



A note from Jo

New landscapes always inspire me to write. Our surroundings shape our lives in the same way that prevailing winds bend trees. And emotions are universal, so travel well. This story emerged during a lovely family holiday to Dorset in the south of England. I scared myself silly on this cliff top near Weymouth. I suffer vertigo but got drawn right to the edge. It was lonely and bleak—a bit too close to the elements. A place where a person might realize she's no longer afraid because she's already fallen.

The Lily Stains White

There is no sign of my family on the cliff top. As I approach the edge, the sound of the surf swarms up the bluff and I brace myself for an impact that never comes. I drop onto my hands and knees—afraid that the buffeting wind might whip me up like a piece of litter—and crawl the last few metres to look down on the beach. The waves batter pebbles so they flail around. Exposed by the morning light, they look alive, as frenetic as children in a playground. But there are no children on the beach. Only a lone figure in a jazzy raincoat following a dog past the ribs of a ship-wrecked barge.

Edging back to the path, I brush dirt off my jeans and head down the hill. I straddle the stile where my daughter fell on the first day of the holiday and stride past the stone marker where she sat while I pressed a scarf to her bleeding scalp. The quarter mile to our hamlet passes unseen as I replay moments from a week beset by mishap, our mood as clouded by disappointment as the sky that

threw itself over us like an unwashed duvet over the head of a depressive. I trot up the steps to our “cottage”, which has the condemned air of a retirement home: windows as dark as the barrel of a gun.

Inside, standing in the bay window of the living area, I realize it feels like we’ve been here much longer than seven days. And yet I also recall very little of the week; holiday time is slippery and I can’t cling to memories. But I do remember gathering in this same spot on the first day, as though awaiting further instruction at a muster point. Jim brought in the bags and also a bunch of flowers: lilies. For me. The kids looked both impressed and disgusted, as though we’d revealed that we were swinging partners with a celebrity couple. My husband kissed me on the forehead before going to the huge window. “It’ll cheer up soon,” he said, nodding at the squalls that swept along the beach like a murmuration of starlings. He’s the optimistic one. The lilies held their mouths tightly closed. “I’ll get this place cleaned up,” I said, and took the flowers with me to find a vacuum cleaner while Jim complained that the house was fine. It wasn’t fine.

Now, seven days later, I scan the paddock where Cuckoo and Bluebeard graze. The kids are not stroking them, nor are they at the beach or in the garden or down the lane. There’s no note from my husband. Maybe they left me to sleep and set off along the coastal path for a final walk? I clear away evidence of a hurried breakfast and try not to mind that they have gone off without me on the last day of our holiday.

As I slice strawberries, I listen to the frantic cries of a wren. Dumpy little bird, powerful voice. Nobody would notice the wren if she didn’t sing so hard. My knife slides to a halt in the red flesh and I remember that the wren disturbed me much earlier that morning, at first light. It’s so quiet now. The house bulging with emptiness. I wipe my fingers and throw down the stained tea towel. Jim’s number comes up first in my favourites and I dial it, then my daughter’s, then my son’s. They all ring out. The kitchen is filthy. Unlike the previous occupants, I will clean up. I suppose I have been left to clean up.

I empty the fridge and cook the leftover sausages to charcoal. The lilies gape at me, dripping rust onto the tablecloth, but I'm loathe to bin them because Jim never buys flowers and I don't want him to find me unappreciative. I give them fresh water and after I've cleaned up the house, I eat a cold sausage standing at the bay window, watching as Cuckoo and Blackbeard toss their heads and gallop about the paddock. The wind is getting up again. It's lunchtime already; check-out time. I hide the door key in the usual place and set out to look for them. I pound along the coastal path as far as the caravan park in one direction and then backtrack though our hamlet all the way to the village.

Coming back along the beach, panic rising with the late tide, I scutter from rock to rock, slipping on the slick rim of seaweed, flicking away flies and sand hoppers, accepting the marine stink. No-one from the steady stream of dog walkers has seen a man with two children. One adds that I should keep my kids away from the mudstone cliffs when the storm comes. Risk of landslides. Her disregard of the issue at hand—what seems like a wilful missing of the point that my kids are already lost—makes me feel more alone than ever. As she slip-slides over the stones, I realise her bright jacket is the same one I saw from the cliff that morning: her two devoted dog-walks bracket the entire time that my family has been missing.

For the first time, I acknowledge that word: missing. What is the difference between not knowing where someone is and someone going missing? I look out over the ribbons of waves; at what point is someone no longer swimming but drowning?

