

Martin

He should have died. It would have been better for all of us if he'd done it right. You think that's an uncharitable thought? Then look across the street and see how Jessica's aged, see how we're all still marked by it, and you'll know I'm right. I'm watching Jessica now, struggling with the wheelchair as she tries to manoeuvre it up the garden path. Her path, not mine. I got rid of him a long time ago. He's Jessica's problem now. She was a good friend once but these days we don't talk. She blames me. I did, too, for a while but not anymore.

I suppose you think it's odd that I've stayed here. I could have easily moved away, started a new life somewhere else but I didn't want to. I still don't. I like it here. I fell in love with the house long before I fell in love with him. I won't let him drive me away now. Anyway, it's become a bit of a compulsion to watch him like he once watched me. I like it that he can't escape my gaze for long. Some think I do it out of guilt, that I'm punishing myself. They call it justice but they don't know the half of it. I call it...well, I don't know that I've given it a label. It's not anything I can get hold of long enough to name.

Jessica puts the brake on the wheelchair while she searches her handbag for her key or maybe it's her mobile she's hunting. She's done that before, speaking long into her phone at the doorstep, looking up at my window. She looks flustered, like she's having a bad day, but all her days are bad now. She knows I watch. She puts on an exaggerated act for me, so I'll never forget, so I can see how hard it is. But I see anyway. I'm not likely to forget. She shouldn't waste her energy when she needs it elsewhere. I know she wheels the chair up the path backwards because it's easier but I sometimes think she does it so I can see the full horror of him. He faces me now, limp and lifeless, only he's not. He's like the rag doll I had as a child. She became more floppy because I loved her too much. His head lolls because, in the end, I couldn't love him at all. Even from here I can see his blank, staring eyes that roll in their sockets, offering the world a series of lewd expressions. They roam madly but seem never to see anything. I'd be surprised if he's not dribbling or mumbling obscenities. His hands lie forgotten on his knees.

I can look at him now quite calmly, not like the early days when I succumbed to everyone's view of me and had to look away. It wasn't pity I felt but shame and a rekindled instinct for self-preservation. Now I observe him like I would a small mouse in an experiment on animal behaviour. I watch how he reacts to things - people walking past or a car maybe, the tweeting of a bird, the feel of rain on his face. Usually he doesn't, react that is, but occasionally I think I see his lips broaden to a sort of crooked smile, or maybe a grimace. I sometimes wonder what's going on inside his head but usually I don't.

It's over ten years since his failed suicide, his hanging that didn't quite hang. It shocked me more deeply than I could ever have imagined, yet I remember my only thoughts at the time were how typically selfish, how unnecessarily dramatic, how bloody cack-handed he was. I know, I know, you think I'm callous, and perhaps you're right, but you didn't live with him for three years. You didn't wake up each day gasping for breath, pretending you weren't drowning, weren't suffocating under his weight. You didn't have to tread carefully on the egg shells he spread throughout your life knowing that at any moment you would break

one and all hell would break loose. You've probably never had someone take over your life so completely as Martin took over mine. You think you'd never let it happen to you. You should think again.

It was Jessica who introduced us. She's Martin's sister, older than him by five years. She's always thought the world of him. To be honest, so did I at the start. Jessica and I became friends not long after I moved in. In fact we became best friends and by the time Martin showed up, I felt as if I knew him already. I suppose I saw him, initially, through Jessica's eyes, through her stories of his life up until then but I hadn't expected the charm. That caught me off guard. He was very beguiling. I was completely taken in.

I was flattered by his attentiveness, his obvious attraction to me, his seemingly worldly ways. I sometimes think he detected a need in me of which I was unaware. How else did he get under my skin so quickly? The frequent flowers, the regular texts and emails, the late night phone calls when he was working away - they always delighted me, excited me even. Our dates were wonderful, varied and intimate. He was always full of ideas of what we might do together. I'd never had so much attention, so much fun, so much culture.

I don't remember inviting him to move in with me but I didn't mind. It seemed to suit us both at the time and Jessica was delighted at having her best friend *and* her little brother living just across the road. For six months it seemed almost like paradise. Then he handed in his notice at work, saying he was fed up with all the travelling and wanted a job that meant we weren't apart so often, we could be together more. I was miffed that he hadn't discussed it with me first. It's such a momentous decision, I said. I don't mind you being away. It isn't as if it's *that* often. He'd laughed at what he saw as my self-sacrifice and said that couples should be together, it was what being a couple meant. I should have heeded the alarm bells that jangled in the lazy mists of my mind but, instead, I glowed with appreciation.

