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You Make Your Noise.

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You Make Your Noise.

Red-brick semis litter the estate like overflowing wheely bins, united by an intricate web of washing lines: an obstacle course for sky-born things, a clouded sky for rats. Cigarette smoke monopolises the air, hooking kids as young as nine on nicotine, plaguing the little tykes with tarnished teeth and bad breath. The boys might kick a footy at your skull but the *girls* will rob you blind, batting their baby blues as they pick your pocket in the cold light of day. Most of the kids would rather learn to fight and scheme than write and read, but Jack Myers was never this way.

Jack lives at number twenty-two, and has done for the entirety of his seventeen years. It's the only house on its street to have more than two bedrooms, although his own was originally a downstairs loo and resides in unfortunate proximity to the creaky back door. Jack used to love the fact his bedroom floor was tiled and spent many childhood afternoons transforming the sequence of squares in to a hop-scotch or a board game, which he'd play alone, for mum was always occupied and Beth was always sneaking in boys and booze. Now, there's scarcely a tile that isn't stained a brown-ish red, dried blood, predominantly from Jack's head—which he'd bash against the floor after falling from his loft bed after a night on the piss, an adverse accident turned regular routine. Jack once had a mate round after school who had spread the word about his tiled floor, granting him the nickname 'council' for the rest of his high school career. Most ceilings within the house are slightly dipped at the centre, especially the kitchen's, which appears unnervingly close to collapse. The combination of leaky walls and faulty plumbing encourages regular power outages and sparky appliances— none of which match, none of which work, except the microwave, the only gateway to a hot meal unless you're treating yourself to a *Pot Noodle*, in which case the kettle lends a hand.

Three miles South, the nice end of town, is Keiron Letty's house. Keiron lives in a quiet estate— a bright white neighbourhood paved with humongous houses and flashy driveways where big four by fours are parked. Inside the houses are brown eyed women with big wide souls and there's homemade carrot soup on their kitchen tables. The women's husbands sit beside them. Decent men. Proper men. Men who set the table and clear away after dinner, men who make the time. Affection isn't few and far between within the houses. In summer, giddy tots in nappies run through sprinklers in the back garden, chased by proactive parents, panicking over SPF while their little ones soak themselves in happy splashes. The houses are named, not numbered, they're characterised— introduced to the street by little wooden signs and curly letters. Their interiors are immaculate: candid photographs ascend spotless staircases and chandeliers hang from sturdy ceilings. The décor is modern and a little ostentatious but the colour schemes are traditional. Dark wooden floors and chocolate brown sofas with red, velveteed cushions ensure the tidiness is still homey, still cosy. Dimmed lighting. All the radiators work. *I'm gonna live in a great big house one day*, thought Jack, *you see if I don't*. Maxy tilted his head a little, like he might just believe him, like he saw something there.

'You're his favourite, you know,' announced Keiron, waltzing in to the sitting room, a chilled Peroni in either hand, 'he just growls at everyone else. He's quite an anxious dog.'

'I'd love to 'ave a dog,' said Jack, 'I'd have a Rottweiler called King and I'd train it to do backflips and shit.'

Kieron chuckled, handing his mate a beer, 'Would you now?'

Kieron loved the way Jack's brain worked, how his mouth moved at the very same time the thoughts popped in to his head and how he couldn't fake a reaction or filter a thought to save his life. They had grown up together, Jack and Kieron. Their mothers, Kate and Caroline, had become uncommonly close after unintentionally bonding at a primary school parents evening thirteen years ago, when the boys were four years old. Kate had rocked up tipsy after two generous glasses of Tesco's own Sauvignon and confessed to Caroline that it was the only way she could bare to hear another excessively polite yet devastatingly desperate plea that Jack's behaviour improve— she was laboriously begged to encourage manners, discourage biting, point out which moments were inappropriate to speak during and which words were inappropriate to say. 'What's the point in a kid if it int funny?' Kate had said to Caroline. 'Our Jack is hilarious, honest, there's nowt funnier than a kid f'ing and blindin' when he's having a tantrum— 'elps diffuse the tension.'

