
Opening Extract from...

The New Woman

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Published by Allen & Unwin

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ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Allen & Unwin

First published in Australia in 2015 by Allen & Unwin
(under the title *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone*)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN 978 1 74331 875 1
E-book ISBN 978 1 92526 671 9

Set in 11.5/15.5 pt Sabon by Post Pre-press Group, Australia
Printed in Great Britain

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Petra King, with my thanks and admiration.

What are little boys made of?
Slugs and snails, and puppy dogs' tails.
That's what little boys are made of.

What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice, and all things nice.
That's what little girls are made of.

Traditional nursery rhyme

Let me tell you a story. Please hear me out, because it will not be easy for me to tell, nor for you to understand. What happened was the last—the absolute last—thing I expected. I never saw it coming until it smashed into my life. I need you to see why I did as I did. I need you to walk in my shoes.

There was once a girl called Eilish French. She was a noisy child, with a bird's nest of hair and socks around her ankles. Her parents divorced bloodily and expensively when she was very small. Though they loathed one another by the time their private war was over, both of them doted on their only child. I'm afraid she was rather spoiled. In those days she wanted to be an air hostess. Then she thought perhaps she would be a pilot, or a brain surgeon, or a film star, or possibly a nun. Each dream gave way to another, and each was abandoned. In the end, she landed a job in marketing at much the same time as Margaret Thatcher arrived in Downing Street.

Eilish attacked her career with a ruthlessness that shamed her later when she thought back on it. A trade magazine described her as a rising star. Her long-term boyfriend, who was a stockbroker, said rising stars had no time for him and found someone who did. Her mother berated her for her carelessness in losing

a very eligible man, but Eilish wasn't sorry to see him go. She could not shake off the feeling that she was in limbo, waiting for something.

And then she met a young solicitor called Luke Livingstone, and knew that the waiting was over. Everyone at the wedding agreed that they were a golden couple, sure to live Happily Ever After; and so it seemed to be. As the decades passed they became parents and even grandparents. Life wasn't all plain sailing, but there was enough love and laughter to carry it along. After all, what marriage is ever without its rough weather? Luke succeeded in his own career, and she forged a new one. It brought her far less income—but far greater satisfaction—than marketing ever had. They lived in a picture-book house. Their pond was a haven for wild ducks; their kitchen a haven for lame ones, who found warmth around its table. At weekends the place rang with the sounds of friendship and conversation.

Girl meets boy. They fall in love, and they marry. That should have been the end of the story.

For thirty years they shared one another's lives.

Thirty years.

Thirty.

I thought I knew that man. I thought I had been shown into every corner of his mind, that he'd shared every fear, every hidden longing. I thought he kept no secrets from me.

Turns out I never knew him at all.

This is his story. And mine.

One

Luke

She answered on the fifth ring, breathy because she'd rushed in from her mowing. I imagined her in gardening clothes: those faded jeans that still fitted as though she were twenty years old, and one of my old shirts, her auburn hair tied up in a silk scarf. My beautiful wife.

'On the train now. I'm finished in Norwich,' I said.

'Wonderful!' She sounded happy. It made my heart ache. 'So you'll be home for supper?'

I had my story planned. 'Look, I've got too many emails marked urgent. I think I'd better stay at the flat tonight, go into Bannermans tomorrow and tackle the backlog.'

'You all right?' she asked.

'Fine.'

'Tired?'

'Not really.' I rallied myself. 'So, school term has ended! How was your—'

A blast of sound rocked the carriage as we shot into a tunnel. The mobile connection was broken. I'd lost her. I would call again later, and find some way to say goodbye.

The train was half empty. Diagonally across from me, sharing my table, an elderly woman frowned at a crossword. And, of

course, there was the man in the window. He filled my peripheral vision, floating just beyond the inky glass. I knew he was watching me: middle-aged, middle everything in striped shirtsleeves and a tie; dark hair, now a little grey, sweeping above his ears. Neat features. Good looking, according to Eilish and Kate, though to me he'd always been grotesque. When I turned my head, my eyes met the cavernous ones in the black mirror. We stared at one another in mutual dislike. *Not long now*, I thought with triumph. *I'll be rid of you forever.* Then the tunnel ended, and the grey ghost faded into a grey sky.

There were things to be done. Final things. I dug in my briefcase for writing paper and fountain pen. Neither my mind nor my eyes wanted to focus, but I made myself concentrate. I owed my family that. I had one last letter to finish. It was to my Kate: twenty-two years old, pierced in nose and navel; the most precious young woman in the universe.