It didn't seem to bother him that the only local employment he could find was part-time, with shorter days and much reduced pay but it rankled with me. He was always there. There when I left for work in the morning and there when I came home at night. I had no time to myself. He couldn't understand why I needed it. Then he started cooking breakfast for me while I was in the shower. He insisted I eat them every morning, even though I didn't want them and they made me late for work. In the evening he'd welcome me home with an elaborate meal that he'd spent all afternoon preparing. It was all too much and I told him so. He thought me ungrateful. I just like simple food, I said. A bowl of cereal in the morning is fine. A simple stir fry or lentil bake is all the supper I need. Sometimes, I said, I'd quite liked to choose what I eat for myself. He sulked for days after that. I thought it churlish, even a little spiteful. It was all so unnecessary but he kept it up for days. I hadn't meant to hurt him. Perhaps I had been too quick to criticise. After all, how many of my friends' partners even bothered to lift a pan? That's how my mind worked then. I placated him by telling him what a wonderful cook he was. I even suggested he should think about opening a small bistro or an up-market café. I really did think he might be good at that. But, although it won him round, he just laughed and said that would mean he would see me even less than in his old job and what he wanted was to be with me more. I joked that we saw quite a lot of each other as it was, more than most couples I knew. If you want to spend more time with me, I teased, you'll have to come and see me at work.

I shouldn't have said that. It was round about that time that he started to suggest that maybe I could reduce my hours too. After all, he reminded me, I didn't need the money. My Uncle Tony's legacy had given me more than enough to live on, even after I'd paid for the house. In fact, he said, neither of us needed to work, we could both live off the legacy. There'd still be money to spare. I told him he was being ridiculous but he thought I was being selfish, that I didn't want to share the money. It isn't that, I told him, I haven't really decided what to do with it yet. It's just that I like my job, I said, in fact I love it. I still do. I work in a small independent bookshop that stocks an amazing range of slightly unusual and rare books. We have a faithful clientele, who are as passionate about the books as we are and often a lot more knowledgeable. Simon's the brains of the outfit. He inherited the business from his dad. He's much more of friend now than a boss and, together with Alison and Mark, we make a good team. At the time, it was beginning to feel like the only place where I could really be me.

Simon was the first to notice things weren't quite right between me and Martin, though he never said as much, he would just listen sympathetically to my increasingly frustrated rants over Martin's behaviour. It's only with hindsight that I see how many misgivings I had, even then. I hadn't realised quite how much my power I'd given away, though I think Simon knew. The trouble was he couldn't do anything to help me until I saw it for myself. By then it was almost too late.

Of course things weren't bad all the time. Martin still charmed me, still made me feel cherished and loved and we still had fun. It was easy to put his sulks and our rows down to the nature of all relationships. It was easy to make things seem alright.

But Martin remained bad tempered with me for insisting on working full time. We muddled along quite happily most days but it only took a small thing for his anger to erupt with a snide comment here or a hurtful remark there. It was obvious he was still brooding over it. By then he'd reduced his hours even more, so he worked only three short days each week. He didn't like it that he couldn't be with me on his days off and we argued about it more and more. Then he started coming to see me in the shop. He would interrupt my meetings, my discussions with Simon, my dealings with customers. He disturbed and upset us all. I was embarrassed, it felt like an invasion, but he just said I'd told him to come and see me at work if he wanted to. I couldn't really argue with that.

Eventually, Simon had to ask him not to disrupt our work. He asked him to stop coming to the shop. Martin never liked being told what to do, especially by Simon, he disliked him with a passion. On several occasions he'd implied, without actually accusing me, that I was having an affair with him. He stopped when I told him Simon was gay, but his jealousy never really abated. In the end Simon threatened Martin with the police, though I only found out about that later. So, instead of coming into the shop on his days off, he started loitering outside, peering through the window with his hands cupped over his face. Both Mark and Alison complained. I didn't blame them, it must have seemed very intrusive to them. When I challenged him he said he was only doing what other people did. Didn't we want customers to look in our shop window?