Caroline had found Kate's perverse honesty liberating, especially in such a decorous, safeguarded setting, for Caroline smuggled the bulk of her honesty under tight, vanilla scented skin that capped her toned abdominals like gold-plated jewellery. She was grounded, kind, thoughtful, selfless— bored. She ached for adventure and the risk that came with it. Kate was exactly that: a storm. Fiercely bright and frequently drunk, Kate was a card charmed by Caroline's disposition— her genuine innocence, indisputable good-nature and fool-proof, intuitive obligation to do and say the right thing, always. Kate found Caroline endearing and Caroline found Kate exciting. In the five years that followed, the pair would have dinner most Friday nights— Friday's worked well because Caroline's husband worked away in London most weekends and Kate, recently single, had an astonishingly microscopic social life and was always available. This was another reason why Caroline was so transfixed by her— Kate felt like a guilty pleasure, a dirty secret, an undiscovered gem. She loved being the first, perhaps the only, to hear of Kate's terrible tales and deviant doings.

The weekly dinners would span for hours and the pair would take it in turns to host and cook, or in Kate's case order in, and provide a bottle or two or three of wine which would be neatly polished off and reviewed in great, satirical detail. Notes of *shaft*, undertones of *sod all* and an aftertaste of *what's the fucking point*, were often detected. The dinner parties occasionally concluded in one of the two staying the night in the other's bed, for it was too late and impractical to head home after one, two, three in the morning. They'd begin most Saturdays together, at the kitchen table, Caroline tucking in to scrambled eggs and avocado on sourdough toast with a plain Yorkshire tea, or Frosties when she stayed at Kate's, Kate backing double espressos like they're going out of fashion— she was never a breakfast person. They'd tear the morning paper in two, Kate whizzing through the sudoku or the crossword, sometimes both, with extraordinary ease while Caroline blushed over the advice column but always finished with the *proper news* to set the tone for the day. Jack and Kieron thought nothing of it at the time, and enjoyed their weekly sleepovers just as much as their mothers did theirs, for they were unsupervised for the most part, despite the odd check in, and could often get away with staying up past midnight, if they could keep their eyes open long enough. They were even granted the occasional sip of wine, which they would claim to enjoy while failing to conceal their squints and squirms. Looking back, however, Kieron could never be convinced that the tale of Kate and Caroline was not a love story, that the relationship was entirely absent of romantic affiliation. It was brazenly obvious that the pair shared an intrinsic connection, an almost disconcerting devotion to one another. He felt it was impossible to love another person with such prolific passion that was also purely

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platonic, but there was no point in dwelling on the details, for that chapter of history is now neatly tucked away and the crumbs wiped from the tabletop.

'How's your mum?' asked Kieron, 'and er— and home, how's home?'

'Everyone's good, yeah, Beth can't 'old down a job to save her life, but er, nowt new there.' A silence slipped between them, prompting a co-ordinated Peroni sip and a panicked, 'Having a train wreck of an older sister takes the pressure off of me anyway, so I'm not complaining.' 'Ha, yeah, I can imagine.'

Sip.

Maxy always gazed adoringly at Jack or jumped up on the sofa to curl up on his lap, which made Kieron feel inexplicably violated— as though his own affection was being mocked, mirrored, exposed, 'Mum said you can stay for tea. If you like, I mean, she's always saying how much she misses you.'

This was a precarious proposal, for Kate had made it abhorrently clear that Jack should avoid interacting with Caroline *at all times*. She had even suggested that he cut ties with Kieron altogether because she wasn't comfortable with him being around *those snobs*, as she called them now. Jack had only asked about the argument once, several years ago, and had consequently dodged a frying pan to the face. He never asked again. It was safe to say the situation was delicate— *but then again*, thought Jack, *homemade carrot soup*. 'I'll stay.'

