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That Girl from Nowhere

Written by Dorothy Koomson

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*That Girl From
Nowhere*

Dorothy
KOOMSON



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Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for
our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

This book is dedicated, with love, to my dad –
sometimes disapproving but *always* supportive.

Prologue

With Her, sometime soon, Brighton

‘You will help me, won’t you?’ she asks.

‘If I can,’ I reply. I wonder what she thinks someone she has just met will be able to help her do when she has a whole family down the hall in the living room who are at her beck and call. ‘What is it you want help with?’

This woman, my grandmother, who has only really been in my life for the past hour, fixes me with a gaze that is determined and a little frightening; woven through with strands of defiance. Maybe I was mistaken; maybe those outside this room aren’t as devoted and loving as I thought. Whatever it is that she wants to do is clearly something they’re unlikely to agree to. She says nothing for a time, and the longer she stares at me with her brown eyes, the colour dimmed by age, the more a feeling of dread meanders outwards from the pit of my stomach. I should not be sitting here having this conversation with this woman. I should have brought her back here and left her to it. The longer I sit here, the longer things are going to go wrong for me.

Eventually, so eventually I thought she was planning on remaining silent, she speaks. Cautiously, haltingly, she says: ‘My time has come. I am too old...too sick...too tired to carry on in this world.’ She pauses but her eyes continue to drill into me. ‘My time has come. I want...I want to leave this Earth. I need you to help me.’

Part 1

Smitty

‘Miss Smittson, it’s good to see you again.’

‘You, too, Mr Wallace,’ I reply. I smile at him and shove my hands into the pockets of my combat trousers to avoid having to shake hands with him. I’ve met him twice before – both times I’ve had to do it and both times his hand has been hot and clammy. The images of what he could have done to get it that way were a horror movie that played constantly through my head.

Mr Wallace, in a shabby, too-tight black suit, offers me his hand to shake. I hesitate. The rest of him seems dry and normal, I wonder if he’d accept a hug instead? It would get me out of touching his hand without seeming rude and it’d be altogether better for my mental health. He pulls a smile across his face, sticks his hand out a little bit further. Defeated, I offer up my hand to be encased in his moist, sweaty palm. The touch of him sends a shudder through me and I can’t take my hand away fast enough, but not too fast in case he notices and his feelings are hurt. Maybe he can’t help being sweaty-palmed, maybe he has a condition and it’s not his fault. Maybe the horror movie in my head has got it all wrong and he doesn’t do unsavoury things in his car before he meets clients.

Mr Wallace’s attention strays to the older woman with wavy brown, grey-streaked hair who stands silently beside me. He smiles curiously at us both, waiting for an introduction.

Mum has obviously noticed how reluctant I was to shake the estate

agent's hand so has taken to holding her bag in both hands, rendering them incapable of being shaken when I do the introductions.

'Mr Wallace, this is my mother, Heather Smittson,' I say. 'Mum, this is the estate agent who's dealing with renting the flat.'

Immediately, Mr Wallace's face does *that thing*. 'That thing' most people who don't know my family do: he double-takes, then rapidly moves his gaze from one of us to the other, wondering why the visuals don't match the words. After the staring comes the perplexed, suspicious frown and, right on cue, Mr Wallace's confusion develops on his face until he is frowning very hard indeed at us.

We're in the car park of a beautiful, reddish-yellow-brick, art deco block of flats on Hove seafront. This is going to be my new home, the place for my fresh start. Everything bad is three hundred miles away and in that place called 'the past' while everything good is here, and about to happen in that shiny new destination called 'the future'.

Except little snags like this, a man who is nearer to Mum's age than mine, giving us his version of Paddington Bear's hard stare because he doesn't understand why Mum is my mother and why I am her daughter. To him, it surely shouldn't be possible.