I hope you find as much love and happiness in your life as I have with your mother. You have been my joy. Do not change, darling daughter. Do not underestimate your gifts. You have the power to make the world a better place.

I'd crossed out two versions and begun a third when the train checked, slowed, and halted. Silence. The scratching of my pen seemed much too loud, so I put it down. Across the aisle a young fellow in a suit kept rattling his packet of crisps. It's a sound that annoys Kate intensely; if she'd been in my seat she might have leaned over and snatched them out of his hand. The woman across from me seemed to feel the same, because she clicked her tongue at every crackle or crunch.

Minutes passed. The temperature rose. The crisp packet rattled. At last the guard's voice thundered over the intercom: it was a signals failure, apparently. He would like to apologise on behalf of Anglian Trains.

'Doesn't sound very apologetic,' remarked the woman. Her hair was absolutely white. A jacket and beret—in matching crimson velvet—lay on the seat beside her. We shook our heads,

and I said, 'Good old British Rail, come back, all is forgiven.' Similar sentiments were murmured all around the carriage as strangers united in their irritation. I loosened my tie and said I was going to get a drink from the buffet, and would she like anything?

She thanked me in the over-loud voice of the chronically deaf, reaching into her handbag. 'What a very civilised idea. Gin and tonic, please.'

By the time I returned, crisp-packet boy had donned a set of headphones and shut his eyes.

'Are you being met?' I asked my table-mate, as we poured our drinks. 'You're welcome to use my phone, if you need to contact anybody.'

'No, no. I shall hail a taxi.' She opened a tiny case, took out two hearing aids and slid one into each ear. They whistled as she adjusted them. 'You don't see those nowadays,' she said, nodding approvingly at my gold pen. 'Proper fountain pens. Proper ink.'

I smiled at the pen. 'This was a present from my children. It's an old friend. They had my name engraved on it, see?'

I pictured Kate and Simon—young then, perhaps twelve and eighteen. They'd wrapped up my birthday present and tied a blue ribbon around the parcel. I still kept the ribbon in a drawer of my desk.

I wished there were another way. I wished I didn't have to leave them.

My companion pulled her knitting from her bag, rolled wool around one finger and began to click at high speed. She talked and knitted, chuckling fondly as she described her great-grandchild Henry, and rather less fondly when it came to Henry's parents, who—she said—cared about nothing but material possessions. She herself was eighty-nine years old, and had been a teacher all her working life.

'My wife's a teacher too,' I said. 'Special needs. In a secondary school.'

'Is she *really*? That's enormously valuable. Aha!' The carriage had jerked, and was inching forwards. 'We may get to London today, after all.'

I may get to die today, after all.

'What's it going to be?' I asked, nodding at her handiwork.

'This? A jersey for Henry. He'd much rather be in a sweatshirt, I expect. With a hood, so that he can go rioting and not be recognisable on the closed-circuit cameras.'

I laughed at this, and she looked pleased. 'You have a family?' she asked.

'Two children.' *Three children*, I always think; but I never say it anymore. People ask what they're doing now, and I have to explain about Charlotte, and can see them thinking, *But she was only a few minutes old! Why count her?*

'Still at school?' asked the woman.

'Good Lord, no! Our second grandchild is on the way.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'You look young to be a grandparent.'

'Eilish and I will have been married thirty years come October.'

'Ah! The pearl anniversary.'

I felt my darkness deepening. 'She's planning a party to celebrate. Marquee, band, fireworks. Half the world's on the guest list. The invitations will be going out any day.'

'Lucky man.' Milky blue eyes were fixed on me as she knitted. Loop, click, another loop.

'Yes. Lucky.'

'You don't sound at all enthusiastic.'

I tried to summon the energy to protest, to insist that I was hugely looking forward to the Big Event; but I hadn't the will. I felt transparent. Perhaps she knew what I was.

A stranger on a train. There was nobody I could possibly have told except a very old woman I'd never seen before and never would again.

'I won't be there,' I said. 'If all goes to plan I'll be gone by tomorrow morning. This signals failure on the line has prolonged my life.'

Her fingers stopped moving. 'May I ask why?'

'Because it's time. Because I have come to the end of a very long road.'

'But you have a choice. There's no need for such drastic measures.'

