding hands, listening to the prayer being read by the minister.

*'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'* The Minister took an extended pause.

I imagined Dr Beach in a room on the upper floor of a fancy house sitting on clouds. He was lying on a single bed, his legs crossed, a look of contentment on his face as he read a book. The scene cut to the kitchen downstairs where God, with long white hair and a bushy beard draping over his white gown, was stirring something in a massive pot on the stove. He shouted upstairs for the Doctor to come down for dinner. The Doctor launched from the bed and ran for the door, excitedly.

I couldn't stifle the snort, made all the worse in the midst of the minister's pause. I stared hard at the hole, refusing to meet Alicia's disdainful glare that I could see out of the corner of my eye. She clenched my fingers together harshly.

The minister continued: *'and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. Thomas said to him, Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

This time I imagined a beefy long-haired Jesus, refusing the Doctor entry into a pearly-gated night club, though I knew I couldn't afford another laugh at this new image. I thought I was going to explode as my eyes filled with water. Perhaps people would at least think these were sad tears.

*'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'*

The minister closed the bible to a murmur of *'Amen'*.

*'And now we will say goodbye to Matthew to the sound of a beautiful song, selected by his loving wife, Janet.'*

A slow piece of piano instrumental by Einaudi was played as, one by one, led by Janet, the congregation grabbed a handful of soil and dropped it onto Dr Beach's coffin. Alicia took the opportunity to tear her hand from mine aggressively and walk on ahead with her family. As the crowd cleared, the rest of the cemetery became visible. *They*

wouldn't be far, fifty metres max. I thought I could see the heads of their gravestones but I was probably imagining it. I didn't visit them, ever. It's not as though it was strictly forbidden from Pat and Felix, but I knew the two of them wouldn't like it if I went. And sneaking around behind their backs to do something I wasn't sure I wanted to in the first place seemed silly.

The congregation made its way from Teddington to The Boater's Inn for the wake. As we walked in, I tried to take Alicia's hand again, but she pulled it away from mine. The Beachs stood at the door in a weird and uncomfortable line.

'Go get a drink, JJ.' Alicia said. 'Just leave us alone for now.'

I nodded, not wanting to say anything to worsen her mood.

I looked to Mrs Beach who gave me a kind shake of the head, a forced smile not enough to hide the fact she was crying still. Tom was already accepting condolences from a family friend, his face and posture expressionless.

The pub was booked out and mostly still empty as the rest of the guests made their way inside. I took advantage of the lack of a queue at the bar and sat in an empty stool in front of the taps.

'What can I get you?' the portly barman asked.

Being served booze in the past had been a bit of a hit and miss venture since my facial hair was still in the process of slowly filling out, but I had a theory. Had anyone really ever been ID'ed at a wake? My guess was no.

'Pint of Peroni, please,' I said in a slightly deeper voice.

The barman took me in for a second. I was sure he was making the same assessment in his mind, before deciding to take a long glass from behind the counter and placing it underneath the tap.

I made to take my wallet from my back-pocket but he waved me off.

'First one is on the house. Sorry for your loss.'

He didn't sound all that sorry.

'Were you close?' the barman asked.

'Not really.'

He nodded and started wiping down the bar surfaces without another word.

I looked to the Beachs, who were still greeting the small crowd of guests. They all looked exhausted.

Before long, I was one beer down and my mind was somewhere else.

It was *their* funeral and I was stood by the door.

'Just let 'em give you a kiss on the cheek and a hug,' I remembered Pat instructing Felix and I as we saw the first guests approaching the hall entrance. 'Let's get this over with.'

The sadness in my stomach was painful as my cheeks filled up with lipstick. I was only six, but even then, I knew they weren't coming back. I understood death better than what was expected of me.

But that was all I could remember. Glimpses of Pat and Felix in their suits, the small hall space where the wake had taken place and having to wipe deep-red lipstick from my face in the dirty bathroom. But I seemed to be stuck there, watching the same scene over and over, until I got lost in a sea of black suits.

When they parted, I was stood on the motorway. It was mostly empty but there were cars in the far distance, heading in my direction. I looked to the hard shoulder – there was time to get there. But when I turned back, the cars were much closer. And they were on fire. The flames soared to the sky as the entire motorway turned a violent orange. The cars were nearly upon me, about to sweep me into the great fireball...

'JJ...'

Alicia's hand was on my chin, turning me to face her.

'Hey,' I said. The pub was much busier. There were two empty pint glasses in front of me and a dozen more or so up and down the bar. The barman was now red in the face, trying to keep up with the orders.

'What are you doing?' Alicia asked, her eye on my third drink, which I don't remember ordering any more than the second. 'This isn't really the time to get drunk.'

'You told me to go get a drink.' I said.

'I meant a coke or something...'

'It's a funeral, this is what people do.'

'It's my dad's funeral,' she said. 'If anyone has a right to get pissed, it's me.'

I was trying not to laugh again. I thought of the conversation the Doctor and I had in his study. Of the connection we shared and the secret he told. Of the loss I also felt, despite us not being close. The forfeiture of information and the even greater distance between myself and my parents after the promise of a bridge. All I wanted to do was laugh, what the hell was wrong with me?

I waved at the bartender. He came straight over.

'There you go,' I told Alicia. 'Now you can.'

She smiled at him and asked for a cranberry juice.

'Why are you doing this today? It's not about you.' She was hurt, red in the face, all out of patience.

That was when the laugh slipped out. And another. And another. I was crying with laughter. I wanted to roll on the floor. It was uncontrollable. Unbearably funny. I knew my relationship was about to be thrown down the gutter. But that just made it funnier.

Tears slipped from Alicia's eyes. Her face soon changed to disgust. She turned back to the bartender.

'He's seventeen.'

The bartender looked a little dumbstruck, unsure what to say or do, simply staring at Alicia and then at me and then back to Alicia. My laughter fit had finally subsided.

'You can finish that one but then no more,' the bartender told me.

I knew it would be fine. Rule number two of wakes – it looks pretty bad if bartenders start kicking out kids. Alicia didn't understand the rules. She was very mad.

I finished my pint quickly, Alicia still stood next to my stool, watching me intensely.

'I'm sorry,' I said, before nearly falling off the seat and weaving in and out of the suits and dresses to the exit.

By the time I had walked back up from the river, the cold night had started to sweep over the street.

I approached home, expecting to see lights peeking through closed curtains but the house was engulfed in darkness. I shouted as I went through the front door, but already knew no one was there. Pat was probably spending the weekend working and God knows what Felix was up to. Most likely hanging out with Freddie – the two had become much closer since Alicia and I started dating and I didn't have as much time for my brother.

An hour had passed since my fit of laughter and I could only look back on it with embarrassment. I cringed at the thought of my amusement at Alicia on the day of her father's funeral. It was blurry, but I could remember it. I didn't have control.

I sat on the sofa in the lounge but didn't put the lights on, nor the telly. In twenty minutes, the room had fallen into total darkness. I could see though. My eyes had adjusted slowly with the light. On the coffee table were some pads, dice and a weirdly shaped cup – the remnants of a game of Yahtzee Felix and I had been playing at some point in the past few days.

I picked up the cup and dice and started rolling, searching for five matching numbers. Three fives, a four and a one. I kept the fives and threw the remaining two dice. Another five and a six. I threw the six and it turned to a four.

When I went to scoop all of the dice up again, my hands were smaller. Like that of a six-year-old. I looked at my legs – they had shrunk too.

A man cleared his throat from the other side of the table. Dad was sat in his old armchair. He was laughing at the dice.



'Just your luck, son,' he said. It was his voice, just how I remembered it, only with a faint echo. He spoke differently compared to Pat. Less of an accent despite them both growing up in the same town in Yorkshire. I wasn't sure how that had happened. If it was the truth.

He wasn't there. I knew he wasn't there and that my arms and legs were still mine and not some six-year-old's. But it's not what I saw. Despite the weird new predicament I found myself in, it was a strangely calm moment.

'Can I get a fourth roll?' I asked.

'That's not the rules.'

'It's just a game, Dad.'

'Sure, it is. But you don't get infinite rolls.'

He sat back in his chair and pulled a cigar from inside the arm. I didn't understand much about him when I was little. He just seemed like a normal dad. But as he sat across from me, I could see it. I could remember it. I looked at him, deep into him, and knew he wanted to be older than he was. Did the man in front of me know he would never get there? Was he trying to fit his older years into his earlier life?

'What's infinite?' I asked.

'Infinite is never-ending, James-Joseph. Like space. Or your Mother's nagging.'

I ignored the jab about Mum. 'But how can space be never-ending?'

'It just is.' *It's just one of those things.*

He sat back and lit the cigar, calm and tranquil but also pleased I had his attention. His goatee was more immaculate than I remembered, so finely trimmed I knew it couldn't be real. He twiddled the wedding band on his fourth finger.

My hand went to my chest where the same ring usually hung, only it was gone. Dad just smiled. There was a curious yet playful look in his eye. He was winding me up, knowing his answers were as unsure as my questions.

'Perhaps, I'm wrong,' he said. 'I have no proof. Do you?'

'No,' I said.

Dad let out a single loud laugh and smoked his cigar.

Car lights shone through the living room window and climbed the walls behind the telly. I looked out to the driveway and saw the Polo pull in. When I turned back, Dad was gone. So was the armchair. I hadn't even realised it was out of place being back in the living room. It felt so normal being on the other side of the coffee table once more.

My arms and legs were normal again too.

I took off my suit jacket and loosened my tie before Felix slammed the front door and looked in at me from the hallway.

'What you doing sat in the dark?' he asked.

'Nothing, I've just got back from the funeral.'

'Ah yeah, how was it?' He was uninterested, already looking up the stairs where he wanted to go.

'Yeah, alright.'

'Okay,' he said.

'You don't have to stay.'

Felix vanished up the stairs at the first sign of permission. I heard his bedroom door click shut.

I looked to where Dad had been sitting and wished him back. I wished that Felix hadn't interrupted us. I wished the Doctor was still alive so he could tell me more about him. Felix didn't care. Pat actively disliked talking about my parents. I was the only one still with any warmth to them.

Alicia would hate me after the funeral. All I had left was five dice in a cup.

So, I rolled them again. A one, six and two threes.

I kept the threes and rolled again.

The front door slammed once more. I looked up and the living room was filled with daylight. The clock on the wall read 8:03. It was the morning.

Uncle Pat's grunts came from the hall as he took off his boots and then he shouted upstairs.

'Fe, what's ye bloody car doing in the bloody drive-'

That's when he noticed me watching him from the living room.

He stepped back in shock, nearly knocking his head on the coat rack nobs. 'You're in a suit?'

I looked down and, sure enough, I was still in the white shirt and black trousers, my tie loosened.

'Yeah...I...' but I didn't have anything more to say.

Pat shook it off.

'Where've you been?' I asked.

'Teresa's. No time to talk, I'm late for work.' He dashed upstairs, one of his rare ventures onto the first floor. The whirring of the shower came through the pipes two minutes later.

I tried to recall what had happened, where all the time had gone. But it was blank. The dice were different to how I had left them. There were four fives again. The pages from the pad were spread over the coffee table, all with violent black scribbles over them.

## Four (2011)

The blackouts got worse as winter settled over Kingston.

From forgetting my lunch break, to waking up in double psychology with no idea how I got there, to eventually missing entire days. Mid-November, I came to, sat on the wooden decking by the rowing club, my legs dangling in the Thames, at 2am. My grey pyjama bottoms were knee-deep in the freezing dirty water. I wasn't wearing anything from the waist up.

North Kingston was deserted on the shivery walk home. When I got back, the front door was wide open and my keys were still in the bowl. Pat was asleep on the sofa, seemingly undisturbed by the cold air pouring into the house. I went upstairs and drew a bath, continuing to run more hot water each time it started to cool over and the shivers returned. It wasn't until the light started to come through the clouded window and I heard stirs from Felix's room next door that I left the bathroom.

I couldn't stop shaking for the rest of the day. No one noticed until I sat down in Biology. I brushed shoulders with Freddie as I took my seat. Felix was on his other side.

'You alright?' Freddie asked.

I nodded. 'Just a bit under the weather, I think.'

His face turned sour. 'Want to move over one more? We have a big game against Croydon this week, I can't afford to get sick.'

I stayed where I was. Freddie was only half joking. Felix and him sniggered as Mr Andrews came into the room. Close behind him was Alicia in a grey puffy jacket, looking like the Michelin Man. She caught my eye and then scanned the rest of the room, as if she hadn't been looking for me. I tried to get her attention back. Instead of taking her seat next to me as usual, she remained at the front of the room and sat next to the kid with the huge red beanie whose name escaped me.

'Guessing you guys haven't...worked things out?' Felix asked.

I shook my head.

'Are you going to tell us what you did yet or what?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Yeah, yeah – who is she?' Freddie asked.

'Just because you two want to shag anything that moves, doesn't mean I do.'

Mr Andrews cleared his throat and shot us a dirty look before beginning a slideshow entitled *Diffusion & Osmosis*. It read *1 of 72 Slides* in the bottom right hand corner. I prayed for a two hour-long blackout but it didn't come.

Alicia didn't turn around for the entire class, determined to remain focused on the presentation and mad at me. It's not like I could blame her. What I did was awful. Perhaps unforgiveable. I couldn't be sure until I actually said sorry.

But she didn't give me the chance. As slide 71 came onto the screen, Alicia packed her notebook into her rucksack and the second Mr Andrews even hinted at dismissing us, she was out of the door. For nearly two weeks she had managed to avoid my messages and feeble attempts at reconciliation.

The rest of the class was a little dumbstruck as she left, still quiet in their seats.

'I guess we're done,' Mr Andrews said to a grumble of laughter from the students. As everyone got up to leave, Freddie nudged Felix and nodded towards me.

'We're going to Freddie's for beer and Fifa. You coming?' Felix asked.

'Sure,' I said, unexcited at the prospect, but lacking the will to do anything else. Alicia's puffy jacket was still imprinted in my misty mind's eye.

Felix and I waited in Freddie's Peugeot whilst he went into the shop with a fiver from each of us.

'Where did he get his ID from?' I asked Felix.

'He didn't. It was his 18<sup>th</sup> last week. We went out into Kingston. I invited you, remember?'

It didn't ring a bell. Since the Doctor's death and my own decline into the fog, I had almost forgotten the rest of the world. Felix's life didn't revolve around me or the Beachs. He could do things like celebrate his friends' birthdays. I say *his* friends because I'd never quite considered Freddie a friend before, despite his inclination to invite me along to everything. Although Felix had been the one to ask, I knew it wasn't his suggestion that I came around for beers and Fifa. I guess I just never saw myself associating with the so-called jocks of the school. Freddie was the guy who was good at everything. He had captained the football team since there was ever a school team to join and had thrived through sixth form, leading KGS to the title. For some reason, he had always stuck with us.

It wasn't that I envied Freddie. I even liked him. But I just never saw myself being friends with him. So I wasn't, not really.

Felix turned back to me from the passenger's seat. 'You're not yourself, I can tell.'

I wanted to tell him I was and that I was fine, but the lies were already getting a little old.

'Is it just the Alicia thing?' he continued. 'Her Dad – well it seems to have thrown you two off course.'

'She's going through a tough time and I haven't exactly been...well...we'll work it out, I'm sure.'

We got to Freddie's place and went downstairs where there was a games room set-up, complete with a 50-inch plasma bolted to the back wall. I let them play the PlayStation whilst I sat in the La-Z-Boy and drank a bottle of beer.

'Can you pass me another, JJ?' Freddie asked, whipping a quick glance away from the screen to the crate of Bud by my feet. I used the bottle opener on my keys to take off the cap and walked in front of the screen to hand it to him. The player Felix was controlling ran into touch in the process.

'Christ, JJ, get out the way.'

I took an extra second in front of the screen on my return trip.

'What do your parents do to afford this gaff?' I asked Freddie.

'They own a chain of pubs. I do a few shifts in one over in Hampton from time to time.'

'You boys see Katrina earlier?' Felix asked, quickly bored from the parents' conversation. 'She's...come into her own a bit.'

Freddie snorted. 'I used to live across the road from her. Her and her parents would come around for dinner sometimes. She's annoying as fuck.'

'Doesn't stop her from being fit.'

'I don't know,' Freddie said. 'It's hard to see her that way now.'

'The fuck are you talking about...her ass is more toned than a printer.'

'If you say so.'

'JJ, Katrina, yes or no?' Felix asked.

I hadn't noticed her earlier. I barely had two conversations with her in 13 years of school. She had always seemed a little too chatty from a distance, but not in too annoying a way. She had a pretty face and a kind way. Once I had seen her offer a little year seven kid an orange after a bunch of older boys munched his own sandwich into his forehead.

'Yes,' I said. 'She's alright.'

'You trying to line him up someone new now he's been binned?' Freddie asked.

'I haven't been binned,' I said. 'Not exactly. Or maybe I have, I'm not sure.'

Felix used his Chelsea forward to curl the ball into the bottom corner of the opposition's net.

'Fuck a duck,' Freddie said, whacking his controller on his knee as Felix slapped the leather sofa in celebration.

'That's how you do it, SON! Stick to the real pitch.' Felix punched Freddie on the arm repeatedly.

Freddie conceded two more goals before the final whistle went and he moodily handed me the controller. I didn't particularly want to play. Felix chose Chelsea again

and I selected Inter Milan. He scored on me in the first two minutes which, in video game time, is all of about five seconds.

Felix didn't celebrate the same way against me. Instead of cheering loudly or punching me on the arm, he just rubbed his eyebrow. Weirdly, it was more annoying than the boasting. It was as though he was treating me like a wounded dog. Hell, maybe I was acting like one. I hadn't been much company since the day the fog came.

I took sips of beer each time the ball went into touch and failed to come back to the game in time – Felix ran rings around me. It was 6-0 by half time. I put the controller down.

'What you doing?' Felix asked. 'Second half, let's go.'

'Nah, Freddie can play for me. I'm bored.'

Freddie and Felix looked at each other as though they'd been waiting for it.

'Why'd you bother coming?' Felix asked.

Their intense stares made me uncomfortable. My face started to prickle with heat. I took a breath to try and calm down, the shivers threatening to take over my body and the fog inching into the centre of my eyes.

'Thought Freddie might have a fit sister.'

The serious stares lasted a moment longer before the two burst into laughter. It wasn't long before I joined them and I realised I hadn't let myself laugh since the funeral. It was a relief to do it again, in the right moment, with the right people.

Felix punched me on the arm and uncapped another beer for me.

'Pick your controller up, you wet-bag. Let's finish this.'

I did as I was told, too tired to put up the wall, and managed to claw two goals back in the second half. Felix scored two as well but the thrashing didn't feel quite so bad in taking away his clean sheet.

We drank beer and swapped controllers for another hour before I bade the two goodbye and made a dash for the early evening bus.

Alicia's grey puffy jacket flying out the door was imprinted in my mind on the journey home. For the first time, I really missed her. At least, I thought I did, it was hard to know for certain. I wanted to win her back, there had to be something. Flowers didn't exactly shout 'I'm sorry for laughing in your face at your dad's funeral'.

My stomach rumbled as I stepped off the bus, the beers having tripped my hunger for the first time since the previous evening. The house was dark, cold and empty but I didn't bother to flick on the lights or heating. I went to the kitchen and slapped a few shavings of cheese between two slices of bread before going up to my room.

That's when I saw the copy of *Crime and Punishment* beside the nightshade on my bedside table. Alicia wasn't like anyone else – she didn't want me to buy her things. She

just wanted me to appreciate the same things she did. Plus, returning the book was my way back in. She wouldn't have expected me to read it, which would make it all the more surprising if I did.

It didn't matter that I was shattered from my unconscious adventures on the previous night – my mind wasn't going to let me sleep until I had won Alicia over. I made every effort to stay focused on Raskolnikov and his plot to kill and steal from Alyona Ivanovna. It's only after he is successful in murdering her that I become properly intrigued. The dysfunctional guilt of a sociopath with a complex expression of morality. His confused love developing for Sonya, perhaps offering redemption for the brutal axing of two people. The more I could try to understand the characters, the more conversation points I could stall Alicia with. I fell asleep as the sun lifted into my room.

The next evening, I paced up and down the path outside the Beach's house for the better part of half an hour, trying to formulate a coherent speech that might make Alicia warm to me again. On my third attempt to turn into the driveway, I froze. The front door was wide open, the hallway light providing a shadowy figure watching me.

'Whatever you're doing...it's annoying.' Alicia didn't sound angry, but rather amused at my nervous pacing.

I walked up the drive and stood in front of her.

'You look tired,' she said.

'I haven't slept much.' As I said the words, I really felt the tiredness for the first time. Breathing seemed to take so much effort. Just standing in front of Alicia was a chore. Wouldn't she invite me in to sit down?

'What's that?' She nodded to my hand, half-hidden behind my thigh, which contained the completed novel. I passed it over the threshold to her.

'I can tell you've read it,' she said, flicking through the pages aimlessly. I wasn't sure how she knew, it was already worn through when she gave it to me.

Most of the anger seemed to have left Alicia since the previous day's storm-out of Biology. It was replaced by the subtle sadness I had seen in her between the Doctor's death and his funeral. It was difficult to watch, perhaps tougher to take than her anger at me.

'Can I-'

'Why are you here?' she cut across.

I searched the scene for the right words, trying to think what would be good enough, but could only land on the object I'd spent eight straight hours reading.

'To return your book.'

We stood in silence as the weakness of my attempt to regain contact washed over. A smile started to form in the corner of Alicia's mouth, but she was fighting against letting it grow.

'What did you think?' she asked.

I nodded. Everything I had come up with since that morning that I wanted to discuss – the impoverished setting, the brutality of the double murder, Raskolnikov's desperation and internal complexities, Sonya's offer of redemption – it fell away from me.

'They died in a car-crash,' I said.

'What?'

'I know you wondered what happened to them. My mum and dad I mean. Well that's what happened. They'd been on holiday – three weeks driving through Europe. They were just back in the country and as they got on the motorway to come home, a lorry hit them. The driver was asleep at the wheel and drifted across lanes – he flipped them and caused a small pile-up. Five people died. Lorry driver was fine though.'

'Oh.'

There was a loud crash from somewhere behind Alicia. Mrs Beach could be heard cursing loudly.

Alicia checked her shoulder but made no move towards her mother.

'Do you need to get back?' I asked.

'No. She's being a right bitch.' Alicia wrapped her cardigan around her tighter and stepped out of the house, closing the door behind her. She walked up the path and sat on the stone wall at the end of it, facing back. She didn't beckon me to follow but I did anyway, to no objection.

'Do you maybe want to cut her some slack? She's just lost her husband,' I suggested.

Alicia shot me a piercing look. 'I lost my fucking dad! Doesn't turn me into a nutjob. Tom's no better – sat on his fucking PlayStation from the second he gets in from school until bed, not saying a word to either of us. I'm the only one acting fucking normal. I'm the only one holding it together. I'm...'

But she didn't finish. The fire burned up and Alicia started to cry quietly. The same way she had in the car.

I couldn't face the humiliation of my arm being shaken off should I put it around her shoulders so I rested it on her leg instead. She stopped crying and watched it, but didn't brush it off.

'I'm sorry about your parents,' she said. 'We never spoke about it properly, but I knew you weren't ready. I guess that would mess anyone up.'

I nodded. Alicia looked at me and I knew she was expecting me to cry too. When it didn't come, she turned her head away.



'It's very sad and everything...but it doesn't explain why you acted like you did. Your parents died years ago and I needed you to be there for *me*.'

'I know. And I'm sorry.'

She edged further away from me on the wall. I knew I needed to give her something more.

'It was your dad,' I said.

She turned back, a curious look on her face. 'What about him?'

'He knew *my* Dad. He told me when I was in his study. It just...threw me off.'

'Right...'

'We don't talk about them. Me...Felix...Pat. It's like this thing that was just banished the second the funeral was over. Their names were never said. Pictures were taken down, memories pushed deeper and deeper. Mostly Pat's doing but it seemed just fine with Felix. I think I'd almost forgotten about them myself until your Dad told me what he knew.'

'What did he know?' Alicia asked.

'Not all that much I guess – at least we didn't get into it tonnes before...'

'Before what?' The realisation set in and Alicia closed her eyes. 'Before I knocked?' She looked guilty. 'I'm sorry.'

'What? No! That's not what I meant. How could you have known? It was nothing anyway, not really. He couldn't have told me much, I know that. It's just with Pat and Felix how they are...'

'That's rough,' she said.

She was shaking, but I still wasn't confident enough to put my arm around her. I took off my bomber and placed it over her shoulders, refusing to let a shiver escape me afterwards despite being very cold. It was as though the water from the Thames was still crawling up my legs.

'I still don't understand why you laughed, JJ. I mean, that's a bit fucked up.'

'I know. It was all just a bit weird; I couldn't control it.' I pulled her around gently so she was facing me. 'I'm really sorry.'

She contemplated what to say back, looking down for nearly a minute. I couldn't take the wait so I looked back towards the house. I could see flashes of light through the curtain, and guessed it was the telly as Tom sat cross-legged on the carpet, playing his wrestling game.

'I suppose neither of us should really have to be dealing with these things. Not at our age. It's all a bit much, isn't it?'

The barrier had disappeared. Alicia rested her head on my shoulder and weaved her arm into mine. I pulled her in tighter and she didn't pull back.

'Does that mean you forgive me?' I asked, knowing the answer.

'I do.'

I went to give her a kiss but she kept me back with a hand on my chest.

'No more holding out on me, okay? It won't work.'

I nodded. 'No more holding out.'

'Why don't you come inside? Maybe you can calm Mum down whilst I make us a coffee. Tell me what you thought about Dunya and Luzhin.'

'What, who?'

She raised her eyebrows.

'Oh, the book. Yes, okay.'

'I'll have to think of what to give you next. If you enjoyed Dostoevsky, maybe *The Idiot* next...'

I smiled. She was on her feet waiting.

'I just need a minute, bit more fresh air, if that's okay?' I said.

Alicia kissed me on the cheek, smiled and walked ahead, back into the house. I itched to call her back outside, to tell her about the fog and the blackouts. Something was very wrong with me and I could feel the storm coming. It wasn't over just because I had Alicia back. I was going down and she was coming with me. I wanted to laugh again. Because I couldn't cry. I couldn't feel any of it. More holding out, I guess.

## Five (2011)

The fucker told me I needed a nasal spray.

'It's likely hay fever,' Dr Maul said, entirely uninterested, tapping away on his keyboard. 'Sometimes this can happen. Nothing to be worried about. The spray should fix you in a few days.'

'Hay fever? So that can cause what's happening to my vision?' I asked.

'Sometimes, yes.'

The doctor prepared the prescription, comfortable with the following silence. I searched the office for confirmation that he was actually a medical practitioner. The balding, spectacle wearing fraud in front of me seemed to lack too much bedside manner to be true. It wasn't until I looked above me, on the wall my chair was leaning against, that I saw the series of certificates in gold frames that validated his authority.

DR EMERY MAUL, MB ChB, University of Bristol.

DR EMERY MAUL, Qualified MRCP.

DR EMERY MAUL, Silly prick who prescribes completely irrelevant nasal sprays for no reason whatsoever.

That last one I may have made up.

'But don't you want to...I don't know, check. For sure. Isn't there like a test you can do, in case it isn't hay fever I mean?'

'It's hay fever, kid. I've seen it a million times. If the problem persists, then come back and we'll look into it more.'

I wanted to slap him for calling me kid.

The printer on the other side of the office sprang to life with an old-school whirring sound. The small sheet of green paper came out slowly and Dr Maul rose from his chair to collect it.

He sat back down, signed it and stared at the computer screen again, holding out the prescription to me without saying another word. I recalled the mostly empty waiting room, wondering what he could have been in such a hurry to get rid of me for.

'That's it?' I asked, remaining in my chair.

'If the problem persists, come and see us again. Have a good day Mr Holmes.'

I unwillingly rose.

'You too, Doctor,' I said. He seemed too engrossed in his computer screen to note the obvious sarcasm.

I made to leave, but paused at the door, noticing the poster tacked to the inside of it that I hadn't seen on my way in. Dr Maul's face was staring back at me, a rare smile

upon it. His teeth were incredibly white, albeit with a few overlaps. He was wearing a different, more stylish pair of black-rimmed glasses. The lines in his forehead were smaller and his brown hair much less greying than the man sat behind me, though I was sure the picture was no more than a couple of years old. Perhaps it was annoying patients such as myself that had caused such a substantial aging in the man.

There was a quote leading off the image in a speech bubble that seemed to cheapen an otherwise professional poster:

*“Here at Crossfield Surgery, Kingston, we make sure you leave with the right solution to your health issues and endeavour to provide you with the most reliable service possible. There is no problem too big or too small” – Dr Emery Maul.*

What kind of name is Emery anyway? It sounds like a vaguely present art teacher who wouldn't remember the names of his students before the academic year was up.

I stepped out into the waiting room, quashing the urge to say something more. It was bittersweet to walk out of the surgery. The relief of getting away from Maul the Tool was met with equal trepidation that the issue had not been resolved. The nasal spray took me even further away from a solution. The fog was already spreading over the street again, but it didn't break as the cars drove through it. It didn't swirl by the trees or glide around the lampposts.

I thought of not waking up tomorrow and the relief of what that would mean.

And then it passed.

The emotion and lack of feeling merged into a soft ball that harnessed tranquillity. The suicidal thought disappeared behind the knowledge that I would wake up in the morning, like it or not. The fog, however, remained, albeit in a lesser capacity. It never quite disappeared.

A classic sign of hay fever.

In the Doctor's defence, I hadn't provided him with the other symptoms. I had only given him the fog and expected him to tell me the right answer. But, seriously... hay fever?

I hated Dr Maul and his fucking nasal spray.

'What's that?' Felix asked as I came through the door, having forgotten to shove my prescription in my coat pocket in time.

'Just something for my allergies.'

'What allergies?'

He was stood in my path to the kitchen. I was starving and didn't fancy playing a hundred questions. I fake sneezed in his face.

'You,' I said.

'Then it isn't working.'

I slipped into the kitchen and opened the fridge but Felix kept watching me.

'What?'

He grinned. 'Want to tell me something?'

His eyes kept flicking to the ceiling. There was a creak on the floor above us. Felix's grin widened.

I closed the fridge and went to the stairs. It was too early for Pat to be home and he wouldn't likely be upstairs anyway. All I could think was that Felix had put some weird animal in my room to scare me.

I climbed the stairs and paused for a moment outside my room, trying to calm myself, scared at what to expect. I pushed the door open slowly but there was nothing in my room. It was only as I shut it from the other side that I saw Alicia in nothing but a black negligee.

She moved in front of the door. Her spaghetti hair was a more decided erratic, falling over the left half of her face.

'I guess I really am forgiven,' I said.

'Figured we shouldn't waste any more time getting back on track...'

She pulled me into her and kissed me passionately, wrapping her leg around and pushing herself harder into the door. I pulled off my big grey coat and as it hit the ground the nasal spray spilled out of the pocket.

'What's that?' Alicia asked, running her hands through my hair.

'It's nothing.'

She didn't push the matter and took off the rest of my clothes.

We hadn't gone all the way before, but it wasn't the first time for either of us. Nonetheless, it was awkward and new. There wasn't a lack of passion, but it took a backseat as we tried to get the timing right. Somehow, my teeth kept hitting hers. And, to be vague...I missed my target. Alicia took control and righted the ship so that it turned into something resembling good sex. But I was less than happy with my performance.

'Hang on,' I said, as Alicia laid down and rested her chin on my chest after. 'My brother let you in?'

'Yes.'

'So, he saw you in that?' I nodded towards the negligee now on the floor.

'Of course not! What, you think I came here on the bus just rocking my boobs out for everyone to see?'

'Well no, Alicia, but...'

'We're all grown-ups here,' she said.

'No, we aren't.'

'Well...near enough. He knew what was going to happen, he's not stupid. I just didn't make it as blaringly obvious as you're picturing. I came in that.' She pointed to a large green Parker jacket on the floor.

'So you came dressed as a flasher?'

Alicia rolled her eyes. 'You really want to debate this?'

I just shrugged and pulled her in tighter.

'Where have you been today, anyway? You don't have any classes on Thursdays.'

Alicia asked.

'I went in anyway,' I lied. 'Sat in the library, trying to get my head around osmosis.'

'Any luck?'

I shook my head.

'Well I'm not writing your coursework for you.'

'I wasn't asking you-'

'And you're coming for dinner tonight.'

Alicia got to her feet and began to dress as though she was suddenly possessed by something else.

'Put your pants on,' she said. 'We should get going.'

It wasn't like before.

Mrs Beach was foul and unmotherly. She threw a dining room chair across the room when Tom sighed at being told dinner was lasagne. Alicia was branded a 'silly bitch' for closing the cloakroom door too loudly. There wasn't anything quite so obviously untoward aimed at me but the scowls and slamming made it clear I wasn't so welcome anymore. I wondered exactly what Alicia had said about the events of the funeral, but should Mrs Beach have had the whole story then I don't think I would have still been in the house.

We ate dinner in silence. The lasagne was lukewarm and stodgy – a far sight from the delicious chilli of a few weeks previously, though that may have been assisted by the munchies. But putting fork to mouth was something to do, at least, in a room where a sneeze might have meant a lashing.

'If you aren't going to eat the rest of that Thomas, then get the fuck back to your game!' Mrs Beach shouted, all of a sudden. Tom had gone about two seconds without eating. He looked terrified, his fork paused in his hand from where he had been about to load up.

'Mum! Leave him alone!' Alicia shouted. 'It's not his fault.'

Mrs Beach stood up sharply, the chair legs scraping along the wooden dining room floor. She slammed her palms either side of her plate and opened her mouth but no words seemed to come. Her stare at Alicia was hateful and malicious. She looked as though she could have chucked the lasagne dish from the centre of the table at her daughter and not thought twice of it.

Alicia remained surprisingly calm, though I felt the need to put a protective hand on her knee all the same. Eventually, she slid her chair back too and picked up her plate.

‘Come on,’ Alicia said to me without averting her gaze from Mrs Beach. ‘Let’s eat upstairs.’

I couldn’t look at anyone in the room as we left. It was too intimidating. I wondered why Alicia had invited me over, but as we entered her bedroom and she raised her eyebrows at me, now all too familiarised with the experience, it became clear she just wanted me to see what she had been going through in the few weeks after her father’s death.

‘Still think I should cut her some slack?’ Alicia said, slamming down on her bed, bouncing gently off the springs.

‘I think you all need some slack. It’s a tough time.’ I placed our dinner on the desk and got on top of the covers next to her, pulling her into a spoon. ‘Say you’re with someone for a long time and it’s all you’ve known. And one day it’s just gone. There isn’t much of a rulebook on how to deal with that I guess.’

‘No, I don’t suppose there is. But I’ve never seen her like this – it’s scary. I almost want to take Tom and get out of here. That would show her.’

‘Yes, well...I’m not sure that would help anyone. You just need to wait this out. It will get better soon, I promise.’

Alicia let out a gentle laugh. ‘You’re an optimist now?’

‘Whatever works.’

She kissed me on the lips and sat up to eat more lasagne. It went down much easier for her than it did me. She caught my look of surprise and worked out what I was thinking quickly, particularly as I made no effort to mimic her with my own plate.

‘Mum’s lasagne has always been bad. It’s one of those things you grow to love.’

I prodded my fork at the mush on my plate but decided against another mouthful.

Alicia shot up from the bed again. Her energy always surprised me. She took my hand and pulled me with her, out of the room and back down the stairs.

‘We’re not doing this,’ she muttered either half-heartedly to me or just to herself.

We went straight into the lounge but hid far enough around the corner so we weren’t visible from the dining room.

'Psst,' Alicia hissed at Tom, who was too engrossed in hammering another wrestler with a ladder to notice us behind him. 'Psst.' Still nothing.

Alicia launched a cushion at his head.

He turned, afraid, fully ready to take cover from more flying objects, but the fear disappeared when he realised it was Alicia who had thrown the cushion.

She held a finger to her lips as Tom opened his mouth to say something. Alicia motioned towards the dining room before using a series of hand gestures that I couldn't see but Tom nodded along too. Alicia finished by pointing to her eye and then performing a fake and silent scream to her brother.

He put the controller down and followed us out into the hallway.

Both Beachs put on their coats and shoes. Alicia looked confused when I didn't follow suit.

She threw my grey puffy coat at me and kicked my shoes over before repeating the eye point and fake scream. I still didn't get it. Tom was smirking behind her.

'Ice cream,' she whispered.

'Ohhhh.'

We slipped out the front door just as silently and sped down the pathway and out of sight of the house.

The centre of Kingston was dead as we stepped off the bus, despite Thursdays being late-night shopping. As we passed Bentall's, I looked in and saw a few more people, but it was still eerily quiet for not gone seven. Perhaps the continually plummeting temperatures had sent everyone inside.

Tom and Alicia were wrapped up in thick jackets, scarfs and gloves but both were still shivering.

'And you want ice cream?' I shouted ahead as they broke into a gentle jog.

'Always want ice cream!' Alicia said.

Tom grinned at me over his shoulder. 'Come on JJ.'

The parlour was surprisingly busy – a medley of couples and teens tucking into sundaes, cones or the assuredly more disappointing fro-yo tubs. We took a booth about halfway down and delayed. I made to go to the counter but Alicia shoved me back in the seat.

'I'll get them,' she said.

'But I don't even know what I want...'

'I'll know what you want when I'm there.'

'You will?'



Alicia nodded and vanished. She didn't ask Tom either. He was watching me with a glazed smile on his face, as though he didn't really see me or feel anything at all. He looked how my brain felt.

'She's...strong-willed,' I said.

'Yes. Can make life pretty easy sometimes,' Tom said.

'How so?'

'Saves the rest of us the trouble of thinking.'

His words were pained but all too true. Perhaps hammering the controller was his way out of thinking when Alicia wasn't making his decisions for him.

'You doing okay?' I asked him.

He shrugged. 'Sure.'

'You can talk about it all if you want? To me, even. No judgment.'

'Thanks, JJ. But I'm okay. Really. I don't want to talk.'

Tom looked to the counter, as if he were willing Alicia to come back sooner so he didn't have to suffer through the awkward 'I'm here for you' bullshit, like I was some annoying parent. Perhaps he was making a mistake – my mistake. Not talking about it, not burdening someone else. Would Tom wake up in ten years' time with the fog too? Would he laugh at his girlfriend's dad's funeral?

'Well if you change your mind,' I finished.

'Thanks.'

Alicia returned a few moments later with three different tall sundaes, all spilling various colours of ice cream over the edges as flakes or wafers sunk deeper into the concoction.

'Fudge volcano or banoffee split Tom?'

'Fudge, please.'

She slid it across to Tom who snatched a fork out of her other hand and started pummelling ice cream into his mouth. He had brain freeze before Alicia had even sat down next to me.

'You like banoffee, right?' she asked me.

'Yes,' I lied. Could there be a more awful combination of foods than banana and toffee?

Alicia had the Royale, chocolate double nut gelato as smooth as silverware, and Ferrero Rocher pieces that made my mouth water. I wanted to ask her to swap, but she was staring at it like it was the cure to all of her problems.

'You know,' Tom announced suddenly. 'I think it's time I made a decision about my name.'

Blank stares encouraged him to continue.

'Mum calls me Thomas, you all call me Tom. Some people at school call me Tommy.'

'Who?' Alicia asked.

Tom's face went bright red. I knew from his look that it was one person – specifically a girl – but I wasn't going to sell him out to Alicia.

'Just people,' Tom said.

'Well, what do you like most?' I asked. 'Tommy?'

He nodded.

Alicia looked from me to him as if she was missing the point of the conversation entirely. I wasn't exactly clued on as to where it had all come from but I thought it best to keep the Beachs as happy as possible.

'Tommy it is,' I said.

'Right,' said Alicia. 'Come on then, *Tommy*, give us a try of the volcano.' She didn't wait for permission to dip her own spoon in and dribble chocolate sauce across the table in an effort to have a bite.

Tommy took a spoonful of mine.

'Alicia steals yours and you punish me?' I ask him.

We all started laughing. And we laughed and ate ice cream and forgot all about dead parents and crazy mothers, foggy minds and flying chairs. I even managed to feel my normal self for a few seconds as I watched Alicia and Tommy push each other playfully up and down Eden Street, the sugar rush multiplying their happiness.

But the near-absence of fog was short-lived – it returned later that evening as I woke up in the middle of the night to a loud crash. I had almost forgotten I was at Alicia's. She didn't stir but the noise had been loud enough for me to be certain I hadn't dreamt it. And just like that, as I slipped my trousers on and tiptoed out of the room, it was back. The wispy glaze was even more unforgiving. Anger and confusion swelled inside of me, though it had nothing to do with what I had heard. It was at everyone else – Alicia, Felix, Uncle Pat, even Tommy and Mrs Beach. I wished for them to feel the fog and understand that the pain they were feeling wasn't as bad.

I looked over the banister into the hall below and another crash rang out. There was a light on in Dr. Beach's study. Another bang – it sounded like something being thrown against the wall. I searched the landing for a weapon before realising a burglar wasn't likely to be using the lights and thumping around the house. Mrs Beach's curse a moment later confirmed the room's occupant.

'Fucking selfish little prick.'

I tried to walk down the stairs loudly, so I wouldn't alarm Mrs Beach. She was still surprised to see me stood in the doorway, though perhaps that was the bare chest and skinny jeans attire more than anything.

'Oh, JJ.'

'Mrs Beach, are you okay?'

She was stood in the middle of the room in the same cardigan and trousers she had been wearing at dinner. There were books everywhere, some torn on the floor in front of her, others at the foot of the wall nearest me, the victims of Mrs Beach's wrath.

'Yes, I'm fine. Shouldn't you be in bed?'

'I heard the bangs – I was...concerned.'

She waved me off. 'No need. I'm just...' – she looked around at all of the books, trying to find the right thing to say – 'having a sort.'

'Okay. Can I help at all?'

'NO!'

I knew I should leave, but I couldn't seem to move. And that's what did it. Mrs Beach slid to her knees, clutching a copy of Sweet & Maxwell's Encyclopaedia of Employment Law. I sat down on the floor next to her and she sobbed into my bare chest. Not dramatically or excessively, but she cried like a woman who had lost her husband. The man she had been with for more than two decades, and who she had expected to be with for far longer. Her bitterness and anger were moored in the books she had thrown at the wall and all that was left was the pain.

'Want me to make you some tea?' I asked.

She managed to snuffle out a yes, so I left her on the study floor to compose herself whilst I made up two mugs in the kitchen. When I returned, Mrs Beach had pulled the chairs back into the centre of the room and took a seat on one as I handed her the drink.

'I'm sorry I've been such a bitch to everyone.'

'It's okay, Mrs Beach,' I said.

She opened her mouth to say something but I already knew what it would be.

'Janet, I mean. I'm sorry.'

We blew on our hot drinks and let the peacefulness of the moment wash over us. I was very aware that I was topless and Janet was looking anywhere in the room she could that wasn't at me.

'You're allowed to be a bitch when your husband dies,' I said.

'That's a kind thing to say, JJ. Did I wake Alicia? Thomas?'

'I don't think so. And I think he's Tommy now.'

'Is that so?' Janet looked at me bemusedly. 'Well, I'm sorry for waking you, at least.'

'Don't be, I was already up,' I lied.

Janet smiled, knowing it was a kind lie.

'What were you doing with all the books?' I asked.

'Ah,' she said. 'Well, you see, for all his intelligence and medical genius, Mattie could be a darn fool.'

'Oh?'

'He hid things. Important things – documents of all kinds, money. Even photos. As though they were all treasures people would want to steal. The man kept impeccable book shelves but couldn't invest in a bloody filing cabinet.'

Mrs Beach laughed to herself. 'Silly really, isn't it? The papers for our life savings are hidden in Treasure Island or Heart Surgery for Dummies for all I know.'

A different thought caught her. 'You and Alicia managed to work things out then?'

'Yes. It was just a silly misunderstanding – we're fine now.'

'Good. She needs a nice boy. It might calm her down a bit. You're being...safe, I take it?'

My skin prickled and I looked to the door.

'Sorry,' Mrs Beach said. 'A mother has to ask.'

'Yes, we're being safe.'

I chanced a look at her and she slouched in her chair a little. I realised then she had been looking for confirmation that me and Alicia were having sex. Not just 'accidentally leave your flies open hand action'. But the real deal. The whole conversation seemed odd to me – as though it were not how it should normally happen. But then, I wouldn't know if it was normal or not with only Uncle Pat for reference of such a chat.

Either way, I had dropped Alicia in it.

'It's okay, I don't need to talk with her about this,' Mrs Beach said, as though she were reading my mind. 'It's only natural. Perhaps better I ask you than her. I'm not exactly her favourite person right now.'

'That will change. You guys just need a little time for the wounds to heal. It will get easier.'

I said it. But I didn't believe it. My life had stayed exactly the same since my parent's death. No better, no worse necessarily. At least not until the fog appeared to complicate everything.

'Why don't you get back to bed,' Mrs Beach suggested, holding a hand out to take my tea. 'I'll stop throwing books, I promise.'

'Yes, okay. Are you sure you're going to be alright?'

Mrs Beach nodded and rose from the chair. 'I'm going to carry on for a bit, see what I can find.'

I left the room and went back upstairs. I realised that something was uncomfortable in my jean pocket and pulled out my inhaler. I hadn't used it yet.

I took two puffs and waited. Not even the slightest dent on the mist spread across the landing.

Fucking gesundheit Dr Emery.

## Six (2011)

Freddie dialled the number into my phone. He had a guy for everything.

I would have asked Alicia, but I didn't want to smoke with her again. Of course, I didn't think she was responsible for the fog. It just so happened it started when we were sat in her room, smoking a joint. But I couldn't risk the same set of circumstances again.

I don't know why I felt the need to try it again. Perhaps it was that moment being the best I had felt since the fog had started. Perhaps it was the thought that, on the slight chance the weed had caused my ailment, it could fix me also. Perhaps I just wanted to get high. All I knew was that I was one inhaler down, pumped full of anti-depressants on Dr Emery's second-best guess, and feeling worse than ever.

'And you promise you won't tell my brother?' I asked Freddie.

'Cross my heart,' he said as he handed the phone back to me.

He'd tell him, I knew he'd tell him. But I didn't have many options. I didn't care enough about him knowing either. He wouldn't tell Pat.

'I can get it for you, you know,' Freddie continued. 'You don't have to deal with the guy yourself. He's my brother's dealer at uni, I don't know if he's a bit rough or what.'

A panicky chuckle escaped Freddie. I looked at my phone and at the number he had entered named Connor.

'No, it's fine, I'll sort it, thank you.'

He nodded and took a sip of coffee. He looked around the canteen, making sure no one was suspicious, not that there was anything to be suspicious of – putting a number in a phone.

It all felt a bit dramatic for a little bit of pot.

'Where is your brother, anyway?' Freddie asked.

'Probably failing to chat up some blonde in his Business class.'

'I resent such an allegation,' Felix's voice boomed over my shoulder. He jumped over the top of the sofa and landed next to me, rocking the cheap wooden coffee table as he clipped it with his foot. Some of Freddie's coffee spilled onto the floor.

'At least the *failing* part. I have a date with Katrina this weekend thanks to my abundance of game, thank you very much.'

'You move quickly,' I said.

Freddie snorted. 'Please, it's been six months since this guy even touched a boob.'

Felix's face went bright red. 'Bollocks has it! I've just been keeping my options open, you know. Can't walk down the aisle with the first bird interested in me like dipshit over here, can I?' He barged me, playfully.

I heard the conversation, but my mind was on my phone and what I would say to Connor.

‘Just a bit of fun, JJ. Crack a smile once in a while,’ Felix said.

‘Maybe later. What are you doing with Katrina?’

‘I’m going to take her to The Ivy for dinner.’

‘The Ivy?’ I said. ‘How are you going to afford that exactly?’

Felix shrugged. ‘Dip into the uni fund, probably.’

He wouldn’t look at me as he said it. His money from Mum and Dad had long since been titled ‘the uni fund’ for the sake of not having to talk about them. It wasn’t enough to pay for university so dipping into it for a pricey dinner to impress a girl probably didn’t seem like a bad idea.