At six o'clock that evening, Jack took his place at the dinner table, squeezing in between Kieron and Kieron's youngest brother, Samuel. Opposite Jack was Caroline, who always sat between her husband Steven and their middle child, Lucas. Every Letty had their designated seat, a wine glass and a separate glass for water, multiple knives and forks that spanned an array of shapes and sizes and a beige, embroidered napkin that matched the tablecloth, knotted at the centre, placed in the centre of a gold trimmed China plate. There were pumpkin scented candles lit and classical music humming faintly in the background from ominous, built-in kitchen speakers. The set-up felt slightly suffocating to Jack, who almost always ate alone, and rarely sooner than nine or ten at night, if he remembered to eat at all. Caroline had prepared lemon chicken with steamed rice and honey-roasted vegetables. Jack could not recall the last time he had eaten or even seen a vegetable, but found the smell of fresh carrots and green beans quietly comforting, nostalgic even. The scent encouraged a brief breath of pining— Jack pictured his own dad, who used to re-position the veggies on his sister's plate to look like funny faces before lathering them with salt and ketchup so that they 'went down't hatch a bit easier'. Beth always fussed over her food but Jack would eat anything. Looking back, Jack sometimes wishes he had caused more of a scene at tea time, so that he too would have been celebrated for finishing his fruit and praised for not lobbing sausages at the floor.

Jack's dad no longer lived at number twenty-two, in fact, Jack hadn't seen or heard from his father in almost fourteen—

'How's the chicken, Jack? Oh, gosh, I hope you like cheese, there's not a sweet tooth between us in this house, so savoury desserts is all I can offer you I'm afraid!' sang Caroline, through an almost grisly grin.

'I hope we have Manchego, that's my favourite!' declared Samuel, looking to Jack for approval or agreement.

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'Sounds mint,' said Jack, 'I love cheese, me.'

The conversation weaved neatly between pleasant small talk and innocuous anecdotes, Caroline asking almost all of the questions, Kieron beaming with pride whenever Jack cracked a joke or said something marginally brash. Steven enquired as to what the *next step* was for Jack, who had completed high-school almost seven weeks ago, the same as Kieron. 'Have you applied to any sixth form colleges, or do you think you'll jump straight in to the working world?'

'You were thinking of becoming a landscape gardener, if I remember correctly?' added Caroline.

'Yeah, er, I'm still thinking about it, but er, I work at a bookshop at't moment.'

Not a single soul succeeded in concealing their surprise.

'I thought you worked at the BP garage?' said Kieron.

'I do, most evenings, yeah, but on weekends I work at Lyles, you know that little nook by the coffee house on't river?'

'Oh, amazing!' exclaimed Caroline, 'I bet you get some lovely customers popping in and out of that shop. I don't think I've ever been, I shall have to pay you a visit.'

'I had no idea,' said Kieron, 'but then again, you've always liked books. I remember you were by far the best at reading in our class, back at Brackenfield.'

'Yeah, in primary school, maybe. I'm sure if I went to your fancy-pants private school, I'd be way behind the lot of yous. Anyway, I like it, yeah. They're like mini movies in your 'ead, books, they turn your brain in to like, a private cinema, except there's no bad actin' cos you get to cast the characters, you know, like, make up their faces and voices.

Books are mint cos you can pick 'em up and put 'em down whenever, too, whenever you need a breather, which I like. I get to read as many as I want and borrow 'em for free at Lyles, and whenever it's quiet, which is most of 'time, I just stand at the register and read. It's sound.'

'That does sound brilliant.' smiled Caroline, with conflicted awe and aching, for Jack's charisma and extraordinarily animated facial expressions reminded her, so savagely, of his mother Kate. Jack felt his front pocket begin to vibrate, Beth—

'Sorry guys, I should probably take this.' Jack removed himself at once and hurried upstairs, his heart making every effort to burst through his chest.

'He's still doing that?' asked Caroline, softly, 'I thought he stopped doing that?'

'Give him a minute,' said Kieron, 'then I'll go check on him.'

Jack locked himself in the bathroom on the second floor before bringing his phone to his ear with a trembling hand.

Hi Jacky, it's me.

Bethany Myers was a complicated person. From the moment she was born, Beth's emotions were indomitable— her highs reached extraordinary heights, her lows were catastrophic, agonising, excruciating, not just for her but for everyone around her, too. Beth felt absolutely everything, absolutely all of the time. Before she fell asleep each night, the nights of which she slept at all, Beth would say a prayer, a proper prayer, the type whispered aloud on bare knees, a tilted chin to the ceiling. She'd beg the sky, eyes sewn shut, through shrinking breaths and streaming tears, *to wake up*, should she have to, *as someone else*. *Anyone else*. For through all her copious spite and acrimony, there was no one on earth Beth hated more than herself. She despised her face— her pale complexion and thin lips, her deep set eyes and sparse brows. She'd routinely pick and cut at her body, all five feet of it— cursing her gangly arms and flat chest, her slumped posture and short legs, her eczema,