Sometimes he'd come to meet me straight after work and he'd wait outside 'til we closed. He'd come with suggestions of a meal out or a visit to the cinema and would never take no for an answer. I'd have to cancel arrangements to meet other friends that I hadn't told

him about because I knew that would make him angry and of course it did. Once I'd done it, he'd say he'd lost his appetite and we'd go home. We'd end up with a cobbled together supper in front of the box watching *Midsummer Murders* or *A Touch of Frost*, neither of which I particularly enjoyed. I watched them anyway because Martin got snarly if I read a book or decided to do something else. He wanted us to do things together but only the things that he wanted to do. I simply wanted to avoid a row.

When some of my friends told me they found him creepy and didn't like being in his company, I was completely taken aback. Can't we meet up without him being there they asked. Just once in a while they pleaded. Tell him it's a girly evening they'd say. I didn't tell them that, whenever we did meet up without him, Martin sulked for days and would only speak to me to make sarcastic comments about them all. It was inevitable, I suppose, that I saw my friends less and less frequently. When Anne said he'd sent her a really nasty email, telling her to leave me alone, I didn't believe her. That's how blind I was. But, I reasoned, he didn't know her email address, so how could he have sent it? I knew she didn't like Martin and thought she was just being mischievous. I stopped seeing her after that. Then, I met with Janet, another friend, over a lunchtime get-together on a day when Martin worked. I could see she was upset about something the moment she walked in and when she showed me his text, I was stunned. I couldn't believe he was capable of such nastiness, such vicious abuse. I didn't know what to say. I was embarrassed. I apologised. I tried to make light of it by saying it was probably one of his warped jokes and promised to speak to him. We parted awkwardly. Inside I was seething. By the time he came to collect me after work I was incandescent and launched into him right there and then. You can't control me, I yelled, but of course, as everyone else was beginning to realise, he could. Simon rescued me from the scene, much to Martin's disgust, and whisked me away to the local pub for a drink to calm me down. I drank in silence, refusing to listen to anything Simon had to say. I didn't want him to tell me what, deep down, I already knew.

Inevitably, it was me who apologised to Martin first, saying later that I'd over-reacted. I asked him more calmly not to text or email my friends and certainly never with abusive messages. I didn't have the courage to challenge him about how he knew their contact details, it would just start another row. He said he was sorry too, that he'd only done it because he'd been angry at the way Janet had spoken to me the last time we'd met. He'd only done it to protect me, he said but, if it upset me so much, then obviously he wouldn't do it again. He charmed me. I was taken in.

Do I need to go on? I think you get the picture. I let him gradually close me down until only a tiny part of me remained. I even reduced my hours at work to the three days a week that he worked. Was it cowardice? Was I so desperate to feel admired and loved that I just went along with it? How did I lose so much self respect? I had no mind of my own. I lived just to keep the peace. But then he found my emails to Simon.

Only reluctantly and at his insistence, had I begun to exchange late night messages with Simon and then only if I could slip out of bed safely once Martin had fallen asleep. They quickly became the only thing I looked forward to other than my hours spent at work. Simon was worried about me and had persuaded me to at least let him know I was alright at the end of each day. Often it was just a quick text. That's how it started but, after a while, I found myself wanting to share more things with him in those dark, lonely hours that I couldn't,

when with him in person, in the cold light of day and so, I began to email him instead. He kept me sane. If you can call the state I was in sane. When Martin discovered the emails he paled and went deathly quiet. When he eventually spoke, his voice was strangely deep and slow, as if some kind of devil inside him was slowing down his tape. It was almost comical but I suddenly realised how scared of him I was. I said and did nothing to provoke but my silence enraged him more. Then it came. First the whip of a slap across my face, then the heavy thud of a punch to my stomach and, once I was gasping, helpless on the floor, the sharp cracks of kick after kick after kick on my back. I have no idea how long it lasted but, afterwards, as I lay there unable to move and hurting like I've never hurt before, I felt a part of me wake up. I'd been asleep too long. This wasn't love!

In the morning, when I eventually roused myself from the floor, Martin had left for work. He'd stuck a note on the fridge suggesting I might like to clear up the mess before he got home. It left no impression on me, I was too numb. How I found my mobile I'll never know, the room had been trashed, but it was there by my broken laptop, near to where I'd fallen. Miraculously it was still working. I called Simon. He answered as if he'd been waiting for my call. He'd been trying to contact me, he said, since the moment he'd woken. One more failed attempt and he was going to call the police and come round. I realised, then, just how far I'd let myself disappear. Simon had warned me so many times but I hadn't wanted to know. He'd been waiting for me to ask for help. I was asking for help now.