Once Felix and I were a bit older, it seemed strange to me that Pat hadn’t taken the money from us at first and given it back to us when we were 18 so we could use it more wisely and as adults. But we had access to our accounts from a young age, not that we knew what to do with the money then as Pat provided everything we needed.

‘You think that’s what they would have wanted?’ I asked. ‘Sacrificing your future for a date of the week?’

‘Well aren’t we Mr high and mighty today,’ Felix mocked.

Freddie was watching from the comfy chair on the opposite side of the table, still on edge from our transaction and waiting for mine and Felix’s play argument to blow up at any moment. He needn’t have worried. Felix would be changing the topic of conversation in three, two, one...

‘You’re going to want to be around tonight, by the way,’ he said.

‘Oh, why’s that?’

‘I saw Pat’s phone. Guess who’s coming over?’

‘She isn’t?’

Felix nodded, a big beam on his face. ‘The infamous Teresa herself!’

‘They’re having dinner at the house?’

‘God, no – you think he’d let that happen? She’s just coming to pick him up. But I thought it might be a good time to do “I made way too much”.’

‘You’re a genius.’

I made it back from meeting Connor just in time.

As I walked through the front door, I was worried the weed in my wallet might smell in the house but the sound of an engine behind distracted me. A Mini Cooper slowly pulled in at the top of the drive to block in Uncle Pat’s Chrysler. I could see a lady with long

ginger curly hair looking out of the driver's window, trying to check the number of the house. She saw me in the doorway, smiled and waved.

I waved back before being knocked out of the way by Uncle Pat as he raced out the front door. 'See you later, kid.' He was wearing the same white shirt he had for the first date, but his cologne smelled much stronger.

'Wait,' I said, but Pat was already pulling open the passenger's door of the Mini and suggesting to Teresa that they get going.

She had other ideas as she exited the car and made no signs of being in a hurry. Pat was halfway in the car, looking concerned as Teresa kept one eye on me.

'Come on, Paddy, he's right there, I think he sees us. Unless you failed to mention one of your nephews was blind. Introduce me.'

Patrick slammed the door in a huff and made back up the path with Teresa on his arm. She pecked him on the cheek, unphased by his moodiness.

'Yeah, *Paddy*, don't be rude.'

Teresa laughed and took my hand. She was kind-looking. Freckles covered her entire face. She was dressed smart in a black skirt and white top, a large and expensive looking brown coat resting over a Michael Kors handbag. I could tell nothing was cheap, but she seemed modest in the way she carried herself. It was my best guess but Pat wouldn't be interested in dating someone who was actually materialistic, so I gave her the benefit of the doubt.

'Teresa, this is James-Joseph. James-Joseph – Teresa.'

'It's JJ. I've heard lots,' I lied.

'Now I seriously doubt that,' she said. 'It's been like getting blood from stone trying to get Paddy to talk about you. I imagine it's been the same for you and your brother with regards to me.' She had a slight Scottish twang to her voice as she stood smiling at me.

'You could say that.'

'Might as well get this done properly,' Pat mumbled. 'FELIX? GET OUT HERE,' he shouted over my shoulder.

As the kitchen door opened and Felix came jogging out, a waft of fried mince and onions followed him, making my stomach rumble. He was wearing his naked body apron that I had got him as a joke one Christmas. Teresa took a step back trying to take it all in. Thankfully the privates were covered by a pair of painted-on hands. Felix's hair was impeccably slicked to the side as though he had just fixed it in the reflection of the oven before he left the kitchen.

As Pat introduced the two of them, I could see Felix gearing up for the big invite.

'Where are you two off to?' he asked. Sly.



'We have a reservation at Carluccio's – in fact, we're already late, best be off.' Pat gripped Teresa's shoulder, ready to rush her back up the path again but she made no sign of moving.

'Ah, but I've got shepherd's pie on the go, I made way too much. Why don't you have dinner with JJ and I?'

Teresa looked to Pat, who tried not to roll his eyes, knowing full well what we were up to.

'Let's stay!' she said. 'You can cancel that reservation, Paddy, your nephews want to have dinner with us!'

He opened his mouth to protest but no noise came out. The battle was lost long ago and he knew it.

'Fine.'

Felix finished cooking whilst I pulled out the folding table from the cupboard under the stairs and squeezed four chairs around it since we didn't have a dining room. The table cloth covered the scratches and tacky plastic. It was far different from eating dinner as a family at the Beach's, but I think I preferred it, even though Pat and Felix weren't much for a conversation. It just didn't happen often so it felt strange.

Teresa had red wine that Felix had bought and no one seemed to be questioning. She smiled from me to Felix, apparently immune to Pat's unease. He stood in the doorway, sipping on a glass of sparkling water, looking embarrassed, uncomfortable and anywhere but at Teresa's glass. Everyone seemed happy with the silence except for him.

'How long's that food going to be?' he asked.

'Two minutes, Pat, Christ. Reckon you can wait that long? You're welcome, by the way.'

'Little shit,' Pat mumbled.

Teresa took a step towards me. 'So, I understand you boys are finishing sixth form at the moment?' she asked.

'Yes. Last few months.'

'And then what's the plan – university?'

I nodded. 'Reckon so. What is it you do?'

'I'm a teacher.'

A teacher's salary wasn't buying that Kors handbag. An ex-husband maybe?

'I understand that might be an ambition of yours too?' she continued. 'Or is that your brother?'

'It's me,' I said. 'The only thing Felix could teach someone is how to burp loudly and fail at getting laid.'

Teresa laughed.

'Fucking heard that,' Felix shouted from the kitchen.

He came through, carrying two plates of shepherd's pie and nodded for me to fetch the other two. As I entered the kitchen, the smell of weed wafted across my nostrils, even over the beef and mash. Shit, if I could smell it, they'd be able to as well.

I took my wallet from my pocket, opened the back door and shoved it under the plant pot, next to the spare key, hoping it would be enough to distance the smell. Perhaps it was already too attached to my clothes. My experience at the Beach's should have taught me how much it stinks.

'Was that the back door?' Pat asked, as I sat down with mine and Felix's plates.

'Yes, just throwing a spider out.'

He looked suspicious for a moment but seemed too hungry to pursue the thought.

Teresa raised her wine glass. 'A pleasure to meet you both, finally,' she said.

'Cheers.'

Pat eyed the glass for the first time, no longer dancing it out of his line of vision. I wondered whether it bothered him that Teresa drank. He knew Felix and I did with friends, but never particularly questioned it or raised the issue. It was unusual of Felix to have brought it in the house. I found it quite cruel in a way. Perhaps even crueller of Teresa to have accepted a glass, though she was new to the situation and might not have known what she was doing. I had to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Pat's eyes returned to his plate as he scoffed the shepherd's pie down quickly.

'What's the hurry?' I asked him.

'Hungry,' he managed to reply through a loaded mouth, reminding me once more that he was no more my Dad than Felix. Teresa dabbed at his scruffy stubble with a napkin, as though he were a child, but he didn't brush her off.

'And what about you, Felix? What do you want to do when you finish school?'

'Full-time drug dealer,' he said. 'Make a shit tonne of cash. Buy one of those massive houses it looks like a drug dealer owns. Marry me a nice honey but keep a few more in the basement for my own enjoyment, wink, wink. Hash tag – life goals.'

Teresa nearly spat her food out. It took her a moment to adjust to his dry tone, but she came up laughing.

'Did you just say hash tag?' I asked him. 'I really hate that.'

'Me too,' Felix said. 'I was saying it *ironically*, JJ.'

'I might hate that even more.'

'Tell me about your girlfriend, JJ.' Teresa said, trying to keep the conversation information rich, away from sibling banter. She seemed genuinely interested. 'Alice, isn't it?'

'Alicia.'

'Oh, sorry, Alicia. How long have you been with her?'

'Only a few months, but it's going well. Things have been a little tricky for her lately though, her father passed.' Immediately after the words had left my mouth, it seemed strange that I had fed her that information so immediately. I wanted to take it back but all of a sudden, there was something in me determined to turn the evening sour. It was how I had felt at Dr. Beach's funeral but this time I was missing the urge to laugh.

'Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, how awful.'

Pat and Felix were looking at each other, uncomfortably. There were a thousand words passing between them without their mouths opening. I felt the distance from them then, more than ever. The fog intensified from the centre of my eyes outwards.

'I suppose you would be a pretty helpful person to have in that scenario though JJ? What with everything you've been through yourself,' Teresa said.

'I suppose, yes.'

The room was tense. Red faces on one half of the table, me and the oblivious Teresa talking on the other side. Frankly, I was surprised Pat had even told her about his dead brother.

'That was awful, what happened to your Mum and Dad. It broke my heart to hear it,' Teresa continued.

Their blood would be boiling. But I didn't want Teresa to stop. They deserved this. Unfortunately, she had begun to cotton on. She was watching Pat's face a little more nervously. Even his moustache looked angry.

'Should I have not said anything?' Teresa asked him.

He forced a glaringly fake smile and said: 'It's fine. Great pie, Felix. What is that, Tabasco in there?'

Felix went to say something but I cut across.

'You can bring it up, Teresa, but if you're expecting them to say anything on the subject in this house then you're going to be disappointed.'

The table went deadly silent. No voices, no scraping cutlery. All that could be heard was Felix's chewing as he finished his mouthful.

'Jim-Joe...' Pat started.

'Don't call me that.'

'Leave it, yeah. We're having dinner.'

'What kind of a reason is that?' I asked. 'They did exist, you know? You remember them, don't you?'

'JJ,' Felix said. 'He's right, just leave it.'

'I've been leaving it for years.'

'JAMES-JOSEPH!' Patrick was animated – his cheeks were shaking and his fork was gripped so tightly in his right hand I thought he might stab me with it.

I laid my cutlery down over my barely touched dinner and left the table calmly. On my way out, I said: 'Teresa, it was lovely to meet you. Hope to see you again sometime.'

She managed a sympathetic smile, but made no reply, I suspected at fear of angering Pat further.

I went up to my room and started punching my pillow. I kicked the bed post barefoot. My toe crunched but the fog stopped it from hurting altogether. My pain was internal. I wanted to scream. I imagined myself inserted into one of Tommy's games, wrestling Pat and Felix. Hitting them round the head with blue chairs and steel ladders, bloodying the ring floor. I threw Felix over the ropes and body slammed Pat into the canvas.

And then I was somewhere else. Back on the motorway again. The cars were coming towards me, only this time my hands and feet were tied together and chained to the tarmac. The cars set alight as the day left the sky and gave way to the inferno of vehicles.

They were getting closer and closer. I could see Mum and Dad in the front seats of their Ford Mondeo. Their luggage filled the back of the car, restricting the rear view. They couldn't see the lorry, taking them on the inside. Increasing in speed, out of control, flames fierce and rising. It spun them out – the wheels locked and they flipped. I could see the look of terror in their faces as the car hurtled towards me, the flames already claiming me for themselves, the heat of the fire sweeping over my whole body...

'What the fuck have you done, you little shit! You're going to pay for that.'

I was on my knees, my hand bleeding uncontrollably. The cold air was pouring into my room, most of a pane missing from my bedroom window. There was blood on the white windowsill, and little shards of glass everywhere.

I swivelled around and saw Pat stood in the doorway, his face bright red.

'Well? What do you have to say for yourself? You bratty little fuck!'

He barged me out of the way to inspect the window and I fell onto all fours. My toe was hurting more than my hand.

'I... I don't know what happened.'

'Oh, enough of the horse shit, Jim-Joe. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with you lately, but it has to stop.' He came away from the window, resigned in his mind. 'I ain't fixing it for you. Not the window, not the hand. Sort it out yourself.'

He paused in the doorway for a moment, his rage suddenly hesitant. There was something else he wanted to say but it just wouldn't come out. He thudded back downstairs.

I looked to the clock on the wall. It was gone 11. I had lost four more hours. I tried to listen out for conversation below but there was none, and a scuff came from the wall I shared with Felix.

I left my bedroom and went downstairs. The door to the lounge was closed. I waited a moment, and heard Pat land heavily on the couch, still muttering under his breath. Teresa must have gone home. I waited in the kitchen, wrapping my hand in a tea towel in the meantime, until I heard the loud snores coming from the lounge and slipped out the back door into the garden.

My wallet was still under the plant pot, the weed untouched. I didn't have a grinder so I went back into the kitchen and took the pizza slicer from the draw. I didn't dare start breaking it down in the kitchen so I took the oldest chopping board I could find and went to the shed at the end of the garden.

The first toke sent a little surge of relief through me but the fog didn't budge. Not in the slightest. I tried again, but there was nothing. Instead, the flames from the highway imprinted once more. They surrounded me in the shed, and merged with the fog, almost as if the two were old acquaintances. It was terrifying, yet familiar. I didn't need to run from either, because they had become so conversant to me. They would hurt, but they wouldn't kill me. Not yet. Dad's armchair was in the corner, but it was empty this time. The brown leather was withered with white lines, ugly creases and the occasional cigar burn. I had forgotten it was there. It was really there.

I stubbed the joint out halfway and sat in the shed until the sun came up, thinking of the luggage in the back of the Mondeo.

## Seven (2012)

Sleep became something to fear.

Before, it had been where the fog couldn't touch me. Provided I could get to sleep, it was my haven and escape. But that didn't last for long.

Soon it was another world. A foggy warehouse, full of cars and vans. At first it was empty, but I moved further inside and other people started to appear. I didn't recognise them.

It wasn't like the visions of the motorway. Not at first.

There was the girl, no more than eight or nine. Her blonde fringe covered one half of her face. The other side showed a hint of a smile. Each time I got near to her, she moved back, further and further, until she disappeared into the fog.

An older boy, maybe in his twenties, would appear, laughing, always laughing. It wasn't creepy – he just seemed drunk. There was a store name badge on his blue and white striped shirt that read Ethan. He didn't back off the same way the little girl did but when I got near, an invisible barrier separated us, preventing any contact. He would tell me everything was okay. That we wouldn't be here long and that he knew what was in my head. And then he would laugh. He would say it again. Everything was okay. His face would change – he would look over my shoulder and suddenly be flushed of colour. He would tell me to be quiet – we didn't want him to hear us.

At the end of the warehouse, things would change. I would sweat profusely, moisture tearing down my forehead and pouring from my chest onto my t-shirt. That's when *he* would come, drifting through the fog like a monster. He had a human form, but I was certain he was a demon of some sorts, sent to haunt the night. The fog had taken the day from me and now it was trying to take the rest too.

I didn't recognise the figure, but it was familiar. He was the only one who would come close. I knew it was a him. I could feel his breath on my neck, but it wasn't warm. It was ice-cold, so much so I thought I might wake up with frostbite. He would whisper in my ear – *it isn't yours*. He said it over and over – never anything more or less, but always that. And as he floated away, back into the fog, I wouldn't be able to move.

The warehouse suddenly catches fire. My neck freezes stiff, my eyes still full of mist. Or is it smoke? The figure continues to drift back into the distance, towards the exit, his black outline never quite lost in the flames. He would make it out, but I wouldn't. I was stuck. There were shouts all around me but I couldn't make any noise. The screams were indistinguishable until they weren't. They would shriek my name. They needed my

help, but I needed theirs. We were all going to die in the fiery warehouse, alone, unable to reach each other.

Just as the flames were about to touch my skin...

Awake.

No fire. No warehouse, no cars. No little girl. No Ethan. No Demon. Just the fog remained.

It was a new year – 2012. But the celebration always seemed a bit irrelevant to Felix and I because our birthday was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January.

Only this year I wasn't much in the mood for celebrating that either. 18<sup>th</sup> or not – it's difficult to be in party mode when your brain is withdrawing you further and further from the world.

I threw the rest of the weed away – it made everything way worse. And the second batch of antidepressants Dr Emery had given me – they were making me fat – a side effect he had failed to mention as he explained fluoxetine was the best thing possible for 'a kid who was mildly unhappy'. Mildly unhappy my ass.

If I could control my dreams and exit the warehouse, I would drive round to the surgery and put a brick through Dr Emery's office window. He wouldn't have a clue who it was since I was certain most of his patients left his office as dissatisfied and distressed as I was.

Alicia protested against my mood, determined to make a big deal out of the day, but settled for treating Felix and I to dinner in town.

'I tried to get your uncle involved,' she confessed to us over mains. She dribbled a little bit of bolognese onto her chin and wiped it up. 'But he didn't reply to my text.'

'Probably couldn't work out how to open it,' Felix said.

'How did you get his number?' I asked.

'From your phone of course.'

'Right,' I said, trying not to show that I felt violated. It was more the lack of anything to find on there that I was ashamed of, rather than having something to hide.

'Yeah, I can't imagine he'd be interested, anyway,' Felix said. '£100 transferred into the bank account, yearly. Tends to be the trick with him, nothing more. Although we did get a card each this morning – that was a turnout for the books!'

'Yeah, they were from Teresa though I reckon...it wasn't Pat's handwriting,' I told him.

'Still, it's something I guess,' Alicia said, checking her phone for the hundredth time that evening. 'And he doesn't get in until really late, right?' she asked.

'Err, nah, not usually. Why?' I looked to Felix, who seemed a little perplexed.

'No reason. How are your uni applications coming on?'

It was too blatant a change of subject and it was clear something else was going on. It wasn't until we got back to Thorpe Lane and walked up the path to the house that I put the pieces together. The curtain twitched as Felix put the key in the lock.

'SURPRISE!'

Few more than a dozen people were packed into the tiny living room, some having made poor efforts to spring out from behind furniture now nursing sore knees or bashed elbows. It was mostly people from school I was only distantly connected to. They all greeted Felix, before me, the first being Katrina who looked prettier than I remembered, and came up to give Felix a kiss on the lips – they had very quickly moved into girlfriend-boyfriend status over the Christmas break. Freddie was close behind and mocked them by trying to kiss Felix too. They both came up and gave me a hug as Felix saw to other people, but it was more obligatory than anything.

Alicia passed me a beer as the welcome party calmed and music started playing.

'Did you know?' she asked.

'Hadn't a clue.' I forced a smile.

'You don't like it?'

I searched the room again, looking for some sign of a friend that I knew didn't really exist. For a moment, the fog tricked me into thinking someone had hired a smoke machine.

'It's very sweet,' I told Alicia. 'I just didn't want a big deal.'

Felix was already finishing his first beer. He was chatting to a group of five people, Katrina very close to him, his arm around her waist. I noticed there was no sign of Pat.

'You weren't kidding about Pat then?'

She shook her head. 'No. I didn't mention the party when I text him though, figured we could get away with it after he didn't reply. Think he'll be pissed?'

'I don't think he'll notice.'

Alicia looked disheartened. I pulled her into me and tried a more convincing smile.

'It was very sweet,' I said again.

'Liar,' but she was laughing. She kissed me on the lips and snatched my beer before dragging me over to Freddie who was surprisingly drunk already. Maybe he *would* have smoked weed with me if I asked.

As the music got louder and the drinks went down faster, the room got foggier. At first it was genuine smoke as Ash Rigby lit a joint in the kitchen. Felix and Freddie manhandled him into the garden and ushered him towards the shed. But even after he left, it was too much.



It took me nearly an hour to escape the grip of Alicia or Freddie. I managed to slip upstairs and into my bedroom, closing the door behind me. The chill from the cardboard covered window was nice on my overheated head. I'm not sure why I had refused to fix it – perhaps out of spite towards Pat, perhaps just laziness.

I flopped onto the bed and tried to slow my breathing.

As I forced my face into the pillow and blotted out the room and the noise downstairs, the little girl crept out of the darkness. She was looking at me as though I shouldn't have been there. As though I were in her head and not the other way around. She kept opening her mouth, trying to scream, but no noise would come out. I tried to talk to her, to assure her she was going to be okay, but the muteness had infected me also. Then came the breath on the back of my neck, more chilling, more disturbing than ever. Mainly because it was the first time that it had happened whilst I was still awake...

'That was sly.'

I flipped onto my front to see Alicia stood in the doorway. She wasn't mad. She stood with a sympathetic or amused smile on her face, I was too disorientated to tell. The girl had vanished as had the breath on my neck, but the chill remained, sending goose bumps all over my body.

Alicia came in and closed the door behind her. She lowered the dress straps from her shoulders and climbed on top of me before beginning to undo my jeans.

'With everyone downstairs?' I asked.

'Live a little,' she said, and pulled the rest of her clothes off. It didn't seem like her, as though she was trying to force the spontaneity because it was sex.

A new burst of energy inspired me and we rolled off the bed and onto the floor with a loud bang. Alicia giggled, but made no signs of stopping. The sex was far more passionate than before as our rhythm matched much better. Alicia let out a loud moan after a few minutes and I was convinced I heard the whole party stop downstairs. I stayed on top, mainly because I liked Alicia's legs wrapped around my back. She bit my shoulder hard and I thought it might have pierced the skin.

The door swung back open and filled the air with the now much louder music from downstairs. By the time I had turned to see, Felix was using both of his hands to cover his eyes, a beer lodged in between them somehow.

'Sorry...shit sorry,' he said and pulled the door shut again. 'SORRY,' he said louder from behind the door.

Alicia looked to me, curious as to whether we should be cringing or laughing. I wasn't sure either, but the mood was definitely dead.

'We should get back downstairs,' she said. She seemed strangely proud of what had happened.

Whether it was because we had just been intimate, or because of the beer in my system, or just because...I seemed to love her in that moment. It was clear to me for the first time that she was with me. Properly with me, warts and all. Not that there were warts. My warts are the fog, I meant. I don't know what I meant. It was a mess.

Then I got dressed and it was gone. I didn't love any of them. Not Alicia, or Felix, or Pat, or Mum, or Dad. Certainly not anyone at the party. They were all just people who I couldn't feel. They were there, but it didn't seem as if they were.

The music stopped downstairs. It was deafeningly silent. Alicia and I got dressed and went back down.

Uncle Pat was stood in the open doorway, swaying.

## Eight (2012)

I could smell the booze on him. I didn't want to. I was trying desperately not to put two and two together to make four. But he was drunk. There was a yellow stain on his white shirt that was either whiskey or vomit. It wasn't spaghetti this time.

Pat was pale, with anger in his eyes.

The party had stopped, its occupants staring towards the front door where Pat stood, silently pulsating. Only one person had failed to grasp that anything was wrong. Ash Rigby was trying to finish a drunken conversation with Freddie, who hit him on the shoulder over and over, increasing the power with each ignored jab. Eventually Ash stopped and looked at the swaying Pat along with everyone else.

'Pat,' Felix started.

'Shut it. Out, everyone out.' The calmness with which he slurred didn't match the rage boiling underneath the surface. I knew he didn't want to humiliate himself in front of everyone, certain the anger was more at his relapse than at the party wrecking his home.

'I said out.' The volume in his voice increased slightly, but he was blocking the doorway and no one was willing to take a step towards him.

'OUT. NOW!'

He moved forward and grabbed the first person he could, clamping his hand around Ash's scrawny shoulder, and pulled him towards the door aggressively. Felix tried to separate the two but Pat pushed him back before launching Ash through the doorway and onto the front path. Everyone else started to trickle out, trying to keep as much room between themselves and Pat as possible. Myself, Alicia, Felix, Katrina and Freddie stayed where we were, sobering at an amplified pace.

'You little shits,' he said, placing a hand on the wall to steady himself. 'You fucking little SHITS! This isn't your fucking house; do you hear me?'

'You've been drinking,' I said, knowing the blunt approach probably wasn't best.

Pat's eyebrows turned inwards and he came towards me aggressively but stopped a metre short, trying to control himself.

'We'll clean this up,' Felix said. 'Why don't you go upstairs and we'll have the place sorted in an hour.'

Pat seemed to go paler. He looked like he wanted to be sick.

'You tell me to go upstairs in my own fucking house!' He kicked the shoe rack from the hall and sent it across the living room. It stopped just short of Katrina's feet. 'Who the fuck are these two?' He motioned to Freddie and Katrina. '*Why are you still here?*'

Katrina was shaking and moved towards the door but Felix grabbed her hand and held her back.

'Don't talk to them like that,' Felix said.

'I'll say whatever I bleeding well please in my own fucking, you ungrateful little cunt.'

The room stood shocked. It was a slur Pat had never used before, at least not towards one of us.

'It's not your house though, is it?' I told him. 'It's theirs.'

Although I had aimed to anger him even more, the fire subsided a little. He was hurt.

'Were you with Teresa?' I asked him, trying to move past the crossed line.

Pat looked to the floor and the aggression died further. She had ended it with him, I knew it.

'What happened?' I pushed.

He saw the beer in Freddie's hand, the desperation in his eyes apparent. There was a half-full bottle of whiskey on the table. He grabbed it and took a swig.

He took another look around, as though he had briefly forgotten we were all in the room.

'Clean this shit up and get out,' he said a bit quieter, holding the whiskey bottle so tight it looked like it might shatter.

'Mr Holmes.' Alicia stepped forward. 'It was my fault. The boys didn't know. I tried to message you but you didn't reply.'

'Sounds like you're trying to make this my fault,' Pat said, stepping towards Alicia. 'Remind me who you are again?'

Alicia's face flushed. She started to cry.

Pat didn't seem to feel bad. He drank more whiskey and rambled again about everyone leaving. He took Katrina's arm and tried to manhandle her in a similar way to Ash.

The last thing I remember was Felix ripping Pat's hand from Katrina and punching him square in the face.

When I came to, I was in Alicia's bedroom. She was wrapping my right hand which was bruised and bloody, the cut from punching the window freshly opened again, whilst the other had peas resting over the knuckles, a gauze tying it together.

'And look, it's fine, you know you can just stay here for now. I wouldn't go home for a bit – you can use dad's clothes if you want, mum won't mind. I'll explain to her what happened. She's been singing your praises for a month now. I don't know what you said to her to get her in a good mood again, but it's worked. Anyway, you're about his size.'

I'm not saying it won't be a little weird, having you wondering around in dad's clothes. But we'll get over it, I'm sure.'

My guess was she had been in full monologue for a while now. She hadn't seen me go. My hands were aching. The one with the peas on it felt broken. What had I done?

'They are just sitting there in the wardrobe, after all. There was some talk of Mum giving them away or whatever, but she can't seem to do it. At least now they'll have a use.' Alicia paused. She looked all over my face with curiosity, trying to work out what was different.

'Are you okay?' she asked. 'You seem strange.'

There was sweat glistening on her forehead. The house was very hot. The peas on my hand wouldn't last long. But she looked amazing. And strong. Her dress was on the floor and she sat next to me in her usual night-time get-up - white vest and pyjama shorts.

I smiled at her, trying to piece together something from before, but nothing was coming to me. My cheek burned as my face moved. Someone had hit me.

I couldn't do it anymore.

'What happened?' I asked.

Alicia looked concerned. 'Happened?' she repeated back to me, weirdly.

'Tonight,' I said. 'What happened...after Pat came home?'

'You don't remember?'

I shook my head. 'No. I must have blacked out.'

Alicia waited, watching, trying to comprehend what I was telling her. That I hadn't been there with her for a while now.

'Well you...you lost it a bit,' she said. 'Pat had been drinking. You don't remember?' she repeated.

'Yes, I remember him coming home. He threw Ash out and then after that...I'm blank.'

She took my pea-covered hand delicately and inspected my face again, prodding on my sore cheek as she continued. She then checked the back of my head for lumps.

'He tried to do the same to Katrina. He grabbed her – pretty hard, her forearm was almost black when we checked her afterwards – and Felix didn't take it well. He hit Pat. And then Pat hit him back much harder. Felix went down. And then...'

She paused again and looked to the floor.

'What?' I asked.

'Well, it's like I said. You lost it.'

'What do you mean I lost it?' It was getting frustrating, I wish she'd just spit it out.

'You sort of beat him. Pat, I mean. He went to kick Felix whilst he was on the floor but you hit him. He hit you back, but you were too strong. I didn't know...I didn't know you could do that.'

Nor did I. Perhaps the fog had its benefits after all. Special strength. The ability to fight. I hadn't hit anyone since Peter Whitehead pantsed me in infants' school.

'Were they...okay?' I didn't know what to ask. 'Katrina? Felix? Pat?'

'Your uncle was pretty battered. Black eye and a couple of cuts. Just about conscious on the floor, but not really. Freddie stayed with him but me and Katrina thought it best to get you two boys away.'

'Right.'

'You don't remember any of it?'

'No.'

She started inspecting my face once more, as though the reasoning for my fugue state might sprout from my nose. I was tempted to tell her about the other blackouts, but that would mean revealing I had been lying to her again.

Instead, I let Alicia ramble some more about me staying at the house, how her mum would be pleased to help me, how I should go to the doctors first thing in the morning, how I should make sure to mention the blackout, how I should message Pat saying I wouldn't be coming home for a few days...

Most of it went in, filtered by the fog which seemed to soften the nagging into an amusing and gentle song. The harmonies made me sleepy. I was on an adrenaline comedown from the fight and my eyes were slipping towards the warehouse, Alicia talking to me from outside. I finally knew for certain of Pat's hatred towards me. For some reason, this was a comforting thought as the warehouse caught fire and engulfed me in its flames once more.

Breakfast with the Beachs was far less awkward than the last meal I had eaten with them. It was comfortably quiet as Alicia, Mrs Beach, Tommy and I spooned cornflakes into our mouths, despite the events of the previous evening hanging over us all.

Before we sat down at the table, I had heard Alicia whispering a hurried explanation to her mother in the kitchen. As I entered, they both conjured forced smiles and asked me what I'd like to eat.

'You're welcome to stay as long as you need, JJ,' Mrs Beach had said as she threw a cloth over the dining table, a nervous eye on my cheek.

'What's JJ doing here and who hit him?' Tommy asked the room whilst looking at me. 'Why are we eating breakfast at the dining table? We never do that.'

'We're doing it, Thomas, because we have a guest,' Mrs Beach told him.

I hoped they wouldn't do it every morning I was there. I had a feeling it would be more than a few nights.

'So why is JJ here?' Tommy pushed again.

Alicia got there first and I'm glad she did because I didn't know what I was going to say.

'Remember how JJ lives with his uncle Pat?' she said. 'Well, he's not very well and JJ needs to stay with us until his uncle is better.'

'Right,' Tommy said. 'What's wrong with him?'

'He's just not very well.'

'But why?'

'Thomas!' Mrs Beach said.

'Where's he sleeping?'

'Thomas!'

Tommy slumped in his chair, his bottom lip sticking out in frustration. Mrs Beach started rambling to him about a new health kick she wanted the family to try. Alicia gripped my knee under the table.

'I've laid out a few of Dad's clothes on the sofa.' She paused before saying: 'I did my best.'

Her best wasn't bad. A stripy shirt that was a little bright, and blue jeans that were baggy on the shins and too wide at the waist. But both felt as though they had only been worn once or twice, which was more than could be said for my usual wardrobe.

It felt strange walking around Kingston in a dead man's attire. We were still off from sixth form for the Christmas break, so Alicia and I spent the day shopping. When we got home, she worked on a law assignment whilst I played PlayStation with Tommy, and Mrs Beach thumped around the house jovially, dusting everything from the skirting boards to the telly, much to the annoyance of Tommy as I took the chance to hammer his wrestler with a steel dustbin. Felix and I were texting what to do about Pat. No one had checked on him since Freddie had deemed him safe enough to leave by himself.

I stayed with the Beachs for three nights, and Felix stayed with Freddie, but when we had to go back to school, we agreed it would be best to go back to the house since we needed more clothes and our schoolbooks. Really, I think we both just wanted to see if Pat's relapse was more than a one-night blip. Felix picked me up from Alicia's on the rainy Sunday afternoon and took us on the short drive to North Kingston.

The house from the outside looked perfectly normal, apart from the closed curtains. I don't know what we were expecting – as if one half would have been blown out in a gas

explosion or the front door would be hanging off of its hinges. No, everything looked great from the outside, but we didn't know what was going on within.

Felix and I gave each other a nervous look as he put the key in the lock, in two minds about staying in the awful drizzle for a bit longer rather than facing what was on the other side of the door. It took a couple of pushes to get through – the coat rack had fallen from the wall and the coat jackets and hoodies had formed a sort of barricade on the other side.

The house didn't smell bad – only a little musty, but that could have just been normality and we were looking for the slightest thing. Save for the coat rack, there weren't things all over the floor or excrement up the walls. The living room was virtually intact – the coffee table had been knocked out of place and not been put back. The only noticeable sign that anything was different was the bottles.

Most of them empty, some with a few dregs in the bottom. Nearly all whiskey – maybe a dozen. That was only in the living room. The kitchen was clear. We hadn't braved upstairs yet. Sober Pat liked it downstairs but maybe alcoholic Pat was an upstairs man – I had an image of him wallowing in his brother and sister-in-law's old room, nursing a bottle of whiskey between his legs as he sat on the floor and cried.

When we went up, there were no bottles. No Uncle Pat. It didn't look as though anyone had been up there since the party. The quilt covers in my room were ruffled the same way Alicia and I had left them as we rolled onto the floor to have sex. The cardboard covering the broken window was still intact.

What *had* we expected?

Felix and I made to collect a duffel bag each worth of our clothes and shoes. I finished first so I went into his room. He was stood over his sock drawer, deadly still, holding his duffel by his side in one hand. There was something in his other hand but with his back to me I couldn't see. I cleared my throat.

He shot around, keeping his other hand behind him. Felix's face was flushed of colour, as though I had caught him doing something he shouldn't have been.

'What have you got there?'

He thought on it for a moment before pulling his hand back out. It was a framed picture of Mum and Dad on a beach in Greece. I could see the ruffled space in the drawer where he had dug it out from under his socks. I didn't get it. Was he ashamed of them? With Pat I could understand things a little better. He had been left two little kids to look after for the rest of his life. Whether dying was their fault or not, he had something to directly blame Mum and Dad for. They messed with his life. But Felix – he had nothing to have a go at.



I didn't want to talk about it. I took the picture from him and put it back in the draw, pulling a pair of old football socks over to cover it back up.

'Let's go,' I said.

We went back downstairs, but instead of going back out through the front door, Felix took a plastic carrier from the kitchen and collected the empty bottles of whiskey. He dumped it in the bin out back and dragged that through the gate and to the top of the drive, ready for Monday morning collection. I met him out front and we got into the Polo.

As I was pulling my seatbelt on, I noticed Felix wasn't doing the same. Instead, he was staring directly ahead of him, his keys paused in mid-air between his lap and the ignition. Pat was stood in front of the car, a white plastic carrier bag in his hands that was moulded into the shape of two liquor bottles. He was staring at us, dead in his steps.

Pat had the same look then as Felix had had when I caught him with the photo frame, his face devoid of colour. He was looking from us to the house, whilst shuffling his feet nervously. He didn't look angry. Not even drunk. It took me a second to work out what the bitterness in his face was exactly, but the shame became clear soon enough.

He nodded at us and went into the house, closing the front door behind him without looking back.

Felix and I sat in silence for a few minutes. He couldn't look at me, and instead chose to watch his lap whilst twiddling the car keys in his hand. He wasn't willing to drive away nor go back inside.

'I'll go,' I told him.

He nodded.

'Wait for me?'

He nodded again.

I exited the car and went back inside.

As though Pat's very presence was tainting, the house seemed dirtier somehow. Though it wasn't any different to ten minutes before, really, there was a darkness inside it. A misery I had underestimated, perhaps never quite understood. For the first time, I wondered about the delicate perch that sobriety rested upon. How easily it could be ripped out from underneath, and how big the drop really was. Twelve years reduced to nothing.

From the front doorway, I could see through to the kitchen. Pat was unloading two bottles of vodka onto the counter. Perhaps he had grown tired of the whiskey.

He hadn't heard me come in, so I cleared my throat so as to not startle him.

'What do you want kid?' he asked.

I edged into the kitchen but stayed fairly close to the door.

Pat couldn't look at me – he watched the bottles he had placed on the table instead. His whole face was quivering, as though he might cry. But I knew he wouldn't, not Pat. The bruising around his eye had gone a little yellow and the cut on his forehead was scabby.

'I'm sorry for hitting you,' I said.

'Don't be. I'm sure I deserved it.'

'You don't remember it?'

He shook his head. 'I'm sure I deserved it,' he repeated.

'You going to drink those.' I nodded towards the vodka bottles. 'I could take them away, if you like?'

Pat didn't reply. He sat down at the table, still looking at the booze. He was sober – that was clear from when me and Felix had seen him from the Polo. His composure was unwavering. And then hearing him speak, not slurring or spitting. Full of guilt...no he hadn't had a drink since the previous evening. Perhaps he had woken up with a new objective, resigned to sobriety once more. Determined not to buy any more alcohol and drink it. He had failed the first part of that test – could he sustain the second?

'Have you been to work?' I asked.

'No.'

I pulled out the chair opposite him, not daring to take one closer. It was unnerving to sit there and try and have a calm conversation. My eyesight was blurrier than ever. The fear of my uncle and reliving what had happened, the blackouts, *the* blackout, the uncertainty of what was going to happen next...

'I should be the one apologising,' Pat said. 'I let you boys down.' But he didn't sound apologetic. He started muttering to himself again – it was inaudible but I'm sure I heard him say something about 'birthday' before he snapped himself out of it, remembering I was there.

'What happened with Teresa?'

'She said it was too much,' Pat said, dangling information I wanted but he didn't care to give. After daring a glance at me and seeing the look on my face that suggested he was going to have to do better, he continued. 'A few times after the dinner. When you...well anyway. She said it was all too much.'

'*What* is too much?' I pushed. 'Me and Felix?'

'Nah, no. Not you boys, you didn't do anything. You shouldn't think that. She said it was me. My attitude towards the whole situation. Said I wasn't ready for anything like this. That I wasn't ready to have her in my life. So, she ended it.'

I tried to take it all in and understand the information, but the fog wasn't processing it correctly to give Pat the comforting response he needed. Fuck, if only Felix had come in instead.

'I don't understand though. Surely this' – I nodded at the vodka bottles again – 'isn't only over a woman you've just been on a couple dates with? It doesn't seem enough.'

Pat looked away from me again and I knew what else was bothering him.

'It's me, isn't it? Pushing about my Mum and Dad.' Dad's wedding ring felt a lot heavier around my neck, dragging me down to the table.

Pat shook his head, but didn't look at me again. It still all seemed too weak to break those twelve long years he had worked so hard for. But perhaps my questions had pushed buttons more sensitive than I realised.

It was quiet for two minutes, both of us seemingly determined not to break the once more comfortable silence.

Eventually, Pat cleared his throat. 'It's not anything really, JJ. It's just what people like me do. We don't drink for a while. Years and years. And then we do. You're not an addict until you stop drinking, you're an addict for life. In the end, we find any excuse. Stupid really, isn't it?'

It was the most profound thing I had heard him say. And it scared me. I didn't want to hear anymore.

I took the two bottles of vodka and placed them back in the scrunched-up carrier bag.

'It is stupid, yes,' I said. 'Did you even put up a fight with Teresa? Did you try?'

Pat shrugged as my patience evaporated.

'I'm taking these,' I said. 'I'm going back to Alicia's tonight. Felix is staying at Freddie's for now. We'll move home if you stop drinking. If you go out and buy more booze, we won't come back. Text me later what you decide.'

Without another look, I left the kitchen, the vodka bottles clinking by my side. I could feel Pat's eyes burning into my back but I refused to turn until the front door clicked shut behind me.

Felix was slumped in the driver's seat of the Polo, watching the street. He bolted upright as he saw me coming back to the car and switched on the engine. I dumped the bag of vodka in the boot and got back in the passenger's seat.

'What happened?' Felix asked before I had put my seatbelt on. 'Well...' he said right after.

As he drove me back to Alicia's house, I filled him in on the conversation I had had with Pat. After I finished speaking, he stayed quiet until we pulled up outside the Beach's house.

'You did well,' he said. 'I don't think I could have done it.' He put his fist out for me to bump. It was odd. We hadn't done anything like it before. It felt silly. I hoped it didn't become a regular occurrence.

I took my bag from the back and the confiscated booze and watched Felix drive off, heading back to Freddie's, before making my way up the path.

Alicia met me at the door but instead of asking what happened she started to kiss me passionately.

'Mum and Tommy aren't here, we've got about an hour.'

We went upstairs and undressed. Alicia seemed in a hurry, even though she said we had an hour. It was unnerving and the sex seemed to suffer as a result. The front door went ten minutes after we had already put our pants back on. I had only just begun to explain to Alicia what had happened at the house but we had to go down for dinner.

As we were munching on homemade pizza, I kept one hand in my pocket sat at the dining table, waiting for the text from Pat. But it didn't come. Nor did it come as we watched telly or as we got ready for bed. I drifted off watching my phone on the bedside table but it only lit up with texts from Felix.

It wasn't until I woke up for school that I saw a message from Pat, sent at 2am. I don't think he could have even opened his phone if he'd been drinking.

*I'm done. Come home.*

## Nine (2012)

Alicia and I were having sex a few times a week. We took our opportune moments when her house was empty, or we knew Felix and Pat wouldn't be at Thorpe Lane, since we had moved back.

But something wasn't right. Each time we had slept together since the party, I felt further and further away from her. It wasn't just her; it was everyone.

The fog had become commonplace, and I knew it was the reason for my increasing detachment. Each time it flared, the lack of feeling increased. It didn't make any sense. As I accepted the seeming inevitability of the fog's permanence, the detachment seemed to have settled just as equally.

And it meant that sex with Alicia, in truth, was nothing.

I watched a lot of porn too. I enjoyed it the same amount as sex, that is to say not very much. But I didn't have to feel guilty for how little I enjoyed it. I didn't have to fake it. That made it more...enjoyable, I guess. I watched it every day, even the days when Alicia and I did have sex. I seemed to want to sit in my disappointment, wallowing in the confusion.

Even worse, the anti-depressants desensitised me. They made ejaculating difficult and painful, but I didn't want to embarrass Alicia by saying anything.

On some of the websites, there were pop-ups for hook-ups in your local area.

At first it was just an idea – sex with a stranger. I ignored the pop-ups. Until I didn't.

What on Earth do you text to arrange to meet a prostitute? Hi, I'd like to meet you for sex – I'm really good at it, I promise!

I didn't text that, but I did text.

There were replies. I ignored them. Until I didn't.

I started taking money from the 'uni fund' – suddenly Felix's expensive dinner with Katrina didn't look so immoral. I had judged him for *that* when I was an 18-year-old using my dead parent's money to pay for hookers and cheat on my loving and loyal girlfriend? I hadn't even finished my A levels.

I arranged my first meeting with a woman named Linda. She was in East London. Her apartment was filthy. She stunk of smoke and I went limp at the smell after ten minutes. I didn't see her again.

Then there was Melissa. She was much better. She had kinder eyes, less judgemental even, for what we were doing. She was gentle and smelled like coconut, not smoke. I met her at a hotel in Central London the first time – more money out of the 'uni fund' – but afterwards, she told me we could use her flat if I wanted to see her again. It was in Wimbledon, which seemed close enough to get to, but far enough away from my

real life. I told Alicia I was studying and I told Felix I was at Alicia's. I was playing with fire, but I didn't care and it seemed easy to get away with once a week.

Melissa seemed young too, maybe only one or two years older than me. And I knew that wasn't her real name. She was Polish and didn't say much at all. She wasn't just gentle, she felt more like a friend. I didn't feel the guilt with her. A comfort in the fog. Even though I was paying £100 each time for the pleasure. Literally.

We would have sex in her bed and sometimes I wouldn't even struggle to finish. I never quite got used to her silky blonde hair in my face as opposed to the curly black of Alicia's – but the novelty was still not enough to install guilt.

I longed for guilt, because it would be just one feeling that was normal again. But it didn't come. For two months I kept it up before I worked that out. I decided to abandon my relationship with Melissa in April, a few days before Alicia and I visited a university open day.

We went to Goldsmiths. Alicia had been before, and I knew she had already decided she was going there really, but we both pretended to ignore that fact since she was only making us go to try and inspire me to finish my applications.

I borrowed Felix's Polo and we set off. He decided not to come with us as he was going to attend the University of Manchester to study Political Science. I'd never heard anything so surprising come out of my brother's mouth in all our lives. Katrina was going to study at Leeds, so Felix may have only been doing it to be close to her. He was in love for the first time and I never saw it coming. And he was leaving me. Somehow it felt like that part was always coming.

We drove onto campus and found parking via the student guides in their bright blue shirts with the Goldsmith's logo and the words 'Student Ambassador' imprinted in large letters on their backs. They all had fake smiles and try-hard attitudes. One guide approached us in the car park as soon as we had gotten out of the Polo.

'Here for the open day?' he asked. His hair was cut into the shape of a bowl, like most boys had in infants' school. I had vague memories of Mum cutting mine and Felix's hair using the cheap plastic mixing bowl. After she was gone, we tended to have long and messy dos until we could go to the barbers for ourselves, since it was the least of Pat's priorities in his new caregiver role.

Alicia stepped forward.

'Yes, we have a tour at 1:40.'

'Very good,' he said. 'I'm Caleb. Let me take you to reception where you can meet your tour guide and the other students and parents.'

Caleb looked into the car as if he was expecting more people to be joining us.

'Just you two?' he asked Alicia, a bewildered expression on his face.

He caught my eye and looked intimidated all of a sudden. I had been staring at him with distaste since he approached us. Caleb's eyes went back to Alicia and didn't return to me again.

He took us through to reception and gave us a little bit of information on the buildings we passed, all of which looked far more modern than I had pictured. Alicia nodded along with genuine interest, whilst I walked a step behind. My phone vibrated in my pocket.

Melissa. She had messaged me asking if I was going to be meeting her that evening. I had forgotten to actually break it off with her. I sent a quick reply. *Not this evening, sorry.* I would deal with it properly later.

We had made it to reception. I caught Alicia eyeing my phone as I put it back into my pocket.

'Everything okay?' she asked.

'Just Felix seeing if I wanted dinner.'

Perhaps it was the fog or just the paranoia, but Alicia seemed to be watching me very closely – she had since I picked her up that morning. Did she suspect me?

We left Caleb and were introduced to James, who was our tour guide – he had long greasy hair that got all over his blue shirt which looked unwashed. I kept my distance.

Alicia and I were the only ones on the tour without parents accompanying us. I recalled Alicia saying the Doctor had brought her last time. I imagined bringing Pat and snorted at the prospective carnage.

Alicia nudged me – my snort had interrupted James' introductory talk to the group. The other tour members were looking at me strangely, unsure why I had been laughing at something that was clearly not very funny.

The tour was long and tedious. I slipped further and further back as the hour went on. Alicia was attempting to chat to some of the other students and parents but I had no interest in doing that.

Halfway through the tour, Alicia had to take my hand and drag me faster so we wouldn't lose the group. James' bland voice accompanied the sluggishness of my foggy mind well. It seemed to voice random words in my head, the same ones over and over – *University. Alicia. Melissa. Bowl. Fog. Doctor. Mondeo.* It didn't make sense, any of it. The fog had dug into me and picked out random parts of the previous year. It wasn't going to let me forget anything. It just wanted to cruelly remind me that I couldn't feel any of it. And I couldn't change a thing.

It didn't stop, even as we drove back. Alicia hadn't relented her staring ways. I kept my eyes on the road, but felt hers burning into me. I was surprised she couldn't hear James' bland voice herself, repeating the words for the whole car to hear. *University. Alicia. Melissa. Bowl. Fog. Doctor. Mondeo.*

It was ten minutes into the drive before Alicia was brave enough to say something to me.

'You going to tell me what you thought?'

'About what?' I asked.

Alicia sighed. 'About *what*? You know what today was, right? I'm trying to give you a direction, JJ. I want you to come to uni with me. I want us to be together. I want you to want that too.'

'I do.'

She let out a single hysterical laugh.

'What? I do!' I said. 'I want to go to uni with you. I want you to be happy.'

Alicia put a hand on my knee, at first her grip was gentle but it got steadily tighter, finding pressure points that made my foot waver on the accelerator.

'You should want it for yourself, not just me,' Alicia said, a lot more quietly. The hysterics had turned to sadness, but it all seemed a little contrived, as though she was just trying to provoke a reaction from me. It was an act. I should know.

'I do,' I said. But neither of us believed it. The car was quiet for another 10 minutes, the only sound being that of Brandon Flowers singing through from the Polo's grainy radio. 'I'll finish my applications,' I said, eventually breaking the silence. 'I'll come to Goldsmith's with you. *If* I get in!'