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her yellow-tainted nails. Then, the very next moment, she'd apologise profusely to her corpse in the mirror, clutching her shoulders with crossed arms, embracing her physical frame and pledging to look after it, to be kinder to it. She'd routinely pack her vessel with vodka and nicotine, lining her liver with legions of liquor, suffocating her lungs with sticky black tar— regardless of whether it was morning or night, whether she was happy or sad. Substance abuse was a behaviour both endorsed and exemplified by Kate Myers, who blamed Beth, vocally, for her marriage's dissolution. Beth welcomed the burden with open arms, as though the grief were weighted wings, sewn in to her back at birth. She was ill; she had always been ill. HPD, BPD, ASPD, OCPD— the many, many doctors to examine Beth Myers each proclaimed a new diagnosis. Jack jokes that she's a Jack of all trades, ticking every box within the realm of erratic and unstable behaviour. The truth behind the gag is heavy, but Beth could carry pain the weight of feathers or of ferries and never know the difference. She cried the same, unthinkable amount the day her dad walked out as she did when she found out Cadbury's had discontinued the *Time Out* bar. Every loss, big or small, let the waves break through the trap door and the world cave in around her.

Thirteen years ago, on her thirteenth birthday, Beth had brought Jack along to ditch school with her mates down by Eccup Reservoir. The kids were a couple of years older than Beth and had adopted her in to their group after she'd infamously spray-painted a penis emerging from a test tube on to Mr Law, head of chemistry's, Volkswagen. The plan was to smoke marijuana by the water and listen to music, but when the group realised Beth had brought along her little brother, they were put off. Beth professed that she had no choice but to bring him because he was too young to stay home alone, but the group decided it was too weird to smoke up with a five year old and told Beth to get lost. She was mortified, and blamed Jack entirely. Revenge, however, was Beth's forte, and so she played a trick. 'I think it's time I taught you how to swim Jacky, doesn't that sound fun?'

Jack had developed a violent phobia of deep water, or any body of water at that, after Beth had shown him *Jaws* on Halloween, insisting beforehand that the Shark was friendly, only misunderstood and struggled with personal space.

'No Beth,' said Jack, 'I want to go home.'

'Come onnn,' Beth teased, 'It'll be fun. Don't you want to be the first one of your friends to know how to swim? Think how cool you'll look, Jacky, think of what they'll say.'

Jack fought admirably, shrieking, kicking, welling up as Beth dragged him by the hand towards the edge of the reservoir. 'I'm not going in.' he asserted.

'Suit yourself.' said Beth, stripping down to her vest and shorts. 'Look after my clothes, Jacky' she said with a menacing grin, before hurling herself in to the freezing water. Jack was astounded, glued to his spot, wiping the tears from his cheeks with crossed fingers, watching breathlessly as Beth, giddy with malicious intent, crossed her arms and clutched her shoulders in the water, shutting her legs together, pointing out her toes. She breathed out gently above the surface before pushing herself under, as far as she could, for as long as she could hold her breath for. She sank and sank and sank and sank, slowly, while Jack's heart plummeted. After many moments of absolute silence, Jack let out a terrorised scream, the kind of haunting screech performed in horror films, a scream he'd only heard in *Jaws*, a bone-chilling howl. He looked around frantically, perilously, desperately— for any sign of anyone at all before diving headfirst in to his greatest fear. Beth was delighted to hear the splash and surged swiftly to the surface, eager to bask in the glorious karma she had orchestrated. She relished in seeing Jack suffer and cackled as he soaked himself in frantic

splashes, yelping like a little puppy, helpless, choking on the water he'd inhaled, sinking, drowning—drowning. He was drowning. He was really, really drowning—
 'HELP!' screamed Beth, suddenly horrified at the severity of what she'd done, darting towards the bobbing body, wrapping her arms around Jack's frenzied state, holding his hysteria with helpless hands, red hands, blood-stained hands—
 'HELP, PLEASE, PLEASE, ANYBODY, PLEASE, SOMEBODY FUCKING HELP US!' Jack was pulled out first, half-alive, by Beth's incredibly high, incredibly paranoid friends, who had luckily not strayed too far. Beth never once admitted to what she had done, committing like a criminal to the lie, the lie, that she *really* was drowning. She couldn't bear to know Jack's face if he ever found out that his trauma was plotted, orchestrated, revelled in by her own, stupid, selfish self. Beth had discovered something rotten within herself that day. She didn't know what it was, how long it had been there or how long it would stay, alas, it absolutely petrified her.