Within minutes he was at my door and, though he tried hard to conceal it, I saw how shocked he was at my state. I remember feeling acutely embarrassed, which, looking back, seems a ridiculous sentiment. I was of course relieved to have him with me, though I refused point blank to go to A&E. He tried to persuade me but gave up when he recognised some of my old resolve and even joked about it. I remember the pain of laughing and the pain of trying not to laugh. He bathed my cuts and soothed with witch hazel on my developing bruises. Fortunately there were no broken bones. You must put an end to this Maggie, he said. He's gone too far this time. Enough is enough. I knew he was right.

Together, and for me very painfully, we packed Martin's things into every available bag or box we could find. The sense of regaining control gave me all the energy I needed. Simon carried them across to Jessica's, while I watched him from the upstairs window. It's where I'm standing now, where I always watch from. Jessica wasn't in, so he piled it all in her porch with an unnecessary note on the top to say it was Martin's. Once I was sure every last scrap of him had gone, I collapsed in an ocean of tears. Simon stayed with me all day, arranged for all the locks to be changed and cashed in on a favour by asking two of his friends, bouncers at one of the local night clubs, to come round for when Martin was due home.

I was asleep when he came. I think Simon must have put a sleeping draught in my tea. He told me later that Martin had acted up a bit, but hadn't really tried it on, not when he saw Benny and Jake standing in the front bay. He'd had little choice but to go across to Jessica's and await her return. They'd kept a watch on him until she arrived and, when she'd come across to ask me what it was all about, they wouldn't wake me but told her what had happened. They told her that Martin was never to set foot on the property again and never, ever to try and speak to me. Simon reckoned he'd probably 'lick his wounds' for a while and then try and wheedle his way back into my life. I said I wouldn't let him but Simon suggested

he move in with me for a month, just to make sure. It wasn't really necessary but I was grateful to have him here.

I spoke to Jessica a couple of times after that. I told her how it had been between Martin and me and what he had done. I said I never wanted to see him again. He was never to come to my house or try to speak to me if he saw me in the street. She was torn, I could see, but inevitably chose to believe her brother's version of events that spoke of provocation and unfaithfulness on my part. Simon's presence only confirmed it for her. I missed her friendship during the following months but I felt let down by her and found it hard to forgive.

It was over twelve months later when Martin tried to hang himself. He'd been badgering me for months to forgive him and take him back - texts, emails, letters - though he was careful never to approach me in person. I changed everything to get away from his bleating, except my address. Was I trying to goad him by staying? I'd like to think I'd have the gall, but it was just a case of simple inertia. I was still numb. Even Jessica intervened on his behalf, trying to patch things up between us but I'm not sure her motives were all that altruistic. By then she was probably fed up with him too. I thought of her as my enemy.

I should have seen it coming, of course, he'd been heading that way for weeks, his letters and notes pinned to my gate getting ever more frantic and wild. But, as I said, I was shocked when I heard. I'm told I laughed out loud when I discovered he'd botched it but when I saw how much damage he'd inflicted on himself, I wore the accusations of blame willingly, like a smothering blanket. Did I have to be so brutal? Could I not have, at least, spoken to him to explain? Then Simon reminded me of the day he'd come round to mop up the mess that Martin had made of both of me and my house. He reminded me of my rants, the contents of my nightly emails, the steady desertion of my friends. I took off the blanket then, knowing I'd never wear it again. No, I thought, you're lying on a bed of your own making, Martin, not mine.

Slowly my life has returned to something resembling the time before I met him, though I feel I'm carrying a burden that wasn't there before - a self awareness that lies heavy on my heart. That I allowed it to happen still astonishes me and frightens. I'm a more cautious person now. I have lost something that I'm unlikely ever to recover. My friends are friends again, but they sense a part of me is missing and, although we've grown close again, we'll never be as close as we once were. Somehow this doesn't bother me.

If anything does go on inside that damaged brain of Martin's, I imagine he smugly believes I feel shame every time I see him. But I don't. My determination to stay in this house, my compulsion to watch, come from a desire to heal myself not to do penance. It's a vengeance of sorts. It's not kind. I gloat when I look at him now. I feel a deep sense of satisfaction.