'You promise?' Alicia asked.

I nodded. 'Yes.'

Brandon Flowers turned into a gloomy Maroon 5 track.

'Only if you change the music,' I said. 'This is depressing as shit.'

My phone was resting in the cup holder by the handbrake. I usually put it there whilst I drove so I could change the tunes easier when I was by myself and listening to my own music. Alicia picked it up and tapped in the code to unlock it. I hadn't thought. A momentary slip.

'Who's Melissa?' she asked.

My stomach turned.

I could lie. It would be easy. I could make up anything. A godparent. An old friend who moved away. A frigging pen-pal from a distant, far away school for Christ's sake. But the words didn't come.

'Who's Melissa?' She asked it in exactly the same way, a calm but curious tone, knowing I had already taken too long to answer.

'Who?' I asked.

It was a stupid thing to say. She already knew. She was going through the message history.



'Well you see, Melissa wants to know if everything is okay? Since you're not coming over tonight.'

Everything slowed down. I knew I was in for it. Totally done for. That was it, all over. But still, I didn't feel it. The guilt, the shame or the damage done.

I swear another silent ten minutes went by but it couldn't have been longer than one.

Alicia started sobbing as she continued to flick through the messages. I tried to take the phone from her but she slapped my hand away harshly. My foot seemed to go harder on the pedal and we sped through Richmond, past the station towards the high street. The corner came at me fast and I slammed the breaks, making it round safely but only just. I pulled into the bus lane, stopped the car and put my hazards on.

'You going to say anything?' Alicia sobbed, unable to look at me. She had turned the phone off but she was still gripping it tightly in her hand furthest from me. She pulled her sleeve over her other hand and wiped at her nose and eyes, whilst looking out of the passenger window. There was only a brick wall in front of her, but it was a better option than looking somewhere she might catch my eye.

'You prick,' she said. 'You fucking prick!'

On that, she opened the door and vanished up the road. I left the car and caught up to her – Alicia didn't make it difficult – but she was still storming up the bus lane, not making any effort to walk on the pavement. I grabbed her hand but she yanked it back when I made contact. She stopped dead in her tracks and finally turned to look at me.

'How long?' she asked. 'How fucking long?'

'Not long,' I replied, my voice hoarse so it came out as barely more than a whisper. I cleared my throat. 'A month, I think. I was ending it today.'

Alicia's hysterical laugh made a reappearance. Only this time it was far more terrifying.

'Ending it today? When I catch you? How convenient. Who is she?'

'That doesn't matter,' I said. 'It's over, I swear to God. It was just...'. I couldn't finish and Alicia latched on to it.

'*Just...just...just* bullshit, JJ. I don't know you. I don't fucking *know* you.'

I took her hand again and she didn't shake me off. But then I realised why, as she used it for leverage to repeatedly hit me in the chest, crying harder with each smack. An elderly couple had stopped on the other side of the road. I wanted to tell them that it was fine and they should move on, but was it fine? Maybe they were better equipped to deal with the situation than I was.

Alicia stopped hitting me as she lost her breath.

'How...did...how did you meet her?'

'Does it matter?' I said.

'Yes, it fucking matters. Just tell me.'

'Online.'

It was stretching the truth but there was no way I was about to confess to having paid for Melissa. That would be irreparable.

'I thought you were different from the other boys at school. Maybe you weren't as charismatic or *cool*, but I thought you would be better. But you're the worst of the lot.'

I stammered for words but they seemed impossible. Alicia waited for a moment but her hurt and discomfort overtook us both and she whipped away from me again.

Only this time, she lost her footing and stepped out of the bus lane and into the road. There was a loud whir of a motorbike engine as it whipped past, taking Alicia too. The screech of wheels. The scrape of metal. The clump of body hitting concrete.

Now

## Ten (2018)

Felix enters the hotel room confidently. He is nothing like I remember. His beard is fierce and black. His jeans are skinnier and his shirt is ironed. There are tiny bits of grey in his hair. I put my hand to my own hair, wondering why Felix has that but I don't, not really contemplating why he is grey in his mid-twenties.

I watch him as he takes in the scene. The broken television on the floor. The drawn curtains. The powder and rolled up dollar bill on the table. He scratches his head before making for the whiskey bottle. He pours out a glass and sinks it.

'You drink now?' I ask.

'It's your whiskey.' His voice is deeper, or perhaps it is the same and I am remembering wrong.

He reloads, this time filling the second glass and handing it to me. He leaves his tumbler full on the table and moves to the curtains. He is about to pull them back.

'Don't,' I say.

Felix turns to look at me, his hand still resting on the curtain's edge. After a moment, he lets go and sits in the chair that Dad had been in a short while before. He is watching my chest. The necklace has fallen out of my shirt, most likely when I was pulling the television down. It is dangling Dad's ring in front of us both.

Felix had never asked me why I had it and he didn't. I don't remember either, it was always something I had. I wonder where mum's ring is...does he have it?

'How did you find me?' I ask, trying not to slur, though even the simplest of sentences is trying.

He gives me a strange look. 'You texted me.'

'I did?'

Felix nods and stands up again, uncertain of how to be in the same room with his twin brother anymore.

'You don't remember?' he asks, not all that surprised. Before I can respond, he says: 'Still blacking out then?'

I don't answer, instead taking a seat at the table and drinking from the tumbler. I check my phone. I did text him. The time stamp is the same as when I texted the dealer, though the message is different. It was my location and three words. *We should talk.*

'I didn't think you had the same number. None of my calls ever went through when you left,' Felix said.

All I can do is nod. Now he would know I blocked him. As if he wouldn't have guessed. As if he wouldn't have known after I blocked every other number he tried thereafter, and anyone else he might have gone through to contact me.

'I even tried emailing you...I mean who does that? It just bounced back.'

I blocked that too.

'Where have you been, JJ?' Felix asks.

'The States. And Canada. Mostly. Couple of other places.'

Felix nods slowly, trying to comprehend. 'For all this time?'

'Yes.'

He comes back to the table, takes the seat next to me, and drinks some more.

'Why now?'

I look at him, pretending to be unsure what he means so I have longer to answer.

'Why are you back, *now*?' Felix repeats. 'Do you know?'

'Know what?'

My voice goes too high-pitched. It is obvious I am lying.

'You've been in touch with Pat? That lying SOB.'

'It wasn't Pat,' I say. 'I blocked all of you. And do you think he'd tell me himself? He'd be the last one for God's sake.'

'I suppose you've got me there. So you do know then?'

Felix runs his index finger along the table where there is some residue cocaine. I think for a second, he might rub it on his gums. But a moment later he brushes it off on his trousers and rises to his feet once more.

'How?' he asks again. 'Please, James-Joseph. It's important.'

I can't remember ever hearing Felix use my full name before. It is weird. It's unnatural coming from his mouth. I watch his face. He knows this too. He did it on purpose – a demonstration of our estrangement. As if I didn't know. As if I didn't cause it. An implication that blood was not so thick.

I pour more whiskey into my glass. I top Felix up too, but he just stares at me, waiting for an answer. I contemplate telling him everything. I try to reconcile the events in my head.

Mrs Beach had emailed me. In spite of everything, it was her. I recall the message so easily in my mind, having read it a hundred times.

*Dear James-Joseph,*

*It has been many years, though I dare say you will remember me. I have not forgotten you. It is my understanding there have been a large number of attempts to contact you in that time, but not my daughter, nor your brother or uncle, or anyone else for that matter*

*has been successful. I never tried to contact you myself for obvious reasons. But something changed recently and it is time to reach out, even after all this time.*

*I have recently started volunteering at my late husband's hospital. On the mental health unit – quite harrowing to say the least. A lot of people need a lot more help than they will ever receive. Far more than I can possibly give. One young man about your age came in yesterday with more cuts on his arms and legs than he had bones in his body. I can't imagine what someone goes through to do that to themselves. I am probably breaking regulations even talking about it, but it seemed worth mentioning somehow. Tommy has had some problems himself in recent years. The death of a parent at such a young age is traumatic. The death of two must be beyond so...*

*I digress. The point of my email...*

*I was asked to assist at a different clinic a couple of days ago. Most patients there had serious problems – organ failures, liver or kidney conditions waiting on transplants now too sick to live their regular lives. I was there for a few hours tending to patients, mostly fetching juice or snacks, taking them to the toilet or cleaning the rooms – when, eventually I entered a room and saw a man who seemed familiar. His name jogged me back to you and a whole other time – it was your Uncle, Patrick.*

*This may come as a shock to you, JJ, but your Uncle is a very sick man. I'm not an expert myself, but from enquiring a little, I found out he has been given only a few months, without the prospect of a new liver. I am not sure what chance he stands of that – I am not privy to that information. I haven't seen your brother, or anyone else around. I asked my daughter what to do with regards to you. Despite what you did, I thought you deserved to know. She said there was nothing any of us could do. But I thought I could try.*

*I am emailing with the slim chance you didn't remember to block me of all people and the hope that this information will get through to you. I have not forgiven you for what you did – I nearly lost my daughter. But I am not a bitter woman either, and your Uncle, for all his flaws, raised you as best he could when he wasn't expecting to have to.*

*It is time to come home, JJ. Make it right.*

*Sincerely,*

*Janet Beach*

I imagine my arms and legs full of cuts like the man Mrs Beach describes in the email. The thought of running a blade over my skin sends shivers up my spine. I had never been a cutter. Other ways of hurting myself seemed more appropriate.

Felix is still looking at me. I had almost forgotten about him.

'It doesn't matter how,' I say. 'I know he's sick.'

'Are you going to see him?' Felix asks.

Again, I do not have an answer for my brother. So I drink more. My hands are shaking. I am tempted to snort another line, but I am not brave enough to do so in present company.

'Have you seen him?' I ask.

Felix looks to the floor. 'Not for a long time, no. We don't speak. Teresa stayed for a while after you left. A year, maybe. And he stayed sober and everything was okay, but it didn't last. Now...he drinks. He doesn't work. He's on the dole. The house is long gone. I tried to help him at first but it was no good.'

All I can do is nod. Although Pat had been sober for so long, it isn't a surprise. Although he had looked after us without hesitation or complaint, it isn't a surprise. And now I am a whole lot like him.

'And you?' I ask.

'And me, what, JJ?'

'Are you...okay? Happy?'

Felix sighs and loads one more whiskey. I can tell he is doing so for one final drink even though the bottle is still a third full.

'I didn't come here to talk about that.'

As he says it, I notice the wedding band on his finger. I wonder if it can be Katrina. Could he have really been the one to marry his school crush? In his twenties? I wasn't there. His twin brother wasn't at the wedding, whooping as they walked back down the aisle as husband and wife.

But Felix doesn't want to talk and I don't have the heart to ask it of him in the moment.

'We could see him together,' Felix says.

'What?'

'Look JJ, I don't know why you're here after all this time. Not really. But it can't be all that much of a coincidence that it coincides with Pat's...condition, now can it? I mean, maybe you came here for something else. Maybe you came to make things right. Maybe you just missed home. But you're here and he's at least *one* of the reasons. So let's go. Right now. Together.'

He is convincing and I am speechless. I rub my eyes and feel the weight in my mind increase. The room is foggier than it has been since I first entered it. There are flashes in amongst the subjects of the room – each one is like a knife to my eye. I need to be somewhere else.

'Let's go,' I say.

'Okay.' Felix gets to his feet and moves towards the door, though a foot before he makes it, he turns back, a little wavily.

'Best take a taxi, eh.'

I smile at my brother for the first time in years.



Then

## Eleven (2012)

It was a strange mood in the ambulance.

Alicia was drifting in and out of consciousness. Each time she woke, she writhed in pain, clenching her eyes as tightly shut as possible. The paramedic was calmly inspecting her abdomen, pressing in different places, trying to determine what damage had been done. He had already bandaged the large gash just above her right temple, but said it would need stitches when Alicia arrived at the hospital. Her shoulder looked dislocated, but her legs were moving at least. The paramedic asked me to recount what had happened but I couldn't get out much more than 'bike' and 'road'.

I sat as far in the corner as possible, away from the both of them, trying not to do any more damage. I texted Felix so he could pick up the car, and Mrs Beach so she could meet us. I was too afraid to call either of them. Mrs Beach rung my phone near on a dozen times afterwards, but I sent each one to voicemail.

As we rushed through the ward, a doctor came to meet us and I overheard him speaking with the paramedic about possible internal bleeding. The word 'surgery' rang through me like a church bell. Before I had a second to really understand, Alicia was gone and I had been directed to the waiting room.

As I entered the waiting room, I looked behind me, back into the corridor. Nurses passed up and down. Dr Beach would have walked these halls not too long ago. I could almost see him, speaking with nurses, or a patient's family. Then there was someone else Dr Beach was speaking with too...Dad. The two of them consulted a clipboard that I couldn't see properly as it was held up in front of me. They couldn't see me. They laughed together and moved away. I pushed further into the waiting room.

I checked my phone again. There had been four more calls from Mrs Beach and one from Felix. My voicemail would be full of anger and hysterics. I didn't have the stomach to listen.

I tried to replay everything in my head. What had happened since Alicia was hit. But the ambulance arriving and whisking us off was far too blurry. I could only see the bike taking her, over and over. And all I could hear was the noise of Alicia's body hitting the concrete. The most surprising part is that it didn't sound how I imagined it would. You expect a sort of thud. But it must be inaccurate movie sound effects which have led me to that thought because the reality is far more haunting. It's a slap. A fierce and vindictive slap that tells you someone's body has just broken. No crunching bones or pops. No thuds. *Slap.*

She came into the waiting room, calm but pale. Mrs Beach. She wasn't angry or hysterical. She hugged me; I think because *she* needed a hug. I could see Tommy in the doorway, watching us both expressionlessly. I couldn't look at either of them, but Mrs Beach didn't give me a choice, holding me in front of her.

'Why didn't you pick up my calls?' she asked. 'Oh, it doesn't matter. Where's the Doctor? What's happening?'

I didn't have time to say anything before she darted out of the room and towards the nearest nurse for information. They disappeared down the hall and out of sight in the direction Alicia had gone. I wasn't sure what the point of it was – it's not like she'd be let into the surgical suite to have an in-depth discussion of her daughter's health whilst the doctor operated. But I had always been better at sitting and waiting than most people. Then again, it wasn't my daughter. It probably wasn't even my girlfriend anymore.

Mrs Beach returned a few minutes later. She had at least a little information about the accident from one of the nurses because her face dropped as she saw me.

'She's bleeding internally. What did you do?'

Tommy was sat by the window, looking more uncomfortable than I had ever seen him. He pushed the chair back further and looked as though he might try and crawl out of the window.

'I...I...' I stammered.

'What did you do?' Mrs Beach repeated.

'I didn't do anything!'

'They said you were arguing in the road! How could you be so stupid? I trusted you with my daughter!'

'I'm sorry, I really am.'

'What were you arguing about?' Mrs Beach asked. A thought caught her. I saw her mind whir. 'Did you push her?'

'What? NO! How could you think that?' I defended. I was many things, but the fact she could think I would do that. I wanted to get out of the room. I wanted to be anywhere else. But the fire left Mrs Beach and she took the seat next to me.

'Of course you didn't,' she said. 'What a silly thing for me to say.' She took a moment before deciding to take a less accusatory approach. 'What were you arguing about?' she asked again, more calmly.

Part of me wanted to get it over with and just tell Mrs Beach what I did. Alicia would only tell her eventually anyway. It was inevitable. So I opened my mouth to say it. *I cheated on your daughter. She found out. She stormed off and she fell into the road. It was all my fault.*

None of it came out.

‘Nothing, really,’ I said. ‘Just silly uni stuff. And then she slipped and...’

Mrs Beach took my hand gently, despite her frantic worry. A slither of guilt crept through – finally. Her holding my hand, after what I did – it was unbearable. I pulled it away, stood up and made for the door. I couldn’t have her kindness.

‘Where are you going?’ Mrs Beach asked.

I didn’t say anything. I got out of the room and started running down the corridor, as far away from any Beach as I could get.

I couldn’t escape it. The slap resounded through my mind, over and over. On the walk home from the hospital. As I went through the front door. Up the stairs. It was worse when I slumped onto my bed, face down into the pillows. I remembered Alicia creeping up behind me whilst I was in the same position at the party. But the image vanished as a bike whipped passed and took her with it.

I imagined going down to the river and picking a quiet spot along the path. There were plenty of trees on the way towards Richmond, some nice and cut-off from the towpath itself – I thought of throwing a rope over a branch, sturdy and not too high. Not too low either. Just the right height for the job. I’d slip the noose over my neck. Where did people get rope from? It seemed the simplest part of the act, but I’d never had to buy rope in my life, so how did everyone else do it? I’d find something to kick out from under my feet. It was all going so well in my mind. But before I could slip off, Mrs Beach’s hand pulled me back. This time it burned my skin, through to the bone.

The front door slammed from downstairs and pulled me back into my bedroom.

Felix’s voice rang up from the hallway – ‘Oi, shithead, you up there?’ I could hear the anger spitting out of his cheeks and from the thuds as he climbed the stairs.

I stayed quiet, face remaining in the pillow, as if that would mean he would just go away. It would all just go away.

Before I could muster an apology in my mind, Felix was in my room, shouting. ‘Why the FUCK should I have to sort out your mess? I lend you the car. I do a nice fucking thing and I nearly have the damn thing towed? ‘Cos my moron of a twin brother can’t look after other people’s shit? You’re going to pay for the sodding fine...got it? Leaving it in the fucking bus lane, honestly!’

I tried to conjure some words but only splutters came out. I was on my feet and then I wasn’t. Felix must have seen the colour drain from me because he stopped shouting and threw an arm around my waist before guiding me back to the bed.

Pins and needles rained through my body. I could feel the noose around my neck. My arm was still burning. I wished for Felix to keep shouting at me instead of helping.

'What happened?' he asked, gentler now that he could see the state I was in.

The words still didn't come.

We sat there for a while, easy in silence but not in position. Felix's arm was still around my waist and it was by far the most comfort he had ever given me. I didn't like it.

'Okay,' he eventually said. 'Well since you aren't going to say anything, you can listen to me. I was at Katrina's last night and...well. The thing is...we hadn't actually – you know – done it. Not yet.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Something so normal about the real world. About someone else. Nothing to do with me or the fog. Not how I had betrayed Alicia or screwed everything up. The rest of it was still out there. The weight in my chest decreased a little.

'Anyway, we're at hers, right? And we've got the house to ourselves, so we set the mood a little. I put some candles on, Katrina runs a bath. It's got fucking bubbles in it for Christ's sake – romantic shit, right? We start to take each other's clothes off in the bathroom, only we'd forgotten the Johnny which was in my bag – so I go back into her room to get it.'

Felix stopped and smiled. His face went bright red and he let go of me before getting to his feet.

'What happened?' I croaked, finally finding my voice. 'Did you bottle it?'

'I wish,' he said. 'No. Much worse. As I was coming back into the bathroom, Katrina pushed the door back out. And let's just say I was already sailing at full mast.'

Felix laughed but I was still trying to do the maths in my mind.

'The door hit your...'

Felix nodded. 'Crunch. Poor thing didn't stand a chance. Solid wooden door – the irony.'

The laughter caught me as I pictured it. 'So, it didn't happen?' I asked.

'No chance. Soldier down.'

We laughed until we didn't have the energy to laugh anymore. It was nice to see Felix being a good sport. I was surprised he was taking it so well; it was uncharacteristic. And for two minutes he made me forget. And then he didn't.

'You ready to tell me what happened?' he pressed.

I thought about it for a moment. But I wasn't ready. I shook my head. He sighed and conceded.

'Very well. Is anyone dead?' he asked, casually.

I faltered and he repeated: 'Is anyone dead?'

'No,' I said.

'Then it ain't life or death bro.'

Felix waited for a second longer, hoping that would inspire me to confess what had happened with Alicia. When I didn't relent, he offered a sad smile to the floor and patted me on the shoulder.

'Feel better. Don't worry about the car – no harm done really. You're paying that fine though!'

As he got to the door, I cleared my throat and he turned.

'Is it...you know...your thing...is it...alright?' I asked.

'A little bruised, but I'll manage.'

He walked out of the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Felix would find out what happened and he wouldn't be so casual when he did. He wouldn't tell me funny stories to try and cheer me up. He would look at me with disgust. He might not stop loving me as a brother, but everything would be different.

Could I blame it all on what was wrong with me? Cheating on Alicia, treating people like shit and making a mess of my life – was it just me really and the fog could be my excuse? Or could everything be better for me if I just worked out what was wrong and fixed it? Fucking hay fever.

I sat and thought about Felix's question. *Is anyone dead?* Alicia, banged up in the hospital, probably still in surgery. My secretive fog and new fantasies of suicide. The tree and the rope. *Not yet*, I thought.

## Twelve (2012)

I tried to go back to the hospital two days later, but Mrs Beach chased me away before I could get into Alicia's room. She had been filled in on the situation.

I even waited around the corner during one set of visiting hours, hoping Mrs Beach would leave and give me an opening. Only, that time Tommy spotted me. In a brave moment for a twelve-year-old, he told me that I had done enough damage and needed to leave. I respected his protectiveness and didn't try to return to the hospital again.

Rumours spread around school as well. Although, Felix, Freddie and Katrina didn't expressly abandon me, I knew they were spending more time together without me. The time that we did spend together was often uncomfortable, with side glances aplenty and the occasional dirty look. Two weeks went by and there was no sign of Alicia at school. If there was news, no one was telling me it. I was the scum of the Earth in their eyes. In my own too.

Naturally, the fog only got worse also.

Dad started appearing far more regularly. Sometimes, I could see him, even when I was with Felix and company, just in the corner of my eye, watching me. I wasn't sure what he wanted and I was too scared to ask.

I went back to Dr Emery. *Depression and hay fever. Depression and hay fever.* Fucking depression and fucking hay fever. Useless sack of shit. *We'll change your medication. You just need to try something new. It will be fine.*

I changed my own medication. Connor sold me some cocaine.

I took it out to the shed on a warm Thursday after college. Felix was in the house. Pat could come back at any moment really. They could see me shoving white powder up my nose and I wouldn't be able to make a single excuse. But it didn't matter. I was beyond excuses and I didn't care if they caught me.

The cocaine was blissful. Unlike weed, which barely touched the surface, the powder was both numbing and electrifying. Mist clearing and joy giving, if only for a short while. But that was okay, I had two grams in front of me – a short while wasn't so short.

Of course Dad was in the shed also, sat in his withering leather armchair, expressionless, yet somehow judgmental as he watched his son snort away.

'I don't care what you think,' I told him.

'I know,' he said.

'Then why be here? What use are you?'

'You tell me.'

Dad's lack of answers was frustrating, and each time the buzz from the coke started to deplete, it made me angry. I would go over to the chair, place my hands on the arm aggressively and get in his face, wishing for him to vanish. I didn't dare actually touch him, for fear of what might happen. He was a ghost after all.

A ghost? Ridiculous.

'Why is it always you?' I asked. 'Why never Mum?'

'Well there you go,' Dad said. 'You finally ask a relevant question.'

There was aggression in his eyes. He wanted to hurt something. But he stayed where he was, as though he was stuck to the chair and had to channel all of the anger into his own, immobile body.

'What do you mean?'

'Where is your mother?' Dad asked.

'What?'

'Where is she?'

'She's dead,' I said.

'So am I.'

My head was starting to hurt. The fog was getting heavier again, so I set up another line and tightened the ten-pound note resting between my fingers. It was tiring, having a conversation with someone not there. Constantly having to remind yourself that they aren't real and that you can't ever forget. Because then, you're really crazy.

I ignored Dad for the rest of my time in the shed. I hoped it just made him angrier. I closed my eyes and tried to think of Mum. Maybe it would wish him away and put her in his place.

But I couldn't see her. I couldn't remember her at all. Her face, her voice, what she wore. What she read to Felix and I as we went to sleep. It had all slipped from my mind.

I wanted to cry, only I couldn't. Dad's voice seemed to be in my ear. *Boy's don't cry, son*. But when I turned back to the chair one more time, he was finally gone. Mum wasn't in his place. The chair was as empty as I had wished for.

I ran my forefinger over the old wooden table where there was some cocaine residue and put it on my gums for one final moment of relief, before placing the packet with the remaining powder into my wallet and exiting the shed.

As I approached the backdoor, I was surprised to see Teresa in the kitchen, stood by the sink, drinking a cup of tea. No Pat or Felix. I checked my watch – it seemed unlikely Pat would even be home.

Teresa jumped and grabbed her chest as I came in through the back door.

'Jesus, JJ. You scared me.'

'Sorry. What are you doing here?' I asked a little too bluntly.



'Oh, I'm just waiting on your uncle to come home, he shouldn't be too long. Your brother let me in.'

Either I was paranoid, or Teresa's eyes kept shifting to my nose. She was shuffling uncomfortably at the kitchen counter and it seemed as though she was keeping something to herself.

'I just boiled the kettle. Do you want a tea, coffee?' Teresa asked.

'I'm fine, thank you.' I slipped past her towards the stairs, trying to avoid the in-depth conversation about why she came back and how long it would last this time.

'JJ?'

When I turned back, Teresa looked almost desperate just to keep me in the room.

'Is everything okay?' I asked.

'Yes...only I thought this might be a nice time for you and I to get to know each other.'

I wanted to tell her no and to get away. But for whatever reason, she was desperate to connect to Pat's life. And I knew that desperation if nothing else.

'Coffee would be great,' I said. 'Milk, two sugars please. There's biscuits in the top draw over there if you want some.'

Teresa smiled and pulled two mugs from the cupboard.

I struggled to keep still. The cocaine was still coursing through my system. Although the initial buzz had gone, the return of the fog mixed with the remnants of the drug was uncomfortable. My mood felt unpredictable, ranging from impatient to bitterly upset over the space of a few seconds. I tried to distract myself by focusing on Teresa.

'You never told me what you teach?'

She was dipping her teabag in and out of the mug. 'I'm a science teacher. Biology.'

'Not at KGS?'

'Oh no, in East London.'

We took our mugs into the lounge and sat. Teresa rested on the edge of her seat as though she was about to be interviewed. She kept opening her mouth to say something and then seemed to think better of it. Her eyes kept returning to my jittery leg and powdered nose.

'Did they ask you to do this?' I said.

'What? Who?'

Teresa seemed unconvincing.

'Pat, Felix, whoever. Did they ask you to check in on me?'

'What makes you think that?' Teresa said, making no effort in her tone to hide that I was right.

'I know they're talking about me. Everyone's talking about me. And what I did.'

I wasn't sure exactly who told who. And how absolutely everyone knew. But they all knew, sure enough. It was crippling to be the bad guy but I had felt as though it was my place since the fog had started.

'You're not a bad guy, JJ,' Teresa said, as if she had read my mind. My face started to burn.

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I can see you beating yourself up.'

The agitation and impatience combined in my mind to make a lethal combo.

'I'm sure you mean well, Teresa, but you don't know me. Not really. So don't tell me what's in my head. What makes you think you know anything?'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just want to help.'

Teresa looked a little nervous in her chair, but still strong somehow, as though my volatility didn't faze her at all. I wondered what challenges kids at an East London school threw her way.

'Have you spoken to Alicia?' Teresa asked.

I shook my head. 'I tried. But I couldn't get near her. I think that ship has sailed. Probably for the best – I'm just going to stay away from now on.'

'What if you could fix it?'

She seemed to be taking on the role of therapist and it felt patronising. Uncomfortable.

'I can't fix it.'

'But what if you could?' Teresa smiled. 'It's not the end of the world to hope for something, JJ.'

She sat back in her chair and took a sip of tea, as though my lack of an immediate reaction was a victory.

But suddenly, a sneeze took me. I couldn't stop it. I felt the powder come out in a heap into my hands as I put them to my face. I couldn't pull them away again, it was everywhere.

'Here,' Teresa said, taking a tissue from her sleeve. 'It's clean, I promise.'

'Thanks,' I said, trying to clean up without showing her my face or hands. But there were white bits on my jeans. Teresa was looking right at them.

She smiled again. 'You don't have to try and hide it, I knew when you came into the kitchen.'

'Will you tell my uncle?'

She took a moment to think, a look of genuine curiosity on her face.

'It's not my place. And I would like for you to trust me, JJ.'

'Right, okay. Thanks,' I said.

‘That said...you should think about telling him yourself. Of all the people to understand it...to help you through it...’

Teresa smiled again and took another sip of tea. The sound of Pat’s Chevrolet pulling into the drive surprised us both. To my shock, as I turned back, Teresa had taken my hand.

‘Thank you for keeping me company, JJ.’

‘You’re welcome,’ I said.

I left the room hastily, making sure not to trail the white powder from my jeans behind me.

## Thirteen (2012)

Alicia returned to school a week later. It was like before but different.

She came into biology on crutches and sat down at a different table without a glance in my direction. Only this time, since it was almost summer, she donned a white sleeveless top and flower skirt as opposed to the Michelin Man coat. It seemed strange that nearly an entire year had passed since we were laying on her bedroom floor in a smoky haze, listening to an awful radio station, kissing and fumbling. So much was different. Worse. Uncertain.

Alicia's hair was still wet, glistening in the sun pouring through the window. Her arm was in a sling and she winced as she sat. Her hand moved to her stomach but no noise escaped her mouth.

This time, I wasn't begging for her to look at me. I wasn't sure I could handle it if she did. But my heart fluttered at every slight movement. I couldn't concentrate on Mr Andrews – his voice was white noise as I feared every hair-flick or reshuffle Alicia tortured me with.

Despite this, I tried to talk to her at the end of class. She was at the disadvantage of not being able to move off quickly, though it didn't stop her trying. I left Felix and Freddie at the table, still packing away their things and caught Alicia just outside the door.

She turned and opened her mouth before I could say anything, sensing that I had followed her out.

'I don't want to fight with you,' she said.

'I just want to talk.'

A cruel smile appeared on her face.

'I don't think I want to talk to you either though,' she said.

'I get it, Alicia. But a man has to try.'

'*Man* is generous,' she said, only half joking. 'Since I can't run away from you however' – she nodded towards her knee and I could see a white bandage through the thin flowery skirt – 'you might as well say what you have to say and then we can both get on with our days.'

'Are you...okay?' I asked. It sounded so stupid and earned a sceptical laugh from Alicia. 'I'm sorry, you know what I mean. Are you going to be okay? Isn't it a bit soon to be back? Not that I'm not pleased to see you. I'm...'

She wasn't saying anything back to me. It was amusing for her to see my discomfort. I understood that, but it hurt to see how far apart we had become in such a short space of time.

'I'm just so sorry for everything, Alicia. It's all my fault. I was awful to you.'

She took a moment to look away from me, her face in concentration. Her eyes were a little glazed. For a split second, I wondered if she had the fog too, before realising she was probably still medicated.

'Buy me a coffee.' Before I could reply or even register what she had said, Alicia had spun on her heel and begun crutching towards the canteen. Felix and Freddie were waiting for me a few metres away, probably in hearing distance.

I gave them a nod to go on without me and headed off in pursuit of Alicia.

Once we got to the canteen, she took a seat on one of the comfy sofas whilst I fetched us coffee.

'Still take two sugars?' I asked, standing over the table ready to pour them out of the sachets. She didn't answer, despite definitely having heard me. I emptied the sugar into her drink anyway.

As I sat down, she spoke again.

'It's not all your fault.'

'What?'

'It's not all your fault, JJ,' Alicia repeated.

'But I...'

I was expecting hours of grovelling. Hours of scowls and guilt. Hours of pointless begging for begging's sake.

'I'm not saying I forgive you,' she continued. 'What you did...this Melissa girl? Awful. But we're young and boys will be boys, I guess.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

'What I mean is, this isn't on you. The accident. It was just an accident, that's all.'

'But-'

'No buts,' Alicia said. 'Do you know what it takes for me to say this to you? To try and put everything else aside and make you feel better? After everything...'

I turned away, unable to look her in the eye any longer. I didn't want kindness; I only wanted her hate. It was the first time I truly realised that. I was so determined for her disdain, I was actively seeking it.

I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. I put my face in my hands. To my surprise, Alicia gently gripped my shoulder.

'You aren't right, JJ. There's something very wrong. I'm sorry it took me so long to see it. If I had looked closer...if I had seen sooner...all of this...'

She stopped talking and let go, as though her compassion towards me for the day had been set on a meter, with an automatic cancellation when the limit had been reached.

‘Why are you trying to help me?’ I asked. ‘After what I did, you should hate me.’

‘I do hate you, JJ.’

She was still smiling and it didn’t match what was coming out of her mouth. The fog amplified. Alicia became blurry and it was the worst it had ever been. It made me feel sick. Every slight head movement increased the dizziness. The entire moment felt fabricated, as though I was dreaming and Alicia was someone entirely different. I was the only real thing left in a fake canteen, full of fake people. A fake world. I wanted out.

‘But I also love you,’ Alicia continued. ‘I’m learning that emotions can be...complicated. Sucks to be young.’

Alicia sat back in her seat. She gripped at her stomach again as she moved.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked.

She nodded. ‘Just feeling a little...run down.’

She forced a smile from the pain. I couldn’t recall Alicia making jokes like this before. Had I never really known her? I had been so wrapped up in my own world and the fog that I hadn’t contemplated there might be more to her. More to us. Her kindness, humour and forgiveness.

‘So where do we go from here?’ I asked, trying to distract myself from the ever-increasing nausea.

‘Well,’ Alicia started. ‘We have a long way to go, but I think we can be friends. If that’s what you want...’

‘Just friends?’

‘JJ...I may not have stopped caring about you. But you slept with someone else whilst you were with me. Cheating is cheating, no matter your reasons.’

It was more than fair. Friends was far from what I deserved, but sitting across from her, it seemed impossible not to be with her. Even though I longed for Alicia’s hate and her love in equal measure. Even though I knew it would never work again. Even though the fog would destroy me – her too if I let it – I was desperate for her to come back to me.

Alicia smiled sympathetically – the disappointment on my face must have been clear. She reached out her hand to shake mine. It made me cringe inside.

I couldn’t take it.

‘I hope you feel better soon,’ I said. On that, I got up, turned my back on her, and walked out of the canteen. Alicia didn’t call after me. I could feel her eyes on my back as I walked away, that strangely wise, knowing and calm smile almost certainly upon her face as she sat unmoving.

She had been fair and reasonable, kind and mature. But I couldn’t be any of those things.

It was my turn to run away from her, and she wouldn't be able to catch me. But getting away from Alicia didn't help in dispelling her from my mind. I could see us on the floor of her bedroom. She was kissing my neck. I could hear the lyrics to that song: '*You can't start a fire...you can't start a fire without a spark...*'

I wished for the fog to increase, to numb me beyond control. The fog granted my bidding, intensifying across my eyes. With it, came the tree. A strong rope. I was in it, suspended a few feet from the ground. The rope had burned a sickening purple into my pale neck. The rest of my face was gaunt. I was already gone. Maybe it was the truth that I hadn't seen yet.

Felix and Katrina were in the hallway as I came back out. They were snogging next to the toilets, oblivious to anyone and anything around them. So sickeningly in love. It did little to help my nausea.

I stayed on the other side of the hallway as I passed so they wouldn't spot me. Not that there was much chance of that anyway.

I concentrated on not being sick and avoided walking into things on the way to the bus stop. When I got on the double-decker and found a seat next to a grey-haired man who smelled like garlic, I wanted to scream. I couldn't be sure that I hadn't. The garlic man was giving me a weird side glance. I wanted to scream at him. I couldn't be sure I hadn't.

I found my way back to the house, nothing but dread coursing through me, unable to escape the images running through my mind. Alicia reaching out her hand for 'friendship', me cheating on her with a prostitute. Felix and Katrina making out in the hallway. I could even hear their kissing noises in my head. I was still making every effort not to vomit. The tree, the rope. The burning purple.

I was so lost, I almost knew what I expected to find as I pushed through the front door and turned into the living room. It had to go wrong at once, all of it.

Pat's slobber was running down the side of the leather sofa as his head hung over the edge. The litre of vodka on the table wasn't entirely empty – there would be enough for a few final sips when he came around.

This was it; the last straw. I knew it was time for me. Pat being out for the count enabled my bravery. I couldn't do it anymore, I couldn't live in the fog. I pulled the living room door shut quietly, so as to not disturb him and went upstairs to the bathroom.

I went into the cabinet. Two packs of sixteen – that should be enough. I pulled the boxes of paracetamol out. As I did, a sachet slipped out of one of the them and fell into the sink. It was half empty, only four out of the eight. I checked the rest – they were full. Twenty-eight would have to do.

It seemed like the strangest of times to do it. Why hadn't I done it sooner? After I cheated on Alicia. After she found out. After the accident. The first time I had thought

about the rope and the tree. But that just hadn't felt right. It wasn't the way. It had been in my head all along, but the time was finally right.

The paracetamol, that I went on to pile into a glass so I could pour them down my gullet easier, felt right. Taking the full glass and a large bottle of water to help me digest them out to the shed, felt right. And as I sat in Dad's chair, emptying the contents of the glass and the water bottle into my mouth, as calm and as peacefully as if I had been eating dinner, I felt right for the first time in a while.

The fog retreated. Almost completely, but not quite.

The pills started to work. I felt myself slipping away. But there was someone else in the shed.

Dad. He had been there every other time I hadn't wanted him to be. It only made sense that he would be there at the end.

But the hand that rested on top of mine on the arm of the chair was smaller and soft. I kept my eyes open long enough to see Mum, for the first time since she had passed. Finally.

I could remember her again. Wavy blonde hair fell down to her shoulders. Her face was kind. She hadn't gotten any older, not like Dad had whenever I saw him. She was smiling at me, pity plentiful in the sadness of her dimples. She didn't speak, she was just there.

I wanted to change it. I wanted to stop it. But I was too far gone. Mum kept smiling at me as I slipped away, her kindness a welcoming bridge to my next destination.



## Fourteen (2012)

I was back in the warehouse. It was just like before, only colder. At least to begin with. The cars and vans. I moved further inside. *They* started to appear again.

There was the girl. Her blonde fringe covered one half of her face. The other side showed a hint of a smile. Each time I got near to her, she moved back, further and further.

An older boy, maybe in his twenties, appeared, laughing, always laughing. It wasn't creepy. Ethan. He didn't back off, the invisible barrier separated us, preventing any contact. He told me everything was okay. That we wouldn't be here long and that he knew what was in my head. And then he laughed. He said it again. Everything was okay. His face changed – he looked over my shoulder and his face flushed of colour. He told me to be quiet – we don't want him to hear us.

At the end of the warehouse, things changed again. Sweat tore down my forehead and poured from my chest onto my t-shirt. That's when *he* came, drifting through the fog like a monster. He had a human form, but I was certain he was a demon of some sorts, sent to haunt my peaceful moments of escape.

He came close. I knew it was a him. I could feel his breath on my neck, but it wasn't warm. It was ice-cold. He whispered in my ear – *it isn't yours*. He said it over and over – no more, no less, just that. And as he floated away, back into the fog, I couldn't move.

The warehouse suddenly caught fire and the chill vanished. My neck froze stiff. My eyes were full of smoke. The figure drifted further back into the distance, towards the exit, his black outline never quite lost in the flames. He got out, but I couldn't. I was stuck. There were shouts all around me but I couldn't make any noise. The screams were indistinguishable until they weren't. They screamed my name. They needed my help, but I needed theirs. We were all going to die in the fiery warehouse, alone, unable to reach each other.

Just as the flames were about to touch my skin...

The smell. It was the first thing that struck me as I woke. It was like vomit covered by bleach.

Then there was the incessant beeping of the monitors which seemed to have been going on for days even though it was the first chance I could have realised they were there. And then there was the snoring.

My eyes pried open like worn-off superglue.

It was gloomy in the hospital room, but a dull sun crept in, between the blinds flapping in the cool summer breeze.

In the corner, Felix was sprawled awkwardly over a chair, his head hanging off the back as though it might fall from his neck. His mouth was wide open and the culprit of the loud snores was clear.

Other than him, the room was empty. The distant sound of screeching wheels and clipping shoes could be heard from behind the closed door, but the stillness of the room and accompanying tranquillity made any other noise that wasn't the flapping blinds or Felix's snoring seem a million miles away.

My mouth was dry and my stomach sore. I was oddly hungry. And very thirsty. The fog was still there.

I pushed myself up into a sitting position and felt the tug of the wires attached to various parts of my person. The bed made a loud squeak and Felix shot out of his chair.

He regained his composure as he took in the room and its occupant with confusion. He wiped some drool from his chin.

I tried to say hello – it sounded so stupid, made more so by the croak that came out resembling nothing of the word.

Felix shuffled on the spot, uncomfortably, unsure what to say. He looked at me with pity and guilt. Two things I just couldn't take. I wouldn't stay. I would go the first chance that I got.

'JJ,' he said.

There was a jug of water on the bedside table. I reached for it but Felix rushed to my side and poured a cup.

'Take it easy,' he said. 'Try not to move loads.'

He handed me the cup and I took a sip. The water was daggers and euphoria on my throat in equal measure.

'Yes, doctor.' My voice was less croaky this time.

Felix took the armchair on the side of my bed next to the window. He looked as if he didn't know whether he should sit back or on the edge, as though it depended on my mental state. Was I normal and happy twin-brother JJ, or the suicidal, fog-induced misery he had spent the last year in the company of?

I didn't have much of an idea myself. All I knew was that the pills hadn't worked and the fog was still there.

Felix kept on going to say something but collapsed back into himself each time he tried.

'Spit it out,' I said. 'You're going to hurt yourself.'

He leaned forward in his chair and whispered, despite the empty room, as though the Gods might be listening.

‘Why, mate? Why did you do this? I mean I know things haven’t been great with you – but this is a bit of a jump isn’t it?’

‘I just...’

But I couldn’t say anything. I didn’t have the answer he wanted. Or I did, but I wasn’t willing to give it. It sounded stupid to say that I had been living in fog. That I had been watching my life through a darkened lens and it seemed to distance me from everyone and everything. It seemed silly to say that I didn’t love any of them anymore, or at least, I couldn’t feel it. That my future felt irrelevant, if not discarded. That every time I tried to say something about it, the fog put a muzzle over my mouth. I couldn’t tell him about Dad. Or about Mum. Would she come back?

‘I’m sorry,’ Felix said.

‘What are *you* sorry for?’

He looked at his feet, as though he might cry and he didn’t want me to see.

‘I should have seen better, that you were going through something bad. I knew...something, I guess. Twintuition and what not. I should have helped you.’

I laughed at his awful pun but it made my stomach hurt so I stopped quickly.

He smiled for a second before returning to his sombre demeanour.

‘I know we don’t speak about them, JJ. It’s just too hard to remember for me. But I didn’t really understand that mine and Pat’s way of dealing it might be hurting you.’

I wanted to tell him that it wasn’t just about Mum and Dad. I wanted to tell him that I was sick and it was everything else too. But I stayed quiet, finally honouring his way of managing our parents’ deaths.

‘You don’t have to say anything,’ he said, after a few moments of silence. ‘We can just sit for a while.’

That’s what we did, watching the flapping blinds in the breeze. At one point, a nurse came in with a loud exclamation of ‘You’re awake!’ and started faffing around with my pillows, topping up my water and explaining that a doctor would be in to talk to me shortly and that I was in the right place. She berated Felix for not going to get a nurse when I woke up.

I didn’t say anything whilst she was in the room. She seemed nice enough, but it was just another person I couldn’t give the right answer to.

After she left, I remembered Pat, drooling off of the edge of the sofa.

‘Where’s Pat?’ I asked Felix.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Got something I need to tell you there...’

I nodded. ‘I know. I saw him. Before...’

‘One problem at a time, eh,’ Felix said.

After a couple more hours, the doctor came into my room. He was nothing like Dr Beach. Or Dad. He was skinny, almost unhealthily so, and much more fresh-faced. He even looked nervous at the prospect of dealing with a suicidal patient. I was glad that Felix left the room whilst the doctor was there, instead deciding to go and find something to eat for the first time in over 24 hours.

‘And this is the only time you’ve attempted to take your own life?’ he asked.

‘And how long have you been having suicidal thoughts?’ he asked.

‘Have you ever made any other attempts to hurt yourself?’ he asked.

Fog, fog and fucking fog, pal. I hadn’t ever tried to kill myself. I wasn’t suicidal. I have never hurt myself ever. This isn’t that.

But I stayed quiet and left him with feeble nods and non-committal grunts.

‘I’m going to bring in another doctor, if it’s okay with you James-Joseph,’ the Doctor said.

I didn’t really register what he was suggesting.

‘He is a specialist – more apt at treatment...under these circumstances.’

The Doctor attempted a smile, but it looked more like a snarl as he bared his teeth at me.

Great, thanks for fucking nothing.

He left the room. I didn’t say goodbye.

Four more people came to visit me whilst I was still in the hospital. First there was Katrina, who came back with Felix after the Doctor’s visit. We had barely ever had a conversation, so it seemed strange that the first one should be after my suicide attempt.

But weirdly she was more normal than Felix. She didn’t try to ask me if I was okay. She didn’t try to get to the root of the problem. She didn’t say much at all, other than informing me she would collect any schoolwork for Felix and myself, and if there was anything else I needed, I shouldn’t hesitate to ask. Then she pulled out a pack of playing cards and started dividing them between the three of us. We played Crazy Eights until Felix had yawned one too many times. I told them I wanted to rest and that they could go home, but it wasn’t for me.

Second was Teresa, though there was no sign of Pat with her. She was reluctant to tell me much because of my ‘stability’. Teresa only said that she and Pat were in the discussion of appropriate ‘facilities’ for him to recover and that she thought it was best he stayed away from me at the moment, despite him wanting to come to the hospital.

I wondered why she was still around. So fresh on the scene and already having to deal with her new boyfriend's second relapse as well as his suicidal nephew? You couldn't pay me to still be here if I were in her shoes. Maybe she wanted to be the hero. Maybe she was punishing herself. Or maybe she loved him. Who could ever really know?

Nonetheless, I was disappointed not to see Pat. I would have been disappointed if he showed up also. The fog wouldn't let me win in either scenario.

I didn't blame him. I blamed me. For all of it. He wouldn't have relapsed if it wasn't for me. Either time. I was certain of it.

Next came the specialist. He wouldn't let me call him Doctor Hendricks. It had to be Phillip, as though the first-name basis would familiarise a total stranger and make me not want to kill myself.

I realised I was being harsh. On all of the doctors. I refused to tell anyone what was wrong and expected them to fix me. Just like that.

Phillip sat down, and he had a kind smile. He was unassuming and sympathetic, but not in an annoying professional way that all of the other doctors seemed to parade in their attitudes. He looked down at a clipboard with hard concentration and read off questions that tried to measure my level of happiness on a scale, as though it were a spirit level trying to find its balance. Asking me if I was depressed, anxious, suicidal, without actually saying any of those words. After this, he looked up from the clipboard and attempted a more natural interview.

'So James-Joseph...' Phil started.

I wanted to give him a chance. 'JJ is fine.'

He smiled. 'JJ it is.'

I sat higher up on the bed. My back ached from where I had hardly moved since my arrival at the hospital.

'So JJ...how long have you been feeling like this?'

I took a deep breath. It was time to try, just a little. After all, this was rock bottom.

'I don't really know. It's hard to remember. I'm starting to think this is how it's always been.'

'That's understandable. You must have been feeling pretty hopeless to have attempted to take your own life. It's understandable.'

I hated that word. *Understandable*. I hated more that Phillip had said it twice. No one would ever understand.

'You didn't like me saying that did you?'

He was watching me closely. I thought I hadn't reacted, but perhaps there was a slight wince. Perhaps I wasn't as good at hiding my emotions as I thought I was.

I shook my head.

‘JJ, I need you to try for me...’ Phillip leaned back in his chair and made a scribble in his notebook to ensure there was still ink in his pen. ‘Tell me as honestly as possible, why you think you might be feeling this way? From the start. And tell me what you hope might happen from now. Could you do that?’

My eyes began to well-up at the prospect of it all. The truth scared me more than anything and baring that to someone else, finally, seemed twice as terrifying.

‘As much time as you need,’ Phillip added.

‘I can try...’

He smiled and reshuffled in the chair, ready to make some notes.