I must go back and phone the police. I have never before phoned the police and I start to think about what to say and how I might sound. But as I climb the slope, I catch a shimmer beyond a high mound of rocks further along the beach: an old landslide. I hurry across the loose boulders, then, when the going is too slow, jump onto the harder-packed stones at the waterline and run, stumbling over a whitecap that swipes my ankles. Decorum slips away like sand through my fingers. The dark shimmer behind the boulders could be a child bending to a rock pool. I scramble up the stones, scratching the heel of my palm on a patch of fossilised wood, and make the top. I stand

up into sea spray that whips my hair back. The beach beyond is empty—no children, not even their spongy footprints in the sand—save for a Peregrine Falcon whose shadow glides across the shining rocks as it struggles to hover in the unruly wind. It swoops into some long grass and I turn back before I see if it has caught any prey.

The police arrive at twilight. I am waiting outside on the terrace, smoking a cigarette. They arrive suddenly even though I'm waiting for them, two figures coming round the unkempt hedge that has old crisp packets trapped in it like faded riding rosettes. I rub out the cigarette on the bark of a tree. The policewoman's eyes notice and I wonder if she disapproves of my bad habit or my abuse of the tree. I make a point of dropping the butt conscientiously into the wheelie bin.

“Mrs Fallon?” The policewoman arrives with her hand out. I shake her hand and then her colleague's, but their names slip right through my head like unravelling knots and I don't say a word because I'm grasping for the loose ends. She steadies me with a hand that is as warm and soft as a bun.

“Jocelyn,” I say, “call me Jocelyn. I have to show you something, inside.”

The woman PC gestures for me to lead the way, so I do. We walk through the living area and straight up the stairs to the tiny attic room with twin beds.

“You see?” I say, when they fill the room behind me. “All their stuff has gone. Everything.”

“Whose room—?”

“The kids were in here. My son and daughter. I came upstairs after I phoned you and it was empty.”

“Excuse me.” The policewoman squeezes past and turns down the duvet on one of the beds. The top pillow rolls plumply off the other. She gets her face down into the sheets and sniffs. “Can still smell the fabric softener. Doesn't seem slept in.” She turns to me as she says this.

“My son slept in that bed last night. I tucked him in. And my daughter slept over here.”

The male officer opens the drawers in the chest with his sleeves pulled down over his fingers. The drawers are empty. No superhero pyjamas in the bottom one. No trainer bras in the top. It's like they'd never been here.

"They're gone," I say.

The policewoman suggests we start from the beginning.

We go through it downstairs. The policeman creaks about behind me and I lose my train of thought when I hear the cellar door drag on the carpet or the toilet cistern being lifted. But I relate the events of the day, from the dream to the Peregrine Falcon, and say too many times that I should have called the police earlier. She doesn't disagree, which is why I get caught in a loop of saying it. She makes notes. She doesn't use her radio. She isn't 'calling it in', as they say on the TV. She wants to talk about the past week. Our holiday.

"It helps me to establish your family routine", she says. "Breakfast time, bed time, that sort of thing."

Later on, she wants to know the places we've been, people we've seen.

"We haven't seen people," I say. "Not to talk to. We're on holiday. We don't know anyone."

"What about the kids? Any holiday romances?"

"They're a bit young for that sort of thing."

"Your daughter is 13?" She thinks I'm naive. "Beach buddies, then? Other families in the neighbouring houses?"

"We've been the only ones on the beach most days. It's not a sandy beach, you see, only good for fossiling, and then most people drive down the coast to Charmouth."

The policeman comes in while I'm saying this last bit. He lets me finish, then whispers in her ear. She flicks back over her notes, two pages now.

"Mrs Fallon?" she says, looking right into my eyes. "What are your children's names?"

"Haven't you—?"

“We’ve been talking about them for more than half an hour, and you haven’t used their names.”

Can that be true?

“Ben and Natascha. With a C. In Natascha. Her date of birth is—“

“And your husband?”

“Jim. Or James. James Fallon.”

“And the four of you are on holiday?”

“Yes, I’ve told you—“

“Because, Mrs Fallon, PC Mills has been through every room in the house and he can’t find any sign of your husband either. No men’s clothes, no shaving equipment, no beer in the fridge. You’ve been here for a week, but most of the towels haven’t been used. And there’s hardly any rubbish in the bin.”

“The bin men came this morning.”

The woman is watching my reaction. Her face is not accusing or angry, but something else. I push my hair back with both hands. It must look crazy after the windy beach.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “but I’ve forgotten your name again.”