'Beth, I'm a bit busy, is it urgent?' Jack's voice bounced between the bathroom walls, his own anguish echoing all around him.

I thought we could get drive through McDonalds for tea.

'I've eaten already.'

Where are you?

Jack double checked the lock on Kieron's bathroom door, jiggling the handle, 'It doesn't matter, I can't— wait, drive, what do you mean drive? Beth, you can't drive, you're banned.'

Mums not banned.

'Mum said she'd take us?'

No, no, but no one will know it's me driving mum's car. I'll- I'll wear a cap and sunnies, it'll be like a... like a secret mission.

The voice whispered and wavered and wobbled.

'Beth, please don't get behind the wheel' begged Jack.

I think you should come home, Jacky. I- I- I think we should go for a drive.

'Are you on somet?'

Mum's angry. We had another fight.

The voice trembled, a sharp breath, Jack's stomach dropped,

'Where is she, Beth, where's mum?'

Bad, Jacky. It's really bad. Can you come home? Please come home, Please—

The gasps multiplied, panting, crying, hysterical crying, shrinking breaths, Kieron knocked twice-

'Just a second!'

He knocked again and then twice more, 'Come on mate, let me in.'

'Beth, stay there, okay, I'm coming home, don't move okay, I'll be five minutes.' Jack wiped the tears from his cheeks with his left forearm, in one motion, his right hand simultaneously unlocking the bathroom door. Kieron was calm, looking at Jack with understanding, assurance, sensitivity.

'I'm gonna have to go, mate, it's urgent' said Jack, 'I'm sorry, tell your folks I said thank you, alright?' he stepped towards the door but Kieron pushed his shoulders back, gently,

'You don't have to go anywhere, mate, okay, talk to me.'

'No Kieron, you don't understand—'

'I do—'

'YOU DON'T.'

'I do.'

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'YOU DON'T, OKAY, YOU REALLY DON'T, AND THAT'S FINE BECAUSE HOW *COULD YOU UNDERSTAND?* YOUR LIFE IS PERFECT. YOUR LIFE IS PERFECT AND THAT'S FINE, THAT'S GREAT BUT I, I HAVE TO... I HAVE TO-'

'It's okay, Jack, just breathe, just hear me out mate, okay, we've been here before, Jack look at me.'

Fate at his fingertips, as though disposing of an active bomb, Jack snatched Kieron by the collar and forced him across the room, hurling his spine against the bathroom mirror, a mirror shattered: glass shards sprawling across the tiled floor. Dark blood leaked from Kieron's head across the sequence of squares. Jack sprinted for the banister, stairs, front door, driveway, car—the screams of panicked, proactive parents echoing all around him as the Letty's rushed to Kieron's side.

Jack pushed seventy the entire drive home, soaring between speed bumps, racing against a dead clock, bargaining with time, eyes sewn shut, a tilted chin to the sky: a proper prayer, *I can make it.*

He reached number twenty-two in fractions, parts of him still wrapped in prayer; parts of him still at Kieron's, under dim lighting, comforted by the scent of fresh carrots and green beans; parts of him at Lyles, nearing the end of a devastating story; parts of him still splashing and spluttering in Eccup Reservoir. His right hand quivered, keys shifting between his fingers: shifted by sweat, his entire vessel shaking vigorously as he turned the lock. Hallway, stairs, Beth's room, Beth, Bethy, Bethany Myers— in pieces, fractions, drenched from the waist down in dark red blood.

It's bad, Jacky. I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry.

Jack fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around Beth's frenzied state, holding her hysteria with helpless hands, red hands, blood-stained hands. He cradled whatever was left of her, pulling the remnants tightly to his chest, rocking them gently as tears crawled from his eyes. Beth became water, slipping through his grasp, descending in to puddles with depth that held greater terrors than Great Whites and all that Jack could muster was, 'You're *my* big sister. You're meant to look after *me*. *When* is somebody going to look after *me*?'