So, I told him. About everything that had happened since the fog appeared in Alicia’s bedroom. About Alicia, her dad, my brother, my uncle. I told him about the laughter fits, the dark dreams, the drug use, the alcohol. I told him that I hadn’t felt myself in months, that I had forgotten what it was like to love any of the people around me. How I seemed determined to hurt them, even though that wasn’t what I actually wanted. I told him how I cheated on Alicia, about her accident and how she had deprived me of the blame and her hate. Sort of.

‘You think your girlfriend was wrong to forgive you?’

‘Ex-girlfriend. But yes, she was wrong.’

‘But she could see you were in pain – perhaps she knew this wasn’t you. That you wouldn’t have done these things that caused her harm if you were healthy. Perhaps you deserve to be forgiven, JJ.’

‘That’s bullshit,’ I told him. ‘Utter horseshit, in fact. I chose to do these things. I chose to hurt her, to ruin us. It’s on me and no one else.’

‘I’m not saying it’s on someone else,’ Phillip said. ‘It doesn’t have to be anyone else’s fault. Sometimes, we lose control of ourselves.’

He sat back in his chair and took me in. ‘I want to go back further. You’ve told me a lot about what has happened to you recently’ – he put his hand up as I went to interrupt him – ‘please...let me finish. But this pain rarely plucks itself from thin air.’

Phillip wasn’t stupid. He had done his research. Perhaps he had spoken to my brother already. How could he not have? I tried to stare through his notebook, certain that if I turned the page back over, I would find my parents demise scribbled casually in black ink.

‘You’re going to make me say it, when you already know?’ I asked.

He smiled, but instead of warmth, this time it came across as patronising.

‘I’m not trying to trick you, JJ. You are too smart for that. I just thought it might be better to hear it from you. Unfiltered and raw.’

He made it sound like a steak doused in dirty water.

'What is there to say? My mum died. My dad died. They're gone and I'm not. No one else wants to remember them so nor do I. Not anymore.'

As I blinked, I could see Mum reaching for my hand as I slipped away. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. She was angelic but also fiercely haunting. Kind, yet her very presence in that shed and in my mind, totally terrifying.

'You haven't been able to speak to anyone about it? What about your girlfriend when you two were together? She must have asked questions.'

'She did. I answered. And then we broke up.'

'You mentioned your dreams. Are they ever in them? Your parents, I mean.'

I was torn between telling the simple truth and the real one – the one that held a pretty big symptom. The one that might tell the Doctor just exactly what was wrong with me. They weren't ever just in my dreams. But they weren't really there when I was awake either. It made no sense.

'No,' I said.

We didn't get much further in our conversation. Phillip didn't exactly give up, but he took a look at the clock about five minutes later and decided to wrap things up. He told me he would come back with some information on depression and anxiety. He wanted me to take a couple of other tests. He told me I wasn't alone anymore. That people would start hearing me. He promised.

Lastly, came the person I least expected to see. Alicia.

She limped in, a little more naturally accustomed to her crutches than when I had seen her at school before. She was silent and sad, but there was a determination to not let her emotions get the better of her as she sat and spoke gently to me, despite the occasional tear that rolled down her cheek.

She asked me if it was her fault. I said it was mine. She asked me if there was anything she could do. I said she couldn't.

'Are you going to do it again?' She said it so casually, with the slightest annoyance, as if I had been on a boozy night out that I wasn't supposed to have been on, and left her waiting up all night.

I didn't want to lie to her.

'I don't know.'

'I spoke to your brother,' she said. 'He wants to help more. So do I. I won't leave you on your own again.'

I couldn't believe what she was saying, not after what I had done.

'You should,' I said.

'What?'

'You should leave me alone. In fact, all of you should.'

Alicia started to cry harder, her emotional hold slowly evaporating with every unkind word that I said.

'JJ, please-'

'No. You can't fix this. You have your own shit to sort, so go sort it and leave me the hell alone.'

She stayed in her chair for a few moments longer, watching me in disbelief. But her hurt turned to anger – she flung the chair backwards and stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

I didn't wait any longer. It was the middle of the day so hopefully Felix would be at school. Pat had gone into a rehabilitation facility according to Felix's last update, so the house would be empty. I slipped out of my hospital gown and put my jeans and shirt back on – the same clothes I had attempted to kill myself in. They stunk of stale sweat.

I walked out of the hospital as if I was meant to, and no one tried to stop me. No one stopped me as I got on the bus back to North Kingston. No one stopped me as I went in through the front door. Not as I packed my life into a tiny little duffel bag, or as I headed back out of the front door, with no intention to ever come back.



## In Between

## Fifteen (2012)

I bought a ticket at Heathrow, the first flight I could think of. A busy place. Somewhere to disappear in the crowd. I couldn't get Times Square out of my head.

New York. I found a place quickly, searching online. Ridgewood, Queens. Rent in cash, no references needed.

My first roommate enjoyed sharing a bag of cocaine with me. As though it was a pouch of Haribo. It wasn't nightly. Sometimes we skipped weeks of drugs altogether. But it wouldn't take long for us to find a way back to it before long. Neither of us were fighting against it with any real vigour.

Ethan was my partner in decline, my companion on the road to ruin. He didn't have the fog, but sometimes I pretended that he did so we felt more connected. Our togetherness prolonged the fall.

Ethan was a chef at a busy diner in Tribeca. He wasn't depressed. He didn't display desperation on the surface. But we were the same in so many ways.

On one very confusing occasion, I kissed Ethan. We hadn't snorted anything that evening, and the fog was particularly bad. He cooked a pot of chilli whilst I wallowed in front of the television watching *The Biggest Loser*, trying not to drink the bottle of whiskey in front of me too quickly. After we ate, I spoke about myself and my life back in Kingston for the first time. I described Alicia and her black spaghetti hair. I described Felix and Uncle Pat. Their names felt familiar, but as I explained them further, they were strangers to me. Words associated with them were acidic as they landed on my tongue.

Ethan was close to me on the sofa. He stared at me with kindness. And I kissed him. It didn't feel right. He didn't throw me off. He didn't make me feel stupid for doing it. But it wasn't how it was meant to be between us. We didn't kiss again.

After a few months of living together, we found a rhythm to our friendship that transcended drugs and confusing chemistry. I worked nights in a bar in Soho that paid cash and didn't ask questions. It wasn't too shady though. Regulars ran the show.

I would finish my shift around one am. I would get back to the flat, sleep until 10 and go to Ethan's diner for lunch. Ethan would make sure the waiters never charged me, even though I always tried to pay. Soon I stopped trying and ate my free burger sat at the bar in peace. This was how it was most days.

One afternoon in bitter cold November, Ethan broke the mould by coming out of the diner kitchen to sit with me. He had managed to shed the white chef's jacket and toque blanche, but sat opposite me in his white and blue polka dot trousers. He pulled off his hair net, but left his long brown curly hair in a tight bun on the top of his head.

'We're going out tonight,' he said.

Each time he moved, I got a waft of fried onions, the smell sewed into all of his clothes despite the overalls' protection.

'We are?'

'We are. We've become a couple of sad sacks, staying in all the time. We don't even do our drugs out of the apartment like normal fuck ups. We do it sat inside in front of the tv like a couple of rejects practically tossing each other off.'

I winced as he said it – Ethan didn't exactly have the softest voice, and some of the other occupants of the diner had looked over. There was an elderly lady sat in one of the nearby booths by herself who dribbled a little coffee down her chin and shot us a disgusted look.

'So,' Ethan continued. 'Kerry over there – *wave at Kerry now Peter* – well Kerry has invited us to a bar opening in Chelsea – it's going to be pretty small but we're going to make it a little bit bigger. Now I bet you've heard that before Peedy-Pie.'

I hadn't told Ethan my real name. I just wish I had chosen something a little less versatile when it came to nicknames. No one had ever made a William sound so perverted. I could have just been Will. Or Billy.

'I don't know man, I was kind of just hoping to chill out tonight.'

'*I was kind of just hoping to chill out tonight, maybe pull on my penis whilst watching Biggest Loser,*' Ethan imitated. 'Come on bro, we can do better.'

Kerry came down to our end of the bar, a coffee pot in her hand. She picked up my mug and filled it a little too close to the top. Coffee slipped over the side as she placed it back in front of me but she didn't make any effort to clean it up.

'You cuties coming tonight?'

Until she said the word cuties, I was on the fence whether I liked her or not.

Just as I was about to make an excuse, Ethan cut across me.

'You bet your perfect heinie we are. Pete here was just saying he might pick up a new shirt on the way home. What do you reckon, Kez? I'm thinking mustard button-down!'

'Are you mad?' Kerry said. She looked me up and down, going so far as to lean fully over the bar so she could see my tatty and faded jeans and white trainers as I sat on my stool. I wasn't feeling too confident in having every inch of my body analysed, particularly with the shambolic mess of uncombed, unwashed hair occupying my defective skull.

After taking all of me in, Kerry placed her elbows on the other side of the bar, far enough from the spilled coffee that it wouldn't make them sticky, but close enough to me that I knew she wasn't repulsed.

'Pete, Pete, Pete, Pete, *Pete,*' she said. 'I'm seeing stripes. Thin, blue and white. Black pants. Black boots. Trust me, I have the vision for these things.'

The shirt she described sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn't place it. I took her advice though and swung by Urban Outfitters on the way back to the apartment, since I didn't have any of the clothes she mentioned. Most of what had followed me from Kingston was tatty, full of holes or unable to lose the smell of stale sweat no matter how many times I washed them.

Ethan still wasn't home after I showered and dressed for our night out. Kerry had been right about the outfit – it was nice.

Just as Ethan came through the door, now deplete of his chef's uniform, I remembered the blue and white shirt the Doctor had worn the first night I had sat to dinner with the Beachs. The night he had taken me into his study. The night he reminded me of Dad but really did nothing more than hang a teasing hook on a pointless string of unanswerable ineptitude. It was difficult to remember. A single memory is not so limited, but rather an ocean of complex waves that do not dissolve, no matter how far they break.

I didn't want to speak to Ethan for the rest of the evening. For no reason other than he had walked in at the wrong time. Conversation on a drunken night out would be tough.

'You okay?' Ethan asked, after about what I could have guessed were three unanswered questions he had thrown my way, despite having not really heard them. He looked guilty, waiting to find out what he had done wrong. I realised this as he took in the messiness of my bedroom, stood naked from the waist up in the doorway, only designer jeans with intentional holes across the knees covering his bottom half (and hopefully boxers underneath, though given his strange habits I couldn't be sure), his uncertainty that I would even be attending the bar opening with him and Kerry clear to me.

Ethan was a kind person. He was also an easy person to live with. Kind and easy, both qualities in short supply. I didn't mind that he was a messy housemate or that his curly, often unwashed, hair smelled a little off-putting as we spent time together, either sniffing cocaine from the cheap oakwood dining table or enjoying a bottle of whiskey or crate of beer together in front of the telly.

'I'm fine,' I told Ethan. 'Just don't know how much I'm in the mood to party is all. Do I have to come? Are you really going to make me?'

He waved his finger at me, an idea suddenly upon his simple mind, and darted from the doorway, out of sight. There was a loud clang in the kitchen which I recognised as the fridge door closing without the guide of a gentle release. Ethan reappeared a few seconds later with two bottles of Budweiser in his hand. He held both in one palm and unscrewed each at the same time with a single twist, a trick I had never quite understood, nor attempted to grasp myself. Twist caps were still a new concept to me as an Englishman, let alone unscrewing two at once.

'You just need to whet your whistle. This'll get you in the party spirit, no doubt dude.'

I despised the word dude, but Ethan made it not so bad, I guess.

I poured the beer into my mouth, taking half the bottle in two gulps. I longed for it to be whiskey. It didn't matter that I could see Uncle Pat in the back of my mind, draped over the sofa with drool running down the foot of the black leather. I saw Pat most of the time when I drank. And then I needed to drink until I couldn't see him anymore.

I had never thought to compare him with Dad, until then. Until I remembered the glass of Scotch my imagination had placed in Dad's hand, laid on the armrest each time he had visited me since the fog began. I couldn't be sure the glass of Scotch was accurate. The more I thought about it, the more Dad was a gentrified, kind soul, dedicated to fixing people. A man of principle, distanced from a brother who didn't share this. My imagination was longing for answers. But did I really want them?

Though I knew Pat was a kind, good man also, the affliction he and I shared no doubt soured the pot. It disabled the prospect of becoming anything that made you respectable, reputable. Truly worthy of a higher existence. Like Mum and Dad. But maybe that was just because they were dead and I couldn't remember them.

Intoxication. Detachment. Persistent fog and complete unworthiness. They may not deplete a good heart, but they cannot cure the discrepancy of lacking guided value.

I finished the beer anyway, and helped Ethan with a few more bottles as we got ready. I say as we got ready – it took me a grand total of seven minutes to finish up whilst Ethan took a record 51 minutes. The end result meant that his curly hair looked no different than normal, up in a bun that wailed intentional unkempt. His jeans had holes in them and his shirt wasn't ironed. Nonetheless, Ethan looked and smelled reasonably better than normal.

It made me feel good about my brand-new outfit.

We got a cab and met Kerry on the corner of the street where the diner was.

'Hi boys,' Kerry said excitedly, a large pretty smile on her face as we exited the car. Boys was much better than cuties. She looked very different without her dull-green waitress uniform on. This had been exchanged for a yellow blouse with leggings and a smart leather bomber jacket. She must have been freezing. My stomach fluttered a little.

'You look...nice,' I said.

Kerry went a little red in the cheeks. 'Well thanks, you clean up well yourself. I see my advice doesn't go unheard!'

'It was good advice.'

I saw the Doctor sat at the head of the table, tucking into his chilli.

## Sixteen (2012)

As the three of us stepped into the reception area of the bar, I saw Ethan fiddle in his jean pocket. Not the main one on his right thigh, but rather the tiny pocket inside that pocket. The 'Inception' of pockets that I never understood until I started doing drugs. It was a 'cocaine pocket' if ever there was such a thing.

At least he wasn't shy on sharing. I would get him to pass me the bag after his first trip to the bathroom.

Kerry stepped in front of us so she could speak to the lady at the desk.

'Kerry Adams plus two,' she announced proudly. For the first time, I noticed a Southern American sprinkling to her accent. Not too harsh or overbearing but, a subtle variance of 'Adams' meant that it couldn't be unheard. I watched her stood confidently in the yellow blouse and bomber, a combination I wouldn't have thought possible, as she laughed with the maître d' about nothing in particular. I wondered how she did that, how anyone did that. I seemed to have lost the power a long time ago, if I ever in fact had it.

We entered into the main room through a set of heavy and impressive double doors that gave the bar a sense of grandeur undoubtedly out of place for a small drinking hole down a side alley in Manhattan. There were a dozen people littered throughout the room. Though it seemed as though the party had barely gotten started, I wasn't sure many more guests would have been able to fit without seriously compromising personal space. I didn't look forward to that.

Kerry wandered the bar saying hi to everyone, though I was sure she actually knew none of them from the way she didn't pause to say more than that. An inane human dance of politeness that seems to serve no real purpose.

Ethan and I trailed behind her until she stopped in front of a black man at the bar who was wearing a large handsome smile upon his face.

'Kez! You made it,' he said.

'Yep! Ethan, Pete, come meet Nick.'

Nick shook both of our hands and seemed genuinely pleased to meet us. Not the fake pleasantries that everyone else in the bar seemed to be adhering to. He was well-built and at least half a foot taller than me, his biceps popping out of his unnecessarily slim-fit t-shirt.

'Good to meet you boys, thanks for coming.'

'You too. So is this your bar then?' I asked him.

Nick laughed loudly. 'I couldn't run a bar kid.'

He was two years older than me, max.

'No, no,' he continued. 'I work in graphic design. My sister bought this place and tore it out. Used to be a coffee shop. Bee, she's around here somewhere, I'll introduce you when she pops her head out of the crowd. Can I get you guys a drink?'

'We'll just get beers,' Ethan replied. Nick looked to Kerry and I for confirmation. She nodded and I smiled.

I sat on one of the stools in front of the bar and leaned sideways so I was facing the others. There were plenty of other stools but they all seemed happy standing. It made me doubt whether I should have been sitting. I had never been to a bar opening before. Perhaps standing was the etiquette and sitting was the golden no-no.

Ethan slipped away to the bathroom. Kerry and Nick chatted and laughed, making no effort to really include me. That suited just fine, I had been feeling increasingly less social from the second I stepped into the bar.

I sipped on my beer, but it didn't taste right. I didn't want it. When Ethan returned from the bathroom, he flashed the inside of his pocket to me. I shook my head. It was a reflex; I didn't know why or how it had happened. None of it interested me for once. It wouldn't help.

Was this the fog increasing or decreasing? Was I coming back or withdrawing further, no longer able to take joy in substance abuse?

The others had dispersed throughout the room. Kerry and Ethan were chatting to a nearby group. Ethan seemed to be leading the conversation. His new friends looked uninterested. I could see Nick's head peeping out from across the other side of the room.

I knew I wasn't interesting enough to go to a party with.

'Wotcha.'

Kerry was back. She was alone stood over my shoulder, watching my barely touched beer.

'Not a big drinker, huh?' she asked.

'I guess not,' I said.

I leaned out from my stall to see around Kerry. Ethan had moved onto a new group. He was getting more animated with his hand gestures and I could increasingly hear every word he was saying to them.

'Your boyfriend is an interesting character. Bit more than a drinker I see.' Kerry tapped her nose knowingly. 'You partake?'

'I have. But I'm not tonight.'

'I can tell. Good.'

On that, Kerry took the stall next to me as if my demonstration of sobriety was the only thing stopping her from embracing prolonged proximity to me.

'SO! How about it then sir?'

'How about what?' I asked.

'What's your name, where'd you come from?' She drew out the Southern-American accent as best she could, on purpose I think, a cheeky grin on her face.

I must have still looked confused because she continued.

'Come on, Pete, just tell me a little bit about yourself. Ethan doesn't talk about anyone but himself, and you've been coming into the diner every day for weeks, letting me serve you coffee and waffles, tipping poorly, and not telling me a word about yourself! It's high time we changed that, don't you think?'

Her grin was still present. She was winding me up and I couldn't help but smile back at her. I went a little hot under the collar.

'Sorry about the tips, I'm not exactly used to it, nor too booming in the cash supply.'

'You came here from London, right? Your family back there?'

I just kept smiling, unable to utter a word on them.

'That's cool, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I don't really mean to pressure you, you just seem like a good dude and it might be nice to get to know you a bit.'

She leaned away on her stall, as though she didn't believe a word she was saying to me.

'My parents are dead,' I told her.

The silence was thunderous in amongst the loud patrons. I thought back to the stone wall, to telling Alicia. It hadn't been any less abrupt then, but I somehow felt safer blurting it out to Kerry. A total stranger.

'Oh.' Kerry looked a little red, but she stared right at me, refusing to draw away from the awkward moment. She sat with me and my unexpected revelation bravely. After a minute, she found her words again. 'I'm...very sorry, Pete. That's awful. When did it happen?'

'A long time ago now really. Years and years.'

'I guess that doesn't make it easier?'

'No,' I said.

Kerry took a large gulp of beer and then moved her stool closer to mine.

She took a deep breath. 'Would it be okay...to tell you I know exactly how you feel?'

She sounded weird. The bravado was suddenly absent. Her demeanour was saddened and her shoulders pointing inwards. Perhaps this was the way it had always been with Kerry, only her beautiful smile hid her pain and insecurity like a camouflaged jacket.

'My Dad died two years ago,' she said. 'Cancer. It was long and painful and we watched it all happen, Mom and I.'



'I'm very sorry Kerry, that's awful.'

She smiled again, but in a much more forced way.

'We've all got our shit, right?' she said.

'Right.'

Kerry leaned in and landed a kiss right on my lips. It wasn't a peck, but rather a long, lingering kiss that resonated through my whole body. It was perfectly soft and I moved closer to her so she didn't fall off of her stall and we didn't have to stop.

It was very unexpected but powerful. Intoxicating. It couldn't be the drink; I had barely got going. She hadn't either. We were sober and Kerry had wanted to kiss me and I had wanted to kiss her back. Just like that.

'Do you want to get out of here?' she asked, just like in the movies. I nodded and she took my hand. We stepped out of the bar, not even attempting to look for Ethan. He would be fine.

Kerry whistled loudly with two fingers in her mouth, a feat I imagined most New Yorkers could achieve. Not me though. I could never do it no matter how hard I tried. I would always have to settle for the much feebler *raised hand* method accompanied by a loud '*YES!*' or '*Excuse me!*' that seemed impossible for a taxi driver to hear anyway.

But I didn't need to this time, Kerry had us covered. We didn't speak in the taxi but she kept her hand on my knee, as if it was there to let me know that silence didn't mean she had changed her mind and that she didn't regret kissing me or leaving the party after barely arriving.

We reached the road where Ethan and I had met her earlier, and took a left. The taxi pulled up to a brick townhouse and stopped. I handed enough dollars to the driver and didn't wait for the change as Kerry was already on the pavement with her keys out. She paused at the bottom of the steps and ran her hand through her hair, sweeping it to the right leaving an attractively dishevelled wave.

'Are you sure about this?' I asked her, but she took my hand and pulled me in for another kiss.

When she pulled away, her lipstick was slightly smudged. 'I don't make a habit of getting myself into situations I don't already want to be in. I'm not some victim you're taking advantage of, got it?'

'Got it.'

But it was all happening so quickly. It didn't seem real. Was it a trick? Why was she doing this to me, pity?

We went up the steps and into the house. It felt empty, and Kerry didn't seem concerned as she dumped her bag loudly on the wooden floor by the door. She went

upstairs without switching the lights on. She didn't look back, but was walking slowly enough to make it obvious I should follow.

She seemed like a long way from the girl I had met for the first time properly that day, her cheeks red from working hard, sat in the booth of a cheap diner in her coffee-stained waitresses' uniform.

Instead, in her immaculately clean and tidy cream-themed bedroom her sweet perfume filled my nose as she kissed my neck. Her hands were gentle as she unbuttoned my striped-shirt, as she pulled off my belt and slid my jeans down.

I was nervous, but it felt good. And I didn't have to feel guilty. I could just be with Kerry. I could enjoy it. I was safe with her. She was kind and warm, homely, mostly because she was nothing like home. We made love, and it was the first time I had ever really felt those words, as though it wasn't some frigid act of shame, but rather a valiant practice that wouldn't carry any regret.

I had never achieved it with Alicia. Certainly not with anyone else. And yet, this stranger, who had been in my life for less than a day, reached a part of me I hadn't known to exist. Was that love? Impossible. Absolutely not. It couldn't be. And yet, I felt good for the first time in a long time. Since I could remember. Since Felix had forced a genuine yet controllable laugh from me during a stupid video game.

I shook away the strangeness of thinking of my brother after sex. Although it was only in the process of searching for happiness, I don't think either of us would have wanted him present in my mind in that moment, a naked Kerry lying in my arms, breathing heavily into my patchy chest hair as she drifted off to sleep.

I could sleep too. Only I didn't want to. The fog was hardly there and it was euphoric. My skin was cold, small goose pimples running all over my arms as Kerry had the duvet covering her, leaving parts of my torso exposed where she wasn't able to shelter me in full. But it was okay because I could feel it properly. The cold, the discomfort. It was real and thriving.

'You okay, Pete?' Kerry mumbled from somewhere beneath my chin.

I nodded pointlessly. Her breathing was heavy again.

'My name isn't Pete.'

Nothing.

The wind picked up and the large trees that lined the residential street outside sung to me, an out of time, out of touch melody, that gave me just a little bit of hope that all was not lost for me and my future.

Now

## Seventeen (2018)

We leave the hotel but there are no taxis in the rank so Felix and I go to the reception desk. The lady who picks up the receiver to dial has a name badge – ‘Rebecca’. She speaks with a northern accent though I have been out of the country for too long to distinguish between dialects. She looks at me whilst she’s dialling, making no effort to hide judgement. She looks hard into my eyes or possibly at the bags underneath, it’s hard to tell. She barely says two words down the phone and I can’t make them out. She puts down the receiver and forces a smile at me and Felix.

‘There’ll be a car out front in two minutes, gentlemen.’

‘Thank you.’

Felix doesn’t wait for me. He goes outside. I walk slowly so as to lessen awkward chat as much as possible. I am not oblivious to the fact we have a five to ten-minute taxi ride that, be it full of conversation or deadly silence, will be incredibly uncomfortable.

By the time I reach his side again, a car is pulling in. The driver calls out the window only I don’t hear what he says. I’m not sure Felix does either, but he nods and gets in the back anyway. I go around to the passenger side, unsure whether to get in the front or the back.

Felix pushes open the back door before I can decide. I get in. His leg is shaking as he puts his seatbelt on. It doesn’t stop as we drive off from the hotel. He looks away from me, out of his window. I can see just enough of his face to know his lip is trembling as well.

‘Are you okay?’ I ask.

‘It’s been a while,’ he says. ‘A while since I’ve had to think about any of this. I pushed you to the back of my mind, Pat too, not long after you left. It’s been working just fine for me.’

‘Seems like it,’ I say.

‘Shut up. You don’t know anything.’ Felix doesn’t raise his voice. He doesn’t have an angry tone. He is composed and sure of himself. But the anger is there. Underlying and powerful. Subtle but direct. He hates me.

‘I’m not here to ruin your life, Fe. I won’t stay. We’ll go see Pat. I’ll say goodbye to him. And then I’ll go, I promise.’

He doesn’t say anything else. He shifts and his left hand falls onto the middle seat, glistening the silver wedding band on his finger.

‘Katrina?’ I dare to ask this time.

He keeps his silence, but I can tell I’m right.

'It's probably a bit late but...Congratulations.'

Felix snorts and pulls his hand back across himself and out of sight from me.

We pull up to a one-story building that looks more like an old-people's home rather than a hospital. It is a hospice. So, this was it. This was where Uncle Pat would die. I could already picture the whole thing in my mind. I saw a decrepit old man taking his last gasp. It was partly relieving, but otherwise harrowing and breaking.

Felix walks in confidently. He knows where he is going – how could he know? He tries to walk straight through a set of double doors but there is a stern-looking dark-haired male nurse sitting at a desk in a small room to the left who calls him back.

'Who are you here to see?' He asks.

'Patrick Holmes.'

'Family?' The nurse looks at me.

'Nephews,' I say.

'Sign in please.' He goes back to his desk and fiddles at the computer, now uninterested in us.

Felix waits by the set of double doors, anxious to get this over with. I take the clipboard from the reception desk and sign us both in, before joining him. But as I go to walk through, he is now still. His leg is still twitching as if his body and mind are in disagreement.

'What's up?'

'I...I don't know.'

I tug on his arm so he faces me. He won't look me in the eye. His eyes are red but there are no tears coming from them. He pulls his arm from my grip as if it had burned him.

'Why? This was your idea?' I ask.

Felix shrugs and finds his way to a seat in the reception area. There is no one else there. I take the seat next to him.

'I told myself...' He pauses for a moment and clears the lump from his throat. 'I told myself I wouldn't come again.'

He looks me in the eye at last, ready for my confusion.

'I lied to you, I came before. Not too long ago, when Pat first came here.'

'Oh.'

Felix looks guilty, as though he had betrayed me somehow. I do not feel betrayed, though the fog does turn up a notch.

'It didn't go too well,' he continues. 'I came out deciding...deciding that I had already said goodbye, I had made my peace.'

The tears finally come. Undramatic but real, rolling down his cheek and dripping onto his blue jeans.

'You don't seem at peace.' I tell him.

He shoots me a disgusted look and gets to his feet.

'What the hell do you know about it?'

'I know that peace can't be forced. You won't find it just by demanding it of yourself. Believe me, I've tried.'

'Whatever. You weren't here, James-Joseph. You left us. You left me. To go find your stinking peace. Don't lecture me on this now.'

He is breathing heavy, looking at me with intensity on his face, his fists clenched. Does he want to hit me? I would want to hit me.

'Just go see him on your own, okay. That man doesn't have anything to say that I want to hear anymore. I'll be outside.'

On that, he turns his back to me and makes for the door. The receptionist is watching us. He rolls his eyes as Felix exits, as though this kind of family drama is nothing new to him.

Felix's anguish is strange to me, though somehow not unexpected. It's as though 'that twin thing' prepared me for his new state. As though I knew all along, that the brother I had left behind was irrevocably changed. Hurting. Perhaps as broken as me.

No, not that bad.

I get up from my chair, and brace myself for Pat. I go through the double set of doors to a long and winding corridor, only then realising I have no idea where I'm going without Felix. I return to reception and the eye-rolling nurse.

'Room 26,' he mutters, without me having said a word. His tone is even more dry. I roll my eyes in return, hoping he lifts his head from his computer for a second to see it. I wouldn't ever be back, what did it matter.

I go back to the corridor and notice the even-numbered doors are on the right. I reach the end without seeing a single person and turn the corner. 26 is three doors down. Before I reach it, I can see the door is open. I slow my walk and take a big breath before entering the room.

Uncle Pat looks much the same as the last time I had seen him. Better even, since he isn't slumped over the sofa, dribbling down the leather, an hour or two from waking up and taking another sip of vodka.

He is in a hospital-style bed, fast asleep, his head awkwardly tilting to the left whilst the rest of his body is upward. He has shorter hair, though it isn't greyer or receded as I had expected it to be. His face is gaunt, cheeks sharp and lips dry, but otherwise he

looks normal. I wonder if there is actually anything wrong with him or if it is all some cheap ploy concocted by my family to get me to come home.

That was the kind of self-seeking, egotistical thought process that had alienated me from them. My family who weren't really anything of the sort anymore.

Pat begins to snore loudly. I take the chair next to the bed, in no immediate hurry to have a final conversation with my uncle.

## Eighteen (2018)

As I sit waiting for Pat to wake up, I try to remember a better time. A time where alcoholism hadn't destroyed his health. A time when the fog hadn't destroyed my life. When Felix wasn't bitter. When everything didn't seem so lost.

The time I keep landing on is when Pat took us fishing, down on the south coast. Felix and I were maybe eight or nine. Pat had been in such a good mood all week. He loved fishing but had been far too busy with work and caring for us since Mum and Dad had died to actually take us. It had been an empty promise for the longest time, until it wasn't. The first chance that he had again, and he wasn't going to miss it for the world.

We drove down on a Saturday evening. Pat warned us that traffic would be busy, but there was barely a car on the road, as though they had cleared just for us. We set up a tent on the beach, just to the right and below the long rock groyne – our fishing spot. It was chilly but none of us minded. We had a flask of hot cocoa each and stayed up until the early hours. No one spoke all that much. Pat explained fishing and showed us how to hook bait. He helped to cast out and reel in our rods. We just sat with the sounds of the ocean. Pat was peaceful.

Strange, for the first time I can remember it – he even told us a story, albeit a very short one that seemed a strain to get through, about how he and Dad fished with their Dad as kids.

We woke the next morning to freezing cold water pouring into the tent. We had set it far back, but it hadn't mattered. The three of us picked up the tent as it was and ran back up the rocky mound. As we threw ourselves down on the stones, safe from the water, we burst into laughter. Despite the shivers, despite our waterlogged tent, our soaked belongings, we had had a great night. For the first time as a three, we were a happy family, at peace with each other. On the soggy drive back to Kingston, I was still warm inside, my uncle and my brother accompanying me on one of the best trips of my life.

Pat lets out a loud noise next to me, somewhere between a snort and a grunt. He stirs slightly and then thrashes aggressively. This causes him some pain as his face contorts and he grips at his side. His eyes peel apart. He doesn't look around but rather stares straight upwards at the ceiling, all too prepared for his conscious truth. His dreams hadn't even taken him away from this ward.

'Hello Patrick,' I say in a pathetically feeble voice. As I do, I feel sober once more, the whiskey and cocaine seemingly flushing from my system and the fog glistening over my eyes, thicker than ever.

Pat turns to me and blinks repeatedly.



'Well I'll be damned,' he says. 'Didn't think I'd see you again.'

I shake my head. 'Me either.'

'Felix track you down, did he?'

'Something like that.'

Pat pushes himself up. Without realising, I am helping; I pull his pillows vertical as he rises so that they support his back. He doesn't thank me, nor bat my hand away.

He is conflicted. One look into his eyes is all it takes to know this. Conflicted between his responsibility and his anger at circumstance. His depleting health and his self-destruction. His love for his family and his resentment towards his brother. I understand Pat and it is a surprise to me.

'Are you...okay?' Pat asks with zero concern in his voice. 'Where have you been?'

'I'm...fine.' It seems a stretch. I don't want to tell him where I've been.

'Good chat, Jim-Joe. Is your brother here?'

I nod. 'He's outside. He doesn't want to see you.'

Pat smiles acceptingly. He knows this before I tell him. He is resigned to the irreparable breaks in this family. He knows in his heart there is nothing he can do.

Maybe there isn't.

'What has the doctor told you?' I ask him.

'Ah well, no mystery there. New liver very soon or time is up.'

'What are the chances?'

Pat just shakes his head. 'Don't you know where I am? I don't care what the chances are, JJ. What will be, will be.'

He takes the cup of water on the bedside table and lifts it to his mouth but his hand his shaking and he spills a little onto his lap. I take the cup from him and help him to take a drink. Again, I am expecting him to bat my hand away. Again, he doesn't.

*What will be, will be?* Would I find that level of peace? Resignation. Acceptance. I am almost jealous of Pat, though I am not entirely buying the holier than thou conversion. He doesn't believe in a higher being. He isn't that man. People don't change.

'What are you doing here, JJ?' Pat asks.

I shrug.

'Liar,' Pat says. 'You know even if you think you don't. Shall we skip the tea and crumpets and cut to it, eh lad.'

He isn't trying to be unkind. In fact, it looks as though he might cry. He just doesn't want anymore bullshit. He is on his deathbed. I always thought that was a metaphor. But Pat will die in this bed. There won't be a new liver. He will slip away, probably alone, wondering what the hell he did with his life, other than stepping in to raise his two

nephews, one of which will follow in his footsteps and drink himself into an early grave, and the other who hates him beyond reprieve. Wow.

I clear my mind of the weight. Of the polar bear hammering into the ice. I listen to the ticking. I'm not sure what is ticking, but I listen to it anyway. I breath in rhythm. My heartbeat has found a way back to normality despite the substance overload I had forced upon it. I find the truth. My truth.

'I need you to tell me about them. Please. No one else can and I'm walking around in the dark over here. And there is *something*. Something I'm not seeing.

Pat watches me closely. His eyes hardly move but I can tell he is switching between every feature on my face. Every line on my forehead, every twitch of my cheek. Every slight tremble of my lip or wave of an overgrown beard hair.

He makes a greater effort to sit up straight but essentially lands back in exactly the same position.

'All these years you never once listened to me, did you? It should be left alone, JJ. They're gone and we're not. Well...you're not. I'll see them soon, I guess. One of them anyway.'

There it is. Another tiny little sprinkle into the life I could barely scrape a shaving from. Something darker. Something that felt more accurate than the waking dreams I had concocted for myself from nothing more than photographs and distant, distant memory.

'Tell me,' I say. 'I'm not the six-year-old boy you reluctantly acquired. I want the truth.'

Pat takes a long, deep breath and tells me three things.

Mum and Dad loved each other very much.

Dad used to hit Mum. Regularly.

Mum and Dad loved Felix and I very much.

Sometime after I left Kingston, I found myself in a call centre in Philadelphia, helping customers who would be having issues with their televisions, laptops, speaker systems and various other electronic devices. In our training they taught us the 'sandwich rule' for whenever anyone would need to replace their entire system but the warranty had already expired. Good news, bad news, good news. People are stupid and this helped them to find peace with their irreparable possessions.

Pat was 'sandwiching' me. I wish I was stupid enough to buy it.

'You want to say it again, less the bullshit?' I tell him.

He sighs. 'I'm sorry, James-Joseph. All of it was true but I can only assume the part you are talking about. Your father wasn't a bad man. But-'

'Good men don't hit women!' I yell. It isn't brain surgery. There isn't some hotly debated online forum arguing whether this is okay in this world. Good men don't hit women.

I'm unsure if I believe it.

Pat almost smiles at me, a knowing look on his face.

'You've always been like that. Black and white. I think it's why you've struggled so much more than your brother. Accepting the grey is near on impossible to you, isn't it? If you make a mistake, there's no way back. Not for you, not for anyone.'

'My Dad punching my Mum in the face isn't *grey*, it's straight up wrong.'

'Aye, well I'm not going to argue with that one. But to say your Dad was a bad man...No, JJ. He wasn't. He did some bad things and he hurt people that he loved. But so have you.'

Maybe I truly was my father's son.

'It doesn't mean we stopped loving you,' Pat says.

What?

I couldn't believe the conversation I was having. For one thing, it was the most I had ever heard Pat speak.

'I don't believe it,' I tell Pat.

'Don't be a child. You wanted this, the truth. You can't hand it back because you don't like the taste kid.'

I pretend as if it is true. 'Does Felix know?'

'Ah well, you'd have to ask him that. Your Mum once told me that, at a very young age, your brother had walked in on your father slamming her against a wall and...well, I guess you get the gist.'

A cruel laugh escapes my throat. The *gist*?

I get up from my seat. This isn't the truth I had been waiting for, surely? This isn't that mind-bending revelation to change all. To stop me on my destructive path. To help me find my way out of the fog. To get healthy and to get my life back. No, this is fucking horse shit.

'All these years...all that time I was in pain and just needed something about them. Something to hold on to that would...calm me down. Now this?'

Pat calls after me as I leave the room. His shouts are feeble, but due to the echoey nature of the hallway, I can hear him until I reach the double doors back into the reception area. I look back through the glass and see a nurse in the hallway, heading towards Pat's room.

I do not look at the nurse at reception, but rather head straight back outside.

Felix is sat on a bench to the right of the entrance.

He is staring into space. It takes a moment for him to register that I have come back out. He gets up but doesn't say anything.

'You should go in,' I tell him. 'Hear what he has to say for yourself.'

'I tried that before,' Felix says 'I don't have the patience to do it again.'

'You'll want to hear it this time, trust me.' I am trying to contain my anger, the tight chest, the impending storm that will surpass any swirling fog.

Felix cannot see it, but his face tells me that he knows it. My pain increasing, my uncontrollable anger suffocating. It's a twin-thing.

He raises his hand as if he is going to put it on my shoulder but it falls back to his waist a second later.

'Go on,' I say. 'Go in.'

Felix walks slowly towards the door. He doesn't look back at me as he goes through.

I see the taxi we took here pulled into one of the bays on the other side of the car park. The driver's head is falling backwards off of his neck, his arms folded across his chest whilst he sleeps.

I go over, get in and tell him to drive.

'Where?'

## Nineteen (2018)

It seems unlikely that she is still there. In some ways, things have changed so much over six years, in others, not at all. But I do not imagine the Beachs have stood very still. Then again, Mrs Beach's email might suggest otherwise.

I have given the taxi driver the road name in Sheen. I struggle to remember the house number but it wouldn't matter, I would know which one when I get there. We drive through Richmond. It is oddly unfamiliar. A lot of the shops are the same. The station building is the same. But the town is smaller somehow. I see more homeless people, several with tired and weary dogs on their laps, others simply have a tatty blanket for company and warmth. I know the place and I don't know it at the same time.

It seems unlikely that I ever spent any time in London stuck with the fog in my head prior to this, though I know it is nearly a year before I left that it started. Everything is so distant. Everyone is so removed.

Though this cannot be true. I am distant. I am removed.

I wonder if Felix is still in Pat's room, learning the same impossible truth that I had just discovered. Perhaps he had always known. He had, after all, followed Pat's lead in ignoring our parent's existence for the entirety of our childhood. Perhaps he had just needed his memory jogging but knew deep down. Could he have seen it, just as Pat had suggested?

What scares me most is how blasé Pat had been. How simple it was to him and how little the confession meant in his eyes. Maybe that was his way of dealing with it, his way of coping with the guilt of hiding that truth for so long. But the image in my mind is too much. I can see Mum more clearly than ever; she is being thrown across the room. Her nose is bloody and one of her eyes' is black. She doesn't scream, she is silent and unbreakable. I know her strength and it tears through the fog. I do not see Dad.

I have been haunted my entire life by something that I never knew. How could I have not known? How could it have been kept from me?

Was it true?

'You getting out or what?'

We had been sat at the top of Lewin Road for a little while, presumably. The taxi driver is leaning over the divider, watching me with a spot of trepidation. Had I been speaking out loud? I had been known. The fog, that blasted fog, making me look crazy.

I am crazy, I know I'm crazy.

'Yes, sorry. How much?'

After handing over an extortionate 18 pounds, I finally get out of the car and head halfway down the road. I remember the number is 26 before I see it. I see the stone wall Alicia and I had once sat on as I explained my parents' death to her. As she forgave me when my mistakes were still at a forgivable level.

Just as I had done on that evening, I wait at the top of the path, pacing with uncertainty of motive and decisive action. The front door is not open. No one is coming to get me this time. I will have to do it myself.

A blind on the first-floor window twitches. Is someone there? The window is open, it could have just as easily been the air blowing it.

But the window is open. Someone is home, at the very least. Most likely. There is no longer the hope available to me that someone might not answer the door.

I have the feeling that someone is watching me. The blind twitches again. It isn't the wind. Time to be brave.

I move up the path and use the wooden knocker on the door three times instead of ringing the bell. I've never understood why people have both.

The door opens too quickly for it to be the same person who was watching me from the upstairs window. An impatient huff greets me before I realise who I am looking at.

Mrs Beach doesn't look older as such, but she is almost completely unrecognisable. Her hair is cut short and dyed a dark red colour, though you would have to be as close to her as I am to realise it isn't the usual dark brown. She has bigger glasses and is wearing a pale blue nurses' uniform.

Her mind is elsewhere – she looks at me but doesn't really see me. She is irritated and restless.

I do not say anything. I don't know what to say, I don't know why I'm here.

Mrs Beach opens her mouth but before she speaks, she squints harder through her large circular glasses.

'Well I never,' she says.

'Hi,' I reply, feebly. Despite finding Felix and Pat already, I am still at a loss for the right words to re-introduce myself to someone after six years. Undoubtedly, awkwardness is inevitable, but I'm sure I'm not helping.

Mrs Beach is waiting for something more from me, but seems to accept that it isn't going to happen on the doorstep. 'You'd best come in then,' she says, before moving to the side and pointing her hand towards the kitchen.

As I step into the hallway, I hear a creak from upstairs. Could it have been from Alicia's room? Would she really be here? I am not sure if I am truly prepared for this.

'Go through to the dining room,' Mrs Beach says. 'I'll make us a pot of coffee. You'll have to remind me how you have it? I'm afraid my memory doesn't stretch that far with the smaller details.'

'Black is fine, thank you.'

I take a seat at the table but it is not the same one that we had sat at for dinner the night the Doctor told me he knew my father. This one is round, without the option of sitting at the head. Where eight people may have fit before, the capacity of the new table is half of this at a push.

The low sun is beaming in through the back window, the luscious and large garden bathing in all its glory. It has been a long day, but my body clock is still on lunch time. My mind feels as though it has been back in London for a week but it hasn't even been 24 hours. At least the day is coming to an end.

Mrs Beach returns to the dining room with a full French Press and two large mugs. She places one down on a coaster in front of me and pours coffee. It makes a gurgling sound to begin with and leaks onto the table in front of me. Mrs Beach appears prepared for this as she has a cloth in her other hand which she uses to wipe up the coffee. As she leans over me, I can smell the lavender scent from her fresh uniform instead of the usually overpowering ground coffee.

She pours some into her own mug and takes a seat.

'You got my email?' she asks.

I nod. 'Thank you,' I say. It seems stupid. Gratitude more irrelevant than a kettle in a snow storm, but I say it anyway, knowing the paper-thin trail I am treading with the mother of my ex-girlfriend that I had cheated on.

'I didn't know that it would reach you. Alicia seemed pretty convinced you had achieved complete removal from everyone here. But I thought it...worth a go.' Mrs Beach continues. She takes a sip of her coffee but winces at the heat. 'I didn't think you'd come round here though.'

'Nor did I.'

'So why did you come, JJ? Were you hoping to see Alicia? She isn't here.'

And there it is. Ripped away from me so early. My stomach sinks and I am surprised – I realise for the first time quite how much I was hoping to see Alicia.

'I think I was hoping to see you too. To thank you and...to see if you were okay. I know you must hate me-'

'Oh JJ, I don't hate you.' She says it matter-of-factly as opposed to ensuring any kind of warmth. She wants to tell me that we are not friends, we are not close. We never will be. But she chooses kindness instead of hatred.

'What you did to Alicia was pretty horrid,' Mrs Beach continues. 'But you were a kid. You were messed up. You had no idea how to manage your emotions. Maybe if your uncle had a grasp on that himself you might not have lost your way.'

'This isn't Pat's fault, it's mine,' I say.

Mrs Beach takes another sip of coffee and I follow her lead. Then she reaches her hand over the table to touch mine. It lasts less than a second and she retracts back to her mug.

'I know a kid in turmoil when I see one.'

But she hadn't seen it, not back then.

'You were all hurting too,' I say. 'More so.'

She forces a smile.

'I didn't mean then, I mean now. You look terrible, JJ. I can smell the liquor from here. Drugs too, I reckon, your eyes...no one ever taught you how not to be a kid in pain.'

'I'm not a kid anymore.'

Mrs Beach smiles again and sips on her coffee, looking out of the back window into the garden. She is a far shot from the grieving widow who had been throwing books around the study in the middle of the night. She is wiser, self-assured, peaceful.

Her left hand clamps onto the handle of her mug. A wedding ring. I look around the room and see pictures of the Doctor everywhere. She hadn't remarried. She refused to let go.

Peace at the cost of living.

'How is Pat?' Mrs Beach asks. 'I haven't been back to that place for a little while now.'

'He doesn't have too much longer.'

'Oh. Well I'm very sorry to hear that.'

'How is Tommy?' I ask.

Her eyes shoot to the ceiling. She wouldn't have much of a poker face.

'Ah yes, I almost forgot I told you about that. He's...well he's a bit of a mess truth be told,' Mrs Beach whispers. 'I don't know if he can hear me right now, he's taken to listening on the stairs.'

'I'm sorry to hear it.'

'He is depressed and anxious. He doesn't sleep. He rarely sees friends and he drinks in his room on his own. He's barely turned 18. I have no idea what to do anymore.'

'That's rough.'

Mrs Beach's face turns redder and she crinkles her eyebrows.

'*That's rough?* Is that all you have to say? Christ, of all the people to maybe have a little wisdom on the matter and that's all you have for me.'



I feel out of my depth. Am I a scared kid or an addict with wisdom? Mrs Beach is as confused as I am.

She pours the remaining coffee in the French Press into both of our mugs equally despite her anger at me.

'I'm not exactly the solution over here, Mrs Beach.'

She goes to correct me but for the first time she holds back. I have dissolved my right to her first name.

'Look at me,' I continue. 'If I stick my oar in, it'll make everything worse. There's nothing you can do anyway. It's not on you. Tell me someone who isn't fucked up after their parent dies.'

Mrs Beach goes to say something but decides against it again. She sips on her coffee and continues to stare at the garden. She is struggling to keep eye contact with me. Almost as if she is scared of me, I can see her body shaking slightly.

I drain the rest of my cup and get to my feet. 'I should go, I shouldn't have come round like this, it wasn't fair.'

Mrs Beach doesn't get up, nor look in my direction. 'Yes, maybe it is for the best.'

In an oddly brave move, I put my hand on her shoulder as I head back to the hallway. She doesn't shake it off.

'I'm very sorry,' I say. 'For what happened to the Doctor, for what is happening to Tommy, and most of all for making everything worse by hurting Alicia, particularly at a time when your family needed it least of all.' The words coming out of my mouth surprise me. 'That's what I came here to say to you.'

I walk out of the dining room, but I hear Mrs Beach get to her feet behind me.

'JJ...'

I turn around. She is digging around in a top draw of the unit by the window. She pulls something out, takes a pen from the chest pocket of her uniform and starts scrawling something down, though it is out of my line of vision.

She turns and walks over to me. I see the sticky note pad in her left hand. She rips off the top sheet and hands it to me. It is an address in Streatham. Alicia.