Mum suddenly needs something from her handbag, and she pops the black leather rectangle open and starts to ferret furiously through it. Clearly what she is searching for is so important the world might end if she doesn't find it RIGHT NOW. What she is actually doing is her version of 'Lalalalalala not happening', which she does every time she might need to explain our situation. If the handbag thing doesn't work, she'll simply wander off, pretending that she doesn't know we're in the middle of a conversation.

With Mum making it clear with every root through her meticulously organised bag that she isn't going to be forthcoming, Mr Wallace returns to me. It's now my job to explain. I'm supposed to say, 'I'm adopted'. To let him know that Mum and Dad did the whole white parents taking on black children thing well before various celebs made it fashionable. He stares at me, I stare at him – he wants answers to his unasked questions, I'm not giving them. I haven't got the energy.

As if someone On High knows I need rescuing, Mr Wallace's left, inside breast pocket begins to vibrate before the tinny, tiny sound of 'YMCA' joins it. 'Oh, excuse me,' he says and reaches for it. He checks the screen, grimaces, struggles with himself. 'I'm sorry, I have to get this. It's an emergency waiting to happen. Do you mind?' He's pressed the answer button and put it to his ear before I even have a chance to react. He wanders away from us, heading across the promenade and towards the blue-green railings that separate land from sea.

'Well, that was rude,' Mum states. She removes her head and her hand from her bag, snaps it closed again with a loud click as the brass clasp shuts itself tight. 'We were in the middle of a conversation.'

'*You mean I was,*' the person I am in my head says. '*You were going, "lalalala, not happening".*' The person I actually am says, 'It's fine, Mum. It gives us a chance to have a proper look at the place. So what do you think?'

This building is as beautiful as it is commanding. The bottom part of it is painted cream and looks from a distance like a short, satiny cream skirt, while the top half looks like it has been dressed in a blouse of russet sandstone. The corners of the building are curved instead of pointed and the whole of the top floor is apparently one penthouse apartment. My flat is on the first floor, and most of it overlooks the sea. I'd spent far too much money on renting it, even with the huge discount I'd got because it'd been empty for so long and the owners were desperate to fill it. It didn't matter about the money right now, it would come out of my savings, and it was only for six months before I decided what to do next.

Mum, who rarely shows if she is impressed, rotates slowly on the spot, stares at the sea, which today is a shimmery azure, and takes in the matching-coloured sky that is crammed with white, floccose clouds. While she looks, I retrieve my small instant camera from the left knee pocket of my navy blue combat trousers and flick it on. I need to take a snapshot of this moment so I can write underneath it: *With Mum, May 2015, Outside New Home (Brighton/Hove)* and stick it up on my wall. A reminder of the moment my new life began.

In my right knee pocket my mobile buzzzz-buzzzz-tings for probably the fiftieth time today. I ignore my phone and take the shot, capturing our proximity to the sea as well as the look of the building.

‘Who is it that keeps sending you messages?’ Mum asks. She can’t ignore it any longer. She’s held her tongue all day but this is the text that has sent her over the edge. She sounds so miffed anyone would think it was her who was being texted at least six times an hour all day. Mum becomes diabolically upset with people who use ‘text’ as a verb. (It’s actually worth doing it just to see her nostrils flare and her eyes turn into hard blue lasers seeking to burn your tongue out of your head for such an evil act.) ‘They were sending messages the whole of the journey and even now when you haven’t replied. Who is it?’

‘Who do you think it is?’ I reply, a little more tartly than is necessary.

‘Didn’t you tell him that you don’t want to see him any more?’ she asks.

She says that like it was a casual fling – not a twelve-year, cohabiting relationship – that he should really be over by now.

‘Well, didn’t you?’ she demands to my silence.

‘Yes, of course I did.’

‘Then why is he still sending you messages?’

For the same reason that I’m still reading them: I don’t want it to be over; I don’t want any of this to have happened; I want to be living at home in Leeds with our plans for the future and my eye on that shop in the Victoria Quarter. I want to be making jewellery, and arguing about my mess, and planning days out in our campervan. I want the life I was promised and thought I was going to live before all of this happened. It’s the same for him, I’d imagine.