“PC Legg.”

“Their things were here earlier when I cleaned up. I’d like to check the house myself, please, PC Legg.”

“Would you like me to—?” She half rises as she says this, but I wave her to sit down.

I get up and go through the rooms. They are right. Jim’s stuff is gone. In the bathroom, the white porcelain shines under the spotlight.

I am sitting on the bed. My side of the bed. His side would feel unnatural. When we first met, we thought it was a *sign* that he preferred the left and I the right. We used to marvel at what would hap-

pen if two people loved each other but could only sleep on the same side of the bed. Would practicality kill romance? In truth, I didn't care all that much either way, but Jim did so I went along with it. But, at some point over the years, it turned into my 'thing', like *I* was the fussy one. But I'm sure it started with him. Or do I misremember? The same way that I have now, apparently, misremembered having a husband and two children who spent a week with me in this holiday cottage beside the beach in Dorset?

The stairs groan a warning that I am on my way down. PC Legg hands me a cup of tea so I thank her but set it down. Instead, I push my phone, which I have retrieved from the bedside charger, across the table.

"Photos," I say. "I have hundreds of photos on my iPhone. Thousands. Look."

PC Legg is interested. She shuffles her chair closer to mine.

I open the Photos app. *You have no images stored in your library.* I come out of the app and open it again. Same message. PC Legg's eyes are on me like a heat lamp. I search through my iPhone. The Instagram app has gone altogether. So has Facebook. I open an Internet browser and go to Dropbox, where my login fails. I wonder if the policewoman can smell my armpits sizzling because I can.

We two women watch each other across the table. I cradle the phone in my hands, though what I want to do is hurl it through the glass of the bay window, where I get stared out by a reflection of myself; a washed-out blur on the sofa. I get up and walk to the window, cupping my hands round my face to block the light and see into the darkness. The cliff top curves away, darkly massive, like Jim's back turned to me in bed. I face PC Legg.

"What normal person has no photos on their iPhone?" I ask. "No Facebook? Nothing at all?"

"I don't follow your meaning, Mrs Fallon."

I sit on the edge of the sofa to be closer to her. "Do you have an iPhone, PC Legg?"

She nods. "I have a Smartphone, yes."

“And do you take photos with it?”

“Yes.”

“Do you, PC Mills?” I turn to ask him. He fills the doorway like a bouncer.

“Yes.”

“That’s my point. Everyone does. Why would a person have an iPhone and not use it? Even if it’s just cats or sunsets, people always have photos. I had thousands—the phone was so full, I had to delete them as I went.”

“Are you saying, Mrs Fallon,” PC Legg, “that photos have been deleted from your phone?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. My children and husband are missing. I’m reporting them missing.”

I hear PC Mills’ shoes squeak on the linoleum as he turns into the kitchen again. The rumble of the kettle. PC Legg opens her notebook and turns the pages. But she’s not reading; she’s mulling over what I’ve said. It rings true and her chord is struck.

“We can test your phone, Mrs Fallon, to see if files have been deleted. But it will take time and if your children are missing, we need to move faster than that. I’m going to call it in.”

Her Smartphone comes out and rests on the table. First she wants details. The family home? I have already tried the landline and there was no reply. No, I don’t know any neighbours because we only just moved to the area and the house is remote, a barn conversion, a rental property while our own house is being rebuilt after a fire. It’s on the market because we don’t want to go back to our old home ever again. We are starting over: a new dental practice in a new town. Maybe I will go back to work myself. I show PC Legg Jim’s website. It says he is married with two school-age children, but of course it doesn’t mention me by name and I am only a home-maker so I don’t have a website. Then I remember something; I check that PC Mills is still in the kitchen and I pull down the front of my jeans. PC Legg holds up a hand even while her eyes flicker over my Caesarian scar. They come away filled with a new doubt.

I sit down, wishing I hadn't done that. It proves nothing beyond the fact that a child was once taken from my body. I have only registered myself as a candidate for a new category of crazy: woman driven mad by loss of child. PC Legg sighs and makes notes.

"Mrs Fallon?" PC Mills comes back from the kitchen, not holding a cup of tea, but instead my passport. "Mrs Jocelyn Fallon?"

"Yes, of course," I say.

He hands the passport to the policewoman. She glances at it, then passes it to me.

"Is this your passport? Or do you have a twin sister?" There's a warning note in her voice; I won't let you trick me twice.

It is indeed my photo, but when I see the printed name I close my eyes. I can't bear to see the world crumble.