'She's useless with her phone now, probably won't reply. Or maybe that's just to me, who knows. I don't know if she will be happy to see you. Don't blame me if it goes belly up okay?' She is smiling.

I nod. 'Thank you.'

'I'll let you see yourself out,' Mrs Beach says before grabbing the French Press and mugs and returning to the kitchen.

I head for the front door. As I reach for the handle, I feel movement behind me. I see Tommy watching me from the top of the stairs, leaning over the bannister, making no

effort to hide himself when I catch him looking. He has patchy stubble and longer hair. His white t-shirt is tatty. If I had to guess, he hadn't changed it in a few days. He is older in appearance but I see the same kid who sat cross-legged on the living room floor, hammering away at a PlayStation controller whilst the world went on around him.

He doesn't smile or wave. He doesn't curse at me or say hi. He just watches.

I take his lead and do not say anything either, but I do smile and nod. That is all.

I grasp the handle, open the door and head back up the stone path.

There is one more person to see.

## Twenty (2018)

Taking the long walk back to Richmond station instead of calling for a taxi is even more sobering. It has now been several hours without a drink, line or pill. Whilst that isn't too difficult a feat usually, being home and substance free seems more of a challenge, particularly as I need the strength for the last visit on my improvised non-stop whistle tour of people who now hate me.

Only none of them hate me quite as much as I thought they would. As I think they should.

Once I get to the station, I find the bathroom and pour some water into my hair. It hardly flattens but I am able to mould it into something slightly more presentable. I buy some mints from M&S and find my platform.

I take the train from Richmond to Clapham Junction. I will swap there for Streatham.

As I take a seat in an empty pod of four, I pull the ring out from underneath my shirt. It has been hanging on string around my neck all of these years and I have barely given it a second thought. A piece of Dad with me at all times. Why? Had I intended to wear it as my own when I get married? Fat chance of that ever happening and it didn't really seem like something I would do.

No, the ring was just another sign of my inability to let go. As if I ever needed reminding of that with Pat and Felix spouting that truth constantly.

I pull the string over my head and place the ring in my shirt pocket. I can't throw it away but I don't want it around my neck anymore. It now feels like the palm of a hand clasping my neck, slowly depriving my brain of oxygen.

Two trains and an hour later I am pulling into Streatham. I don't have a plan. I don't know what I'm going to say. I don't even know if I'm going to go through with it. But I have come this far at least.

I walk up the high street and take a side street as the map on my phone tells me to. It takes five more minutes and two more turns until I arrive outside Alicia's house, just before my phone dies. Three stories. Two cars out front. I imagine a large garden at the rear. There is a light on the first story window though the curtains are shut. The rest of the house is dark.

It's late now. A Friday evening – the chances of her being in seem slim. I hadn't thought very hard about the possibilities as I made my way from one end of South London to the other.

There is no path – instead I must wedge myself between a Corsa and banged up baby blue Peugeot. The colour made me want to be sick.

I press the bell lightly, as if that will quieten the ring and give me an excuse to be calling so late.

The hallway light flicks on a moment later. I can see movement behind the small cloudy glass pane that is head height. Someone is coming down the stairs.

The door opens and a pretty mixed-race brunette gives me a glance before ensuring her gown is tied tight enough that it won't flap open when she moves. Her breasts are hanging half out the top anyway so I see little point in this.

Once she has adjusted, she gives me another, more thorough, look up and down.

'Can I help you?' she asks.

'Is...is Alicia here?'

She looks behind her for a split second as though Alicia might magically appear over her shoulder right after being summoned.

'LEESH!' The girl shouts, cutting through the deafened street behind me.

She shouts again, this time a little louder and deeper. There is no movement or sound behind her.

We wait for ten seconds before the girl shrugs at me.

'I guess not. We aren't really friends; I don't know where she'd be.'

Friends enough to call her *Leesh*. Perhaps that was the issue. I wondered about the living situation.

'But she picks up a few shifts at The White Horse just up from the big Tesco,' the girl continued. 'She might be there. If not, I can't help you.'

She hadn't hugely helped anyway.

'Thanks,' I say.

She starts to push the door closed but pauses.

'Want me to tell her you knocked?'

I shake my head and retreat. The door clicks shut as I wedge myself back between the two cars.

I return to the high street, disappointed and relieved in equal measure.

The day is finally over, if not quite complete.

I walk back down the high street. I don't see a big Tesco, so I won't pass The White Horse. Alicia would have to wait for our reconciliation. I pull my contactless credit card from my wallet knowing the station is only two minutes further.

Only there it is. The White Horse. I hadn't noticed it on the way up. Why would I have done, I wasn't looking for it. The building was white, there was a horse on the sign above the door, also white. It does what it says on the tin I suppose.

I peer in through the window.

She wouldn't be there. She won't be there.

Whilst I am picturing myself inside the pub, enjoying a pint or several, I find that I am already walking through the door.

It is busy. Friday night, of course it is. A strange mix of young professionals and slightly older couples. Music is playing though I can't hear the tune, just the beat.

I go by the bar. I try to snatch one of the empty bar stools tucked under the counter but they are inaccessible due to the volume of people. For the same reason, it is difficult to see behind the bar, though the flurry of at least two or three bartenders as they make drinks is discernible.

A flash of curly black hair. It can't be. It won't be.

I edge to the front of the queue and land my right elbow on the bar as that is all I can manage with the restrictive horde still remaining strong.

It's her. Alicia is at the other end. She measures a double gin from the bottle suspended upside down on the back wall, before placing the glass on the bar and uncapping a tonic to go with it.

She doesn't see me.

A good-looking barman in a green and white check shirt brushes past her and whispers into her right ear. Alicia's shoulders start bobbing as she tries to contain her laughter whilst requesting payment from the customer.

The good-looking barman has made his way down to my end of the bar. He catches my eye so I point at the tap of Peroni before he can look away. I turn my point into a raised finger to signify just one.

He pulls the pint and places it directly in front of me so as to avoid the array of planted elbows. I gently slide one of them out of the way with my own elbow so I can reach the card machine.

What now?

Alicia is working, she is too busy to talk. I'm not sure I want to talk anyway. Am I to just sit at a table in the corner until things die down and Alicia catches me creepily stalking her after six years of nothing at all?

As it turns out, that is the exact plan.

I sit, I watch, I wait.

## Twenty-One (2018)

It takes another hour for the crowd to settle. The White Horse seems to be more of a starter pub, as there are only a couple of dozen people left when 10 o'clock calls, despite being a Friday night.

Alicia starts a sweep of the tables with a crate to collect the empties. She hasn't noticed me still. The longer it goes on the more awkward I feel. It's not like I'm hiding.

What am I supposed to do now, jump up, rip off my jacket and shout surprise? It almost seems better than being sat here weirdly pouting when she comes to collect my glass.

Nonetheless that is the option I go for.

At first Alicia doesn't look at me. She takes the empty and places it in her crate with the rest, her mind elsewhere. Then she smiles at me. She still isn't seeing it. The moment dawns. The smile drops. But there is no surprise.

'Thought you might turn up,' she says.

'Why?'

'Mum texted that you'd been round.'

She looked in two minds, still holding the crate.

'I can't talk right now. I'll finish in half hour or so, I don't have to stay for last call, there's enough of us on. You want to wait?'

I nod.

'Okay,' Alicia says. 'I'll get you another drink.' She checks the writing on the glass she just placed in the crate and turns back to the bar. She instructs the barman in the green and white shirt to pour the pint and returns to my table.

Alicia doesn't look at me as she places the drink down.

My heart is racing. The fog is swirling. I am terrified of the conversation that is about to happen. But I have forced myself into having it. Alicia is so calm, and it makes everything worse.

No one tells you how scary it is to see someone again after so long. After you spend so much time thinking about them. They couldn't have possibly thought about you that much. Surely Alicia had moved on with her life, forgotten all about me. A boy she went out with for a few months, not even a year, was undoubtedly a spec on the windscreen of a fast-moving car. Was I ever in love with her or just obsessed? Is there a difference?

I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm going to say. I don't know what I want from this.

But I am here.

I close my eyes. I can see the fire-filled warehouse. Screaming. The black drifting shadow. Dad is there. He is angry, furious in fact. I feel sick, I'm going to vomit.

I run outside and puke on the pavement. There are people on the opposite side of the street but none close to me. I see a middle-aged lady with a headscarf cringe in disgust, yet she refuses to look away.

There is a hand on my shoulder.

'Come on, JJ, we can go to mine. You're a mess.' Alicia is here. She is keeping enough distance between us so that she can jump back if I'm sick again. But the nausea passes. My skin tingles, I know I'm pale.

I let Alicia guide me back up the street, towards her house.

I think of the effort it will take to get back to the station. The trek across South London thereafter in order to get back to Kingston and my trashed hotel room. I don't know that I have it in me.

We make it back to the house. It has probably taken twice as long as it would have if it was just Alicia. I feel weak. Broken. I want to cry. I don't.

Once we get into the house, Alicia guides me through the hallway and into the living room. She gently sits me on the sofa and disappears into the kitchen. She returns a few minutes later with two mugs in her hands and places one down next to me. I can smell peppermint.

'Feeling better?' Alicia asks me.

The fog is swirling. The initial nausea somewhat passed once I had been sick, but it is still there somewhere. I just nod at Alicia.

'Drink the tea, it will help.'

I take a sip, sceptical of Alicia's assurance.

But the tea does help. The peppermint clears my nose and warms my throat. It calms my chest as though someone has spread vapour rub across it. The nausea pushes further away as sobriety dawns ever closer. I feel calm and warm.

'Where's your housemate?' I ask.

'Ah probably stripping off to a bunch of followers in her room.'

I am unsure what she means. It sounds like there are a lot of people upstairs.

'My Mum managed to get through to you then?' Alicia asks.

'Yes.' My voice is croaky. It has forgotten how to present.

'She said that you were high when you went round. And that you were looking for me.'

'I...I guess I was looking for you, yeah. I don't exactly know why.'

Alicia laughs, but it is warm and gentle. She isn't making fun. She seems honestly pleased to see me.

'You don't mind that I tracked you down?' I ask.

She shakes her head. 'I'm glad you did. Mum told me about her email. I told her to tell you where I was if you came looking. For all your uncle and brother knew, you died in a ditch six years ago. Eventually they let themselves believe that, I think. Probably made it easier. They mourned you, you know.'

'Not you?' I ask.

'No, not me.'

Alicia starts fiddling with the handle of her own mug. She takes a teaspoon and dips her teabag in and out of the mug several times.

She won't make it easy on me.

'I went to your brother's wedding you know. It was small but beautiful. Your uncle wasn't there, but there were lots of friends. I know he missed you hard that day.'

Guilt swept across my stomach like a dust storm. I could see it happening in my head. Katrina in a beautiful dress, walking up the aisle to my brother looking sharp in a suit. He was wearing a larger version of the black suit he had worn to Mum and Dad's funeral in my vision as that is the only one I have seen him in. They experienced the happiest day of their lives, without me. Maybe it is for the best...

'Have you seen him?' Alicia asks.

'Who?'

'Your brother, of course.'

I nod. 'He came to my hotel today. We went to see Pat.'

'How was that?'

I just nod again. It seems to be all I can do.

Alicia gives an impatient sigh but it is loaded with expectancy.

'Well JJ, for what it's worth, it's good to see you. It seems as though you might have some way to go still, but you're alive. You've seen your family. That's all I've wanted for you and them these last few years. I didn't forget you. This all didn't stop meaning something to me, you know.'

'Me either,' I say. 'Are you...happy? Successful?'

Alicia smiles. 'Yes, and...not yet.'

I laugh, remembering her stubborn determination. I want to cry but I don't.

'Coming out of uni isn't easy. In fact, it is downright terrifying. Out of my friends, if you got a decent graduate job, you were one of the lucky ones. Most people ended up like me, in a bar, or Tesco or something shite that we didn't need to get tens of thousands of pounds in debt for.'

'Do you regret it?' I ask.

'No. I'm happy. I've had a good life! So far, of course. I'm healthy and...something will work out.'



I don't know if I entirely believe her impenetrable optimism but she is strong, resolute, focused. Self-sustainable. Better than I could have ever hoped to be. Yet for some reason, somewhere in the back of my mind, I put her down beneath us all. It was sickening. Arrogant. Cruel.

'I'm sure it will,' I tell her.

'How was Pat?' Alicia asks.

'He's going to die.'

'Don't say that!'

'It's true. For better or worse, he won't be here for much longer. I'm not sure what to do with that.' I pick up my tea which is now cold, but force myself to drink more. It still has a soothing element but the cold is harsher on my chest.

I want to tell Alicia what Pat had said. My new truth. Maybe it would help her to understand me. Help her to understand what had happened between us, why I had left. Why I had ruined everything for myself. I want to tell her so she can understand what I can't.

But I don't. I stay quiet and rest my head back on the cushion. I don't lie down in order to avoid falling asleep.

There is a blanket over me when I wake up, still on the sofa. An extra pillow under my head.

The harsh early sun is shining right on my face. My neck is sweaty and mouth dry. A glass of water is waiting for me on the table. I drink it in one but I need more.

I leave the living room and find the kitchen at the end of the hall, empty and chilly. I fill the glass up at the tap, down the water and repeat twice more, until the pincers clasp at my throat ease off.

There are gentle creaks above my head. The stairs thud. Shuffles in the hallway. Alicia appears at the kitchen door.

'Thought I heard you up.'

She comes in the kitchen, fills the kettle and returns it to the heating base.

'You passed out cold JJ, practically mid-sentence.'

'I'm sorry,' I say.

'Don't be! It's fine. I didn't want to disturb you, or rather I couldn't. Thought it best to leave you for the night.'

'Thank you, I really appreciate it.'

Alicia has sympathy in her smile. 'Tea?'

I want to. She looks amazing, even with her black spaghetti hair in a dishevelled mess and her blue and white dressing gown that's stained with coffee on the sleeve.

'No. Thank you. I'm going to go.' I am pretty ripe. I try to keep my distance from Alicia but the kitchen is small. I go back out into the hallway and make for the front door.

But before I get there, Alicia grabs my wrist and pulls me into a tight hug. She stays for a while, seemingly unphased by my filth.

When she releases me, I kiss her on the cheek and move to the door.

I take a step outside and it feels good. The fresh air is medicine to my pounding head. Alicia places a hand on my shoulder and I think it is her way of saying to let it all go. I must find a way to forgive myself.

I take two steps up the path.

'JJ...'

I turn. Alicia is still stood in the open doorway. She ties up her dressing gown tighter against the morning chill.

'When I said that I didn't mourn you...it's not because I didn't care. It's because I knew we'd be having this conversation one day.'

She smiles and it's a wondrous sight.

'But your brother,' she continues. 'Your brother and your uncle, they struggled with that faith. Go easy on them, yeah?'

Yeah.

## Twenty-Two (2018)

I go back to visit Pat every day.

We don't say very much. Mostly we sit there reading, pretending as though Pat isn't dying. As though he is actually going to beat this. As though the doctor will walk through the door at any second announcing the availability of a new liver. We don't talk of Dad or Mum, nor Felix's continuingly loud absence. We sit in peace because I am done with my questions and I know Pat wants it this way.

At the hotel, I throw away the remaining powder and pills. The whiskey. It won't be for long, nor forever, but it goes for now. I fix up the room as best I can but the television is irreparable. I tell the front desk – they let me stay but they will charge it to my credit card.

The first two days are the worst for me. As I sit with Pat, it is more that I can't talk than not wanting to. I am shivery and paranoid. Foggier than I can ever remember being. I am a zombie to the world. Complete sobriety hasn't been attempted for a long time. But it doesn't seem impossible either. I will sit with it. I will make it work. I won't be Pat in that bed in 30 years' time.

I don't crave any substance, but the shivers, the vomiting, diarrhoea, the pain in my gut – it can be taken away by one simple process. But I won't. I deserve this, I need it. Perhaps if I do this, I can find a way to get rid of the fog permanently.

After a week passes and I start to feel more human, I message Alicia, asking if she wants to go for coffee. She accepts and we meet in Richmond so she can visit her Mum and Tommy at the same time.

She tells me about her life in the last few years. University in Southampton studying Classics. Moving back to London but not wanting to return home for fear of sitting still. Despite not wanting to be stuck in her bar job, she is finding her way on her own. She has been dating boys but wants to find success in her career before she thinks about settling down. She thinks that Felix did it far too quick and that was fine for him, but she doesn't want that.

We are still so young after all.

Currently she is seeing a semi-professional footballer called Anthony who is a few years older. She doesn't see it lasting but he is nice to her.

It is strange to sit in the corner of a small coffee shop with Alicia and to find peace of mind over all that happened. There wouldn't be a next step to our reconciliation. We won't be together; it is not some sort of dysfunctional love story. But there is forgiveness and friendship. And that seems to be enough for us both at last.

As we come to the end of our coffees, Alicia seems to be battling with saying something to me. She opens her mouth several times but words don't come out.

'You can say it,' I tell her. 'Don't hurt yourself.'

She smiles for a second but it doesn't last.

'I've been speaking to your brother. He is hurting. This is all very hard on him and he doesn't know what to do.'

She knows about Dad.

'I'm sorry for what you both had to hear. That must have been hard. You should reach out to him. You can do this together, you know.'

I close my eyes. Dad is hitting Mum. My mind warps and they are in the car. I wonder...

It doesn't matter. It is done. We are here and they are not.

'I know,' I say. 'But so much has changed whilst I've been away. I don't know if we can come back from it.'

'It will be different,' Alicia says. 'It's different with you and me, look at us! Who would have thought it?' She is smiling warmly. 'You can start again with Felix. Make it better.'

I don't know if she's right. The idea scares me, it seems like so much work to try and find a way back just to crash and burn. Possibly.

I go to Pat's that afternoon. He is thinking about Felix, I know it. We both sit and think until Pat falls asleep and I find the motivation to walk back to my television-less hotel room.

I realise when I get there, that Pat and I hadn't actually said a word to each other that afternoon.

And we won't get another chance to.

He goes that evening. His liver failure was too stressful on his other organs, the nurse tells me over the phone. She is so matter of fact. It was too much for his heart. He is gone.

And that's that. I sit in my hotel room after the phone call, staring aimlessly out of the window at the dark sky. Felix had to know.

I find his number in my phone and call.

When he answers, he knows it's me.

'He's gone, Fe...Pat.'

'Oh.'

I guess I can't expect much more than that.

We go to the funeral directors together. There isn't much to arrange. Pat wanted a burial so he will be laid to rest not far from Mum and Dad.

Coffin, flowers, and a date is set exactly two weeks after his death.

We don't know any of Pat's old friends, if he had any, to invite, so we don't. I ask Alicia if she will come and she accepts. It's just me, her, Felix and Katrina.

I don't have a suit so Felix lends me one, but I have to settle for grey as he only has one that is black. When I go round to his house to get dressed, Katrina answers the door and hugs me tight. She is happy to see me. I notice something is in the way of us. She has a bump.

I find out I'm going to be an uncle the day I lay mine to rest.

Another funeral. It is peaceful and uneventful. I think Pat would have liked it, mostly because no one speaks. Prayers are delivered but there are no eulogies.

We each drop a handful of dirt into the hole and move on.

Felix, Katrina and Alicia are discussing the pub. Back to The Boater's Inn like after the Doctor's funeral. We will take a taxi but I tell them to go ahead, I will meet them there.

Mum and Dad aren't far away.

I go and sit with them. I don't say anything. It's awful when people talk to gravestones. I mean it's fine in films, but in reality, it's bonkers.

I have Dad's ring in my pocket. I dig a tiny hole with my fingers just in front of his grave, place the ring inside and cover again with the dug-up dirt.

Then I shuffle along, scuffing the back of my trousers on the grass. I would get the suit dry-cleaned before I return it to Felix.

There is a hand on my shoulder. I don't need to turn. I know it is my brother. He has come back.

Droplets of water fall on my lap. I think it is raining at first until I realise, I am crying. Crying hard but without sound. The tears fall before I feel the enormity of it all. Of everyone who is gone, of the part of me that never stood a chance.

I stand up and hug my brother. And I finally feel a love for him that I can hardly remember. It is warm and overwhelming in my chest. I cry on his shoulder until I can't anymore. The fog starts to clear.

'You should come and stay at the house. For a while, at least. I've spoken to Katrina about it and it's fine with her. I bet you're bleeding money at that hotel.'

I think of the near depleted inheritance that I have pissed down the drain by continually running away. I could go to my brother's. I could fix things. I don't have much of a choice.

'Okay. Thank you.'

Felix puts his arm around me and leads me away from Mum's grave.

We would mend our relationship. We would find a way to be brothers again.

Because, as I walk away from all of the pain, with my brother's arm around me, the fog is gone. For the first time in a while, I am fixed.



## Epilogue

Felix tells me I am obsessed with the dead and I should focus on the living.

Which I get, but it's easier to focus on what you know.

He doesn't say it like he used to though. He is trying to help me to let go of some things. He also acknowledges we need to hold on to the memory of our family. We don't need to talk about them all the time, but every once in a while, there is something. Something that reminds us of Mum. Uncle Pat. Even Dad. And that's okay.

I am trying to live. I have finally finished my A Levels. I have been accepted to start university in September. I will study Business Management and Media Studies. Only, at Kingston University, so I don't have to leave again. It would just feel like running. I am a little old for it. The other students will be younger, but it's okay. There is hope. I don't know what I want to do for work yet, but that's why I have chosen to go to university instead. I can sort it out after that. Perhaps I will teach. All I know is that I am not inspired by IT or medicine. They wouldn't run in the family.

Felix is a paralegal at Osborne Clarke in central. He studied Political Science at university but isn't sure why. He went on to a complete a Graduate Diploma in Law and hopes to take his solicitor qualifications soon.

I have a room at Felix and Katrina's house, though I hope to find my own place soon. When the baby comes.

I will be Uncle JJ.

The kid will never know my name is James-Joseph, I am determined of that for some reason. It would only ever be JJ. And Jim-Joe dies with Pat.

Alicia and I have the occasional coffee for a while but soon enough we run out of things to talk about. There is warmth to our meetings, but they become irrelevant. I leave her to get on with her life. It didn't seem like the end of the world to know I might not see her again.

The fog is yet to permanently disappear. I see a specialist about Depersonalisation Disorder. They recommend several medications. Lamotrigine, fluoxetine. But they don't know much, not yet. I attend support groups. I am not the only one who was triggered by a seemingly meaningless and minimal drug use. It is common amongst DPD onset. Others were triggered by abuse. Some are yet to find a reason. It just is.

I see others who are worse than me. Some who are similar. Some who are 'fog' free though always expectant of new episodes.

I don't expect it to ever go away, not properly. But I am finding new ways to manage. New methods to handle the tougher days. Embracing my brother, asking for help – it's...something. The loneliness is not so crippling.

The storm makes it hard to see clearly but I will not let it take me. There is a way through.



## II. Research Introduction

### 1. Introducing the Topic

Belbin (2011) describes Young Adult (YA) fiction as a 'bridge, or a multiplicity of bridges, carrying the reader across the deep river that divides children's fiction, which many grow out of in early adolescence, and adult fiction' (143). Whilst YA fiction is a vast term that incorporates books which explore multiple themes, and uses varying styles and genre blends, the idea at its core is almost always 'coming-of-age' – a first step into adulthood after experiencing some form of trauma, identity crisis or defining event. It is the process of beginning adulthood and answering the question 'who am I and what am I going to do about it?' (Campbell, 2010: 70). YA can address 'weighty issues, such as (chronic) illness, substance and sexual abuse, violence, and death' (Monaghan, 2016: 32). This can stray into the fantastical, develop in a dystopian world, or remain grounded in a real-world setting, such as school.

Mental health is an increasingly popular theme in YA literature. Mental illnesses are defined as 'health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotion, or behaviour (or a combination of these)' typically connected to 'distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities' (American Psychiatric Association [APA] in Richmond, 2019: 3).

This research discusses the development of mental health themes within YA literature, the effect of these themes being readily available to a YA audience, the portrayal of mental illness by potentially relatable characters to that audience stemming from specific choices of the writer, and the possible glorification of mental illness for the purposes of profitability.

Monaghan highlights that a greater understanding of mental illness can be developed from mental health-based YA literature as well as providing an education to issues a YA audience may not yet understand on a deeper level. This view considers that authors should have a strong knowledge of such conditions, either through personal experience or thorough research, in order to provide a balanced and authentic narrative.

### 2. Problem Definition

Given the vulnerable nature of a youthful protagonist, particularly one whose health is in question, mental or otherwise, critical scepticism has inevitably developed as to the

benefits and legitimacy of mental health-based and 'sick-lit' stories, though not just in literature. The popularity of turning these books into films and television series in the last two decades has shed further light on these topics in other mediums; *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), *All the Bright Places* (Niven, 2015), *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005), *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (Vizzini, 2006) and *13 Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007) are among numerous adaptations relevant to this study.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, these forms of representation have helped to provide the recent surge of mental health awareness outside of fiction, but the benefits of the fictional portrayals themselves will be brought into question in this analysis. Are the portrayals accurate? Could they be damaging? Does the fictional nature of the story question the legitimacy of mental health representation within a novel? Where relevant, do novels based on true events provide a more valid representation of mental health? Much of this relates to the choices of the writer and I seek to understand what obligations might be present in this process when handling mental health subject matter.

### 3. Research Objective

The focus of this research falls within 'YA realism' (Ross, 1985) – that is to say YA novels that occur in non-fantastical, contemporary settings, in order to prioritise an understanding of mental health in a realistic environment and not to run the risk of attempting to analyse the psychology of characters whose stories are likely more defined by a fantasy-based journey and less so by the internal struggle.<sup>2</sup> This is not to discount mental health themes in YA cross-genres. However, the scope of that extension is substantial and this is a valid area of further research that will be removed from the works discussed in this thesis.

Jones (2020) suggests that 'one of YA's greatest strengths is how, at its best, it manages to discuss serious issues in an accessible way...these are not frivolous or silly topics – nor are they treated as such...just because these issues are examined through the eyes of a teen rather than an older character doesn't make them any less meaningful...'.

However, these are vulnerable themes being placed in potentially impressionable minds. Meaningfulness is apparent, but suitability and/or accuracy perhaps less so. My objective is to understand when and how YA may cross a line in its representation of mental

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<sup>1</sup> The aspect of on-screen adaptations will only be highlighted in this study for the purposes of demonstrating extension – the core focus on narrative will remain with the literature.

<sup>2</sup> YA realism and YA can be considered interchangeable terms in this study unless indicated otherwise.

health, when it presents a healthy portrayal of mental illness, and what a suitable future might look like for YA and mental health.

This thesis will be positioned with the following research question:

***How can the fictional representation of mental illness in Young Adult literature educate readers? Where might it misrepresent the challenges of living with a mental health condition? What considerations by the novelist/writer can prevent misrepresentation?***

#### 4. Relevance

Given the increasing mental health crisis in the UK, and the global COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating this significantly, the need for mental health education, knowledge and awareness is more crucial than ever before, and the representation via media is an important aspect of this, particularly given the increased consumption during lockdowns.

The popularity of the YA genre and its connections to mental health present a need to gain an understanding of what may be positive or harmful for an audience to consume, particularly a youthful YA-based audience, to consume in terms of fictional content that relates to this and connects with readers. Whilst there is other research that combines these topics, there is little that questions the potential benefits or harmfulness of fiction in this area. Is it possible poor mental health has been glorified in fiction for the purposes of profit? Or is potential profit just an added benefit of important and beneficial work? In all likelihood, as is the case with most literary and other research questions, the answer sits somewhere on a subjective scale where some novels will be more prolific in educational benefits and offer 'a more authentic experience of mental health issues' whilst others provide a motive, representation and morals that are not demonstrative of furthering the cause (Monaghan, 2016). My research will attempt to understand what can make the difference between the two.

The APA addresses this argument in the following summary (in Richmond, 2019: 5):

'Mental health misrepresentation in entertainment media can fuel stigma, leading to discrimination against people with mental illnesses and barriers to treatment. Media that romanticizes or features graphic acts of violence, especially self-harm and suicide, may trigger imitative violence, risking copycat acts.'

Several of the works considered in this study have been accused of mental health misrepresentation and romanticisation of violence including forms of self-harm. Therefore, this research will address the suitability and/or accuracy of said representations as well as how and why poor mental health may be romanticised in this way, what defines it as misrepresented, perhaps inaccurate, or inappropriate, and what a resolution to this, including a fair, accurate and educational portrayal, may be through the consideration of writing choices.

The subjectivity of analysing representation is challenging, and the qualitative method further explored in Chapter IV has its limitations. However, through the thorough consideration of previous research and useful frameworks, I will develop an original approach to evaluate mental health representations in YA fiction.

The creative piece of this research has sought to understand this on a more specific level, including the research, analysis and eventual portrayal of a less commonly known mental health condition, Depersonalisation Disorder (DPD). Whilst DPD is being highlighted more and more, it is understood that approximately 1-2% of the UK population experiences some level of DPD, most likely in combination with some other form of psychological illness such as PTSD, depression, and more commonly, panic disorder/anxiety (Hunter et al., 2014). The creative element can be viewed as an attempt to provide a legitimate and beneficial work of fiction about a real and under-represented disorder in order to compare a personal experience of the research question with the other forms of literature that are being researched. For this reason, Chapter V: 5 will be self-evaluative, considering my research question and later-developed sub-questions, with the results of my case study analyses, alongside my own experience of drafting a fictional YA novel that intends to be educational towards mental health. Current debates and theories on DPD will be factored into my research in order to understand my own writing choices and considerations throughout the creative process.

## 5. Key Terms Defined

Although some of these terms may be fairly self-explanatory, this short section gives definition and meaning as to how and why this wording applies to the research and its importance to context. These will be extended by theoretical research and understanding throughout the literature review.

- Suitability is ‘the fact of being acceptable or right for something or someone’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). I use this term in attempting to understand how the representation or misrepresentation of mental health themes in YA may be

considered in light of a youthful audience. How can these themes be managed by the writer in order to *make* them suitable?

- Educational is defined as ‘providing education or relating to education’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022) but this is a much more loaded term throughout this thesis. It relates to the accuracy of mental health representation in YA. There is a considerable inaccuracy to fiction by its very nature and I use this term to try to understand the balance of enabling accurate and relational themes of mental health within a fictional story in order to educate its audience on real conditions.
- Healthy Representation – representation is defined as ‘a person or organization that speaks, acts, or is present officially for someone else’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This applies to this term and the next. What constitutes a ‘healthy’ version of this will be a substantial point of debate throughout my case study analysis. But my aim is to understand how portrayals of mental health may be objectively considered as healthy and beneficial to its audience and how the research surrounding this area factors into that decision.
- Misrepresentation is ‘something that misrepresents an idea, situation, or opinion, or the fact of something being misrepresented’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). As mentioned in my introduction, YA fiction has often been accused of misrepresenting mental health themes and challenges over the years. My research looks to dissect where, how, and why that misrepresentation occurs as well as how to avoid it in writing considerations.
- Development is ‘the process in which someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This term is more relevant to the earlier stages of my research, in attempting to understand how YA has developed over the course of the years, particularly in reference to mental health themes, but also how this may further develop and how that relates to writer decisions with regards to their mental health focus.
- Stigma is ‘a strong feeling of disapproval that most people in a society have about something, especially when this is unfair’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This term will be familiar to a much higher number of people over recent years with particular attribution to mental health. There have been a lot of negative assumptions with regards to a number of mental health conditions in history, and this research attempts to understand the relationship stigma has with mental health and YA literature.
- ‘Madness’ is ‘a word for mental illness, which was used by doctors in the past but is now offensive’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This relates quite closely to

stigma and prior assumptions made about mental illness. It has a complicated history with mental health and is a strong indicator about the importance of correct language being used in this subject.

### III. Literature Review

#### 1. The History of YA

YA is complex in both classification and origins and the historical trajectory of the genre provides a wide range of views and definitions that perhaps shed more light collectively.

Belbin (2011) suggests *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is 'maybe' the first YA novel, since 'it has had a large impact on the style of numerous YA novels' (141). However, the exact starting point is difficult to specify owing to the ambiguous definition of a YA novel. Belbin goes on to suggest that 'if a story about young adults is told in hindsight, through a mature adult mind... then it's an adult novel. But if it's narrated through a young adult consciousness – even if the narrator is sophisticated, or unreliable – then it's a Young Adult novel' (141). However, this cannot be an exact science since the YA novel is defined by more than the age of the protagonist. If the perspective is skewed by a narrative voice, speaking at some point in the future, even if this isn't clear until the end of the novel, this has the potential to redefine the genre of the novel, as can differing national views on what defines the age of the Young Adult, either in literature or elsewhere, the subject matter of the novel, or other continually changing social aspects that reposition the genre entirely (Belbin).

Defining the genre via the point of view of the narrator or subject may confound the definition since many novels are written with this point of view yet are not considered 'Young Adult' (for example Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* [Roxburgh, 2004]). Roxburgh suggests that 'there is no difference between the young adult novel and the adult novel. There are distinctions to be made between them, but they are not different art forms.' What is often defined as YA usually involves: '1) plots of character; 2) the characters tend to be adolescent; and (3) the point of view is often first person'.

Smith (2002) suggests that YA was conceived much earlier than *The Catcher in the Rye* if it is defined by the age of the reader that embraces it. She extends a definition of the genre back to 1868 with Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Smith also discusses the rise of the 'problem novel' during the 1970s which is when subject-matter can be seen to be overshadowing both character and plot – essentially the novel becomes a lesson rather than a story. Her view aligns with Roxburgh's distinctions of YA but adds to them by suggesting that YA is defined by its inclusion of the following: 'adolescent protagonists, narration from the adolescent's point of view, contemporary settings and subject matter formerly considered taboo' (Ross, 1985: 174).

Wells (2003) considers YA a 'relatively new concept' and accepts that it started later than *The Catcher in the Rye* since *The Outsiders* (1967) was the first work of fiction to be written *about* young adults and written *for* young adults. YA was particularly developed in the 70s and 80s owing to the 'problem novel' addressing 'real problems that young adults faced, such as drug abuse, divorce, poverty, etc' as well as a boom in genre fiction that included romance (1).

In considering YA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kaplan (2005) develops Ross's identifying factor of 'subject matter formerly considered taboo' and suggests that the genre has progressed in that 'authors of many articles say, the world of young adult literature is being transformed by topics and themes that years ago would have never ever been conceived without someone labelling them 'daft' or at least, a little far-fetched and out of touch with everyday reality' (11). Kaplan explores this in terms of science fiction, but he is also suggesting that factors less known at the conception of YA that are now more prominent in understanding adolescence are included here. This presumably represents a multitude of mental health knowledge and understanding, explaining experiences that the young adult faces in their life. Kaplan summarises that the YA novel of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is defined by a 'new normal' and that 'the world of cyberspace and cloning, of blurred genres and conventions, and of critical discourse and contextual analysis, is what drives young adult literature in a new and specialized arena of complex thought and ideas' (18).

Touching further on how this relates to the mental health aspect of this research, Hayn et al. (2011) suggest that with the introduction of *The Catcher in the Rye*, came a desire for 'the often harsh and unforgiving reality of adolescent lives (neglectful parents, wayward youth, and abusive relationships). Happy reads — or at least relatively pleasant ones — were replaced with more volatile and angry voices that spoke to young people in a style that had much market and artistic viability' (177). Hayn et al., in their examples suggest, without directly insinuating, that YA and mental health have perhaps been aligned from the beginning of the genre. Their mention of style would imply that this is a purposeful construct to assist with the profitability of being 'relatable'.

## 2. YA Readership

Roxburgh (2004) suggests that 'Young Adult' is historically defined by its audience despite art in general having a 'moving target' for this and being the only art form (he is aware of) to assess its audience in such a way (4). This is complicated further by the reasoning that YA is marketed to young adult readers but YA readership consists of



roughly half young adults and half of readers over the age of eighteen (Kitchener, 2017). More recently, there has been a move to split certain YA novels away from the genre into 'New Adult' literature that covers the gap between YA and adult fiction where eighteen-year-old plus characters are experiencing many of the same dilemmas and relationships that are found in a YA novel (Pattee, 2017). My own novel could be considered a 'New Adult' novel, since the protagonist turns eighteen approximately halfway through the story. However, in order to simplify the scope of this research, I am researching YA without the 'New Adult' consideration as to not depart from the mental health focus, though this is a valid area for further definition and understanding.

Kokesh & Sternadori (2015) suggest that YA novels are 'geared toward female audiences' and are mostly 'written by women and have female protagonists but do not always promote gender equality, although that has been an increasing trend in both realism-based and fantasy books' (140). Their study indicates that there is a feminist progression in this genre 'with an increasing emphasis on toughness and independence', but that young women are still primarily defined and judged by acceptability of appearance as the genre 'also continues to enforce traditional femininity in the face of clingy, insecure, and ever-dieting heroines' (156).

Brendler (2014) considers YA to be an increasingly mixed genre where fiction appeals to both genders but that the diversity of trends within each gender has developed significantly also. Brendler continues that YA provides the opportunity for a combination of 'action/adventure with romance, paranormal, fantasy, and science fiction elements' and thus an increasingly combined readership, but also that specifically male readership is increasing owing to the introduction of 'lad-lit' – 'realistic fiction that deals with male perspectives on adolescence'. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) is a primary example of this, as well as the prominence of John Green writing novels from a male perspective. Brendler summarises that 'if we subscribe to the belief that readers can be categorized by gender, we eliminate the opportunity to introduce teens to a plethora of wonderful materials that we assume will only interest one gender' (224) and that there is a danger in subscribing to the notion of 'boy books' and 'girl books', particularly in introducing these to children at an early age.

### 3. YA Themes

Roxburgh (2004) suggests the following regarding point of view in YA fiction (7):

'The first-person narrator in a coming-of-age story—a plot of character—is almost always unreliable. They are innocent and/or ignorant. Life experience is about to change that, but the protagonist is unaware. Initially the reader can almost never rely on the main character's assessment of reality. As the narrator grows and changes, often through trauma, experience leads to self-knowledge and a new perception of reality. In other words, the narrator becomes reliable, or, at least, more reliable. Typically, in the young adult novel, the narrator transforms from unreliable to reliable.'

It would seem Roxburgh is suggesting an unreliable narrator is essential to YA though perhaps not in such a dramatic definition of the term but rather by the acquisition of adult knowledge, hence the 'coming-of-age' element highlighted as integral in the introduction. Growth and change come alongside this, perhaps as attributes of YA that are as important as Roxburgh's other distinctions.

Wells (2003) identifies seventeen literary themes of YA fiction: friendship, getting into trouble, interest in the opposite sex, money, divorce, single parents, remarriage, problems with parents, grandparents, younger siblings, concern over grades/school, popularity, puberty, race, death, neighbourhood, and job/working with friendship, getting into trouble and interest in the opposite sex occurring (4).

Several of these thematic elements are likely to come into play within any one story, but a useful characteristic of this theory is that it seems to mostly focus on a 'real-world' setting that audiences are likely to experience or can relate to. This assists my research's focus in YA realism, and whilst it is likely there are more themes that didn't make the list, these are prevalent over a number of YA realism-based texts.

Wells considers these themes to have been a natural development owing to their relatable nature as well as the increase in certain real-world factors affecting young adults including facing parents' divorce, youthful employment, struggles with gender identity and racial awareness such as experiences of racism and the knowledge of living in a racialized world.

Whilst Wells' themes are identifiable, they also appear to be outdated for a more modern understanding of the potential developments faced in adolescence. Mention of mental

health is notably absent, as is progression in the understanding and acceptance of various gender identities and sexualities.

These themes provide an overlap that modern YA literature is exploring, and whilst gender identity and sexuality won't be ignored in this research, it is a far wider exploration to be understood in future investigation. I will limit the scope of my research with mental health as the overriding discussion point throughout.

## 4. Mental Health & Fiction

The following section offers insight into current literature relating to mental health and fiction, addressing representations from both YA and adult fiction. Exploration across genres provides a wider understanding of mental health within fiction, including how this relates to the misrepresentation of language e.g. 'madness', and aspects of the subject that are commonly distorted e.g. mental health nursing. Research connecting YA and mental health often draws from alternate genres in order to widen its scope and provide valid explanation of mental health representation.

### 4.1 'Sick-lit'

'Sick-lit' is a 'genre of adolescent fiction that fused illness and romance narrative' (Elman, 2012: 175). This and 'narrative medicine' are now common terms to explain the attractiveness and profitability of illness-based stories. Elman considers this divergence as an evolution from YA into a new literary genre in itself. The term is a recent creation and presents an issue in itself with the potential fetishizing of illness. This isn't considered a 'bookshelf' genre but rather a marketing development that enables entertainment through sadness. This demonstrates the importance, and possible damage, that language choices can present on a number of levels when considering mental health education.

'Sick-lit...offers a narrative medicine scholar a prolonged and authentic view into what it's like to be a teenager and to be dealing in some way with illness' (Monaghan, 2016: 34)). Elman provides that the development of 'sick-lit' occurred as a result of 'post-1968 liberal social movements and post-Fordist economic shifts toward service industries that commodified emotion' (175) – a 'service through tears' (189). Whilst Elman's research focus is primarily related to cancer within this genre, and therefore a physical ailment as

opposed to a mental disability, much of her understanding of this can cross between those differences, similarly to how Monaghan mentions her four criteria that deduce the strength of mental health representation in fiction (outlined in 4.4) are changeable between physical and psychological health issues. This thesis will relate to mental-health based 'sick-lit' only, though it is helpful to draw from theory that doesn't differentiate.

John Green is one of the most popular and prolific writers in the field of 'sick-lit', or mental health and YA fiction. His body of work focuses on depression/PTSD (*Looking for Alaska*, 2005), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (*Turtles All the Way Down*, 2017) and cancer (*The Fault in Our Stars*, 2012). Monaghan (2016) suggests that the 'staying power' of these texts demonstrates the popularity and resonance of this genre, in that novels such as Green's remain on the tables at the front of bookstores despite their release dates. This is likely heavily assisted by the aforementioned surge in film and television adaptations of the novels, and book shops marketing strategies to direct buyers to the literary origins of such adaptations.

YA 'sick-lit' provides a 'child defined by the terminology of pain' whether this is on a physical or psychological level (Egoff in Feinberg, 2004). Egoff suggests that, with this, comes a number of likely characteristics:

- The protagonist is alienated and hostile toward adults.
- Some relief from unhappiness comes from a relationship with an adult outside the family.
- The story is often told in the first person and is often confessional and self-focused.
- The narrative is told from the point of view of an ordinary child, often in the vernacular; vocabulary is limited; the tone is often flat and emotionally detached.
- Dialogue predominates.
- The settings are urban, American, usually in New York or California.
- Sexuality is openly and frequently discussed.
- Parents are absent, either physically or emotionally.

Some of these aspects are quite specific and would seem more possible as opposed to likely, though they do offer relatable components that will allow further analysis of the YA novel perhaps as a general rather than specifying 'sick-lit'. One element that will be further questioned later in this thesis is the notion that the novel will likely have an American setting. Whilst this doesn't seem essential, the majority of YA novels, or novels that are objectively defined as YA, are based in the US. *There's Something Wrong with JJ* is set in London, though my personal view is that it invokes strong elements of an

'American' YA novel and the setting does temporarily shift to the US. This influence is likely from my generation's consumption of American iconography and integration with these forms of media. Therefore, in Chapter V: 5, I will further consider the implications of setting a mental health-based YA novel in the UK.

Holmes (2014) understands an important principle in terms of the humanity of this subject. Novels of this variety are about mental health, but it shouldn't be forgotten that they are also about people 'who care about their friends and families, plan for their futures, face up to their fears, and struggle to make the right decisions in difficult situations, just like the rest of us—and who also happen to suffer from a mental illness' (68). This suggests that, although it should not be considered as far as an afterthought, mental illness is not the definition of the story – it is a story about people in all of their complexity, not just about the element of their experience that is a mental health disorder. This would imply that the risks associated with the 'problem novel' are still prevalent and mental health, as the given problem, has the potential to consume plot within a story. This will be considered in the textual analysis in Chapter V.

Holmes goes on to suggest that students and other readers 'deserve to meet characters like themselves in the books they read. They deserve to know they are not alone' (71). Hall-Clifford (2015) asserts that 'people want to read about illness because illness and interactions with health care are, just like coming of age, something experienced by and of interest to everyone' (366). Whilst her research focuses on 'autopathographies', and therefore non-fictional accounts, she ties this to fiction since these forms of literature follow similar 'heroic' and 'redemptive' story arcs. However, she also highlights that social benefits of writings of mental health can potentially be negated by the post-publication real-life endings. She discusses several authors' own battles with mental health and, on a small number of occasions, eventual suicides, as was the case with Ned Vizzini, author of *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (2006).

## 4.2 Stigma & 'Madness': Education & Terminology

In considering more general mental health research, Sirois (2014) suggests that 'societal stigma, fear, and ignorance about mental disorders forms barriers between those who live with it and those who do not' and that 'to the uninformed, mental disorders can look like negative personality traits, such as stubbornness, inattention, or indifference' (8). This is further complicated by the sensitivity regarding the language of mental health, possibly from its vastness, the negative connotations naturally associated with certain

terms, or simple lack of general understanding. Richmond (2014) suggests that terms such as “disturbed, nuts, freak, psycho, spastic, crazy and mental” are prolific amongst young adults when describing the mentally ill, intimating that there is a lack of understanding amongst young people of depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as well as media encouragement that allows for the polarisation and demonization of suffering individuals.

Stigma seems to be the main area of concern here, and that the breaking of stigmas, possibly via the installation of correct language (such as ‘neurodiversity’) and more honed education in mental health, is key in positive change (Sirois).

Sirois suggests the social benefit of literature here in that ‘the same way that books and stories of racial trauma, gender differences, and cultural diversity have benefitted...so contemporary narratives written by people who have experience with mental illness allow students to enter the point of view of the author and connect with disabled people’ (9). It should be noted that Sirois’ discussion is specific to an educational context, but in considering this as a wider theory amongst young readers, there is the opportunity to allow a YA audience to feel less alone if they are experiencing mental health complexities in their own lives, or to increase understanding and empathy for other readers.

Authors are attempting to ‘reclaim’ the words ‘madness’ and ‘insanity’ in order to invoke less insulting and more normalised language around mental health, and whilst there have always been stories about ‘madness’, changing perspective allows development and understanding. The encouragement of empathy and emotional awareness in schools, for teachers and students alike, can assist with this and providing the correct literature is vital. This can motivate the unfamiliar ‘to be aware of the power of language choices and to become empowered to confront the stigma associated with mental illness and confront bullying of those struggling with depression, anxiety, and others living with mental illness’ (Richmond, 2014: 24).

Sirois provides a lens on the alternative, intimating that when writers lack knowledge of subject matter they can foster ‘a breeding ground for misunderstanding which disseminates fear’ (11) and that this can increase stigma, thus achieving the opposite goal of educating and destigmatising. This leaves for an interesting question – is it only those who have direct experience with mental health disorders that can write a beneficial fictional account of a mental health-based novel? Or can a person who hasn’t undergone a mental health crisis provide accurate research on what happens in the period leading up to diagnosis? For someone who has not experienced poor mental health, either in

themselves or from someone close to them, on a prolonged level, is it possible the level of research they are able to do is insufficient in providing a healthy, relatable form of fiction on the subject matter?

Scrofano (2015) highlights the importance of an understanding of mental health in the classroom since roughly half of life-time mental illness begins before the age of fourteen and seventy-five percent by the age of twenty-four. She suggests that stories of mental illness are important in order to provide a 'focus on the illness as a biological brain disorder, a chemical imbalance in the brain' and that a move away from the 'madness' term in more modern literature allows a different point of view in fiction where there is representation of 'clinical illness, including visiting the psychologist's or psychiatrist's office, trying out different medications, dealing with side effects, having conflicts with family members, and all the rest that a modern-day diagnosis of mental illness entails' (15). Scrofano goes on to raise a number of questions that will help to develop my sub-questions in Chapter IV and will benefit the later analysis of understanding whether the representation of mental health is educational or misrepresented (20):

- What do teens think of the current literature of mental illness?
- Are the endings of the books too tidy?
- Are the adults given too much power?
- Do the novels leave us wondering about characters' lives beyond their initial diagnoses or once the crisis is over?
- What kinds of stories of mental illness should be told in the future?

