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# WHITE BODIES

JANE ROBINS



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For Carol



## AUTUMN 2017

The evidence suggests that Felix showered. Beyond that, I know practically nothing about his final hours on this earth. All I have is the odd scrap of information and the patchy impressions of the bystanders, and it's like I'm at the theatre, looking at the stage and seeing only the supporting cast, the scenery and the arrangement of shadows. All the important elements are missing. There are no principal actors, no stage directions and no script.

The receptionist said this – that Felix's last morning was fresh and cold, that there was a frost on the lawn outside the hotel and a mist in the distance, where the woods are. She'd watched Felix sprinting out of the hotel, down the gravel drive, then turning left at the gate. 'I was arriving for work and I called out "Good morning!"' she said. 'But he didn't reply; he just kept running.'

Forty minutes later, he was back, dropping his head to catch his breath, panting and sweating. He straightened up and, now noticing the receptionist, said that he'd sprinted all the way to the golf course, running the perimeter and the long path through the woods back to the hotel. He thought that the sun glancing through the trees had been magical, as though life

was just beginning (how extraordinary that he should say such a thing!). Then he took the stairs up to his room, two at a time.

He didn't come down to breakfast or order anything to be sent up, not even the continental breakfast that was included in the room rate. His colleague, Julio, said he was surprised when Felix failed to attend the first session of the conference. At the mid-morning break, Julio carried a cup of coffee and a biscuit up to the room, but found the *Do Not Disturb* sign hanging on the door. He thought Felix was unwell, sleeping maybe, so he drank the coffee himself and ate the biscuit. 'We missed him at lunch,' he said, 'and again in the afternoon session. By three o'clock I was calling his phone many times, but my calls went to voicemail.' Julio felt uneasy. It was so unlike Felix to be unreliable, so he went upstairs one more time to hammer on the door, then he summoned the hotel manager, who arrived with a key.

The two men were struck by the unnatural stillness of the room, its air of unreality; Julio said it seemed considered, or planned, like a *tableau vivant* with Felix as the centrepiece, lying on his back on the bed in a strange balletic pose, right arm cast out across the duvet, left leg bent, bath robe open like a cape, grey eyes gazing at the ceiling. His left arm was dangling down the side of the bed, fingers suspended above the floor, and the hotel manager, who had a degree in the History of Art, was reminded of the pre-Raphaelite painting of the suicide of Thomas Chatterton. Except this didn't look like suicide; there were no pill bottles or razor blades or other signs.

Dr Patel arrived and the receptionist stood by the door while the doctor conducted her examination. Her professional opinion was that Felix had suffered a heart attack or had some sort of seizure after his morning run. She left, and the receptionist took photographs of Felix and of the room – the bedside table, the



pristine bathroom, the opened shower door, the view from the window and, finally, the untouched hospitality tray. 'I know that was weird,' she said. 'But it felt like the right thing to do, to make a record.' Maybe she thought her photos might become important, that they'd suggest that something about the scene was wrong. No one else had that sense, though. When the results of the postmortem came through, they were in agreement with Dr Patel – Felix's death was due to heart disease.

As simple as that, he had collapsed and was gone – and for a while it seemed that he'd simply vanished. The world had swept over him like the tide coming in.

But then the funeral happened. I trekked out of London that day to a pretty Berkshire village with a Norman church sitting among gravestones and windblown copper-coloured leaves. When I saw it, I thought that Felix, who was born and raised in America, was having a very English final moment, though the mourners who were arriving in small solemn groups were from his international life. Solid men in sharply cut suits; flimsy, elegant women in heels. I watched them from a distance – in fact, from a broken bench set against the churchyard wall, where I was trying to calm down. Eventually, I slipped into the church and stood at the back.

My sister, Tilda, was the person on show and she walked slowly up the aisle like a melancholy bride. I tried hard, really hard, to get inside her head at that moment, and I conjured up a spectacular array of emotions – from profound grief and loss, to exhilarating release and relief. But nothing felt right. As always, I found her confusing, and I was reduced to noticing her expensive clothes. The black silk dress, the tailored jacket, doubtless costing a thousand pounds or more. And I watched her take a place in the empty front pew. On her right, in front of

the altar, was Felix's coffin, under a cascade of white lilies; and to her left, on a wooden stand, a giant photo of his smiling face. A few minutes later, Felix's mother and father slipped in beside Tilda and then his brother, Lucas. There was the slightest of nods towards my sister who sat perfectly still, gazing at the floor.

The first hymn was a thin rendition of 'The Lord is my Shepherd' – but I found that I couldn't sing. Instead I slumped against the back wall, feeling faint and nauseous, overwhelmed by the occasion. Not that I was mourning Felix, although the sight of his hunched-up, grieving family was upsetting. It was more that I was sick with knowing too much. On the day of his death, I'd waited for the police to turn up at my flat or at the bookshop. It was the same on the morning of the postmortem. And now, at the funeral, it seemed certain that police officers were waiting for me outside the church, stamping their feet to keep warm, sneaking an illicit cigarette, and that as soon as I stepped out of the gloom into the autumn sun I would hear my name. Callie Farrow? Do you have a minute?

SPRING 2017

1

The branches outside my window are spindly and bare, and Tilda stands across the room looking like a waif-woman, saying, ‘How can you stand it? All those broken fingers tapping at the glass.’ She’s opening the door, is halfway out. ‘Anyhow, I want you to come to Curzon Street this evening. I’m ordering Thai food and a DVD. *Strangers on a Train*. It’s an Alfred Hitchcock.’

‘I know that.’

‘Come about eight. There’ll be someone else too. Someone I want you to meet.’