Jack's tears joined the stream surrounding him: sewage water contaminating the ocean, burdened with the elemental knowing that it's presence only further polluted the realm around it, a depth he could never swim in.

Whenever Bethany Myers came close to death, the sight that flashed before her was always the same: big black letters inscribed with Sharpie. She had first seen the writing, in the flesh, on a Friday in June. It had past one o'clock in the morning and Beth was screaming in the kitchen. She had deemed Kate a shitty mother and Kate had deemed Beth a shitty human being, which was perfectly unremarkable, for their viscous, violent and verbally abusive spats usually lead them to such conclusions, but the memory of this particular duel was sharp: it was an altercation every witness remembers vividly and relives often. Beth had stolen half a litre of Kate's best vodka and replaced it with water before attending an eighteenth birthday party a few streets away. Kate noticed almost immediately, mere hours after Beth had departed, for Caroline was at number twenty-two for dinner celebrating a work promotion and the pair had already polished off two bottles of prosecco when Kate suggested they move on to spirits, just this once, for it was a special occasion. Kate was particular about very few liquid vices and a connoisseur of even fewer, but vodka— Kate knew vodka. *Grey Goose* was her tipple, which she served on extra special

occasions with an ounce of lime cordial, a splash of soda water and a lime wedge. She handed Caroline a glass proudly and raised a toast,

‘To you’.

When Kate brought the liquor to her lips, she noticed Beth’s tampering immediately. *That little shit.*

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Caroline.

‘Beth. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with ‘er when she gets back.’

Kate seemed unfazed, for the most part, and so Caroline asked no further questions. Beth returned home only moments later, unfathomably drunk. Her entry was marked by the comical, ceaseless sound of keys rattling inside the lock, of which she eventually managed to turn after several strenuous minutes. She was crying already, for reasons unbeknownst to anyone, herself included, and was quick to panic when she spotted the opened vodka on the kitchen table.

‘Good time?’ asked Kate, sharply.

‘Yeah,’ slurred Beth, ‘hi Caroline, you alright?’

‘I’m very well than-’

‘If you’d asked, I would’ve given you some’ interrupted Kate.

A pin dropped: a firework.

‘I somehow doubt that’ said Beth, firmly.

‘What was that, sorry?’

‘I said I SOMEHOW DOUBT THAT. Catch it that time?’

Kate stood up slowly, beholding the apprehensive eyes of both women in the room, ‘Don’t you *dare* speak to me with that tone, you little shit.’

‘What you gonna to do, parent me? I wouldn’t exactly say that’s your strength.’

Caroline shifted awkwardly in her seat, ‘Kate, perhaps I better—’

‘No no,’ said Beth, ‘I’ll go. Wunt wanna spoil your little lesbo fest.’

Caroline’s heart bucked. Her cheeks grew red with embarrassment, her eyes met the floor immediately. Kate’s gaze, however, did not migrate from her daughter, not for a moment. She clenched her fists and tilted her head a little, like she might just kill her.

‘You disgust me. You selfish, spoilt-’

‘SPOILT?’ cried Beth, ‘Fuck me mum, spoilt? Look around, I’m ‘ardly fuckin spoilt, we live in an absolute shit ‘ole.’

‘THAT’S ENOUGH!’ bellowed Kate, picking up her empty glass as though it were a gun,

‘You have no idea the shit I do for you Beth Myers, you have NO idea what you put me through, you and your DERANGEDNESS.’

‘Me deranged? You’re an ALCHOLIC.’

‘You’re a PSYCHOPATH.’

‘Well, you’re fucking... you’re fucking DEPRESSED.’

‘AND YOU, BETH, YOU ARE THE REASON WHY.’

A merciless silence broke out between them. Rage and embarrassment took Kate, who made violent eyes at her agonized daughter. Beth simply felt it all— every conceivable crumb of sadness, desperation, tortuous grief. Not a single syllable started on either tongue for what seemed like an eternity, until suddenly, as though the words had climbed from somewhere rabid and rooted within, Beth screamed,

‘YOU DON’T TOUCH US. YOU DON’T KISS US OR HUG US OR HOLD US WHEN WE CRY YOU NEVER. TOUCH. US.’