I drained my drink. It felt rough at the back of my throat. 'You were right when you described me as a lucky man,' I said, and coughed. 'Lucky, lucky. Everyone knows that. People kept telling me so on our wedding day—looking shocked, as though I'd somehow tricked her. Actually, it's true: I *did* trick her. Eilish French could have married anyone at all, but for some reason she chose me. Look—hang on . . .' I felt in the pocket of my jacket and pulled out a black and white photograph.

I'd taken the picture on a winter's evening when I'd just walked in from work and stopped in the doorway of the study. Her head was bent over some child's handwriting, her cheek freckled, her hands strong and sure. A coppery lock of hair had escaped from its velvet tie and brushed her mouth. It was one of many moments in our life together when I'd felt overwhelmed at the very sight of her. She had music playing on the stereo and the room seemed to swell with sound. I could still hear it, rippling across the rattle of the train. I hummed the melody under my breath. Debussy. It poured into me. It made me want to weep.

The woman put on her glasses to look. 'Ah, yes. Beautiful,' she said, before handing the photo back. 'I suppose you're having an affair. How very mediocre.'

'Worse. Much worse. I've been acting a part since the day we met. I'm not who she thinks I am.'

'Who are you, then?'

'I'm . . .' No. I couldn't tell her. My secret shame was too monstrous. 'Take my word for it. If Eilish knew the truth, it would destroy her.'

'Whereas your suicide will shower her with blessings?'

'You think I'm selfish. A selfish coward.'

'Hmm.' She considered the suggestion, her head tilted to one side. After a moment she began counting rows, two by two, and I went back to staring out of the window.

I was the birthday boy, five years old, standing at the top of the very tall tree in our front garden. I felt the trunk sway in the wind but I wasn't frightened. I'd skinned my knee on the way up. A trickle of blood was snaking its way down to my sock. I could see across the garden, across the barns, right to the far end of the farm. They were having a party for me, down there in our house. My mother had invited all the boys in my class at school. I'd run away. I didn't want the party. I didn't want the boys. I didn't want to be me.

Then she found me. I could see the white oval of her upturned face, hear her voice high with panic. *Luke! Oh dear God, dear God. Hold tight!*

Something was whispering in my ear. *You don't have to hold tight*, it said. *You could just let go*. In my imagination it was a mummery figure with a red butterfly mouth. That was my first encounter with The Thought, and it stayed with me from that moment on. Other children had imaginary friends who tempted them to steal biscuits; mine nagged me to run in front of a lorry, or turn one of Dad's guns on myself. *No more*, it whispered each morning when the lonely child—the anxious adolescent—the despairing adult—opened his eyes and contemplated a world in which he didn't fit. *No more being Luke. No more being, at all.*

It was whispering to me right now, as I sat on the train.

'Don't give up,' said the woman across the table. I'd forgotten she was there.

'You're trying to be kind,' I said. 'Thank you. Thank you for your kindness, but you know nothing about me.'

'Perhaps I know something about how your wife will feel.'

'This is the best thing I can do for her.'

'I doubt it.'

I leaned closer, wanting her blessing. 'It's the right time,' I said. 'My father's died. He needed me, so I stayed; but now he's gone.

Our children are grown up. Eilish is a strong woman, and the finances are all arranged—she'll be able to live very comfortably.'

The woman looked severely at me, her brows drawn. 'Think of the poor person who has to scrape you off the railway line, or fish you out of the Thames.'

'No, no,' I said. 'I've thought of that. I've everything I need in our flat in London. It won't be messy. I've planned a way to make sure I'm found by someone who won't care. He's ex-SAS.'

'Even ex-SAS soldiers have feelings, I expect.'

'Not this one. And especially not about this, because he doesn't like me very much.'

She completed several more rows of knitting before she tackled me again. 'You're not quite sure, though, are you? When you spoke before of your family, of your wife . . . there's ambivalence. I can hear it.'

She was right. My family. Eilish. I felt something blocking my throat.

'My husband once made a mistake,' said the woman, laying down her knitting. 'He worked for a charity. He cooked the books; embezzled money to pay our children's school fees, though he never told me we were struggling. They could have gone to the local school, for heaven's sake, it wouldn't have been the end of the world! He meant to pay everything back, his ship would soon come in, but it never did. He thought of the disgrace he was bringing on all of us, of prison; he imagined what the newspapers would print. Those thoughts possessed him. So he drove his car to an isolated spot and piped the exhaust through the window.' She reached into her bag, took out a flowered handkerchief and pressed it to her nose.