The second point provides an implication from Scrofano that the conclusion should be messier in order to provide a realistic account. But does this then counteract the educational benefit of such a novel? An element of hope may prove incredibly important to a reader who can relate to mental illness. Removing this could be more damaging to the reader than ensuring a potentially more realistic ending is depicted. Or perhaps Scrofano is not suggesting to remove or lessen the element of hope, but rather avoid resolving character issues in their entirety.

De Leon (2017) develops the idea of mental health-based YA literature in the classroom further through the consideration of 'bibliotherapy' and 'counter-storytelling', the former being 'the practice of integrating book use into therapy to promote mental wellness' and the latter being 'a method of telling stories about those in the margins of society whose experiences are not often heard' (6-8). De Leon considers these methods in practicing empathy via the exploration of adolescent engagement through YA literature in order to discuss mental health topics. Again, although her research specifically links back to the

classroom and focuses less on the portrayal of mental health within fiction, I would suggest that this form of engagement dictates a need for accurate portrayals within texts that are used for such purposes. Accurate portrayals and factual symptoms are educational for those inexperienced. By this thought, conditions that are dramatized to an extent beyond accuracy for the purposes of fantastical storytelling are less likely to create empathy and more likely to sensationalise mental health. The concept of bibliotherapy relates closely to the overriding arguments provided in this research and the importance of using literature to help those suffering with mental illness 'has never been higher' (Richmond, 2019: 3).

Bladon & Bladon (2019) provide that mental health nursing and fictional literature can be used together in developing a better understanding for treatment. Fiction 'permits an immersive experience, stimulates the imagination and shows other worlds, including inner ones that may be inaccessible through traditional means' (2). This highlights the importance of an internal monologue and specific point of view in a story about mental health. This can enhance empathy within the reader and also provide a greater 'self-understanding'. It may also allow for greater understanding of others (Oatley, 2016).

However, in earlier work, Bladon (2018) also considers how negative portrayals of mental health nursing being pre-dominant in fiction can 'perpetuate stigma'. Bladon cites Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) as the overriding and, unfortunately, inspiring example. If mental health nurses are not portrayed as evil then they mostly serve as a background character often deemed momentary and insignificant. He suggests this can be circumvented by mental health nurses themselves creating fictional literature of realistic experiences in their profession in order to provide coherent identity and positive portrayals. Bladon (2017) considers this to be a gap in this fiction, the filling of which could address stigma and stereotypes in a beneficial way to the practice of mental health nursing and those being treated.

Whilst Bladon's research is primarily focused on mental health nursing and its representation as opposed to the representation of mental health itself, many of the points he raises are valid in this research and provide the same area of understanding. Breaking stigma, not only in terms of understanding a condition but also in how it is treated is important, and how fiction could play a valuable role in respect to this, will be addressed in my sub-questions in Chapter IV.

Much previous research in this field seems to centre around the idea of audience understanding and this has been mentioned in quite a number of theorists introduced thus far. Deshpande (2012) summarises this neatly in providing the example of



Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* – 'he takes us into the minds and hearts of the seemingly most unloveable people – a murderer, an alcoholic, and his loud, nagging shrew of a wife. But we learn to understand them, even to sympathize. And when, finally, they redeem themselves in different ways, we learn that redemption is never impossible for anyone'. Applying this to mental health-based fiction could be beneficial, particularly in addressing this old-fashioned idea of associating particular conditions with 'madness'.

However, it would seem there is a long way to go before more sensitive portrayals are the norm and the idea of 'madness' being associated with poor mental health is abolished. This is particularly true to other genres, as Goodwin & Tajjudin (2016) point out when discussing the character of The Joker from *Batman*, potentially the most famous comic book villain in history. Being described – and portrayed – as a 'violent schizophrenic' naturally links the two words together and this is possibly the most common and particular stigmatisation of a mental health disorder amongst the public. This isn't to say that schizophrenia doesn't install dangerous behaviours but Goodwin & Tajjudin explain several inaccuracies in The Joker's actions that refute a diagnosis of schizophrenia. These include failing to display difficulties with concentration, remembering old information, and learning new information or the presence of hallucinations, delusions, and disorganised speech. Therefore, when one knows much of the portrayal is inaccurate, the entire depiction could be questioned. Should schizophrenia and violence be so closely associated when it is more of a possibility than a given? Goodwin & Tajjudin go on to suggest the character seems more likely associated with a dissociative disorder.

Thaller (2015) provides a similar thought in that 'schizophrenia has become the "easy out" for writers who need to cover the tracks of a mysterious antagonist or wrap up all of the narrative's loose ends with a clear-cut villain who exists outside of logical answers or motivations' (216-217). She concurs that schizophrenia is often misconceived for multiple personality disorder (now known as dissociative identity disorder).

This is where genre is particularly important – whilst Goodwin & Tajjudin's analysis strays far from the genre of this research, that perhaps raises a point in itself – genre could be integral to a fair or imbalanced portrayal of mental health. The notion of 'villainy' could be a threat to educational representation and this is an unlikely element of YA realism, hence the potential for positivity of mental health focuses within this genre.

### 4.3 Disability, Gender & Sexuality

YA literature can be seen to 'conjure a relationship between "realness" and emotional intensity in which sadness connotes authenticity' (Elman, 2012: 175). This is usually developed through romantic themes that intertwine love and illness, though Elman also presumes an imbalance of gender in this theme where 'boys demonstrate their athleticism and virility "in spite of" their illness or within their remission, while girls with illness must continue to cultivate their normality by rehabilitating their physical beauty in mostly all-female communities' (178). However, she also highlights the public benefit to these narratives, arguing that although social equalities may not be advanced as far as they perhaps should be in this genre, and in spite of differing evaluations of 'YA literary realism's medicinal value', realistic representations will 'evoke transformative emotions in teen readers' (178).

Hicks (2020) highlights the negative effect gender performance expectations can have on a YA reader. In considering several YA novels, including *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) and *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017), she also suggests that over the span of 20 years little has changed with regards to mismanagement of mental health conditions by protagonists and the potential influence this may have on a young reader. She summarises with the following (41):

'Young adult literature is an important tool that allows young readers to explore real-world issues in a way that is more approachable, so readers and authors alike must be mindful of the way topics are represented within novels.'

This would further imply the importance of accuracy in description and portrayal of mental illness.

Baldys (2012) considers disability in several genres and looks to define the power of its representation in terms of sexuality by providing the dominance of 'hegemonic heterosexuality' and 'compulsory able-bodiedness'. She suggests that more contemporary romance novels in particular look to 'contain' and 'rehabilitate' the 'threat' of 'disability sexuality'. However, 'despite the limitations imposed by these ideologies, both disabled and nondisabled readers often express pleasure at seeing disability represented "realistically" in popular romance; their responses demonstrate how realism can be ideologically coercive, but also suggest a hunger for difference from which disability studies may benefit' (125). Baldys understands her case studies to have 'privileged the explicitly abled, definitively gendered body as a precondition for romance,

presented heterosexual love and marriage as an organic imperative, and propounded ableist fantasies that seek to reinscribe and rehabilitate disability' (136) but that this is complicated by a lack of intention to do so or perception as to this being the case. She also finds that the more modern the text, the less likely this neutralisation is to occur owing to increased psychological depth in the writing as well as a more defined and realistic depiction of disability.

This focus on disability and sexuality can heavily attribute itself to YA analysis and provide a more specific understanding of the research question in terms of sexuality representation, particularly in the lead characters, and whether this contributes to the fairness in portrayals of poor mental health.

Cheyne (2012) suggests that 'the narratives circulating in popular culture play a significant role in shaping wider understandings of disability and impairment' (117) and that they are not trivial when it comes to genres such as science fiction and romance, both of which can play into YA fiction. She also suggests the publication of scholarly texts are increasing, but are still scarce when it comes to disability, as are novels where the lead character is disabled. Whilst her paper was written nearly a decade ago, perhaps this still rings true and there is still minimal representation in realistic psychological 'narrative medicine' as well as its analysis – a gap this research aims to close.

#### 4.4 Frameworks

Monaghan's 4 criteria in her analysis of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* that deduce the strength of the representation of mental health within the novel are as follows (39):

1. The protagonist/narrator accurately reflects the knowledge of someone his age under the circumstances in which he finds himself.
2. The protagonist's/narrator's illness experiences allow the reader to draw parallels between her life and experiences and those represented in the narrative.
3. The protagonist's/narrator's story rings true.
4. Somewhere in the narrative, the illness or condition is explicitly articulated.

Whilst these criteria were also developed to analyse the portrayal of illness in general as Monaghan points out, it would seem the application to mental health is appropriate given the background of her research being that of a case study with a mental health focus.

These elements will influence my research sub-questions; however, Monaghan's criteria cannot form the entire basis of this analysis as they are limited in several ways:

- The first point appears more relevant to the legitimacy of any YA novel, not specifically to mental health representation.
- The third point also features the same problem, as well as being heavily vague for research purposes. In trying to measure authenticity of representation, 'ring true' is insufficient and provides little limitation on subjectivity. Patterns, traits, and solid analyses can still be gained in understanding representation, but this must be completed with more measurable criteria.
- Points 2 and 4 are more specific but may provide complications in terms of analysis application with an unspecific purpose for collecting data.

Monaghan's work and criteria are analysed by Francis (2020) and summarised neatly into the following (35):

'An author should be able to educate the public on issues of mental health, while also simultaneously being able to depict these issues authentically. Otherwise, I do not believe that you can say as a writer that you have done your best in working to de-stigmatize these issues, because you have then compromised the integrity of your depictions of mental health issues.'

Francis continues by highlighting the necessity of transparency alongside authenticity in a beneficial depiction of the struggle of mental health and provides that this is best achieved through a first-person point of view.

Richmond (2019) utilises three criteria in her analysis of several YA case studies that span many different mental health conditions – she discusses how the following are portrayed within any of the given novels:

1. Warning Signs/Symptoms/Diagnosis
2. Psychiatric Treatment
3. Reactions from Peers, Parents and Others.

These criteria address three core elements of how mental health may be managed by people in real life, by the author of a novel, and consequently, by the characters of a novel.

I will both utilise and extend these criteria in my research, in order to develop the field and provide further questioning into the fictional portrayals of mental health in YA literature.

Reynolds (2007) partially aligns with Richmond, suggesting that there is an obligation of YA literature and children's books to provide hope. She does not eliminate the idea of exposing young readers to harsh themes, but rather highlights the necessity to handle them with care and eventual optimism. After an analysis of several YA works and a discussion of self-harm mainly in the form of cutting, Reynolds summarises with the following passage (113):

'Although they focus on strategies for progress, perhaps implying too forcibly that there are always ways forward, they are also perceptive and credible. None of these books makes the world seem simpler or safer than it is, but through their insights into the motivations behind and behaviour of self-harmers, and their depiction of such behaviour as damaging and only temporarily effective, they convey the message that ultimately, self-harming itself is not a solution. At the same time, they help to dismantle the long-standing stigma associated with self-harming, thus encouraging those who self-harm – or who know people who hurt themselves – to talk about it and to seek help with both the causes and the behaviour.'

My take on this is that Reynolds provides the following criteria for an educational novel pertaining to mental health:

- Providing credibility through the realistic depiction of mental health, its themes, and the darkness associated within them throughout the story
- Without shaming those who have engaged in self-harm as a result of poor mental health, a deterrence of some form must exist within the novel in order to eliminate glamourisation of such acts
- Some form of encouragement within the novel for those readers who may be able to relate to the protagonists', or other characters' suffering, to seek help and find a resolution
- A strong element of hope throughout the novel, or more specifically at the end of the novel, that, despite the difficult issues addressed within the story and the darker experiences faced by characters in the narrative, shows a way out, or through, the darkness

Similarly to Monaghan (2016) and Richmond (2019), Reynolds' analysis will be influential to my research sub-questions. Although Reynolds is quite specific in terms of self-harm, I would argue that her suggestion that there can often be a strong element of shame and/or shaming associated with such an act, is applicable to the history of mental health and those suffering from mental health conditions also.

## 5. Theories of Learning, Mind, Mental Health Education & Purposes of Literature

Since this research contains a focus on how effective YA fiction can be in the education of its audience, and since that audience has been considered as substantially comprised of young adults earlier in the literature review, there is an importance to understand how this particular set of readers might evaluate a YA text with a mental health focus. The next section considers a number of different theories that may help to clarify where an educational or suitable representation of the subject matter might be apparent through the eyes of a reader that is seeking to learn about mental health.

Collier (2019) describes the following benefits that can be gained from children reading literature: vocabulary is larger and more extensive, they have better performance academically, increased imagination and creative skills, they develop empathy, gain a deeper understanding of their world, concentration levels improve, parent and child bond improves, cognitive development is supported, and social skills and interaction improve.

This invokes deductive reasoning – ‘a logical process where a conclusion is drawn based on the concordance of multiple premises that are generally presumed to be true’ (Jeon et al., 2019: 224). Considered to be one of the most established and influential theories of deductive reasoning and how this applies to adolescence is Piaget (1971)’s cognitive-developmental theory. This considers four stages of development as summarised below:

- Sensorimotor stage: birth to 2 years - The infant knows the world through their movements and sensations. Children learn about the world through basic actions such as sucking, grasping, looking, and listening. Infants learn that things continue to exist even though they cannot be seen (object permanence). They are separate beings from the people and objects around them. They realize that their actions can cause things to happen in the world around them.
- Preoperational stage: ages 2 to 7 - Children begin to think symbolically and learn to use words and pictures to represent objects. Children at this stage tend to be egocentric and struggle to see things from the perspective of others. While they are getting better with language and thinking, they still tend to think about things in very concrete terms.
- Concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11 - During this stage, children begin to think logically about concrete events. They begin to understand the concept of

conservation; that the amount of liquid in a short, wide cup is equal to that in a tall, skinny glass, for example: their thinking becomes more logical and organized, but still very concrete. Children begin using inductive logic, or reasoning from specific information to a general principle.

- Formal operational stage: ages 12 and up - At this stage, the adolescent or young adult begins to think abstractly and reason about hypothetical problems. Abstract thought emerges. Teens begin to think more about moral, philosophical, ethical, social, and political issues that require theoretical and abstract reasoning. Begin to use deductive logic, or reasoning from a general principle to specific information.

(Piaget in Cherry, 2020)

Piaget proposes that cognitive development is achieved by assimilation where 'the knowledge bank is increased to include new information' and then accommodation 'whereby mental structures have to be altered in order to cope with the new experience that has contradicted the existing model' (in Pritchard, 2013: 21).

Jeon et al. (2019) considers this stage-like development analysis as important in cognitive development as well as being useful in adult development (although the model does not consider this specifically), however, takes issue with the reality of strict boundaries between categories, mainly the concrete operational and formal operational stages, highlighting a need to define 'between-stages'.

This model is also limited in its universal approach, failing to understand the individualistic nature of cognitive growth owing to a child's particular social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). This can be linked to social class, income, and as a result, 'school readiness', that is to say children of the same age entering education in different states, with different levels of language acquisition, and differing abilities to develop emergent literary skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory is also isolated from social constructivism theories where 'emphasis is placed upon interaction between the learner and others' (Pritchard, 2013: 26). This language implies a teacher-pupil relationship. However, this is generally considered in broader terms and emphasis is upon interaction and dialogue with the backing of prior and existing knowledge.

This research is primarily concerned with the latter two stages of Piaget's theory, but mainly the formal operational process of cognitive development given the defined age category relating to the young adult. In applying this to the research, it's important to

consider the level at which a young adult might be able to assess mental health themes in fiction. According to this theory, it is apparent that upon reaching the formal operational stage of cognitive development, readers are likely to be able to engage texts on a deeper level, with an ability to question meaning with more extensive understanding. Objectivity with this is complex, and further complicated by the subjective nature of a young adult's social environment. There are many other factors to consider, including emotional response and association with subject matter. Blanchette & Leese (2011) highlight how emotion factors into this also, stating that the relationship between emotion and formal reasoning 'is generally consistent with commonsensical expectations, showing that reasoning about emotional topics, or while in an emotional state, impairs normatively correct deductive reasoning' and that one is 'less likely to provide normatively correct responses when reasoning about emotional topics, compared to neutral topics, or while in an emotional state, compared to a neutral state' (235). This asks a question of the effect on readers of the same age group but with different emotional states, including those suffering with mental health conditions. The same literary experience will likely impact one reader in a certain way and a second reader completely differently. This is true not only of emotional states, but personal circumstance in general, and furthers the complexity of subjectivity in this research.

Whilst the above theories consider the ability of an adolescent to reason with their environment, it doesn't specify literature as the material of engagement. Therefore, it is important to also consider where theories of literature and the purposes of fiction can factor into this.

Jones (2019) suggests that 'among the many reasons students are assigned to read fiction is the belief that reading fiction is an important way of learning about things in the actual world' (3). He considers the paradox of understanding that fiction is not real, but a reader being able to deeply care about a story and its characters – 'surely it is just as paradoxical to believe we can learn a lot about human nature from fictional characters who could easily be radically different from their real-world counterparts' (4). He considers the danger of belief in fiction and that this can be resolved by further research outside of the story, and that analogy, author trustworthiness and an environmental 'resemblance' to the real world are key to the educational process.

He summarises as follows: 'this means that, for almost anything one cares to learn about, there is an enormous time differential between coming to know it through fiction and coming to know it through non-fictional means' (15). Marsh et al. (2003) considered this through an experimentation of misinformation, whereby subjects were given 'facts' in



fictional stories and then asked to answer questions on this afterwards. The belief in this misinformation and new 'knowledge' was apparent in a number of cases where subjects would be willing to use the information read to answer questions incorrectly – 'exposure to misinformation reduced subjects' ability to answer easy questions that they otherwise should have been able to answer' (534).

Keen (2010) considers the interpretation of fictional literature from an empathy point of view addressing both readers' and authors' empathic tendencies as contributors to 'the emotional resonance of fiction, its success in the marketplace, and its character-improving reputation' (vii). She highlights the method of character identification and the narrative techniques that may enable this such as first-person perspective and the representation of internal emotional states, but that identification itself can be considered trivial since the reader and character may only have 'minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling' in common (xii).

Keen suggests that there is not enough currently understood about narrative empathy to 'place the novel in service to social goals' and that there is a lack of a solid connection to later altruism from reading fictional literature (xv). She highlights the connection of empathy to both positive and negative traits, the impossibility to help, benefit or support a fictional character from any readers' affirmative action in the real world, and that it's a complex path from empathy to 'mature sympathy', though Keen does not dismiss it as a strong contributor. Whilst her historical analysis on the development of the relationship between empathy and fiction is too extensive for this review, the concept of 'middlebrow' readers, or 'educated general readers', and empathy is carefully considered with the 'invention' of best-seller lists, peer-reviews, and word-of-mouth, and how complex this has made purposes and results of fiction, as summarised below:

'Novels, surely, can still be sexy, time wasting, and subversive— or do they have to be vitamin-enriched bowls conveying good-for-you moral fiber? It is helpful to recall that the very centuries in which novels were frequently condemned as corrupting influences on the young enjoyed burgeoning growth in the numbers of novels and novel readers. Bring on the prohibitions; print the warning labels. Novels can be dangerous. They convey disturbing ideas. They awake strange desires. They invite identification with criminals and prostitutes and assassins. They give people, not just children, nightmares that they can't forget.' (64)

Keen goes on to say that whilst 'I certainly do not think that novels have a primarily negative influence on readers, I observe that their impact is considerably more unruly than advocates of narrative ethics would lead us to believe.' (68)

Keen also attempts to understand empathy from the author's perspective, ie. empathy as a construct, or something that cannot have intention or control. For example, the author does not realise the empathy they are intending in a character may have a different effect from audiences entirely or possibly in a villain – 'the fearful view of authors' empathy as corrupting readers by offering them others' feelings for callous consumption leads in some quarters to the depiction of empathy itself as a quality that weakens humans and makes them vulnerable to others' cruelest manipulations.' (131)

Keen provides several hypotheses throughout *Empathy and the Novel* and these are listed out below:

- empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization
- character identification often invites empathy, even when the character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways AND
- spontaneous empathy for a fictional character's feelings opens the way for character identification
- empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details of experience exists
- empathy with characters doesn't always occur as a result of reading an emotional evocative fiction
- the capacity of a particular novel to invoke readers' empathy may change over time (and some texts may only activate the empathy of their first, immediate audience)
- empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite
- discussion of fiction that takes place in public settings, while extremely valuable in itself, may not be the most reliable source of evidence for emotional responses to fiction
- (summary) situational empathy, which responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance, involves less self-extension in imaginative role taking and more recognition of prior (or current) experience
- readers' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances

- readers' empathy may have little to do with the quality of fiction as acclaimed by professionals

There is a lot to consider here, but one of the takeaways from Keen is her notion that writer empathy intentions are not overly controllable in reader reception. The reader can be guided in certain directions of thought, but these may be ignored, reversed, or redefined. She summarises her position on empathy and the reader in the below passage:

'Real readers believe that they have legitimate empathetic experiences as a result of their encounters with fictional characters and the imagined worlds they move in. Indeed, when questioned, readers report a wide range of emotional responses to novels, not only the culturally sanctioned feelings of catharsis and compassion. Scholars studying the effects of reading using controlled experiments seek to verify their beliefs that fiction reading evokes empathy, which in turn results in improved attitudes toward others and prosocial action in the real world. Though the evidence for these effects is still scanty, the faith in the relationship between reading narrative and moral or social benefits is so strong and pervasive that it remains a bedrock assumption of many scholars, philosophers, critics, and cultural commentators. Real readers are more hesitant about the results that reading has worked in them, however. Most readers value empathy as one of the desired experiences brought about by reading, and to that end they seek out novels that will allow imaginative identification with characters and immersion in vividly rendered fictional worlds so that they can feel with fiction. The mass appeal of empathetic fiction may not translate directly into altruism, but its very success in the marketplace demands attention.' (99)

Easterlin (2013) highlights the difference in purpose of literary studies as opposed to literature itself as a use to 'increase the efficacy of meaning-making processes and the conscious awareness of humans as interpreters of their reality by teaching a rich tradition of literary works and engaging in communal interpretation' (679). This also suggests significance in collective agreement and objectivity in literary analysis.

This ties closely to another means of interpretation, in the 'ability to infer other persons' mental states and emotions' or 'theory of mind' (Brüne & Brüne-Cohrs, 2006: 437). This is aligned with cognitive development and language acquisition, and Brüne & Brüne-Cohrs suggest this is easier to measure in earlier years as a complete set, but is more complex in adults, and individuals with various psychiatric disorders, and that both

genetics and environment can seriously affect an individual's ability to infer mental states in others.

Not only is this important in terms of a YA reader's ability to infer mental states in their characters, but also in terms of how mental illness can disturb social reasoning in itself. Blakemore (2018) tries to specify further how and when this occurs, highlighting experiments that show different age groups use different parts of the brain in order to understand behaviour, and the ability to infer mental states in others improves in later adolescence.

Kokkola et al. (2022) links theory of mind with flexibility, empathy, and a reader's ability to shift the focus of their cognitive and emotional engagement. 'Deictic shifts' are attainable in literature owing to character insight and narration and this can provide 'readers with feedback on the accuracy of their theory of mind skills' (11).

Similarly to individualistic tendencies in cognitive development and the impact a social environment can have on adolescent learning, subjectivity is important to consider in theory of mind. Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998) considered social class and 'school readiness' in earlier stages of cognitive development, but Dunn et al. (1991) links 'family-based exposure to internal state talk' as a strong determinant of later theory of mind ability, particularly focusing on a caregiver's influence (in Meins et al., 2013: 1777). This considers early exposure to feeling, particularly maternal self-assessment as well as inference of a child's internal state by a caregiver, as a way to 'scaffold their children's behavior in a psychologically attuned manner later in development' (1789).

Woods (2019) links closely with the above works in attempting to understand more deeply the purpose of literature in '*How Fiction Works*'. This includes an analysis of 'reality hunger' and the increasing demand for autobiographical presence in fiction. This will be highly relevant in the YA novels introduced in my analysis as well as for the potential desire for high accuracy in displaying mental health themes in this genre. Woods challenges the necessity of this and the very nature of fiction being to invent. He admits himself this contradiction alone positions the fictional novel as a 'hypothesis that is always testing itself' (9) with a merge of 'reality hunger' and 'fiction hunger' being a more likely/prosperous approach for present day authors. He considers this through a process of eliminating the 'machinery of convention' – 'Why, we say to ourselves, do people have to speak in quotation marks? Why do they speak in scenes of dialogue? Why so much 'conflict'? Why do people come in and out of rooms, or put down drinks, or play with their food while they are thinking of something? Why do they always have

affairs? Why is there always an aged Holocaust survivor somewhere in these books? And please, whatever you do, don't introduce incest...' (187-188).

Woods summarises that the invisible rule-book that defines 'commercial realism has cornered the market' and 'become the most powerful brand in fiction'. But there are ways to avoid the dullness of 'realism' and how this has the potential to nullify originality and fiction building – Woods suggests this is about writing 'truth' in any given fiction where there may not be 'representations of likely or typical human activity, but are nevertheless harrowingly truthful texts' (200).

## 6. Depersonalisation Disorder

In order to provide self-analysis of my own creative process during the results chapter, in this section I will discuss current important debates surrounding DPD.

Depersonalisation/derealisation disorder (DPD/DPDR) is a type of dissociative disorder whereby one experiences 'the feeling of being outside yourself and observing your actions, feelings or thoughts from a distance' (DPD) or 'where you feel the world around is unreal. People and things around you may seem "lifeless" or "foggy"' (DPDR) (NHS, 2020).<sup>3</sup> These can be considered a separated or combined diagnosis, and the NHS groups these disorders by dissociation alongside dissociative amnesia and dissociative identity disorder (DID – formerly known as multiple personality disorder). The NHS further lists the following associated conditions and causes/symptoms for DPD but highlights that the causes are not well understood:

Associated Conditions	Causes & Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• post-traumatic stress disorder</li> <li>• depression</li> <li>• mood swings</li> <li>• anxiety and panic attacks</li> <li>• suicidal tendencies or self-harm</li> <li>• phobias</li> <li>• an eating disorder</li> <li>• obsessive compulsive disorder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• related to a previous traumatic experience – switching off from reality is a defence mechanism that helps the person cope during a traumatic time</li> <li>• may have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse during childhood</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> DPD/DPDR can be considered generally as DPD moving forward unless stated otherwise for discussion purposes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some dissociate after experiencing war, kidnapping, invasive medical procedure</li> <li>• it's a form of denial, as if "this is not happening to me"</li> <li>• the environment may be no longer traumatic but the person still acts and lives as if it is, and has not dealt with or processed the event</li> </ul>
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This is essentially the UK's medical summary of DPD. However, there is much academic and theoretical discussion around the disorder since it is so widely defined.

This includes drawing into question the diagnosis of DPD itself. This can be complex given its close relation to other mental illnesses, as well as its ambiguous causes and symptoms – Reutens et al. (2010) suggest symptoms lead to a diagnosis of DPD only when they become 'chronic' or 'the experience interferes with the ability to form close relationships or fulfil their social roles' (278). This in itself seems complex for the purposes of measurability and suggests a reluctance to diagnose separately from singular dissociative episodes (transient depersonalisation). Despite affecting 1-2% of the population, DPD takes an average of 7-12 years to be diagnosed (Salami et al., 2020). This is unsatisfactory as a 'correct diagnosis of DPD is an urgent matter in the area of psychological disorders, and there is a need for finding diagnostic markers highly specific to DPD in order to distinguish it from other alternative diagnoses' (533). This is further complicated by suggestion of high rates in students and young people, meaning they are less likely to receive a diagnosis until further into adulthood, and there is a reluctance to diagnose dissociative disorders until the patient is in adulthood (Hunter et al., 2004: 8).

DPD is complicated further with symptom and etiology heterogeneity. Both are considered in more detail shortly, but a recent study by Millman et al. (2021) highlighted a clear distinction between detachment and compartmentalization dissociative symptomatology. These categories continue to separate further symptoms and highlight the likelihood of alienation of surroundings in the detachment category, whilst compartmentalization is more likely to cause amnesia, behavioral or emotional dysregulations, and fugue states. In short, one DPD experience may be completely distinct from another, both in these highlighted categories as well as severity.

However, there are tools in place to specify, including the Cambridge Depersonalisation Scale (CDS), a 29-item scale, which captures the frequency and duration of depersonalisation symptoms and the Structured Clinical Interview for Depersonalisation–Derealisation Spectrum (SCI-DER), which assesses depersonalisation symptoms across an individual’s lifespan, generally considered a ‘reliable and valid’ instrument to assess lifetime DP(D) spectrum symptoms’ (Mula et al, 2008: 984).

Also in contention amongst medical experts and theorists is the causes of DPD. Reutens et al. (2010: 280) considers illicit drug use as a trigger of the condition, ‘continuing even after cessation of the illicit substance’. This includes marijuana, hallucinogens, ketamine, and ecstasy. More deep rooted causes are also considered such as ‘traumatic experiences... childhood anxiety...stress, depression, panic attacks and ingestion of psychoactive substances’ (Salami et al., 2020: 524). Here it seems important to distinguish between long-term factors and short-term triggers as it is not necessarily a case of one or the other. There is debate amongst these theorists as to the validity of such causes and triggers, and the routes of causation from the above factors, but there is general agreement on the commonality of said causes and triggers and this association can be seen throughout the creative piece of work provided. I will explore the writing choices connected with this further in Chapter V: 5.

Clinical features of DPD are also considered in these discussions, and although the ambiguity of the disorder complicates concrete information, experimented scientific frequencies can provide educated knowledge for the purposes of this research.

In considering the symptoms of DPD, the most common and defining feature of the condition is dissociation from the self and/or world. This can be a ‘perception of unreality’ where ‘inappropriate signals interfere with the representation and continuous updating of self-orientation in the environment’ (Renaud, 2015: 646). More simply put, it is a ‘dream-like state, loss of empathy, and a sense of disconnection with bodily parts to the extent that sufferers feel as though they are observing the world from behind glass’ (Hunter et al., 2004: 9).

Sedeño et al. (2014) considers the process of emotion and notes that in DPD ‘there is a disruption of the process that allows emotions to gain conscious representation (usually called emotional awareness) instead of a global dysfunction of emotional processing’ (2). They further explore this in terms of impairment of interoceptive processing/body self-awareness and, through DPD, the disruption of ‘body signal processing, which leads to conscious representation of the self and of emotional states’ (14). This is also known as ‘emotional numbing’ and is considered as one of the key traits of DPD (Sierra et al.,

2005). Horn et al. (2020) furthers this as a 'flattened emotional reactivity to negative stimuli' (881), but does not advise on a hypothesis for emotional reactivity to pleasant stimuli. Salami et al. (2020) consider the emotional numbness has greater power to extend beyond the present to include memories and imagination' and note the frequency of 'disembodiment or detachment from...physical self' (524), 'feeling as if their speech or movements are robotic and not their own' (527) and fragmentation of memory.

Sierra et al. (2012) suggest that anxiety is significantly associated with patients who have mild DPD but that in moderate to severe cases, DPD is of greater significance and anxiety plays a smaller part. Therefore it would appear there is an altering relationship between the two conditions where one could be considered the primary disease and the other secondary, though this might not only change from person to person, but also within the self as the conditions develop or decrease. Hunter et al. (2004) consider DPD's association with anxiety and panic disorder as naturally developmental: 'considering the notion that in states of high anxiety, when a person believes their life to be threatened, they may experience a kind of calm or detachment which is akin to DP/DR, it is hardly surprising that similarly high anxiety occurring as part of a panic attack can lead to a similar state of mind' (8).

Whilst there is no universally effective treatment for DPD, a number of treatments for other mental illnesses have been found to show improvement including serotonin-specific reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), Lamotrigine (used to treat epilepsy and bipolar disorder), and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Reutens et al., 2010). However, given the previously mentioned differences in DPD symptoms amongst patients, Millman et al. (2021) highlights the potential need for more individualised and tailored forms of treatment that can hone in on the specific symptoms of each person. The reluctance/inability to diagnose the condition, specifically with regards to adolescent patients, means that the routes into treatment are complex and dissociation is often overlooked when it comes to children. This is due to it being 'often more covert and less complete than it is in adults' (DID-Research.org, 2018). Therefore, dissociative states in adolescents are often recognised as more common mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. This misdiagnosis is also common in adulthood owing to the aforementioned difficulty in separating symptoms into specific conditions.

Finally, the validity of the condition itself is also questioned given its comorbidity with other mental illnesses and this 'impels the question whether depersonalization is a distinct disorder or an atypical presentation of anxiety and depression' (Reutens et al., 2010: 279). The questioning of acknowledgment of DPD as a valid condition summarises



the concern of lack of valid information when it comes to diagnosis, causes, symptoms, and treatment, and although research and awareness have come far in recent years, there is still a great deal of the unknown to manage when it comes to DPD and this research.

## IV. Method

### 1. Data Collection Method

The methodology for this research is outlined below:

Data collection will connect theoretical research with analyses and conclusions from the case study novels used in this thesis, alongside my personal experience of writing my own YA novel.

Whilst all of the research theories and questions cited in the literature review are important to this research, I have developed a series of sub-questions primarily influenced by the works of Richmond (2019), Monaghan (2016), Reynolds (2007), and Scrofano (2015), though these questions are a combination of elements and in their blend, are original.

My research sub-questions will be positioned as follows:

- 1. What plot and language choices has the author made regarding warning signs, symptoms, and diagnosis of the character experiencing mental illness?**
  - **Is the illness or condition explicitly articulated somewhere in the narrative and does this bear enough resemblance to medical diagnoses?**
- 2. What plot and language choices has the author made regarding psychiatric treatment that is available to and utilised by the character experiencing mental illness or highlighted in the novel?**
  - **Is there an eventual positive medical management of the illness or step towards this by the character suffering from the mental health condition?**
- 3. What plot and language choices has the author made regarding reactions from peers, parents, and other characters in the novel in relation to mental illness and the character experiencing it?**
- 4. What plot and language choices has the author made regarding the overall mental health message and outcome delivered in the novel?**

Qualitative content analysis will be used in order to collect and compare information from the case study texts and evaluate my analyses in terms of the research questions.

Qualitative content analysis is considered a flexible approach for the analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating of text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). More specifically, I will use directed content analysis, considered most appropriate 'when existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description...to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory' (Hsieh & Shannon: 1279). Since my research sub-questions are influenced by and derivative of other theoretical positions, yet in their own extensions developmental and original, this method is most appropriate as previous theory has provided me with predictions and pre-conceptions about the potential results of my research but the answers provided to similar questions in previous research are not definitive. Existing theory as outlined in the literature review can be utilised effectively with this method, either through support and extension, or by refuting other findings through my own research.

## 2. Research Design

The novels highlighted in Chapter IV: 3 will form the basis of my case studies. Several YA works are being analysed in order to provide a more solid understanding of the research in terms of how various YA authors approach mental health, how differing methods may be considered against my research question and sub-questions, and why those approaches and methods appear to be effective to the educational advancement of real-world mental health or whether they appear to be misrepresented.

Mayring's (2000) method of inductive category application within qualitative content analysis will be embraced on a micro level for the application of my research (Fig. 1). This method allows for the determination of criteria, the step-by-step formulation of categories with which to interpret a text (as developed from my literature review and outlined in the sub-questions in IV: 1), and any necessary revision of categories instigated by my analysis of the texts in response to the sub-questions.

The case study approach is effective as it offers an 'opportunity for a holistic view of a process' (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003: 63). Kohlbacher (2006) considers case study methods to be widely used as they are rigorous and incorporative, despite offering a challenging approach, and highlights the importance of providing descriptive and illustrative answers.

### 3. The Novels

In utilising the works discussed in the literature review to analyse the research topic, a select set of YA novels will be used as a key focus. Though the study will not limit itself to discussing the novels in the headings, these will enable the research to be grounded in contemporary writing and focused on current literature that has a mental health focus, as well as providing detailed analysis in a select few case studies.

The novels chosen for analysis have been selected because of their individual and complex relationships with mental health in terms of character, point of view and plot. There is importance in their popularity and 'staying power' (Monaghan, 2016) as well as this having an influence on later media adaptations being created. Also, this allows for wider reception to be understood. The chosen texts cover multiple areas of mental health, allowing for comparison between different conditions and how they are represented within YA. Four individual authors have been selected, though discussion and influences from their other novels may be considered in this research to understand a broader background to the writers and their works.

My thesis will examine these texts for the reasons outlined individually below and enable comparisons to be drawn between the novels in later analysis to assist the discussion of YA mental health-based novels.

#### 3.1 *Looking for Alaska* (John Green, 2005)

Heavily based on his own childhood and school experiences at a boarding school in Alabama (MacPherson, 2006), *Looking for Alaska* is Green's debut novel and focuses on Miles 'Pudge' Halter's experiences at Culver Creek boarding school in Alabama. Here, Miles meets and begins to fall in love with Alaska, a strong-minded and outgoing girl who exhibits signs of emotional instability. Green provides an interesting perspective on mental health as *Looking for Alaska* observes, from an outsider's point of view, someone suffering from a mental health disorder without any real knowledge that it is occurring until approximately halfway through the book. It is clear that Alaska is struggling with her mental health in a number of ways from quite early on in the text, but initially this is misconceived as teenage mood swings. As well as this, with the point of view being that of Miles, there is an element of an unreliable narrator present within *Looking for Alaska* and how this character is written to perceive a mental health crisis.

### 3.2 *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Jay Asher, 2007)

Perhaps now more renowned for the recent Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why* tells the story of Hannah Baker, who the audience knows from the outset, has recently taken her own life. Through a series of cassette tapes she recorded shortly before her death, now in the hands of Clay Jensen, we learn Hannah's story, her struggles, and the events that led to her suicide. Similarly, to *Looking for Alaska*, the main point of view comes from a character who is close to the person suffering from mental illness as opposed to the person with the condition, but via the consideration of cassette tapes, Asher provides a unique element of this second perspective that isn't necessarily skewed by the character conveying it, as the content for Hannah is written through her own narrative. Asher more explicitly flags mental health as a focus in *13 Reasons Why* than Green does in *Looking for Alaska* with the immediate introduction of suicide as the overarching theme. However, on a micro level within his work, there is little mention of mental health.

There is much public and academic controversy surrounding *13 Reasons Why*, both as public reaction to the novel and more recently to the Netflix TV adaption, often framed in terms of its explicit content. Hendrickson (2018) considers the mental health approach in this novel to be scattered and misguided.

### 3.3 *All the Bright Places* (Jennifer Niven, 2015)

Niven gives two first person perspectives in *All the Bright Places* through the characters of Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, both of whom begin the novel at the top of their school bell tower with thoughts of jumping. Violet has recently lost her sister in a car crash that she herself survived and struggles with the guilt of this. Finch suffers from depression and undiagnosed bipolar disorder. Niven writes an ongoing battle of improvement and relapse in both characters as they fight mental illness. Reliance, or lack of, upon the other is also explored and provides a unique result given the first-person perspectives. Finch's illness is explored through 'Awake' episodes and the internal monologue of his isolation. Violet's voice is more forthright in her grief and guilt, but equally apparent.

### 3.4 *When We Collided* (Emery Lord, 2016)

*When We Collided*, set in the small town of Verona Cove, California, is the story of a summer romance between a new girl to town, Vivi, and one of its established teen

residents, Jonah, who comes from a large family. They must try to understand and accept each other's circumstances, whilst considering if they have a future together.

The novel uses a similar plot device to *All the Bright Places* in that the narrative is split between two first-person perspectives. The characters offer parallels to *All the Bright Places* also in their forms of mental illness with Vivi suffering from bipolar disorder and Jonah grieving the loss of his father and taking on a bigger role in the family home in order to look after his younger siblings.

However, whilst the set ups are similar, the tone of *When We Collided* is generally lighter. The relationship Vivi and Jonah embark upon is comparable to Finch and Violet. It will be helpful to consider the similarities and difference of these novels in my analysis given that they are considered very differently by Hendrickson (2018) with *All the Bright Places* assumed to be a negative portrayal of mental health, whilst *When We Collided* is summarised as an 'authentic portrayal of life that invites readers to confront and challenge beliefs about their own world and the world of those around them who are seemingly unlike themselves'.

### 3.5 Material Conclusion

Three of the four novels I have chosen are considered by Hendrickson (2018). She lists both Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) and Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2015) as poor influences on young YA readers' education in mental health. Hendrickson cites a lack of internal/mental health focus within *Thirteen Reasons Why*, suggesting that Asher instead chooses to prioritise anger within his characters and that a sensationalised plot takes over. She also suggests that the book presents suicide ideation as an overriding, albeit possibly inadvertent, theme, instead of highlighting solutions. Hendrickson continues that *All the Bright Places* steers too far in the other direction and focuses entirely on the mental health struggle of its characters, being defined by depression and bipolar disorder, and taking away from their personalities and positive character traits. With this, Hendrickson suggests that a perfect middle is provided by *When We Collided* (Lord, 2016), arguing that 'the most effective stories illustrate the realities of life, and it is this authentic portrayal of life that invites readers to confront and challenge beliefs about their own world and the world of those around them who are seemingly unlike themselves' (25).

Each of the novels I have chosen to examine have contrasting methods of representing mental health conditions in a young adult character by the writer. Using the sub-questions I have developed, in Chapter V, I will analyse each novel in turn, exploring examples of each category, and providing reasoning as to why this may be considered a positive or negative representation of mental health.

As well as the writing choices in relation to mental health, there will be discussion of the commercial success of the novels in question. This is important as it questions the purposes of literature, perhaps the aims of the writers, as well as an overall debate of profitability vs social responsibility. This is complicated by the lack of an ability to understand true and accurate sales figures of any given novel without a dedicated system for this. However, there are other indicators of popularity and success (such as filmed adaptations of these novels), and this will be explored in my results and conclusions.

#### 4. Ethical Considerations and Possible Limitations

Kohlbacher (2006) suggests that qualitative analysis may be problematic in that 'qualitative researchers...work is termed unscientific, or only exploratory, or subjective' (2). This can present itself in terms of an individual analysing texts and collecting data – where one researcher may interpret a text in one way, and another may understand the same text in a completely different manner. Therefore, the acceptance of such research may be called into question in terms of its validity or lack of objectivity and/or reliability. Kohlbacher summarises problems of inference and reliability as follows (21):

- Problems of inference relate to the possibility of drawing conclusions, on the one hand, about the whole text on the basis of the text sample and, on the other hand, about the underlying (theoretical) constructs such as motives, attitudes, norms, etc., on the basis of the text. As a result, inference in content analysis confines itself only to specific features of external and internal validity.
- Problems of reliability: here, particular attention is paid to the trustworthiness of the coding. The so-called inter-coder reliability shows to what extent different coders agree in the coding of the same text and intra-coder reliability explains how stable the coding of one coder is.

There is also the possibility that the directed approach is limited in terms of neutrality or confirmability of trustworthiness 'in that researchers approach the data with an informed but, nonetheless, strong bias' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1283). Essentially, the research

conducted to develop the literature review may present skewed or biased results owing to the possibility of my own pre-formulated views based on these readings.

However, the above issues can be stabilized in several ways. The categories of analysis are developed as a result of the literature review and therefore pre-determined research, results, and criteria. Although the research sub-questions are unique in their blend, they have been developed from previously published and peer-reviewed research.

Furthermore, although extracts from texts will be used, the entirety of the text has been read and will be considered in the development of my analysis. Whilst subjectivity is always going to be a factor in this form of research due to my own formulated perceptions from reading the chosen literature and drafting my own novel, it is also essential to produce original research and research findings. Therefore, whilst this study attempts to limit subjectivity as much as is possible for the purposes of reliability, it also benefits from it with the researcher considered a variable in this project (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003).

There is also a limitation with the number of works being considered. Four case studies have been selected but the number could have been far larger and incorporative of other YA texts including those that go beyond the 'YA realism' genre. Later research may allow for the analysis of lesser-known YA works, or cross-genre fiction. However, the selected texts seek to incorporate variety in terms of character gender, author gender, public, critical and theoretical reception, and, to a degree, initial publication date. This at least allows for a broader and comparative understanding of the research question than only one YA case study text would provide.



## V. Textual Analysis

There are a number of mental illnesses that will be discussed in the results of this research based on their prominence within the chosen novels. These conditions are outlined by Richmond (2019) according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (DSM-5)*. Richmond describes *DSM-5* as ‘a respected source on mental disorders used by most American mental-health professionals. The manual offers common terminology for psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, therapists, physicians, researchers, and others to facilitate communication about mental disorders between practitioners and clients. The *DSM-5* does not have information about specific treatments for mental illnesses; instead, it is a diagnostic tool...’ (4). For these reasons, it is an appropriate guide and helpful resource in addressing specific mental health disorders and the diagnostic focus aligns well with this research in order to assist my text analyses.

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – ‘...occurs in individuals who have either experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as death, serious injury or accident, natural disaster, an act of terrorism or war, assault (e.g., rape or torture), or another violent or disturbing incident...especially focused on invasive and involuntary memories of the event...; emotional detachment or avoidance of reminders of the event; negative thoughts or feelings about oneself or others; and increased arousal or negative reactions.’ (115)
- Bipolar disorder – ‘Individuals...experience severe mood swings between extreme highs and lows:
  - Bipolar I – ‘...at least one episode of mania, described as an elevated, expansive, or irritable mood with increased goal-directed activity or energy lasting at least a week and persisting nearly all day each day...Mania is...when at least three of the following symptoms are present for at least seven days: grandiosity, excessive talking, distractibility, increased goal-driven activities or psychomotor agitation (e.g., pacing, tapping fingers, or other repeated movements), or extreme involvement in activities with a high potential for hurtful circumstances.’
  - Bipolar II – ‘Those with bipolar II have *never* had a manic episode and must have had a least one hypomanic<sup>4</sup> and at least one major depressive

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Hypomanic episodes include the same symptoms as mania; however, psychotic features (such as delusions of grandeur, hallucinations, or catatonia) are not present’ (Richmond, 2019: 47)

episode. A common feature of...is impulsivity, which can contribute to suicide attempts and substance-abuse problems.'

- Cyclothymic disorder – '...a long-lasting, shifting mood disturbance involving numerous periods of hypomania as well as symptoms of mild depressions...Persons who have cyclothymic disorder have a higher risk of developing bipolar I or bipolar II disorder. (46-47)
- Suicidal Behaviour Disorder (SBD) – 'an individual's suicide attempt in the previous two years and having exhibited behaviours that indicate some intention to die.' (178)
- Depression (Major Depressive Disorder) – '...an individual must have five or more of the following symptoms during the same two weeks: depressed mood most of the day each day (which can be displayed as irritability in teens), reduced interest in most activities; significant weight change without trying, insomnia or sleeping excessively, psychomotor agitation or retardation, exhaustion or lack of energy, feelings of worthlessness or extreme guilt, inability to concentrate or indecisiveness, recurring thoughts of death or suicidal ideation with no specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for such an attempt. At least one of the first two symptoms must be present.' (59)

The conditions defined are more widely understood from recent increased representation of mental health in the media. However, fictionalised representation complicates the potential accuracy and fairness of the message that is being delivered to an audience. Therefore, these definitions from a respected source are helpful in understanding this accuracy and fairness in the chosen novels for analysis.

### 1. *Looking for Alaska* (John Green, 2005)

*Looking for Alaska* was first published in 2005 and has since gained a large fanbase with over 45 million copies thought to have been sold (Study.com, 2022). The novel did not debut with strong sales, though this developed over time with the aid of Green's later novels' popularity and ultimately resulted in a recent Hulu TV adaptation in 2019 that was similarly as well received. The novel can be considered commercially successful and high profile for the purposes of this research.

However, *Looking for Alaska* could be considered a questionable entry on this list for its lack of clarity in mental health as a theme, as well as the absence of diagnosis and other signifying factors. But it is for this reason I wish to include Green's novel, as the lack of

purposeful description does not prevent the obvious connection to mental health or a reader's ability to realise its presence. Though published relatively recently, it is the earliest novel I will analyse, and it may be illuminating in this study when compared with more recent publications, which are perhaps more explicit in their exploration of mental health themes. *Looking for Alaska* can be divided into two halves – before Alaska's death and after. Conveniently, this can also mostly be divided into before the audience, and the central protagonist Miles, knows of, or has some understanding of Alaska's mental health battle, and after. Therefore, this analysis can now understand the first half of the novel from a less naïve perspective, viewing a seemingly healthy Alaska with the post-novel knowledge that she is actually suffering from mental illness.