I can’t talk about this with anyone, but especially not with her when she made it clear over the years how little she thought of him. ‘I don’t know why he’s still texting, Mum.’ Like clockwork her eyes harden and her nostrils show their annoyance at the text verb. ‘Maybe he thinks if he sends me enough messages I’ll change my mind.’

‘Typical,’ she mumbles nowhere near under her breath. ‘I never did like the way he was so confident and sure of himself.’

‘Really?’ I reply. ‘Cos I always loved that about him.’

‘And look where that got you,’ Mum says. Shocked, I take a step back. She’s not normally that spiteful. Her words usually have a sting to them, but that was like a nasty stab from a vicious weapon and it’s hit me square in the chest, right over my heart, right where everything seems to ache from at the moment.

Mum, even though she must have seen my reaction, and noticed that I have stepped away from her, is openly unapologetic as she observes me.

‘*Oh, get knotted,*’ teeters on the tip of my tongue, while huge tears are cramming themselves into my eyes. I take another step back and force myself to look away because I’m not sure if swearing at my mother or crying in front of her would be the worst thing to do right now.

With Seth & Dylan, November 1996, Liverpool

‘Can I get you a drink?’ The man who asked this question looked vaguely familiar, fitted right into this university world of distantly remembered, partially recalled faces.

He had come over and sat down on the stool on the other side of the table in the area of the student bar where Dylan, the absolute love of my life, had unintentionally annexed these last few weeks we’d been here. Dylan was like The Fonz in that people were drawn to him; they hung out near him like groupies around a rock star and didn’t seem to mind if he didn’t actually get around to talking to them during their time together in the bar. Today was one of those rare occasions where it was only Dylan and me having a drink after an additional early evening tutorial that only he and I had turned up for. Other lectures hadn’t started or were about to finish, and in that lull I’d managed to get him all to myself. I was relishing every last second – until this guy appeared.

Like most of the people I met at college, I wasn’t sure if this new bloke was someone I’d seen around – in halls, in the library, right here in the bar – or if I’d met him before I arrived at Liverpool University to study Political Science.

‘I’ll have a pint if you’re buying,’ Dylan replied to the new man.

‘I wasn’t asking you,’ the new man said good-naturedly. ‘I was asking your friend.’

I pointed to myself in surprise. ‘Me?’ Male or female, no one noticed me when I was sitting with Dylan. He was far too rock star-like.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘No. Thank you, but no.’

‘Make the most of it while you can,’ Dylan laughed. ‘Seth’s not exactly known for reaching into his pocket unprompted.’

‘Think you’re mistaking me for yourself there, mate,’ the new guy, Seth, replied. ‘Which is why I’m not offering to buy you a drink – you owe me a couple of thousand of them.’

Dylan laughed again.

‘Does your mum like *Emmerdale Farm*, by any chance?’ I asked. She may have had a special interest in Greek mythology but I was guessing modern-day TV was probably more her thing.

Seth nodded slowly. ‘I got off quite lightly,’ he said then laughed. When he laughed his pink lips moved back to show his perfect white teeth, while his hazel-green eyes danced with mirth and kindness. ‘My brother’s called Sugden. We’ve got Alans and Jacks in our extended family so Sugden he was named.’

‘That’s not true,’ I scoffed.

‘It is, actually,’ Dylan said. ‘I’ve known Seth since we were in nursery. Grew up near-ish to each other over the years. Now, apparently, he’s transferred to do Political Science here, too. Can’t get away from him, it seems. But yes, his brother is called Sugden. His family’s dead posh and all, you’d think his mother would have some shame about it, but she’s unrepentant.’

Seth nodded.

‘Seth,’ I said contemplatively.

‘Yes?’

‘Nothing, I was just turning the name over in my mouth. I don’t think I’ve ever said it before.’

From the corner of my eye I saw Dylan's head turn towards me before he frowned.

'What's your name?' Seth asked.