'I'm so sorry,' I said.

'So was I. So were our children. So were his poor mother and father. He was thirty-eight years old. Do you think we were grateful? Do you think we cared two hoots about the money when we buried him? Would I have cared now, aged nearly ninety?'

'No.'

'We didn't. We *didn't*.' I could hear her anger, still raw after all these years. 'I dare say it would have been grim—possibly I would have divorced him, though I doubt it—but he would have been alive to give his daughter away on her wedding day. Don't you want to accompany your daughter up the aisle on her wedding day?'

I smiled, despite everything, at the unlikely image of Kate in a white veil. 'She's not that kind of girl.'

'Mine was, but her father wasn't alive to see her married. He couldn't see any way out. That's what he said in his letter. *No way out. No choice*.' She shook her forefinger, admonishing the long-dead husband. 'If he'd asked me, I would have told him! There are always other choices.'

'Not for me.'

'Yes, for you!' Her voice was almost a shout. 'It's been fifty years since Jonathan left me. My children, my grandchildren . . . all of us haunted by that one terrible act. His parents never recovered. They died in grief. When I see him at the pearly gates, I'm going to give him a damned good kick up the backside.'

'I'm sorry. I really am.'

Her eyelids came down for a second, heavily, as though I'd bored her. 'Have you murdered somebody?'

'No.'

'Have you raped or maimed or tortured anyone?'

'No.'

'Well, then. Whatever your "crime", your wife has the right to know about it.'

The unshed tears of decades began to scald my eyes. Eilish was my closest friend. She knew me better than anyone in the world. I longed to confide in her.

'She'd think me a monster,' I said.

'*Are* you a monster?'

The door at the end of the carriage slid open, and a guard came noisily click-clicking. 'Tickets, please; all tickets, please.' He woke crisp-packet boy. The woman tucked her anger away,

attacking the knitting with pursed lips. I finished my letter to Kate, slid it into an envelope and wrote her name on the outside.

When the train pulled into Liverpool Street, I stood up and lifted our bags from the rack. Hers was small and very light. She thanked me coolly as she put on her jacket.

'Let me carry your case to the taxi,' I said.

'Don't leave that beautiful woman alone. Don't leave her with unanswered questions. And anger. And guilt. She deserves better. Take it from someone who knows.'

•

It took quite a while to get up the platform and past the barrier. The station was packed with Friday travellers, and my companion was alarmingly shaky on her feet. She used a stick, but even so I was afraid she was going to tip right over. I saw her to the covered rank and waited with her until we were at the front of the queue.

I was helping her into a taxi when she gripped my forearm. 'You will continue living? Promise me.'

I had no answer. No promise.

'There's a drain,' she said, lowering herself into the seat. 'There, by your foot. Drop the keys to your flat down there. Buy yourself a little more time.'

I thanked her, and we said goodbye. I stood irresolute as her cab drew away. Three women waited in the queue behind me. They were dressed to the nines, perhaps for the theatre: sparkling earrings, high heels, swirling skirts. I caught a puff of scent mingling with exhaust fumes, hot tarmac and midsummer dustiness. Their heads were bent together in easy intimacy—if you watch a group of women together, you'll see that they manage this as men cannot—talking very fast, never quite finishing a sentence; never needing to, it seemed. Suddenly all three burst into helpless laughter, and I felt the familiar agony of envy.

The rope was waiting for me. I'd already made it into a noose,

already tied the knots in exactly the right way. It's amazing what you can find on the internet: step-by-step guides to suicide by every possible method. I had an email ready to send to Bruce, the retired SAS man turned property manager who might or might not have feelings. I'd be long, long gone before he found me.

The next taxi was mine. The journey would take no time at all. Within an hour, I'd be free.

Now was my time. Now. Tonight.

I reached into my pocket to turn off the phone. I couldn't bear to hear her voice now. Two black cabs pulled in from the road, and the first stopped in front of me. I took hold of the door handle. I could feel the vibration of the engine under my fingers.

All around me, life roared and rolled. The three women waved at the second taxi. I glimpsed a flurry of heels and skirts as they threw open the door and piled inside. My driver looked out and spoke to me.

'Sorry?' I said.

He spoke again, but I heard no words. The sky was billowing. I saw Eilish in the garden, among the roses. She had a silk scarf in her hair, and she was alone. She was alone.

Out on the road, it had begun to rain.