### 1.1 Warning Signs, Symptoms, Diagnosis

Exactly what mental illness Alaska is experiencing isn't clarified by Green in the novel, though her behaviour leaves no doubt that there is an issue in some form. Her character is wild, care-free, and erratic. This doesn't suggest anything in terms of mental health in itself necessarily. But combined with Alaska's fragility, her grief over her mother's death, and eventual, potentially purposeful, demise, these traits may be connected to her mental state as opposed to just her personality. It could be suggested that she is suffering from PTSD, possibly a form of bipolar disorder, and/or Suicidal Behaviour Disorder (SBD), based on what we can identify from the actions and traits in Green's text.

The definitions outlined by Richmond previously may seem explicit, though they are relatively simplified descriptions of each mental illness. Much of what is described under PTSD, bipolar disorder and SBD seems relevant in some sense when observing Alaska's characterisation, particularly the following elements of PTSD as a result of witnessing her mother's death and her response. According to *DSM-5*, PTSD: 'occurs in individuals who have...witnessed a traumatic event such as death ...especially focused on invasive and involuntary memories of the event' and evokes 'negative thoughts or feelings about oneself' and 'increased arousal or negative reactions'. A form of bipolar disorder is possible given Alaska's occasional mania and extreme mood swings. The consideration of SBD arises from the simple reason that there is cause in the novel for readers to believe Alaska's death was a suicide, though it would be difficult to attribute suicidal behaviour to Alaska's actions based on how she is portrayed in the novel.

However, Green's lack of medical insight in the novel complicates finding a definitive answer to both Alaska's intentions in the moment of her death as well as her mental health status throughout the novel, as will be further understood in 1.2. Clarity may be more easily obtained if the audience were to experience Alaska's internal monologue, but instead we understand her from Miles' point of view. This means the reader's knowledge is drawn away from mental health primarily and pulled towards Miles' infatuation with Alaska. Much of the narration focuses on this to begin with and what Alaska means to Miles, her looks, her personality as they appear to him:

'When Alaska Young is sitting with her legs crossed in a brittle, periodically green clover patch leaning forward in search of four-leaf clovers, the pale skin of her sizeable cleavage clearly visible, it is a plain fact of human physiology that it becomes impossible to join in her clover search. I'd gotten in enough trouble already for looking where I wasn't supposed to, but still...'  
(53.)

Hormonal teenage desire may take over as a consequence of Green choosing Miles as the narrator, enabling elements of unreliability in descriptions of characters and events. But in amongst this, Green does provide early warning signs that something may be wrong with Alaska's psychological state. Miles' friends, the Colonel and Takumi, often describe her temperament to Miles as moodiness:

"Alaska was kind of mean to me tonight," I said. I leaned over, opened an empty desk drawer and used it as a makeshift ashtray.

"Like I said, she's moody." (38-39)

'Takumi just shook his head. "Yeah, well, she didn't know the whole story. And people are moody, dude. You gotta get used to living with people. You could have worse friends than –"

The Colonel cut him off. "Enough with the psychobabble, MC Dr Phil. Let's talk counter-insurgency." (41)

Initially handing Alaska's psychological state off as teenage moodiness provides a movement away from addressing her potentially more serious mental illness earlier in the novel. This aligns with Richmond's (2014) thought that there is potential damage in mis-labelling mental health conditions as trivial or negative concepts in literature. This is likely intentional for the realistic representation of how teenagers, and teenage boys in particular, might deal with such circumstances, however, the decisions that Green introduces for surrounding characters isolates Alaska.

As the text develops and offers more information about Alaska's past, Green begins to hint at the death of her mother and the blame she places on herself for this. This also develops Miles awareness of the seriousness of Alaska's psychological state and the trauma she experienced starts to show a little more, albeit still in more subtle than explicit ways.

"So why don't you go home for vacations?" I asked her.

"I'm just scared of ghosts, Pudge. And home is full of them." (99)

The explanation of Alaska's trauma is also highlighted through the notion of the 'labyrinth of suffering' that Alaska is obsessed with, developed from the last words of Simón Bolívar – 'Damn it, how will I ever get out of this labyrinth!' She ponders how to escape the labyrinth as one of life's biggest questions and tasks Miles to give her the answer in exchange for finding him a girlfriend.

"You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you'll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present." (68-69)

"It's not life or death, the labyrinth."

"Um, OK. So what is it?"

"Suffering," she said. "Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you. That's the problem. Bolivar was talking about the pain, not about living or dying. How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering?"

"What's wrong?" I asked.' (101)

There is something clear-cut in Green's writing addressing Alaska's obsession with the labyrinth being linked to her mental health whilst little is expressly said in the lead up to her death. But the metaphor is present at least – Alaska is living with mental pain. She is suffering something beyond teenage angst. This is further identified in a passage where she describes the blame she places on herself for her mother's death in further detail:

"...I came home from school. She gave me a hug and told me to go do my homework in my room so I could watch TV later. I went into my room, and she sat down at the kitchen table, I guess, and then she screamed, and I ran out, and she had fallen over. She was lying on the floor, holding her head and jerking. And I freaked out. I should have called 911, but I just started screaming and crying until finally she stopped jerking, and I thought she has fallen asleep and that whatever had hurt didn't hurt any more. So I just sat

there on the floor with her until my dad got home an hour later, and he's screaming, 'Why didn't you call 911?' and trying to give her CPR, but by then she was plenty dead. Aneurysm. Worst day. I win. You drink."

And so we did.

No one talked for a minute, and then Takumi asked, "Your dad blamed you?"

"Well, not after that first moment. But yeah. How could he not?"

"Well, you were a little kid," Takumi argued.

...

"Yeah I was a little kid. Little kids can dial 911. They do it all the time. Give me the wine," she said, deadpan and emotionless. She drank without lifting her head from the hay. (145)

The trauma of seeing death from such a young age and Alaska's inaction in this moment, I believe, are the closest indicators that Green is writing about PTSD and/or perhaps a form of bipolar disorder when you also consider her occasional mania, need for constant affirmative action, and regular extreme personality/mood swings. Her admission of unhappiness the morning after confessing what happened to her mother, is also the most obvious moment that she is self-aware of her own psychological state:

"Maybe you shouldn't drink so much," I suggested.

"Pudge." She shook her head and sipped the cold coffee and wine. "Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person."

(150)

Green provides a calmness with Alaska expressing her unhappiness in this moment, perhaps a reason why there is less urgency in her friends to act on it. And this calmness could be considered misleading to Miles, the Colonel and Takumi, as Alaska's ability to dramatically change in character is also clear at several points in the narrative, though perhaps not more so than in the final moments before Miles and the Colonel see Alaska before her death.

"I have to get out of here!" she cried.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"God, how many times can I fuck up?" she said softly. I didn't even have time to wonder what she forgot before she screamed, "I JUST HAVE TO GO. HELP ME GET OUT OF HERE!"

"Where do you need to go?"

She sat down and put her head between her legs, sobbing. “Just please distract the Eagle right now so I can go. Please.”

The Colonel and I, at the same moment, equal in our guilt, said, “OK.”

“Just don’t turn on your lights,” the Colonel said. “Just drive slow and don’t turn on your lights. Are you sure you’re OK?”

“Fuck,” she said. “Just get rid of the Eagle for me,” she said, her sobs childlike half-screams “God oh God, I’m so sorry.”

“OK,” the Colonel said. “Start the car when you hear the second string.”

We left.

We did not say: Don’t drive. You’re drunk.

We did not say: We aren’t letting you in that car when you are upset.

We did not say: We insist on going with you.

We did not say: *This can wait until tomorrow. Anything – everything – can wait.* (160-161)

Whether Alaska is suffering from PTSD, a form of bipolar disorder, or something else entirely, Green does depict elements of her mental pain in the text. Warning signs and symptoms are present. However, there is a lack of clarity as to Alaska’s diagnosis, complicating the mental health message being delivered in Green’s work. Without more knowledge and explicit descriptions of what it is she is suffering from, the constructive element for mental health in such a story seems limited. Monaghan’s (2016) final criterion for an educational portrayal of mental health was that the illness or condition is explicitly articulated somewhere in the narrative. Perhaps this has improved in more recent texts with mental health knowledge advancing widely, but given that the novel is nearly two decades old, and despite the lack of providing a year for the narrative (presumably it is set at least pre-2000 given the technology available and since this is based on Green’s school experiences), *Looking for Alaska* doesn’t appear to be progressive in this sense. Green is reserved in presenting a medical diagnosis for Alaska and reluctant to hone in on her poor mental health in the lead up to her death

This would imply an importance of ensuring all three elements of Warning Signs, Symptoms and Diagnosis, are present within a piece of work of this nature in order to be educational on mental health.

## 1.2 Psychiatric Treatment

There is no medical intervention in Green’s writing to help Alaska’s mental state at any

point in the novel. The only adults available to her throughout the story are the teachers at Culver Creek, including the Eagle, who seems more interested in excluding rule breakers rather than caring for his students' needs, at least until the point of Alaska's death when he appears to grow more of a conscience. Alaska's strained relationship with her father isolates her from what family she has left. There is no mention at all of offering her guidance, therapy, or medication, in order to help her through the grief for her mother, or any other psychological issues, such as those outlined at the beginning of this chapter, that she may be experiencing at an important developmental stage in her life. Even when Alaska confesses her unhappiness to Miles, there is no mention from herself or any other character of seeking help for this. It is for this reason the audience can only provide a speculative diagnosis for Alaska as opposed to a definitive label that can be derived from the text.

The style of novel that Green has championed is that of a rebellious group of teenagers who fight the power, so as a natural occurrence, adult and medical intervention may be purposefully lacking. But Hicks' (2020) suggestion that mismanagement of mental health has the potential to be damaging to young readers is apparent in *Looking for Alaska*. It is difficult to suggest that this method advances positive mental health management, and the tragic end to Alaska's life without any hope of a fix in the build up to this provides a dramatic plot but not an educational depiction in terms of treatment.

### 1.3 Reactions from Peers, Parents, and Other characters

Since symptoms and diagnosis are less explicit, much of Alaska's initial mental health descriptions provided by Green already come from other characters. As seen in 1.1, there is often easy dismissal by the characters that anything is really wrong with Alaska, instead attributing her inconsistencies to being 'moody'.

'I rolled back towards the wall and pulled the comforter over my head. I didn't know whether to trust Alaska, and I'd certainly had enough of her unpredictability – cold one day, sweet the next; irresistibly flirty one moment, resistibly obnoxious the next. I preferred the Colonel: at least when he was cranky, he had a reason.' (93)

Alaska's friends are far from understanding in their reaction to her mental state. Miles appears to be battling between falling for her and disliking her at the same time, and the complexity of this choice from Green draws the novel's focus away from Alaska's mindset further.



There is also a pressure amongst the friendship group to ensure loyalty and to avoid being a 'rat' at all possible costs amongst the many pranks that they play at the school. This seems to cause heavy angst and imply 'world-ending' consequences at the slightest slip-up which appears to add to Alaska's instability – her constant self-punishment over 'ratting' on a former student of Culver Creek, Marya, in order to save her place at the school derails her at several points in the story and particularly when she confesses this to her friends:

'She sat down on the couch, her every exhalation a mix of whimper and scream.

...

"I don't...I don't understand why I screw everything up," she said.

"What, like with Marya? Maybe you were just scared."

"Scared isn't a good excuse!" she shouted into the couch. "Scared is the excuse everyone has always used!"

...

"I try not to be scared, you know. But I still ruin everything. I still fuck up."

"OK," I told her. "It's OK." I didn't even know what she was talking about anymore. One vague notion after another.

"Don't you know who you love, Pudge? You love the girl who makes you laugh and shows you porn and drinks wine with you. You don't love the crazy, sullen bitch."

And there was something to that, truth be told.' (116-118)

There are signs and early contributing factors that Green provides that allow us to see the real state of Alaska's mental health through the other characters. But it is not clear-cut, nor indicative of the extremity of what is to come. Perhaps an intention of Green's writing is to provide a naivety in considering a character's suffering, however slight it may appear, as lacking the potential of harsher developments.

However, in part two of the novel, Alaska's poor mental state is undeniable to these characters given the nature of her death and her possible intentions in the moment of the accident.

"Somebody was setting off firecrackers in the woods," he said, and I closed my eyes tight, the ineluctable fact of the matter at hand: I had killed her. "I went out after them and I guess she drove off campus. It was late. She was on I-65 just south of downtown. A truck had jackknifed, blocking both lanes. A police car had just gotten to the scene. She hit the cruiser without ever

swerving. I believe she must have been very intoxicated. The police said they smelled alcohol.” (169)

Green sends Miles, the Colonel and Takumi through many different reactions themselves in the instance of Alaska’s death, including denial that she is dead, anger at the realisation that it was possibly suicide, followed eventually by investigative tendencies to identify what really happened to her.

”She wrote something in here after the flood,” I said. “But it’s weird. Look. Page 192.”

I tossed the book to the Colonel, and he flipped to the page and then looked up at me. “Straight and fast,” he said.

“Yeah. Weird, huh? The way out of the labyrinth, I guess.”

“Wait, how did it happen? What happened?”

And because there was only one it, I knew to what he was referring. “I told you what the Eagle told me. A truck jackknifed on the road. A cop car showed up to stop traffic and she ran into the cop car. She was so drunk she didn’t even swerve.”

“So drunk? So drunk? The cop car would have had its lights on. Pudge, she ran into a cop car that had its lights on,” he said hurriedly. “Straight and fast. Straight and fast. Out of the labyrinth.” (186-187)

”Do you think it was an accident?” the Colonel asked as I stood beside him, my shoulders slouching, wanting a cigarette but nervous to be as audacious as him.

“Ah been an officer here twenty-six years, and ah’ve seen more drunks than than you’n count, and ah ain’t never seen someone so drunk they can’t swerve. But ah don’t know. the coroner said it was an accident and maybe it was. That ain’t my field, y’know. I s’pose that’s ‘tween her and the Lord now.” (195)

Green provides the boys with a determination to understand Alaska’s mindset at the moment of the crash. This is framed as a reaction stemming from their grief, and in this, they attempt to ‘diagnose’ Alaska as they read about suicide and the warning signs:

‘Warning signs of suicide the Colonel and I found on the web:

Previous suicide attempts

Verbally threatening suicide

Giving away prized possessions

Collecting and discussing methods of suicide

Expressions of hopelessness and anger at one's self and/or the world  
 Writing, talking, reading and drawing about death and/or depression  
 Suggesting that the person would not be missed if s/he were gone  
 Self-injury  
 Recent loss of a friend or family member through death or suicide  
 Sudden and dramatic decline in academic performance  
 Eating disorders, sleeplessness, excessive sleeping, chronic headaches  
 Use (or increased use) of mind-altering substances  
 Loss of interest in sex, hobbies and other activities previously enjoyed  
 Alaska displayed two of those warning signs. She had lost, although not recently, her mother. And her drinking, always pretty steady, had definitely increased in the last month of her life. She did talk about dying, but she always seemed to be at least half kidding.' (198-199)

Whilst this list can be educational to the reader in a sense, the reaction of Miles and co to find out what was wrong with Alaska after she had already died lacks constructive management of mental health, or a sufficient reaction from supporting characters given the belated nature of this 'investigation'. The novel resists offering readers a definitive answer as to whether Alaska intentionally killed herself, or whether it was an accident:

'Within a minute, the Colonel had the best solution either of us would ever come up with. "OK. She's sleeping. Jake calls and she talks to him, and she's doodling, and she looks at her white flower, and 'Oh God, my mom liked white flowers and put them in my hair when I was little' and then she flips out. She comes back into her room and starts screaming at us that she forgot – forgot about her mom, of course – so she takes the flowers, drives off campus, on her way to – what?" He looked at me. "What? Her mom's grave?"

And I said, "Yeah probably. Yeah. So she get's in the car and she just wants to get to her mom's grave but there's this jackknifed truck and the cops there, and she's drunk and pissed off and she's in a hurry, so she thinks she can squeeze past the cop car, and she's not even thinking straight, but she has to get to her mom, and she thinks she can get past it somehow and POOF."

Takumi nods slowly, thinking, and then says, "Or, she gets into the car with the flowers. But she's already missed the anniversary. And she's furious and she hates herself, and she decides, 'That's it, I'm doing it,' and she sees the cop car and there's her chance and she just floors it."

The Colonel reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, tapping it upside down against the COFFEE TABLE. “Well,” the Colonel said. “That clears things up nicely.” (251)

This is summarised as an ‘accicide’ or ‘suident’ by Miles (252). Again, the lack of clarity here is no doubt intentional and aims to leave Alaska’s intentions up to interpretation for both the characters and the reader. However, a potential suicide, as ‘investigated’ by supporting characters, following a lack of mental health diagnosis, and an absence of positive mental health management, would seem to add to *Looking for Alaska’s* misguided approach in mental health representation.

#### 1.4 Mental Health Outcome

Whilst there are positive themes within *Looking for Alaska* – friendship, love, pranking, and generally a lot of fun and laughter had by the characters – the underlying theme of the novel is Alaska’s struggle and internal unhappiness. This in itself, does not negate hope of her mental health improvement in the novel, indeed a strong point of portraying mental illness in fiction could be to give the audience an understanding of the struggle or to be able to relate to this in some way.

But with the lack of elements included from the above categories, particularly diagnosis, treatment and positive action taken to address Alaska’s mental health, combined with her death, absence of answers and any form of resolution for her character, it would be difficult to conclude that there is affirmative action and optimism in terms of the mental health arc to the story.

Dean (2010), in addressing *Looking for Alaska* specifically, suggests that books for young adults can ‘nourish the spirits of their readers and thereby ensure their ability to live fully’ (27). Certainly, Miles, the Colonel and Takumi, seem to find some peace in the conclusion to their investigation of Alaska’s death, albeit not necessarily happiness. But Alaska’s story does not contain much in the way of a positive relatable element to mental health. Her character is likeable and fun. But based on the key analysis criteria falling short in every area up to this point, it would indicate that the mental health outcome is minimal and non-beneficial.

## 1.5 Conclusion

It should be noted that this analysis has a primary focus on the character with the most obviously poor mental health and doesn't necessarily draw attention to that of other characters such as Miles or The Colonel who have unstable mindsets themselves in certain areas of the novel. Their age, lack of adult guidance and inability to assess and/or process their own emotional and mental states in the light of Alaska's death is apparent and precarious.

A further limitation in this analysis is the lack of express intentions towards mental health. Much of Green's focus is on grief: Alaska is grieving over her mother's death. Miles, The Colonel, and Takumi are grieving Alaska. This raises a question of the understanding of grief itself being a determinant of poor mental health or simply a period of sadness after experiencing death or trauma. There is not much clarity or purpose here provided by Green in terms of offering useful or pragmatic ways of understanding grief.

There are many unknown variables which make this novel complex to judge in terms of mental health, but the analysis given suggests that, although this may be a realistic depiction of the given circumstances, and possibly a great deal of the content being based on Green's teenage experiences, the representation of mental health is lacking in all categories by the writer, possibly as a result of the time it was written and the lack of public mental health exposure, resources and awareness from nearly twenty years ago.

However, the market success of the novel is more apparent. As mentioned, this has been aided by Green's success with later YA novels and resulted in the well-received TV adaptation of *Looking for Alaska*. This suggests a potentially different purpose for the novel than that of providing a light on mental health management. As earlier presented by Hayn et al. (2011), there is a desire for 'the often harsh and unforgiving reality of adolescent lives...volatile and angry voices have much market and artistic viability' (177). As well as this, Roxburgh's (2004) suggestion of the unreliable narrator being a key trait to a YA novel implies Miles should not hold all of the answers as the main character and Green should not write him as such. Had Miles been providing lists of mental health information and educating his friends in all elements of such conditions, his character, and the novel, would not have rung true to genre, purpose and good storytelling. Being realistic in representation is integral in order to 'evoke transformative emotions in teen readers' (Elman, 2012). It would be difficult to define *Looking for Alaska* as a 'vitamin-enriched bowl conveying good-for-you moral fiber' (Keen 2010).

For all of these reasons, *Looking for Alaska* cannot be deemed an unsuccessful novel by any means, and the criteria on which to judge the mental health element of such a novel do not define it entirely. However, there are perhaps ways of better balancing the management of mental health within a YA novel, alongside realistic depictions within fiction and pursuing commercial achievement. Green's primary purpose was not necessarily to educate an audience on the subject of mental health and he cannot control how this might be perceived by an audience of more mental health-aware readers nearly twenty years after publication.

## 2. *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Jay Asher, 2007)

*13 Reasons Why's* readership developed in a similar fashion to *Looking for Alaska* with initially slow sales followed by commercial success, though this was aided by the Netflix TV show adaptation's popularity. Over 3 million copies were thought to have been sold in just the USA by 2017, the same year in which the TV show began (McClurg, 2017).

Unlike *Looking for Alaska*, *Thirteen Reasons Why* tells us from the outset that it is a novel about mental health. Asher informs us within the first few pages that one of the central protagonists, Hannah Baker, has intentionally taken her own life. *Thirteen Reasons Why* is about the exploration of how and why Hannah's suicide happened. Similarly to *Looking for Alaska*, however, the death of the character suffering with a mental health condition complicates, and possibly eliminates, the likelihood of the novel providing a strong hopeful element towards the mental health outcome.

As highlighted in Chapter IV: 3.5, Hendrickson (2018) considers *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) to be a poor influence on young YA readers in terms of mental health with the lack of an actual mental health focus present, despite the subject matter and overarching themes.

### 2.1 Warning Signs, Symptoms, Diagnosis

Essentially the novel is a long list of warning signs and symptoms. Since these are being written by Asher to be described by Hannah's character via cassettes after her suicide, as the reasons for her suicide, we can assume that the reactions from peers, parents and other characters have been insufficient in assisting with Hannah's mental health also. But the novel is complex in terms of analysing these warning signs and symptoms,

with the reader's knowledge already established that there is no hope for Hannah's life. Her voice becomes contradictory as the tapes develop, suggesting there is the possibility of reprieve, but the audience also knows this will not occur by the conclusion of the novel.

As in *Looking for Alaska*, Hannah isn't given an actual medical diagnosis in the novel by Asher. The author only narrates that: there were a number of people who made her incredibly unhappy; she was later sexually assaulted and; she took her own life.

Returning to Richmond's (2019) *DSM-5* information, I find it important to consider the following conditions in relation to Hannah Baker's story:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Depression (Major Depressive Disorder)
- Suicidal Behaviour Disorder (SBD)

The above list could be considered in chronological order in Hannah's case, perhaps interchangeable when it comes to PTSD and depression, though Hannah's sexual assault leading to PTSD, eventual depression and then her suicide, seems the most likely route of mental health. The lack of clarity on this in the novel, perhaps to which Hendrickson is referring, makes it complex for reader's to fully understand the intersection of Hannah's mental health issues. Similarly to Alaska in *Looking for Alaska*, this is also left open to reader interpretation by Asher.

As we understand each betrayal from Asher through Hannah's descriptions, there are a number of her feelings relayed to the listener which identify her potential depression and loneliness:

*'After your visits, I twisted my blinds shut every night. I locked out the stars and I never saw lightning again. Each night, I simply turned out the lights and went to bed.*

*Why didn't you leave me alone, Tyler? My house. My bedroom. They were supposed to be safe for me. Safe from everything outside. But you were the one who took that away.'* (89)

*'I ran inside, searching for a bathroom to hide in. I didn't feel physically sick. But mentally...my mind was twisting in so many ways. The only thing I could think of was that I needed to vomit.*

...

*In Health, we once saw a documentary on migraines. One of the men interviewed used to fall on his knees and bang his head against the floor,*

*over and over during attacks. This diverted the pain from deep inside his brain, where he couldn't reach it, to a pain outside that he had control over. And in a way, by vomiting, that's what I hoped to do.'* (111-112)

Over time this gets darker and more complex. The audience comes to understand how something more serious came to affect Hannah, and how she became more desperate to take her own life.

*'Right then, in that office, with the realization that no one knew the truth about my life, my thoughts about the world were shaken.*

*Like driving along a bumpy road and losing control of the steering wheel, tossing you – just a tad – off the road. The wheels kick up some dirt, but you're able to pull it back. Yet no matter how tightly you grip the wheel, no matter how hard you try to drive straight, something keeps jerking you to the side. You have so little control over anything anymore. And at some point, the struggle becomes too much – too tiring – and you consider letting go. Allowing tragedy...or whatever...to happen.'* (124)

*'My eyes began tearing up, but I could not break my stare from the small wet circle where the glass had been. If I even tried to utter a single word, I would have lost it.*

*Or had I already lost it?*

...

*I can tell you this, at that table, the worst thoughts in the world first came into my head. It's there that I first started to consider...to consider...a word that I still cannot say.'* (161)

For most of the novel, Asher chooses to limit Hannah in addressing her future suicide with the word itself, perhaps owing to the likelihood she is undecided on actually taking her own life whilst she assembles the tapes. But as the novel develops and as her desperation becomes more apparent, the term is employed, as Hannah considers the differing methods available for taking her life:

*'It? Okay, I'll say it. I thought about suicide.*

...

*After everything I've talked about on these tapes, everything that occurred I thought about suicide. Usually, it was just a passing thought.*

*I wish I would die.*

...



*But sometimes I took things further and wondered how I would do it. I would tuck myself into bed and wonder if there was anything in the house I could use.*

*A gun? No. We never owned one. And I wouldn't know where to get one.*

*What about hanging? Well, what would I use? Where would I do it? and even if I knew what and where, I could never get beyond the visual of someone finding me – swinging – inches from the floor.*

*So I've decided on the least painful way possible.*

*Pills.' (254-255)*

One strength of Asher's writing is that the linear cassette structure allows the audience to see how mental health can decline over time. Although this could be better developed, as I will later discuss, the decline is displayed alongside the voice experiencing mental health issues. However, Asher's structure also seems flawed in that he is determined that there needs to be 13 substantial reasons that really pushed Hannah to her eventual suicide. According to Mind (2021), common causes of suicidal feelings include that of the bullying and sexual abuse that Hannah experiences in the novel. But the degree of this seems excessive considering it is contained within a heavily fictionalised plot, and the reality might be that for someone to be suicidal, they do not need to be sexually assaulted, stalked, bullied, and mistreated by several people on so many occasions. Mental health conditions can develop from only one or two physical incidents, or none at all, and still decline to the same dire state that Hannah finds herself in.

In describing so many wrongdoings and the escapades of the supporting characters, Asher provides few of the above examples and insights into the true symptoms that Hannah is experiencing in her mental health's decline. This is partly why the lack of a defined diagnosis is problematic also. The novel seems to want to teach a lesson but prefers to focus on fictional mistreatment as the core narrative, glamourising the structure and stereotypes of high school as opposed to delving deeper into the realities of poor mental health.

## 2.2 Psychiatric Treatment

Similarly to *Looking for Alaska*, a large gap can be identified in terms of mental health treatment in *13 Reasons Why*. The novel screams for intervention in Hannah's life. She has been mistreated by nearly everyone in it, but the absence of a satisfying resolution for her, given that the audience understands she is dead from the start of the novel,

suggests acceptable psychiatric treatment is likely to be missing from the rest of the novel. The purpose and design of the novel would struggle with sustainment if this weren't the case but it is evident why Hendrickson (2018) is unable to identify constructive mental health elements in this novel.

Hannah's character does seek help from Mrs Bradley and Mr Porter for her suicidal thoughts and about her sexual assault respectively:

*'She also wanted us to recommend topics for future discussions.*

*So I did just that. I wrote a note to Mrs. Bradley that read: "Suicide. It's something I've been thinking about. Not too seriously, but I have been thinking about it."*

...

*Why was I writing this note? It was a lie. I hadn't been thinking about it. Not really. Not in detail. The thought would come into my head and I'd push it away.*

*But I pushed it away a lot.'* (170)

*'I'm giving life one more chance. And this time, I'm getting help. I'm asking for help because I cannot do this alone. I've tried that.*

...

*Of course, if you're listening to this, I failed. Or he failed. And if he fails, the deal is sealed.*

*Only one person stands between you and this collection of audiotapes: Mr Porter.'* (269)

Although Mrs Bradley's intentions with her anonymous notes system are positive, her methods are flawed and the mismanagement of this system allows other students to bully Hannah and have her declining mental health concerns go unchecked and unanswered.

The situation with Mr. Porter is more serious and later develops into very poor advice regarding what happened to Hannah at the party.

*'-So what happened, Hannah? How did we get here?*

*We? Or how did I get here?*

*-You, Hannah. How did you get to this point? I know you can't sum it all up. It's the snowball effect, am I right?*

*Yes. The snowball effect. That's what she's been calling it.*

*-It's one thing on top of another. It's too much isn't it?' (273)*

*'-Did anything happen with this boy – and you can be totally honest with me, Hannah – did anything happen that might be considered illegal?*

*You mean rape. No. I don't think so.*

*-Why don't you know?*

*Because there were circumstances.*

*...*

*-Well, if you won't press charges, if you're not sure if you even can press charges, then you have two options.*

*What? What are they?*

*She sounds hopeful. She's putting too much hope in his answers.*

*-One, you can confront him. We can call him in here to discuss what happened at this party. I can call you both out of...*

*You said there were two options.*

*-Or two, and I'm not trying to be blunt here, Hannah, but you can move on.*

*You mean, do nothing?'*

*I grip the bars and shut my eyes tight.*

*-It is an option, and that's all we're talking about. Look, something happened, Hannah. I believe you. But if you won't press charges and you won't confront him, you need to consider the possibility of moving beyond this.'* (276-278)

Whilst Hannah does reach out for some form of intervention, she is met with worrying responses that seem not to take mental health seriously enough and therefore she is refused any effective form of treatment for her mental state. A school counsellor offers insubstantial support, telling Hannah to 'move on' from her sexual assault. Asher presents this negligent attitude as the final straw in Hannah's decision to commit suicide.

### 2.3 Reactions from Peers, Parents, and Other characters

One of the main causes of Hannah's suicide, appears to be the lack of intervention from peers, parents, and other characters. Further still, it isn't hidden by Hannah's character that much of what the other characters actively do, both indirectly and directly to her, are the reasons for her death.

However, Asher also provides a resistance towards Hannah's blame in some of the characters who receive the tapes as shown by Marcus in the passage below:

*"And you?" I ask. "What did you do?"*

For a moment his eyes stare through me.

“Nothing. It’s ridiculous,” he says. “I don’t belong on those tapes. Hannah just wanted an excuse to kill herself.”

I let the rock drop onto the sidewalk. It was either that or smash it in his face right there.’ (110)

But this does not happen for Clay. He holds himself responsible despite not knowing what blame he holds during the majority of the novel and his eventual absolution from Hannah when Clay’s tape is presented.

‘The cold air isn’t the only reason I’m shivering anymore. With every side of every tape, an old memory gets turned upside down. A reputation twists into someone I don’t recognize.’ (133)

As well as the sexual assault she experiences at the party by Bryce, there are multiple occasions earlier on in the novel where Hannah is assaulted including on a date with Marcus:

*“Stop it,” I said. And I know you heard me because, with me looking over the backrest, my mouth was just inches away from your ear. “Stop it.”*

...

*“Don’t worry,” you said. And maybe you knew your time was short because your hand immediately slid up from my thigh. All the way up.*

*So I rammed both of my hands into your side, throwing you to the floor.*

*Now, when someone falls out of a booth, it’s kind of funny. It just it. So you’d think people would’ve started laughing. Unless, of course, they knew it wasn’t an accident. So they knew something was going on in that booth, they just didn’t feel like helping.*

*Thanks.’ (143)*

Furthermore, Hannah’s classmates’ reactions to her reaching out for help with her mental state in Mrs Bradley’s class alienate her further from support and guidance with her depression:

*‘So what did I want from this class? Mainly, I wanted to hear what everyone had to say. Their thoughts. Their feelings.*

*And boy, did they tell me.*

*One person said it was going to be hard to help without knowing why the person wanted to kill himself.*

*And yes, I refrained from saying, “Or herself. It could be a girl.”*

*Then others started chiming in.*

*“If they’re lonely, we could invite them to sit with us at lunch.”*

*“If it’s grades, we can tutor them.”*

*“If it’s their home life, maybe we can...I don’t know...get them counseling or something.”*

*But everything they said – everything! – came tinged with annoyance.’*

(171)

It is only after Hannah’s death that some characters display remorse for the way they treated Hannah or their lack of recognition that she was struggling and failing to intervene, as displayed by Tony’s character below:

“I’ll never forget this,” he says, and he turns to look at me. “Her eyes, Clay, they never looked away. She just kept looking, straight into my eyes, and started crying. She just stared at me and tears began streaming down her face.”

He wipes away tears from his own eyes and then wipes a hand across his upper lip. “I should have done something.”

The signs were all there, all over for anyone willing to notice.’ (234)

Hendrickson (2018) considers that the actions of the other characters provide the main downfall of the novel from a mental health perspective, drawing focus away from Hannah’s mental health battle, and focusing on a range of misguided and damning actions from her classmates. Whilst there is a great deal of focus on other people’s issues, there is also a lot of narration from Hannah with regards to the actions of her peers and caregivers – her monologues provide insight into feelings on how other people’s actions affect her, how this contributes to her mental decline, and how everything in the story does in fact connect to her plight. Though perhaps Hendrickson’s point draws back once again to the lack of positive intervention introduced by the author that has the potential to help Hannah before she takes her own life.

## 2.4 Mental Health Outcome

Once more, it is difficult to identify a hopeful element in the second novel in this analysis. Whilst the issues introduced – bullying, mental health, suicide – are very real, negativity, mismanagement of mental health, and lack of character resolution are also heavily embedded into the story. *13 Reasons Why*, as Hendrickson (2018) implies, is a story about bad and/or immature people, doing terrible things. This consumes the narrative.

The fact that they all attend the same high school and connect in the ways that they do is very much a work of fiction, and the impact of Hannah's suicide is often used as a lesson to bullies as opposed to being an important tragedy to be understood better from a mental health perspective by Asher.

## 2.5 Conclusion

One further issue within *Thirteen Reasons Why* is that there doesn't seem to be enough information (or reasons why) to explain why Hannah has taken her own life. Although through the tapes Asher explores many of the issues Hannah has experienced, the story is heavily diluted by the issues of the other characters, of which there are many, in such a short novel. Early on in the story, Hannah explains that her suicide is not trivial or random, but rather a developed action as her story is explored through the cassettes:

*'This was not a spur-of-the-moment decision.'* (10)

*'I know. I know what you're thinking. As I was telling the story, I was thinking the same thing myself. A kiss? A rumour based on a kiss made you do this to yourself?*

*No. A rumour based on a kiss ruined a memory that I hoped would be special. A rumour based on a kiss started a reputation that other people believed in and reacted to. And sometimes, a rumour based on a kiss has a snowball effect.*

*A rumour, based on a kiss, is just the beginning.'* (30-31)

But, despite the insight into Hannah's mind through the cassette tape narrations, and the horrible things that have happened to her, there seems to be a gap, likely through the lack of explanation of her potential depression, or PTSD from sexual assault, that connects these feelings and experiences to her eventual suicide. I am not saying she hasn't experienced, either through her ill mental health or the events that have happened to her, enough to be suicidal. As I discussed previously, her traumatic life events would be indicative of a poor mental health outcome. But the lack of a connection, or a full explanation, means that the novel struggles to ring true or provide a solid explanatory note to mental health by Asher.

Similarly to *Looking for Alaska*, however, the commercial success of *13 Reasons Why* cannot be denied, as mentioned, assisted by the success of the TV adaptation. There is a resistance to the lack of constructive mental health consideration by the writer in favour

of drama. I find it relevant to return to Keen's (2010) words – 'Bring on the prohibitions; print the warning labels. Novels can be dangerous. They convey disturbing ideas. They awake strange desires. They invite identification with criminals and prostitutes and assassins.' There seems to be a conflict between theorists' reactions to the novel and show, and the desire for 'fiction hunger' (Woods, 2019). Asher's writing choices are certainly drama driven, and the analyses I have given find little positivity in terms of mental health consideration. This seems conflicting with the various warnings and disclaimers provided including a Samaritans header on the Amazon purchase page for the novel and a filmed message by the actors prior to the show that offers support for those experiencing mental illness.

### 3. *All the Bright Places* (Jennifer Niven, 2015)

*All the Bright Places* is a New York Times and international bestseller by Jennifer Niven (Amazon, 2022). Whilst sales figures are not clear again, Bookseller (2016) suggested that 550,000 copies were sold worldwide within the first year, and the novel has gained further popularity with the Netflix film adaptation in 2020. Once more, the novel can be considered commercially successful and high profile for the purposes of this research.

The concept of *All the Bright Places* is unique in that it shows two characters suffering from poor mental health in different ways, and whilst one declines, the other improves. Violet has only just begun to experience her grief and depression, and is desperate at the start of the novel, given how she finds herself atop the bell tower, considering jumping. Finch is also at the top of the tower, but this is not new for him, and from the start, despite it being clear to the audience that Finch isn't well, Niven portrays Finch as less of a danger to himself than Violet is to herself.

#### 3.1 Warning Signs, Symptoms, Diagnosis

Although we don't come to understand that Finch is suffering from bipolar disorder until much later in the novel, the opening passage immediately indicates his mindset is directed towards suicide:

*'Is today a good day to die?'*

This is something I ask myself in the morning when I wake up. In third period when I'm trying to keep my eyes open while Mr. Schroeder drones on and on. At the supper table as I'm passing the green beans. At night when I'm lying awake because my brain won't shut off due to all there is to think about.

*Is today the day?*

*And if not today – when?' (3)*

However, Niven does not necessarily display this as dark or concerning given the light tone in which Finch can discuss such topics, including when he is at the top of the bell tower trying to talk Violet down:

'I gaze past all of this at the ground itself, which is now slick and damp, and imagine myself lying there.

*I could just step off. It would be over in seconds. No more "Theodore Freak." No more hurt. No more anything.*

I try to get past the unexpected interruption of saving a life and return to the business at hand. For a minute, I can feel it: the sense of peace as my mind goes quiet, like I'm already dead. I am weightless and free. Nothing and no one to fear, not even myself.' (9)

Niven writes Finch as an explicit character, albeit metaphorical, through his 'awake' states that describe how he suffers from his mental illness. These are not trivial explanations, and the intensity increases as the novel develops and we come to understand exactly how desperate Finch is to stay alive, despite his belief that this won't necessarily happen:

'The fact is, I was sick, but not in an easily explained flu kind of way. It's my experience that people are a lot more sympathetic if they can see you hurting, and for the millionth time in my life I wish for measles or smallpox or some other recognizable disease just to make it simple for me and also for them. Anything would be better than the truth: *I shut down again. I went blank. One minute I was spinning, and the next minute my mind was dragging itself around in a circle, like an old, arthritic dog trying to lie down. And then I just turned off and went to sleep, but not sleep in the way you do every night. Think a long, dark sleep where you don't dream at all.*' (15-16)

'The thing I don't say is: I want to stay alive. The reason I don't say it is because, given that fat folder in front of him, he'd never believe it. And here's something else he'd never believe – I'm fighting to be here in this shitty,



messed-up world. Standing on the ledge of the bell tower isn't about dying. It's about having control. It's about never going to sleep again.' (16)

This includes clear descriptions of Finch's mania and how his disorder manifests in his mind:

'I lean forward, like I'm a rocket, like I. Am. The. Car. And I start yelling because I'm getting more awake by the second. I feel the rush and then some – I feel everything around me and in me, the road and my blood and my heart beating up into my throat, and I could end right now, in a valiant acclamation of crushed metal and explosive fire. I slam the gas harder, and now I can't stop because I am faster than anything on earth.' (57)

But that's not it. I like to think that the colors and sounds and words have nothing to do with him, that they're all me and my own brilliant, complicated, buzzing, humming, soaring roaring diving, godlike brain.' (139)

"I get into these moods sometimes, and I can't shake them." He's still strumming the guitar, still smiling, but his voice has gone serious. "Kind of black, sinking moods. I imagine it's what being in the eye of a tornado would be like, all calm and blinding at the same time. I hate them."

I lace my fingers through his so that he has to stop playing. "I get moody too. It's normal. It's what we're supposed to do. I mean, we're teenagers."

Just to prove it, I write **Bad mood** before tearing it up.' (294)

However, despite these descriptions, Niven portrays Finch's mindset on the matter as resistant in that he doesn't want to be labelled with a medical term. It isn't until a therapy session that Finch has with 'Embryo' later in the novel, that the term bipolar is even used.

"What do you know about bipolar disorder?"

I almost say, *What do you know about it?* But I make myself breathe and smile. "Is that the Jekyll-Hyde thing?" My voice sounds flat and even. Maybe a little bored, even though my mind and body are on alert.

"Some people call it manic depression. It's a brain disorder that causes extreme shifts in mood and energy. It runs in families, but it can be treated."

I continue to breathe, even if I'm not smiling anymore, but here is what is happening: my brain and my heart are pounding out different rhythms; my hands are turning cold and the back of my neck is turning hot; my throat has

gone completely dry. The thing I know about bipolar disorder is that it's a label. One you give crazy people.' (271)

Niven provides Finch with an awareness of his ill mental state by his addressing of the fact that people call him 'freak' constantly and that this isn't right:

"Listen, I'm the freak. I'm the weirdo. I'm the troublemaker. I start fights. I let people down. Don't make Finch mad, whatever you do. Oh, there he goes again, in one of his moods. Moody Finch. Angry Finch. Unpredictable Finch. Crazy Finch. But I'm not a compilation of symptoms. Not a casualty of shitty parents and an even shittier chemical makeup. Not a problem. Not a diagnosis. Not an illness. Not something to be rescued. I'm a person.'" (307)

Finch's abuse by his father is also addressed and suggested as a cause for Finch's mental health issues by his sister, Kate:

"I get these headaches sometimes. No big deal." This isn't an out-and-out lie, because the headaches are a part of it. It's like my brain is firing so fast that it can't keep up with itself. Words. Colours. Sounds. Sometimes everything else fades into the background and all I'm left with is sound. I can hear everything, but not just hear it – I can feel it too. But then it can come on all at once – the sounds turn into light, and the light goes too bright, and it's like it's slicing me in two, and then comes the headache. But it's not just a headache I *feel*, I can see it, like it's made up of a million colors, all of them blinding. When I tried to describe it to Kate once, she said, "You can thank Dad for that. Maybe if he hadn't used your head as a punching bag."

Niven portrays Violet's grief and depression as a very different story to Finch's condition, though the two characters naturally connect through their illnesses. Violet suffers from depression following the grief of not only losing her sister, but the guilt that stems as a result of surviving the accident in which she died. This leads her to the top of the school bell tower, the same as Finch, where she is considering jumping, and she displays suicidal tendencies throughout the beginning of the novel.

Violet's depression is portrayed as less complex than Finch's condition. It manifests in Violet suffering from nightmares, and withdrawing from her parents, friends, schoolwork, and future:

'The nightmares started a month after the accident. She asks about them every time I see her, because I made the mistake of mentioning them to my

mom, who mentioned them to her. This is one of the main reasons why I'm here and why I've stopped telling my mom anything.' (19)

Niven also writes Violet to be resistant to addressing how her sadness relates to the death of her sister:

"I'm concerned about your progress, Violet. Frankly, you should be further along than you are right now. You can't avoid cars forever, especially now that we're in winter. You can't keep standing still. You need to remember that you're a survivor, and that means..."

I will never know what that means because as soon as I hear the word "survivor", I get up and walk out.' (22)

Though she also displays hope in her moods during fleeting moments of normality both with her family and with Finch:

'The thing is, there are good days and bad days. I feel almost guilty saying they aren't all bad. Something catches me off guard – a TV show, a funny one-liner from my dad, a comment in class – and I laugh like nothing ever happened. I feel normal again, whatever that is.' (24)

"When I went to the tower, I wasn't really thinking. It was more like my legs were walking up the stairs and I just went where they took me. I've never done anything like that before. I mean, that's not me. But then it was like I woke up and I was on that ledge. I didn't know what to do, so I started to freak out.'" (60)

Niven is often suggestive that Violet's grief manifests as the feeling of being someone else who is angrier than her and alien to her:

'She pounds and pounds and then suddenly covers her face. "You don't know how it is. It's like I've got this angry little person inside me, and I can feel him trying to get out. He's running out of room because he's growing bigger and bigger, and so he starts rising up, into my lungs, chest, throat, and I just push him right back down. I don't want him to come out. I can't let him out."

"Why not?"

"Because I hate him, because he's not me, but he's in there and he won't leave me alone, and all I can think is that I want to go up to someone, anyone, and just knock them into space because I'm angry at all of them.' (226)

There are a lot of vivid descriptions given by Niven in *All the Bright Places* of how both Finch and Violet suffer from their respective mental illnesses. The audience has a stronger and more personalised insight than is perhaps gained from this set of criteria in the previous two novels analysed. As mentioned earlier, Hendrickson (2018) suggests that Niven provides too much in this respect, and that the characters are primarily defined by their mental health struggles. I agree in the sense that the topic consumes much of the novel, but Niven gives clear purpose for this, and well-placed description of psychological pain and suffering, though is perhaps still lacking in terms of developing the diagnostic element.

### 3.2 Psychiatric Treatment

There is an increase in terms of the treatment options available to Finch and Violet in *All the Bright Places*, lacking in the first two novels analysed. However, this comes in the form of school counselling offered to both, which is perhaps a normal first step for students, but the author doesn't offer further systems of support for the characters and the dire state of Finch's mental health without additional intervention is clear.

Mr. Embry, who attempts to guide Finch through his troubles after his previous suspension from school, embraces his counsellor position and is seemingly genuine in his attempt to help Finch. Though at several points, he also discusses his own liability with Finch as to what would happen legally if Finch were to take his own life, and this seems like an odd pressure to install into their sessions, though this is perhaps indicative of the reality of such a position.

"I need to know if you were or are planning to harm yourself. I am goddamn serious. If Principal Wertz hears about this, you're gone before you can say 'suspended' or worse. Not to mention if I don't pay attention and you decide to go back up there and jump off, I'm looking at a lawsuit, and on the salary they pay me, believe me when I say I do not have the money to be sued."  
(13-14)

And as already mentioned, the first reference to bipolar disorder comes very late in the novel, realistically meaning the only time that is left for Finch to consider this before he is successful in taking his own life, he spends in denial, and resistant to mental health terminology, instead preferring to hang on to his 'Awake' metaphor.

### 3.3 Reactions from Peers, Parents, and Other characters

There is a wide variety of reactions from the other characters in the novel as to both Finch and Violet's mental states.

Niven portrays Violet's parents as incredibly protective whilst she's grieving and as a result of them losing their other daughter. Violet knows this, and tries desperately to hide from them that she was considering taking her own life:

'Like Ryan, my parents are perfect. They are strong and brave and caring, and even though I know they must cry and get angry and maybe even throw things when they're alone, they rarely show it to me. Instead, they encourage me to get out of the house and into the car and back on the road, so to speak. They listen and ask and worry, and they're there for me. if anything, they're a little *too* there for me now. they need to know where I'm going, what I'm doing, who I'm seeing, and when I'll be back. *Text us on the way there, text us on your way home.*' (51-52)

But this also factors into Violet's parents' negativity towards Finch and his influence on her. Their protectiveness is understandable, but not necessarily a positive reaction towards either Violet or Finch.

"This isn't like you." Mom shakes her head.

Dad says, "You can't use losing your sister as an excuse to act out." I wish, just once, they'd send me to my room. (188)

"The boy is troubled, Violet. The boy is unpredictable. He's dealt with anger issues since he was little. This is not the kind of person you need to be spending time with." (237)

Niven provides Violet's support system, and school popularity, as far more positive a depiction of other characters. They appear supportive and friendly, despite Violet's resistance. However, this is less the case for Finch. Violet's friends are the main cause of his 'Freak' label. They are quick to assume that Violet was saving Finch from suicide and that this is trivial for Finch.