'Clemency Smittson. I'm only telling you my surname because my friends call me Smitty. My dad started it when I was about twelve, drove my mum wild with annoyance, but it stuck.'

'I see.' He nodded. 'The question for me then is: are you a Smitty or a Clem to me?' It was Seth's turn to receive a small, suspicious frown from Dylan but Seth didn't seem to notice. Or if he did, he didn't care. Seth got to his feet, still staring intently at me. 'I shall ponder which one I think you are to me on my way to the bar. Are you sure you don't want a drink?'

'Actually, I think I will. Half a lager and lime, please.'

'A half with lime it is.'

Once Seth had left our vicinity, Dylan sat back in his seat, his body slid down a bit against his part of the corner sofa we'd commandeered and he stared at me with his head slightly to one side as though sizing me up. Eventually, when he'd watched me study Seth at the bar, he said to me: 'Don't go there, Smitty.'

'Go where?' I asked.

'*You know*,' he hissed irritably. 'Don't do it. Not with him.'

'Why not?'

'Just don't, all right?' He glanced over at Seth, which made me look at him too. 'We're all young, just starting college... don't be getting involved with blokes like him.'

'Why? Is he a complete bastard?'

'Nah... He's a nice guy. And if you do it with him, you'll fall in love with him or something equally stupid and he'll probably fall in love with you. It's too soon when you're still in college.'

'You are pulling my leg,' I said to him. I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing.

'No, no, I'm not. Not really. I just don't think... Look, being honest, I wouldn't like it. You're my friend, not his.'

Dylan and I had been 'friends' since the first week in college when I sat next to him in our Political Foundations class. I had turned to

ask him what time the lecture was due to finish and found my voice had abandoned me. He was simply the most beautiful man I had ever seen. With his dark olive skin, close-cut black hair, huge brown eyes, and easy, natural smile, I fell for him straight away. It was impossible not to. Over the next few lectures we'd discovered we had the same sense of humour and liked the same music and films so I rather easily slotted into becoming one of his groupies. For the most part I didn't mind because very few of the other groupies had all the same classes as him, so didn't get to spend as much time with him in and out of class as I did. What he was saying now, though, was that I was a cut above the entourage of good-looking women who seemed to draw his attention; I was different. He would be bothered if I slept with someone else.

'Are you seriously saying you wouldn't like me going out with Seth because he's a nice guy?' I asked.

'Going out?' Dylan said despairingly. 'Smitty, you've just met the guy. I'm only saying I don't think you should go there, all right?' He shrugged. 'Please. I've known him a long time, me and him are good mates. Me and you are good... well, whatever. Just don't.'

'It's nice of you to care about my feelings so much,' I replied casually. Inside... Inside all my internal organs were dancing: Dylan liked me enough to be jealous.

'I've thought long and hard,' Seth stated. He placed our two drinks on the table, ignored Dylan's grumbles about being left out and focused on me. 'I've decided you're going to be Smitty to me. Mind if I call you Smitty?'

My grin must have taken him by surprise. He had done me the hugest favour – he'd made me interesting *and* desirable in Dylan's eyes. Dylan wanted me. I never thought that would happen. Not ever. 'You certainly can call me Smitty. In fact, I'd be offended if you didn't.'

'Excellent,' Seth replied.

Really excellent, I thought as Dylan sat up, and with one hand picked up his almost empty glass and took a sip, while under the table, his other hand moved possessively on to my leg and stayed there. *Really, really excellent.*

Mr Wallace finishes his call and starts his way back to us. I am furiously blinking away tears, trying to sweep aside the pain from my mother's words and slowly the agony starts to recede while calmness takes over. Mum is still staring at me but I ignore her and focus on Mr Wallace, concentrate on not revealing how much she's hurt me. 'Many apologies for that, ladies,' he says. 'Now, if you'll follow me, I'll show you into your new home.'

Oh yes, like things aren't bad enough, my mother is also moving in with me.