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Before either creature could process Beth's words, hanging in the air like a rope-wrapped neck, crashing sounds began from Beth's bedroom.

Beth sprinted for the stairs immediately, panicking Kate who followed, and Caroline who followed Kate. The women darted through Beth's doorway, only to discover a six year-old Jack, bawling his eyes out, in the pit of Beth's collapsed bedframe. He had trashed the room entirely— posters were ripped from walls, wardrobes had been flung open and their contents scattered across the floor, the bedside lampshade was ripped and the bulb shattered, incisions were made in the curtains, and there, on the wall above Beth's bed, written in black sharpie, were the words:

YOU MAKE YOUR NOISE. I MAKE MINE.

That detrimental Friday in June was the last time Kate ever saw Caroline, it was the last time anybody made that much noise at number twenty-two, and those big black letters, those harrowing words, they hung before Beth in the moments where Jack rocked her limp frame, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and back and forth.

The Letty's called Kate, informing her that Jack had *had another incident* and that Kieron had been injured in the process. Kate was working a night shift at the shop when she received the call, from Steven, for Caroline's number had been blocked. She rushed home rapidly to retrieve her son, who laid, in fractions, on Beth's bedroom floor. The following weekend was Jack's eighteenth birthday. Jack felt impartial to turning eighteen, accepting the milestone with neither excitement nor resentment. He had become the man of his house at only four, captain of his local under ten's football team at seven, and had worked eighteen hour weeks, minimum, since fourteen, on top of school. If becoming an adult meant unsought responsibility, Jack's childhood had escaped him at the full speed of light a long time ago. If becoming an adult meant unsought responsibility, Kate Myers had entered adulthood mere days ago, for she had done something she had never attempted before— she had planned a nice day for her son. Kate began setting the table at eleven in the morning, guests were expected at two ish, and Jack was helping her fold paper napkins and lay out paper plates, 'So there's no washing up,' Kate had said, 'it's genius.'

Number twenty-two had never looked so inviting— the floor had been swept and mopped, every surface bleached and scrubbed, every window polished, every pair of curtains parted wide open, and an *18 today!* banner hung from the wall behind the kitchen table. There was a variety of drinks and picky bits presented prettily on the bar cart Jack's grandparents had gifted him, along with a fancy fifteen-year-old whiskey that read *Matured in European Oak Casks* on the bottle. Jack was expecting a fair few arrivals— a few work mates from the BP garage, Lyle from Lyle's, an old school mate or two and most importantly, Beth, due to return that afternoon from a strenuous, however, successful recovery at *Waterloo Manner Psych Ward and Hospital for Women*. Jack hid his whiskey and nipped out quickly to purchase a range of soft drinks, the intention being to show support for Beth's sobriety. When he returned, he lined up his findings— orange juice, apple juice, sparkling non-alcoholic wine, Fanta of every available flavour, even tomato juice— so that Beth felt catered for, thought of, looked after.

Jack felt genuinely giddy for the first time in a long time when he heard the doorbell sound. He tucked his shirt in to his jeans coyly, corrected his posture and opened the front door readily, only to greet an unanticipated postman with an almost

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grisly grin. Jack was then handed a large, blue envelope— a birthday card from the Lettys. It was lengthy and awkward and sorrowful, explaining, in Caroline’s usual courteous drawl, that although Kieron appreciated the invitation and hoped Jack had a *splendid do*, she was no longer comfortable with him attending the occasion, suggesting the boys spend some time apart. Jack’s stomach plummeted as his brain began to swarm with anxious questions and discomfoting, barely-there memories, invading his headspace like gunshots.

If only Kieron had accepted the invitation, if only he had shown his face, despite it all. If only the Letty’s had understood Jack’s outburst, the trauma, the episode, if only they could forgive and forget, sympathise, even, or walk a mile in his shoes. If only Beth had been expected back, safe and sound and sober from *Waterloo Manner* that afternoon, if only it wasn’t too late. If only she hadn’t died the first time, in her brothers’ arms, five years ago, aged twenty-two, at number twenty-two, if only the loop would cease. Jack felt his front pocket begin to vibrate, Beth—