"She saved you from jumping off that ledge, didn't she?" This is from Amanda. She waves her phone, where I can just make out the headline from the *Bartlett Dirt*.

Roamer mumbles, "Maybe you should go back up there and try again." (87)

'Finch doesn't show up at school for a week. Someone says he's been suspended, others say he overdosed and was carted off to rehab. The rumours spread the old-fashioned way – in whispers and texts – because Principal Wertz has found out about the *Bartlett Dirt* and shut it down.' (175)

The violence from Finch's father is also highlighted as a strong indication of the start to Finch's mental health issues. Although Niven is not explicit about the abuse during the time when the family wasn't separated, she provides vivid descriptions as to how this still happens at Finch's current age when he visits his father weekly:

'He slams the beer so hard against the coffee table that the bottle shatters. "Don't you come into my house and tell me what to do." And then he's off the couch and lunging for me, and he catches me by the arm and wham, slams me into the wall. I hear the crack as my skull makes contact, and for a minute the room spins.

But then it rights itself, and I say, "I have you to thank for the fact that my skull is pretty tough now." Before he can grab me again, I'm up the stairs.

Despite this very negative aspect of Finch's life, Niven also writes him to have close friendships and kinder family surrounding him, though all are very hands-off and allow Finch to experience his mania, periods of isolation and occasional disappearance without intervention. Perhaps this contributes towards Finch's feeling that he cannot fully confide in any of them and heightens his loneliness and suicidal tendencies.

'On Thursday, I find Charlie Donahue in the parking lot after last period. I tell him I'm working with Finch on a class project and that I haven't heard from him for a few days. I don't ask if the rumours are true, even though I want to.

Charlie tosses his books into the backseat of the car. "That's just his thing. He comes and goes when he wants." He takes off his jacket and throws this on top of the books. "One thing you'll learn is he is one moody old todger." (175-176)

*'I will stay awake.*

*I will not sleep.*

I think of ringing up ol' Embryo. I go so far as to fish his number out from the bottom of my backpack and punch it into my phone. I don't press call.

I can go downstairs right now and let my mom know how I'm feeling – if she's even home – but she'll tell me to help myself to the Advil in her purse

and that I need to relax and stop getting myself worked up, because in this house there's no such thing as being sick unless you can measure it with a thermometer under the tongue. Things fall into categories of black and white – bad mood, bad temper, loses control, feels sad, feels blue.' (185)

Niven portrays Finch as an incredibly lonely person, who struggles with isolating thoughts and behaviours. In this sense, Violet's character provides a difference. Her reaction to Finch's illness is far more positive. And although there is only so much she can do, she is written as less accepting of his resignation to his 'Awake' and 'Asleep' states. As she falls for Finch, she seeks to help him away from this. In a similar way, Finch also wants to restore a sense of Violet's former self instead of letting her be consumed by her grief for her sister and withdraw from the world.

"...This morning, your parents painted a pretty good picture of the *you* you used to be. That other Violet sounds fun and kind of badass, even if she had horrible taste in music. Now all I see is someone who's too afraid to get back out there. Everyone around you is going to give you a gentle push now and then, but never hard enough because they don't want to upset Poor Violet. You need shoving, not pushing. You need to jump back on that camel. Otherwise you're going to stay up on the ledge you've made for yourself." (126)

It seems the most positive influences in this novel on Finch and Violet's mental health, is the impact they have on each other, as opposed to any intervention from other characters. Their love and support is healing, and contrasting to most of the reactions from friends and family.

### 3.4 Mental Health Outcome

An element of hope in *All the Bright Places* is again somewhat negated by the death, and again in this case by the suicide, of one of the characters who is suffering from poor mental health. Finch could not escape the complexities of his illness, and whilst this may 'ring true' for a lot of people in life, it is not necessarily a positive influence on an audience that may be seeking to gain answers from fiction. On the other hand, Violet begins the novel suicidal, depressed and grieving. It seems there is little room for her future, and as she progresses, finding her way back to a more normal life, this also provides the reader with hope that things can get better from a very difficult situation. In terms of educating the reader realistically, *All the Bright Places* gets some things right

and some things wrong, arguably a parallel with mental health awareness messaging in general in contemporary society.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Whilst Hendrickson may consider *All the Bright Places* to be consumed by its mental health element, there is also far more information and content on the subject than in *Looking for Alaska* and *13 Reasons Why*. The insights into bipolar disorder, depression, grief, and suicidal tendencies, are far more specific. The novel also offers more opportunity for the reader to be able to relate the character and their suffering.

Finch's 'Awake' state to imply that he is in a 'positive' mental space provides a complex design to the character's mindset that isn't necessarily clarified enough in the novel. But the extremities of his mood shifts, the detail of his mania, and the overall emotional experience provided to the audience by Niven feels like an authentic insight into the intricacies and hardships of bipolar disorder.

The novel is still lacking in some of the established categories for this research. However, Niven's development for both lead characters is controlled and intuitive in several ways that gives the audience a more educational novel about mental health, perhaps a difference established from the later date at which it was written.

*All the Bright Places* also follows the trend of these results in its commercial success. It still offers the harsh and unforgiving truths sought (Hayn et al., 2011). I do not entirely agree with Hendrickson's criticism of the novel as my analysis finds a strong balance between the mental health elements of the story and the characters retaining their humanity instead of being consumed by their mental illness. The depth of humanity allows for greater empathy and insight.

I would also suggest that Niven's structure allows for a more gender neutral audience with the point of view split and is therefore likely to cover wider demographics. Two first-person narratives in *All the Bright Places* is simpler than the structure of *Looking for Alaska* and *13 Reasons Why* in a way. Whilst genre is perhaps a larger indicator of audience, main character point of view no doubt factors in and alternating between male and female likely supports a wider and more diverse reach.

Finch and Violet's story does not necessarily provide the happy ending one might be hoping to find, but Niven offers the opportunity for a much greater understanding of mental health in a realistic, albeit dramatized, representation of bipolar disorder, grief



and depression.

#### 4. *When We Collided* (Emery Lord, 2016)

*When We Collided* by Emery Lord is the final entry in this research, and the least commercially successful novel on the list. There is little data to suggest strong sales figures, not a huge range of information on the web when searching the novel, and no additional adaptations of the book unlike the other entries in this research. However, there is much to discuss with regards to mental health and *When We Collided*.

The main mental health focus is on Vivi who suffers with bipolar II disorder. Lord addresses this through both Vivi's own perspective as well as that of her new boyfriend Jonah, who is also grieving the recent death of his father and looking after his younger siblings. Depression is also a factor in Jonah's life through his despondent mother, who spends most of her time in her room and withdraws from the world in her grief.

##### 4.1 Warning Signs, Symptoms, Diagnosis

Lord does not shy away from using explicit terms and descriptions to address grief, depression, anxiety and bipolar from early on in the novel. This is the case even when Jonah is reluctant to discuss mental health matters on a deeper level, particularly when it comes to his mum. Despite this, there is a desperation to understand her and what is wrong, but he struggles to speak with anyone about this. Lord provides information through Vivi about depression in her early internal monologues, but Vivi is also resistant to, and impatient, with Jonah's ignorance.

"About a month after my dad died, Felix reminded me there's a difference between grief and depression. His son has dealt with depression, so he would know. And it's like you said – my mom's grieving. I know that. I just think it maybe slipped into depression. How can you even tell? Six months seems like too long to stay in your room."

I almost say that I think it's a good sign that he said she still cries, but I close my mouth because that seems like a cruel sentiment. But what I mean is, depression, it settles like a shadow over your body while you sleep, and it mutes every frequency into blankness, into fog. Everyone thinks you can't

laugh when you're depressed, but I couldn't cry either, because I couldn't feel.' (88)

Lord demonstrates empathy towards the subject of mental health through the presentation of the main character suffering from mental illness. Vivi is the most understanding and influential person on the situation with Jonah's mum. She also warns Jonah of her own darkness constantly and this is supplemented with erraticism and possible signs of mania before the audience understands Vivi to be suffering from bipolar disorder.

"I know I act like I don't have a care in the world...but, Jonah, I've prowled the dirtiest back alleys of sadness, okay? And I know what it's like to fight for your life on those mean streets. So if you need someone to vent to or someone to be quiet with or someone to talk your ear off, I can be that person. I'm not scared of the dark places." (89-90)

'By the time the sun is winking midmorning, I'm on a ladder in the center of the room.

"What the *hell* is this?" My mom stands in the doorway with her arms crossed in a parental way that does *not* suit her.

"I found a fantastic inspiration image in a magazine. An accent wall, but the ceiling. Don't worry. I called Richard."

...

My mom is narrowing her eyes at me. "Are you not sleeping well?"

"I'm sleeping fine. Are *you*?" The passive aggression beneath my question is, *Don't symptomize my sleeplessness as part of a greater problem, because you have artist's insomnia, too, and when you don't, it's usually because of an all-natural sedative called vino.*' (pp 116-117)

But it's more than empathy and insight that Lord provides in *When We Collided*. Where Hendrickson compares this novel with that of *All the Bright Places*, she suggests that the latter is all consuming in mental illness, taking away from the characters themselves, and although I consider *All the Bright Places* to still provide strong elements in its representation of mental health, this would appear true to a degree – Lord finds ways of demonstrating Vivi's bipolar disorder without taking away who she is as person that Niven does not manage to the same degree in *All the Bright Places*. Though it could be hard to separate mania and personality in portraying bipolar disorder, Vivi is presented as a whole and rounded character in her moments of mood stabilisation, primarily in the first half of the novel. We see her decline in health clearly as she stops taking her

medication and slowly reveals more of her darkness to Jonah, including suicidal thoughts:

'I stare down at the ocean, which pools farther offshore but weaves in closer, between the craggy cliffs. To land squarely in the water, you'd need a huge running start and the wind direction working in your favor. A standing hop would plunge you straight into the rocks, but I can think of worse ways to go. It would feel like flying, like soaring, the wind barely resisting you, and you'd die on impact, or so they say. Still, God, the landing. I shudder to think.

"If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?"

Jonah is silent for a few moments, and I don't turn to see his expression because I don't care – if he's shocked, if he's judging me, if he's offended, I don't care. "Jesus, Viv. I have no idea. I've never thought about it."

Ugh, of course he hasn't, noble Jonah and his duty to his family.' (231)

This culminates in an accident in which Vivi is badly hurt after falling, or possibly intentionally jumping, off her vespa. But instead of insisting on the dramatic effect of killing off a character, Lord uses this as an opportunity to provide hope that mental illness can be managed, and that it does not need to define a person's life:

"Mom." My voice creaks, but the tears won't come out. The medicine in my veins has dried them up. Still, my breathing sounds like sobbing as I get out the words, a desperate whisper. "What...if this...ruins...my life?"

"No," she whispers back. Her tone is fierce, eyes unblinking. "This is going to ruin a few days. It might make some weeks harder. A few hard weeks in a great, big life. You can do that. We can do that. Look at Uncle Mitch. He has really tough days, but his life is so great that we're jealous of it!"

My little sob noise almost becomes a laugh. My uncle has severe anxiety. And a sweet little apartment in San Francisco and my cousin Pip and these great friends whose laughs sound like a big, cacophonous symphony together. My mom and I lived with Mitch for a short while when I was little. I used to fight to stay awake so I could hear the group of adults laughing around the kitchen table. Mitch has his work at the museum; he has Golden Gate Park runs and wonderful food. He has medication and therapy. He's had some hard weeks in a great, big life.' (282-283)

Lord also provides 'research' on bipolar and discussion of symptoms and behaviours after Jonah finds out about Vivi's condition:

'Now I've read a lot. Irritability, sexual behaviour, disjointed thought and speech patterns. Bipolar I, bipolar II, mixed, rapid cycling, cyclothymic. They seem pretty clearly defined, in separate boxes with definitions. But I honestly can't even guess which one Vivi has.

I sat in front of the computer, head in my hands. She's been different the past week. Should I have known? Did I take advantage of her, without knowing it? I absolutely didn't mean to. Will she feel different about me now? I know it's not about me, but I'm the only person I'm in charge of. and I just don't know what I'm supposed to do next.' (289)

Whilst the other novels considered provide similarities in all categories, I would agree with Hendrickson that the tone of addressing symptoms and diagnosis in *When We Collided* is developed through a more considered, informative, and therefore healthier approach. Rather than consuming the entire story, mental health is an element of it. An element that can be managed and demonstrated to an audience that the death of a main character doesn't need to be the only outcome of a mental health-based story.

#### 4.2 Psychiatric Treatment

In comparison to the other novels in this research, *When We Collided* provides a number of mentions of treatment for Vivi, both in terms of medication and therapy. Initially, this is in the form of her resistance to taking her pills and how she battles with her mum on the trust of doing so. We learn early on in the novel, that the suspicions are correct and Vivi has stopped taking her mood stabilisers.

"Viv." She sighs, closing her eyes for a moment, like a tiny prayer for strength. "Please don't make me ask."

"I won't make you do anything." I glower at her. "How about you just don't ask?"

I hate to be reminded, and I hate that she still thinks about it. I don't think about it – at least, barely, because I don't see the point in reliving the bad parts of your life. Earlier this year, I got too low. And then too high. They put me on medicine that pulled me out of my rabbit hole, and one of the side effects was weight gain. That's why my mom is being suspicious and suggestive and unfair.' (37)

'I make my usual cliff-side stop. Today, I stand right on the edge, so close that one step forward would be like the final move in walking the plank. I rest a pill on the pad of my thumb and then flick it with my middle finger. *Thank you for your service, little pill, but you are no longer needed!* With that, I run toward town, skipping through the moss and grass, howling a victory cry – "AYE-YI-YI!" The ocean echoes my sounds against its waters, I know it does, because even the ocean recognizes that I am a wild creature, a spirit child of a vast and star-drunk world. HURRAH!

They call these little pills lithium...It means "stone" in Greek...And lithium was the weighty stone that pulled me back down when a wild, thrashing windstorm tore me away.

...

But I'm better now. I'm best, even! Besides, I still take my other pill because that one keeps the shadow creatures at bay. Last year, they curled their inky arms around me until my Technicolor world became crackling gray static. Until I felt nothing but blankness.' (118-119)

There is also discussion of treatment when Vivi is the nearest person to reach Jonah's mum, who has broken down in the supermarket and been escorted to the back room where Vivi finds her.

"Did you...did they make you take medicine?" She sounds like a child, afraid that the doctor will give her a shot, and I don't blame her. "I'm sorry – please forget I asked. That was unconscionably rude."

"I don't mind. Yes. They did. An antidepressant."

"And that helps?"

*Say the words, Viv. She won't tell Jonah; she needs to hear it, just spit it out. It's the right thing to do, do it, do it.* "It really does. The first kind they gave me was a nightmare." That first kind set me off, untethered me and sent me flying. It began the windstorm. "But this one... I feel like myself still, on it."

"I'm just so tired. I'm so, so tired all the time." A tear slips down her face, all the way down till it drops off her chin, and she doesn't brush its trail away.'

(123)

This explanation and interaction between two sufferers provided by Lord seems unique, certainly amongst the discussed novels, and opens a channel of encouragement and diminishes shame often still associated with mental illness and treatment. Furthermore, following Vivi's accident on the vespa, there is a long interaction with a therapist in the

hospital that delves into the particulars of bipolar disorder, and both unique and generic ways this can manifest for a person, including explanations of how this factors into depression and mania.

“So let’s get to it. Your doctor in Seattle diagnosed you with bipolar II disorder last March. Do you accept that?”

What the heck kind of question is that? I wonder for a moment if he’s going to officially change my diagnosis to bipolar I. “I don’t really want to.”

“Accept the diagnosis? Or have bipolar disorder?”

“Both. But before you say it, I *know*. depression, hypomanic episode in March, depression *after* the hypomanic episode, then new medicine and manic again the past” – I almost say *week*. Two weeks? I don’t even know – “time. So I know I have it, okay? Classic symptoms.”

“Well,” he says, setting his file down. “There are baseline symptoms, but it varies so much from person to person, and I’d like to know what it means for you. So can you talk about what your hypomanic episode in March was like?”

I take in his kind, open face, and something slithery in me wants to shock him.

“Oh, *can* I. Well, let’s see! I went to a concert where I felt high even though I actually wasn’t, until I was, and I went home with a girl I met there – a tattoo artist. I dreamed up a watercolor lotus the next morning, and she inked it onto my side. My Mom was working all hours at her studio, but we got into a throw-down screaming match when she realized I hadn’t come home.” He’s still nodding solemnly, jotting this down. Just wait, doctor. I’m only getting started. “I somehow managed to get myself to my friend Ruby’s birthday party after buying her a three-hundred-dollar purse on a whim. I did shots and smoked with near-strangers. And then I slept with my friend Amala’s ex-boyfriend in her bedroom. And there was another guy, too, that night.” (299-300)

Lord doesn’t just address medication in her writing, she also acknowledges that this is a process dependent on how a person reacts to certain types. Vivi struggles with her meds, but Dr. Brooks assures that there are alternative options that can be explored and one bad experience doesn’t necessarily write them off as ineffective:

‘Dr. Brooks doesn’t push me for more. “And, after that time, you were put on a mood stabilizer in addition to the antidepressant. How did that work out?”

I gesture widely with both arms, like, *Well, here I am! How do you think it worked out?*

“You stopped taking the mood stabilizer?”

“Yes.”

“Why is that?”

I narrow my eyes. He knows why. “Because I felt...off.”

He nods, scribbling down a note. “But that was only one medication at one dosage. There are plenty of options that will regulate your body into a healthier –“

“Regulate?”

“Yes.” He pauses, as if reconsidering his choice of word. “Don’t you think it’s fair to say that’s necessary at this point? You’ve now had a depressive episode that ended in self-harm. And so did this episode.” (302)

#### 4.3 Reactions from Peers, Parents, and Other characters

So far, the reactions from other characters towards individuals with mental illness in the research novels has not been encouraging; Alaska’s ‘moodiness’, Hannah’s betrayals, Finch being a ‘freak’. Similarly, to the other categories researched, *When We Collided* seems to break the chain here. Although there is still a familiar ignorance, and not everyone’s reactions are perfect all of the time, most characters have a kind and supportive nature. They are understanding of Vivi and Mrs Daniels even if they don’t have the power to help a great deal.

The novel acts as a learning curve for Jonah, who has had little experience of mental illness. However, his mum’s depression requires him to understand more, and Vivi provides an empathetic point of view towards mental health to address this.

He runs his fingers along his brow, pressing hard enough to leave red marks for a moment. “I think I need to tell Felix.”

“I think you should ask your mom what she needs. Talk to her.”

Jonah looks up at the sky like the answers will rain down on his face, clearing away the dusty pollen of grief. But it never rains in Verona Cover. “I think I should have told him a long time ago.”

“Fine. Whatever, Jonah.”

...

As I storm off, I can hear his arms slap against his sides, and I'm sure he's tossed them up in frustration. Then I hear the car start, but I don't look up as they drive off, because he doesn't deserve it.

To the deepest, most cellular level of my being, I resent people who believe that depression is the same as weakness, that "sad" people must be coddled like helpless toddlers. So to think that Jonah – my own boyfriend, my friend, my lover, whatever he is – would believe that he knows what his mom needs better than she does? That her grief makes her unaskable, voiceless, unreliable? This is very hurtful.' (125-126)

This factors into reactions from several of the Daniel's family, namely the older siblings who are trying to keep the family going whilst Mrs Daniels is incapable. But as Jonah understands Vivi's darkness more, he finds more understanding for his mum's suffering also.

'The fire snaps in front of us, and a log splits within it. Naomi is quiet for what feels like a long time. Finally, she says, "I'm just trying to hold it together."

This isn't exactly an excuse for her perpetual bad mood. But I know what she means. "So is Vivi."

I don't know how I know this, but I do. I've never asked about the scar on her left wrist, jagged and intentional. She wears long sleeves almost all the time or, if she's in her bathing suit, an armful of bracelets. Isaac asked about the scar once, and Vivi told an elaborate story about getting attacked by a bear while camping near Mount Rainier. She's never told me the real story other than to say she isn't afraid of darkness. I believe her. Every once in a while, her temper flashes. It's like she's exhausted from beating down her demons.' (150)

However, Lord also writes Jonah to be unaware of Vivi's bipolar disorder. This often makes it tough for him to understand and to be kind to her mania:

'She's lost me. I'm spooked to be honest. I thought *I* was coming loose at the seams, but apparently Vivi is too. If she can't turn off her Vivi-ness for a few minutes to help me when I really need it, then I'm done. "Forget it, Viv. I'm glad you're having a great night. *I* am having a *shitty* night, but who cares about me, right?"

"UGH, *Jonah*, stop treating me like I am the antagonist in the play of self-pity that you are writing. I am not your bad guy, and I am not your princess. I



am me, and I am my own. You cannot REDUCE me! So just STOP. KILLING. MY. CREATIVE. ENERGY.” The snap of her fingers, frantic now. “You can’t kill it! I’m having a breakthrough!”

Here’s what I learned from the past five minutes: you can’t out-crazy Vivi Alexander. On the grouchy to blissful spectrum, she spends zero time in the middle. She wallops me with the change in her moods like a one-two punch. Thrilled! Pissed! And right now, with her glare burning into my skin, she hates me. The feeling is mutual, and I slam the door behind me.’ (247)

Vivi’s mum is also a very supportive character and understanding of Vivi’s bipolar disorder. However, Lord provides her as a hands-off parent, a style that clashes with her ability to trust that Vivi is taking her medication, looking after herself, and confiding in friends, which leads to a number of verbal fights between the two characters.

“Chickie?” my mom asks quietly. “Ruby knows, right? About the bipolar disorder?”

My silence serves as an obvious answer, especially since I can’t meet her eyes.

I feel my mom draw away from me. “Vivian! Ruby is your oldest friend. How could you not tell her? After everything that happened?”

“I don’t have to tell her everything! And I don’t have to tell you everything either!” Before she can protest, I cut her off. “You won’t even tell me who my dad is. So I don’t think I need to provide you with the status of all *my* relationships.”

...

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Viv. You have an illness-“

“STOP. You are obsessed with this.” Tears fill my eyes, and I feel my hands clench, bending the card. “It’s my birthday – God, Mom!” (167-168)

There is an unusual balance of support and neglect that Lord provides for Vivi throughout *When We Collided*. She has the opportunity to both help herself and contribute towards her mental health’s decline as a result, leaving the audience poised for a mental health outcome that could be positive or negative.

#### 4.4 Mental Health Outcome

Through the above categories, Lord offers optimism in *When We Collided* to a far more satisfactory level than any of the previous novels discussed. Vivi has support from

medication and friends and family, she is not made to feel foolish for how her bipolar disorder manifests, and the author has not felt the need to provide Vivi with a tragic ending to her illness but rather signs off with a note that it can be managed and doesn't need to define her whole life. Whilst her relationship with Jonah appears to be over, and there is still a solemn note as a result of this, it is a realistic approach to these characters that doesn't consume them through unnecessary dramatization of the novel, or glamourisation of the negative possibilities of mental illness.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Each of my chosen categories are provided, explored and developed with strength in *When We Collided*. Lorde appears understanding and knowledgeable of the mental health considerations within the novel.

The supportive nature of the text is apparent. Whilst Lord does not shy away from the ugliness that mental illness can cause, she ensures that the reader is left with hope for the characters and the knowledge that they can manage the conditions presented.

However, in comparison to the other novels analysed, the lack of commercial success of *When We Collided* is apparent and interesting to consider. Where the other novels are lacking in one or more of my mental health categories, this novel appears to be successful. This could be interpreted that *When We Collided* is *too* positive or happy in its outcome for strong profitability and there is considerably less drama offered by the writer for audience impact, interest and widespread reach. Therefore, we are seeing a clash between high commercial value and the notion of novels being 'vitamin-enriched bowls conveying good-for-you moral fiber' (Keen, 2010). This isn't to say that *When We Collided* is not dramatic, problem-free, or uninteresting. For me personally, it is a strong read. But the tone is notably lighter for the majority of the novel in comparison to the other novels researched. The correlations between mental health portrayal and commercial value will be considered further in my conclusions.

## 5. *There's Something Wrong with JJ*

The novel that I have written as a part of this research focuses on the development of depersonalisation disorder (DPD) in a young adult male called JJ. The DPD research presented within the literature review will be utilised in the following section as I record my experience of writing a novel with mental health themes, specifically DPD. I will factor my research of other novels into these thoughts, and consider how this has affected my own writing choices in the unique position of a creative writer drafting fiction alongside in depth research.

To begin, I wish to highlight a definition of DPD that offers a simple yet wide explanation of the condition: depersonalisation disorder is an 'alteration in the perception or experience of the self so that one feels detached from and as if one is an outside observer of one's mental processes or body' (American Psychiatric Association, 1994: 488–490 in Medford et al. 2018). As we have seen, there are a large number of debates to consider when it comes to DPD and an accurate depiction is not as objectively calculated as, say, a more physical illness. Subjectivity of my own perception of my research will inevitably factor in and it is important to recognise that in this section with in depth justification of my choices as a writer.

Whilst initially drafted prior to the development of my results in this research, the editing process has been conducted alongside the finalisation of this research in order to gain the benefit of my results. As such, I have structured this chapter to consider my novel's development alongside the same categories used to build my analyses of the novels.

### 5.1 Warning Signs, Symptoms, Diagnosis

The strategy that I employed in *There's Something Wrong with JJ* to foreground the collapse of JJ's mental health was in the consideration of where the story began. Initially, the novel was going to be structured in a linear, present tense format. However, I later developed a prologue that took place towards the conclusion of the story that re-developed this structure and flagged the decline of JJ's mental health within the first sentence. DPD is mentioned briefly by JJ here. This reverses the structure to Diagnosis – Warning Signs – Symptoms, where the majority of the other novels used these in the order of how they appear in the heading.

Whilst this may be blunt and deny the reader mystery in one aspect of the story, the novels analysed in this research do not seem to gain anything by keeping their reader

guessing about the mental health condition that the protagonist is experiencing. In discussing this from the start, the reader is able to label the condition, and develop an understanding of the warning signs and symptoms of DPD in a clear and beneficial manner.

An educated understanding of how DPD can manifest was also essential in developing this aspect of my novel. As we have seen, DPD can offer many different symptoms including the following:

- a sense of unreality about the self and/or the external world
- detachment from physical experiences
- feeling emotionally and physically numb
- the world may appear artificial, two dimensional, lacking in significance and other people may appear like actors or robots

(Hunter et al. 2014)

It was necessary to maintain JJ's awareness of what was happening to him as DPD 'experiences are not delusional since the person with DPD retains insight that these are subjective phenomena, rather than objective reality' (Hunter et al., 2014). Therefore, I provide a lot of description in the form of an internal commentary, developing JJ's recognition of his illness and symptoms, whilst also maintaining his unfamiliarity with exactly what condition he is experiencing in the 2011 sections of the novel.

Having had personal experiences working with people who suffer from DPD prior to developing my thesis proposal, there were a few anecdotes that inspired the story. This includes a single use of marijuana providing the onset of the condition and the glazed, foggy effect that consistently affects JJ's vision thereafter, contributing to his detachment from reality – 'What would it feel like to smoke cannabis and never sober up?' (O'Connor, 2019). The feeling of being outside yourself (the NHS uses the term "foggy") (NHS, 2020) and a 'dream-like state, loss of empathy, and a sense of disconnection with bodily parts' (Hunter et al., 2004) become common to JJ in my novel. The regularity of this as the overriding feature of the condition is apparent, and I found it to be an effective grounding for JJ's experience.

Illicit drug use or even singular drug use is mentioned to have been a fairly common cause of DPD onset (Reutens et al., 2010). Though there are other triggers, I felt this strange yet common cause worked well for JJ's introduction, and for a progressive story, that allowed for a slower development of the potential deeper issues that have led to JJ's mental illness. Use of other substances to try and manage the distress of DPD is also a

substantial part of the story and I have written JJ to be a developing addict with respect to this. There is a commonality for those with mental illnesses to try and manage their conditions through alcohol and drugs (Alcohol Change, 2022). Even though this will exacerbate the situation, temporary relief might be sought. JJ takes this path early on, so that in later stages of the story this has developed into a real issue. I wanted to portray that desperation in the lack of knowledge of his condition that so many must feel with DPD being so scarcely diagnosed or understood. The close relationship between mental illness and substance misuse struck me as a plot point that would not only enable interesting fiction, but do it in a realistically problematic way that might show readers more about how this occurs in the real world.

It was also important to consider how the condition and its symptoms relate to love for family, friends, and partners. A common description of how DPD makes one feel, is the inability of the sufferer to love those around them (Eley, 2017). This can be described as 'emotional numbing' and 'disembodiment or detachment from...physical self' (Sedeño et al., 2014: 524). JJ experiences this towards his girlfriend, brother, and uncle throughout the novel, unsure why he cannot produce the same emotions that he had been able to before. I found this to be an integral aspect of the novel as I was writing it, though the introduction being at JJ's onset of DPD means the reader is only ever provided with a version of JJ that is mentally ill throughout the novel, as opposed to how he was before the condition started. This means it can be difficult to gauge how loving a person he was before DPD. For this reason, I felt it important to add a level of desperation to JJ's character also, relating to his desire to obtain his feelings back for those friends and family members that it is indicated he loved before the condition prevented this.

As well as this, I wanted to consider the deeper reason for JJ developing this condition. Whilst it was important to not rest too much on this as being a cause, as people have developed DPD without experiencing trauma or underlying mental health conditions previously, the distress of losing his parents at an early age, as well as knowing something was being kept from him about them, later revealed to be that his father was physically abusive towards his mother, gives further reason to JJ's internal pain. I wrote JJ to be very curious about his parents, who they were and why his uncle and brother never talk about what happened to them. They are two characters with vital importance to JJ's story and relate to the mystery of his symptoms and illness without ever being a physical presence, at least within the characters' reality, in the novel.

In later drafts of the novel, I found it important to consider the notion from my research that in order for DPD to truly be DPD, the symptoms must be chronic and the diagnosis

would not be provided to JJ in adolescence (Reutens et al., 2010). Whilst I had already factored in the time-jump in advance of knowing the likelihood that he would not be diagnosed with a dissociative disorder at such an age, there were adjustments that I made. These are only minor but they offset JJ's awareness of DPD as the condition that he is suffering from until the later stage of the story and ensures the novel is about the development of the condition within JJ without the unrealistic expectation that medical practitioners would be diagnosing him at a youthful age.

## 5.2 Psychiatric Treatment

As we have seen in the novels discussed, treatment can be a difficult element to place in a novel about mental health. In this case, given that DPD is a lesser-known and researched condition, understanding treatment options and applying them to a fictional novel has been complex.

Specialists in DPD have mostly discussed treating the condition through a combination of Lamotrigine (used to treat epilepsy and bipolar disorder) and a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) such as citalopram, sertraline, or fluoxetine (Medford et al., 2018), alongside behavioural therapy. However, historically in the UK, a gap in DPD knowledge by medical professionals and a lack of NHS funding to provide DPD treatment for adolescents has meant that diagnosing and treating have really only just begun.

I felt it important to retain the lack of knowledge within *There's Something Wrong with JJ* for the majority of the novel for this reason, particularly given JJ's age. The reader still knows of the condition from the first sentence, but in the lack of help for JJ thereafter, perhaps gains a reasonable understanding of how difficult it must be to suffer from such an alienating condition without answers as to what it is, or how to treat it. When JJ sees his GP, he diagnoses him with severe hay fever. This is one of many real-life misdiagnoses that have occurred due to lack of professional knowledge with regards to DPD. I felt it necessary to highlight this particular misdiagnosis owing to its irrelevance to mental health, and this seems to evidence how knowledge and treatment for DPD by professionals in medicine is emerging slowly. As discussed in the literature review, we have also seen that there is a reluctance in general for medical practitioners to diagnose dissociative disorders in younger patients. And the research presented shows a separation between dissociative states and full-blown disorders, how to diagnose and treat these, and the notion of chronic DPD (Reutens et al., 2010).

However, as discussed with the novels researched, dismissing treatment and hope for recovery has the potential of a dangerous representation of fictional mental health. Where we have seen more constructive portrayals, medication and therapies have been present. Therefore, even if it is a smaller element within *There's Something Wrong with JJ*, I wanted to ensure that this was present. After JJ's suicide attempt, although he is resistant and eventually runs away from home, he is presented with options, medications and therapies, and as we come to the end of his story, we learn that he does eventually embrace these and attempt to recover from his condition.

Particularly here, we are presented with the complexity of writing a realistic story on mental health, and an educational account that may provide a reader with some concept of what to do if they are suffering with such a condition. There is a mismatch that will be discussed further in my conclusions.

### 5.3 Reactions from Peers, Parents, and Other characters

The analysed novels vary greatly in terms of the reactions towards the person with mental illness from other characters. Whilst the consideration of kindness is important, human reactions must also be considered realistically in a YA 'realism' novel. This can lead to an array of negative traits such as impatience, ignorance, anger and indifference amongst others. Since DPD has been relatively unknown to medical professionals, on a more grounded level, I thought about what this would mean for JJ's family, friends and partner. JJ doesn't know what is happening to him – it would seem unrealistic that Felix, Uncle Pat and Alicia would understand either. They are also multi-dimensional characters themselves, with their own priorities, issues and lives. Therefore, I felt it important to keep an initial scepticism in the reactions from other characters, as well as their distancing from JJ because they do not understand what is happening to him.

This is, however, the category with the most flexibility in terms of providing an effective and educational representation of mental health. There is room for development and education through the eyes of multiple characters, not just JJ. Despite resistance and poor treatment from JJ as his condition worsens, there is support for him from the three secondary characters as the novel continues. They are present where they can be, suggest medical intervention on occasion, and their understanding of JJ's mental illness develops slowly throughout. Where *13 Reasons Why* seemed to receive a great deal of criticism for the nasty of behaviour of nearly all of its characters, I wanted to reel this back and provide characters that are not perfect in their understanding of JJ, but not a

cause of his condition or an element that worsens it necessarily. There is love and warmth in the relationships. There is drama too, but this novel has the opportunity to present a constructive outcome towards mental health with its supporting characters.

#### 5.4 Mental Health Outcome

Prior to the beginning of this research, I had planned to end the novel by confirming that, despite initial signs of recovery from his condition, JJ does eventually take his own life after several further episodes. This was to highlight the impact of suicide in the UK as a result of mental illness, particularly regarding the high male suicide rates (Samaritans, 2019).

However, it became apparent that, in order for the novel to serve a better mental health purpose, this needed to change. Instead of highlighting the worst possible outcome, it became important to embrace mended relationships, education towards mental health and the potential of partial or full recovery. Whilst much of the novel could be considered quite dark in order to show how DPD can manifest, the ending provides JJ with hope and control over his illness. We have seen previously that this may not align with the more commercially successful novels analysed in my results. I will discuss this further in my conclusions alongside the purposes of literature.

#### 5.5 Conclusion

My own experience of writing a novel with a strong mental health element has been a learning curve with which my research within this paper has greatly assisted me. Although what is educational and effective in terms of fictional representation will always hold a degree of subjectivity, understanding where other novels have appeared stronger or lacking has enabled me to apply a more educated method of writing *There's Something Wrong with JJ* across the researched categories.

My novel has developed over several drafts. Draft one contained only research related to the elements of DPD that I needed to be knowledgeable on, since my thesis had not been drafted during this stage. Draft two took place during the early stages and drafting of my literature review. And draft three was simultaneous with my first recording of results. In this section, I will consider what has developed through the drafting process and how my research has assisted my writing choices.



One aspect that I have not discussed a great deal thus far is the tone of my novel. I consider it to be quite dark, with a small element of humour, and hopefully a realistic approach to mental illness. I have not strayed from 'the often harsh and unforgiving reality of adolescent lives' (Hayn et al., 2011) in my writing. In fact, the 'volatile and angry voice' that Hayn et al (177) suggest is heavily ingrained in my main character. I found the importance of having an unreliable narrator in JJ in both his youth and how his condition altered his perception of reality fulfils Roxburgh's (2004) suggestion that this is essential to YA.

But we have also seen that YA novels on mental health need to be more than just a tale of illness, but rather about humanity (Holmes, 2014; Hendrickson, 2018). Therefore, an appreciation of what makes JJ unique apart from his mental illness has been important to me, as well as Felix, Alicia and Uncle Pat being their own three-dimensional characters who are not solely focused on JJ's plight.

I also found the notion of relatability to be important. My discussions with DPD patients prior to this research highlighted a need for them to be able to relate to their illness in media forms since this is such an under-represented condition. And as Hall-Clifford (2015) highlighted, this is essential to YA readers in general in order to 'evoke transformative emotions in teen readers' (Elman, 2012).

Whilst my research also highlighted that medical experts are reluctant to diagnose dissociative disorders and personality disorders in adolescents, the lack of insight the general public has of DPD perhaps considers the need for more informative materials on these disorders in appealing forms such as fiction. My research also suggested that the onset of DPD commonly takes place in adolescence. This seems to lack alignment with the practicality of waiting to diagnose disorders in adulthood. However, the reality of all of this has been considered between drafts two and three of my novel and the ongoing debates surrounding DPD needed to come through in this sense.

Furthermore, terminology has been important to me in my writing. As Richmond (2014) has suggested, in the past there has been a 'demonization' of mental health by the use of inappropriate terms. We have seen the reality of this with certain conditions such as how schizophrenia has been portrayed in various fictions and the ramifications of this in reality and how the condition is positioned in society (Goodwin & Tadjudin, 2016). As demonstrated in the research of *All the Bright Places*, this positioning of a condition via certain language used creates and sustains stigmas, the example here being bipolar disorder and the use of negative language by supporting characters. However, this stigma is also reality. Should authors refrain from using the language if it satisfies the

'reality hunger' of an audience (Woods, 2019)? This contributes to the clashes in purposes of literature in such a genre and whether or not the author owes a duty of care to representation of reality, educating an audience, fulfilling the role of fiction, and publishing a commercially successful novel. For me, these do not all add up to the perfect YA novel on mental health and realistically, choices must be made here. This relates back to some of my research on empathy and Keen's (2010) notion that 'novels, surely, can still be sexy, time wasting, and subversive' rather than 'vitamin-enriched bowls conveying good-for-you moral fiber'. Her concept of what a novel can be does not necessarily empower a kinder or even accurate work of fiction that Hendrickson (2018) might be suggesting – 'Bring on the prohibitions; print the warning labels. Novels can be dangerous. They convey disturbing ideas. They awake strange desires. They invite identification with criminals and prostitutes and assassins. They give people, not just children, nightmares that they can't forget.'

This leads into my next consideration and that is author intentions versus reader reaction. Keen understands the two to have a complex relationship where the author does not necessarily have a great deal of control over how readers might perceive an intended character, plot, or tone. And as we have seen, inferring the mental state of another (Theory of Mind) is such a varying process dependent on so many circumstances of a social environment and individualistic tendencies that this can only further complicate the authors process of making a reader feel a certain way. Fiction is often so hotly debated. Antiheroes are a concept created from associating with the villain of a story or at least one with an askew moral compass, and now these characters are a regular occurrence within fiction. In hindsight, JJ is probably a character written to be an antihero of sorts. He is not a very nice person for much of the novel, and I had not necessarily intended to write him in this manner. But I considered what his condition would do to him, how his personality might alter, and how a realistic portrayal may manifest. I do not think he is a bad person, but I wrote him to certainly embrace morally ambiguous decisions during his illness. It is interesting to consider how my intentions for this novel and its characters have developed through the drafting and research processes.

On a macro level this is also important with regards to my intention for the novel. As we have seen, there are clashes in purposes of literature. Several of the novels I've analysed are very popular and commercially successful novels. The same novels have also drawn a lot more critique for their representation of mental illness and indeed my research finds several issues in terms of realistic or educational portrayals of such conditions. *When We Collided* was less commercially successful, yet critically better

received. For me, the latter is more important. Given the nature of my research is more focused on the representation of mental health and its potential for education, as opposed to the profitability of the YA genre being assisted by this, I would guess that is no surprise at this stage of my thesis. Whilst my novel is unpublished and there isn't a definitive answer as to how my novel might be perceived critically, or perform financially, I have at least stated my intentions and how my writing choices factor into this. An author *does* have the potential to educate readers in matters of mental health and can do so by careful management of the categories established in this research. This is not an exact science, since my research also highlights how difficult it can be to manage these categories in tandem and does not consider the possibility of additional categories being able to assist with representation. We have seen how mental health conditions can and have been misrepresented in YA fiction and the language that surrounds this, and my research provides many considerations for writing choices by the novelist in representing mental health on the page.

I come back to Woods' (2019) suggested merging of 'reality hunger' and 'fiction hunger' and find that this is where an effective summary for the consideration of a *good* representation of mental illness may lie – the writing of truth is not an easy process and may indeed invite an, at times, dull perspective for fiction to embrace. But as Woods suggests, the complexity is in writing 'truth' in fiction where there may not be 'representations of likely or typical human activity' but may provide the opportunity for a 'harrowingly truthful text'. For me, demonstrating good practice and sensitivity with warning signs, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, reactions from supporting characters, and the overall plot outcome for a mental illness is important, but it needs to be done in a way that is true to fiction and the story being told. Pain, suffering, illness, suicide, death – these are not elements to omit from consideration as they are also reality and can be valuable lessons of the real world to a young reader also. But where plots are so close to reality, contain such a strong element of relatability, and the readership is known to be comprised of a youthful audience, an author owes a duty of care as to how these topics are handled, regardless. I have not found it easy to manage these considerations in my writing. Dark tones and representing the difficulties of DPD have been just as important as containing strong hope for my main character in overcoming a mental illness. Managing the uncertainty in real debates of DPD with regards to causes, symptoms and treatments has been complex, and at times, a guessing game with the correct approach, albeit an educated guess. It is not a perfect science – an author can only do their best to be as educated as possible in their own topics of writing and enabling this within their

novel. Writing this 'truth' is the real skill of the YA author working with mental health topics.

## VI. Conclusion

Developing this research has been an incredibly challenging experience for a number of reasons. Firstly, my original bachelor's educational background is in Business and Law. This already required two very alternate styles of writing, but they shared similarities, perhaps much more systematic and logical than that of creative writing research. This required me to write, present and debate in a much more factual manner, asked that I shed any real opinion on my reading, and that there is a 'correct' answer in any materials that I 'create' and submit myself, lacking a pathway for real originality.

Creative writing and research surrounding this area has been a very different experience, primarily in a positive way, since, particularly at this level of education, I have been able to challenge myself creatively, challenge opinions on creative writing research, young adult literature and how mental illness is represented in this form of fiction. One such challenge of this level of education, however, is the time it has taken to complete this project and how much has changed in the field over that time. The parameters of literature, fiction, the young adult genre, and particularly mental health awareness, education, and representation are fast moving and many papers have been published in recent years that were not initially included. There has been increasing awareness of DPD over the years in which my research has occurred. It is still an underrepresented condition, with little public awareness in contrast to its widespread nature. But I have also had to factor in this consideration and more recent learnings on the condition within my research.

My study has considered a range of novels about mental health and teens, assessing how effectively certain novels describe the mental health challenge and treatment pathways. As I have shown, there are a number of ways in which an author can approach this subject.

It has also been shown that it is difficult to include all elements of the developed criteria to a satisfactory extent in any given novel. This is fiction after all – writers write characters who make human decisions and these won't always be the right ones. Characters won't always be a perfect example of a healthy reaction. Characters with mental illness won't always seek understanding of their symptoms or achieve a diagnosis. They won't necessarily embrace treatment for their condition, nor will those around them always be understanding, sympathetic and helpful. These aspects of human behaviours are considered by the writer, as part of the plot of a novel about people, rather than a description of an ideal clinical outcome.

Each of the novels analysed in this study are lacking in one or more of the categories I have outlined. Each novel has some strengths in the way it represents the mental health challenge it describes, but as I have shown, the novels vary in the power of their accurate portrayal across the range of categories. Considerations that I have explored include the stakes of the fate of the protagonists in the novel (mental health outcome), how informed the writer is about using correct clinical language to describe the condition and how much real understanding of the condition a reader might expect to garner from the novel due to the author's writing choices. In order to write an 'educational' or 'beneficial' novel on mental health, the considerations of all of my categories are incredibly important. But the true practice of this seems limited and the ability to include all categories to a satisfactory level in a fictional story impractical.

The setting of some of the novels makes it easier to effectively examine mental health. For example, an unexplored novel in this analysis is *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (Vizzini, 2006) set almost entirely on a psychiatric ward based on the author's experiences of his time there. Because of this setting, the patient's experience of psychiatric treatment is fully explored in the novel. Many of the other chosen novels present the mental health challenge but do not explore the route to overcoming that challenge. However, as we have seen, these novels offer a stronger representation in terms of the other categories I have considered, such as the warning signs, symptoms and diagnoses, as well as the reactions from peers, parents, and other characters.

This provides a conclusive element in a sense; that these texts should not be taken as medical intervention in themselves. This could be easily misunderstood from the nature of the research question in considering an authors approach to mental health-based fiction. Perhaps such texts can educate in terms of specific conditions, how to best treat them, and to provide hope and light relief for those struggling with mental health. However, whilst they might assist in understanding, fiction, even that which is set in realistic circumstances and settings such as the novels analysed, these novels do not hold complete answers and should not be an assumed truth for the mental health aspects that are portrayed.

Conclusions may be further understood on a more macro level also. I would summarise that there are notable conflicts of purpose for young adult novels that invoke themes of mental health – education, social responsibility and profit do not necessarily align, and this begs the question of the definition of 'success' in this genre. It cannot be denied that it is profitable to divulge into dark themes of the mind, including abuse and suicide, given the commercial success of the novels analysed. Would their resonance amongst readers

have been as effective without inclusion of these themes? It seems possible but unlikely. But their social influence, given the critiques other theorists have provided and the results of my analysis in this research, is more questionable. Indeed, my research, albeit being isolated to four novels and a practice-based draft, suggests a negative correlation between more suitable mental health-based YA, and profitability, given the lesser commercial success of *When We Collided*.

I have discussed at several points the dangers of misrepresentation and the glorification of darker mental health subject matter alongside many mentions of how literature can positively apply to education. The conflict here may be resolved if it can be concluded that young readers are able to understand the varied purposes of fiction and the profitable nature of genres such as 'sick-lit' whilst also being educated in matters of mental health, and not being burdened with increased vulnerability from the unhappy, negative, or undesirable outcome of the narrative, particularly if it involves suicide. From the common mismanagement of mental health themes in the novels analysed, this conclusion also seems unlikely. Disclaimers of these themes will prepare the reader to a degree, but there is a danger in empathy or character identification from the audience. Their individualistic tendencies may put this danger on a sliding scale of how one might respond and from the discussions of reader empathy introduced, how an author may manage this response is an unpredictable science.

In best-case scenario, as Keen mentions, one might be inspired to positively act, change, or even suddenly become a brilliant philanthropist as a result of reading a novel. But the unlikelihood of this is apparent, and is this really what the social responsibility of fiction is about? It's true purpose. The bottom line of any business is profit. But perhaps another intention of the author might be critical praise as I feel it is for my own publishing purposes. Regardless of this clash, an underlining *obligation* within this genre in particular is to protect young minds through writing choices. To inform and educate, maybe. But rather for authors not to endanger youthful readers with their writing decisions simply so they do not miss out on the profitability of what darker themed inclusions provide. There can be a better balance between the 'sexy, time wasting, and subversive' and the 'vitamin-enriched bowls conveying good-for-you moral fiber'.

Therefore, there is a great deal to consider in a novelist's creative process when writing a novel about mental health, and my own process in writing fiction surrounding the very real condition of depersonalisation disorder has been influenced greatly by this research. This includes what a readership may hope to see, but not necessarily knowing or having control over how they will perceive the novel. It is knowing how to represent the condition

accurately, fairly, and without taking away from the humanity of characters and a good fictional plot. It is understanding debates about mental health, and in my case DPD, from a range of theorists, and how I personally adjust my writing based on my perception of theory. It is knowing the various purposes of literature, and where my own approach lies in the clashes I have discovered. This has been unpacked in detail and demonstrates the complexity of the YA genre, the sensitivity of the mental health challenge, and the responsibility of the novelist.



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## VIII. Index

- Fig. 1: Step model of inductive category development (Mayring, 2000)