Jacqueline O'Connor. It's kind of a pseudonym. And a message from my husband.

Please explain, says the policewoman. But I am not listening any more. I am talking.

Jaqi O is what I call myself sometimes. Online. O'Connor is my maiden name.

I stop and check the date by waking up my phone. That makes sense. It is the anniversary.

She asks about our wedding, but I shake my head. Not that kind of anniversary. There isn't really a word for the anniversary of a bad event, is there? Memorial suggests death, but nobody died.

PC Legg sighs again and shifts in her chair.

I had an affair, is how I begin. Affairs, actually. Plural. Numerous. Via online hook-up sites.

Tinder? says the male one. PC Legg shoots him a look.

Not Tinder, more private than that: Ashley Madison, that kind of thing. I call them *affairs*, coyly, but I never met the same one twice. Novelty was the whole point. Having someone focus on me. Pay attention to me. Because once someone has seen it all before, they just climb inside and leave their rubbish behind as though I'm a hire car.

The police are so still by now it's almost comical.

Anyway, today is the anniversary of getting caught. I had told my husband I was going to the gym. I met the hook-up in a pub. As usual, we drove in my car to the nature reserve. But, unbeknownst to me, my daughter had lost her iPad and got Jim to do a 'locate device' search on his phone. It showed up in the car park by the nature reserve, where he assumed it had been dumped by a thief. It was only three miles from home, so he got into his car with Natascha and Ben, and they all came to find it. Instead, they found me.

There is a long silence in the holiday cottage. If the police expect me to feel ashamed, they can screw themselves. I plumbed the depths of shame when I was hauled out of a Range Rover and paraded in front of my own children with white stains on my dress. The family car, Jim kept saying, the *family* car. I'm beyond embarrassment.

My hands have stopped shaking so I pick up my tea and sip. I feel calmer now that I know the children are safe. I mean, they're not at the bottom of a cliff, buried in a landslide. Jim doesn't want to hurt them: only me. At least I understand. It is almost a relief, like waiting for an injection that doesn't hurt too much. I drink the tea. The whole *affair* had been glossed over too easily. For months I waited for legal papers. Or at the very least a request for couples therapy. But nothing. We even made love, slightly rougher than before. You might say better. And the fire that gutted our home distracted us. We were just glad to be alive.

But now I see that all this time—for one whole year—he has been plotting. A big white pill plinks into my brain and fizzes with truth: he set the fire, burning away evidence of us, the paper trail that was me. Like a terrorist planning a 'spectacular', he made me think he was one of us, but in fact he was one of them. Because ever since they unearthed me at the nature reserve, my children have hated me. This may even be their idea.

Using the torchlight on my iPhone, I pick my way over the stile onto the coastal path. By the time I reach the cliff top, the sun is rising and I drop the phone on the grass. At the edge, I hear the waves

shushing the pebbles. I shuffle my feet forward to where the land crumbles. My weight sends dirt balls falling. I count how long they take to hit the beach, but they never land. Now I can't see the dirt beneath my feet because I am crying. Is this what they need me to do?

The police left after my confession, called to a more deserving incident: a road accident. No one chooses to crash—that's the implication; that I chose to crash because I'm just a dumpy little wren, singing her heart out.

I curl my toes over the edge.

Blades of grass cling to soil that has been washed thin by storms. The land could slide at any moment. A sudden movement to my left, a rush of white, and I jump back; a part of my mind applauds the arrival of my survival instinct. The blur was a sheep on the precipice. We saw her earlier in the week. Danger Sheep, my son named her—Ben named her—and sang the theme from Mission Impossible. Danger Sheep jogs down the slope and under the barbed wire fence, where she leaves a clump of wool. I follow her and pluck the wool free. It is nicotine yellow and greasy, but I rub it over my hands, letting the lanolin sooth the parched skin. The sea air desiccates me. From far along the beach, I hear a sharp whistle. No doubt it is the jazzy-coated walker, dutifully performing the morning ritual. I bet she doesn't fuck strangers when she should be loading the dishwasher. My hands will smell of sheep for the rest of the day. But there will be a day. And another day.

I walk back towards the hamlet. Straddling the stile, I rest for a moment, turning the wool in my hands. This is where my daughter fell a week ago. I scan the rough fence posts before jumping down to run my fingers across the knots and cracks. Natascha is tall, so I move further along the fence and there, caught in a whorl, is a clump of hair. Kneeling again in the dirt, I let the breeze drift her strands against my cheek, while the sea continues to grind down the land.