The invitation sounds innocuous, but it isn’t. For a start, Tilda always comes to *my* flat for movie nights. Also, it’s unknown for her to introduce me to her friends. In fact, she rarely even talks about her friends. I can name only two, and those are girls she’s known since childhood. Paige Mooney and Kimberley Dwyer. I’d be surprised if she saw them more than once a year, so I’m curious and am about to say, ‘Who?’ but she’s leaving as she’s speaking, disappearing down the communal stairs.

\*

At Curzon Street, I'm clutching my bottle of cider, knowing full well that Tilda won't have cider. And I've brought brownies.

She's waiting on the second floor, at the open door of her flat. Then she's greeting me with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, kissing my cheeks, saying brightly, 'Callie!' Behind her a tall, fair-haired man is in the kitchen area, sleeves rolled up, busying himself with things in cupboards. He comes to say hello, holding out a thin hand, and from the way he stands, so firmly inhabiting his space, I realise that he's accustomed to being there. Tilda gazes at him proprietorially, glancing at his hair, his shoulders, his bare forearms. She says, 'Callie, meet Felix. Felix Nordberg.'

'I'm opening a bottle of white,' he says. 'Will you have some?'

'No, I'm fine with cider.' I hold up the Strongbow bottle for inspection and take it to the kitchen counter, thinking that Felix seems to be in command of things. The kitchen, the wine. Then he starts asking me polite questions in a soft, moneyed voice that makes me think of super-yachts and private islands. Where do I live? Do I enjoy my work at the bookshop? I ask him about his work, which is for a Mayfair hedge fund.

'I don't even know what that means. Except that it's a sort of gambling.'

He laughs. 'You're right, Callie. But our clients prefer to call it investing, so we humour them.'

I sense that he's humouring me too, and I watch him pouring our drinks with precision, examining the label of a French Chablis, checking that the wine reaches the perfect level in the glass. And he's careful with my cider, treating it like precious nectar, even though it's in a plastic bottle with a gigantic red sticker saying £3.30. He hands Tilda her wine, and she flashes him a half-smile as their hands touch. Then Felix gets back to the kitchen cupboards, taking out plates and bowls, wiping them

with a cloth and sorting them into piles, at the same time telling me how to short a market.

‘Think of it like this, I’ll sell you this plate for the current price of ten dollars, agreeing to deliver it to you in three months’ time. Then, just before the three months is up, I’ll buy-in a plate for nine dollars. You see? I’m betting that the plate market will go down and I’ll make a profit of a dollar.’

‘That’s an expensive plate.’

‘Felix likes expensive things,’ Tilda offers from her position at the end of the sofa. She’s decoratively arranged, her feet tucked up, hugging a velvet cushion with one hand, holding her glass with the other, and she’s observing us, wondering how we’re getting along.

I look at Felix, to see if he’ll say *That’s why I like your sister*, but he doesn’t. He just grins as if to say *Got me there!* and opens the cutlery drawer, taking out the knives and forks and polishing them. I don’t comment. Instead I ask Felix where he comes from, and how long he’s been in London. His family is from Sweden, he says, but he grew up in Boston, USA and considers himself to be a citizen of the world. I snigger at the phrase, and he tells us that he’s trying to get to grips with England and London.

‘What, queuing and minding-the-gap and apologising all the time, that sort of thing?’

‘Yes, all that. And the self-deprecation, and the way you guys make a joke of all situations, and find it difficult to accept compliments... Did you know, Callie, that those dark eyes of yours are enigmatic, soulful even?’

Feigning a serious expression, he looks right into my face and I feel embarrassed because he’s so handsome and so close to me. But I feel he’s including me in the joke, not laughing at me.

‘Whatever.’

I move away, hot-cheeked, and as I pour myself more cider, I think that he's intelligent and funny and I like him.

Tilda says, 'Come and watch the DVD,' so I pick up my glass and head for the other end of the sofa, intending to recreate the movie nights at my flat, when we sit like that, at each end, passing brownies back and forth and making little comments like 'Keanu Reeves looks sad in this,' or 'Look at the rain outside, it's going sideways.' Nothing that amounts to conversation, but enough to make things seem companionable, like we're children again. But I'm too slow. Before I can establish myself, Felix has taken the space next to Tilda, making it obvious that I should be banished to the old armchair. So I flop down and put my feet up on the coffee table, while Tilda presses the start button on the remote.

Felix and I haven't seen *Strangers on a Train* before, but we both like it, the chilling effect of the black-and-white, the clipped 1950s voices and mannerisms, and we all have comments to make as the drama unfolds. Tilda, being an actress, and some sort of expert on Hitchcock, chips in more than Felix and me. Hitchcock put his evil characters on the left-hand side of the screen, she tells us, and good characters on the right. I laugh. 'So I'm evil, because I'm sitting over here, and you're good.'

'Except, silly, onscreen that would be reversed. So I'm bad and you're good.'

'I'm the most interesting,' Felix says. 'I'm in the middle, and can go either way. Who knows what I'll do?'

'Oh, look at Ruth Roman!' Tilda's suddenly distracted. 'The way her lips are slightly parted, it's so suggestive.'

I say, 'Hmm,' in a sceptical way, pouting, and Felix raises an eyebrow. But Tilda isn't put off.

'And Robert Walker is incredible as a psychopath. He does that clever thing with his eyes – looking so calculating. Did you

know he died just after this movie, because he was drunk and his doctor injected him with barbiturates?’

‘The other guy is using his wrists,’ I offer. ‘He’s doing wrist acting’. Tilda laughs.

‘I like the plot,’ I say.

‘Patricia Highsmith... She wrote the novel that the film is based on.’

The idea is that two strangers on a train could swap murders. The psychopath with the calculating eyes offers to murder the estranged wife of the wrist-guy, if, in return, the wrist-guy will murder the psychopath’s hated father. The police will never solve the crime because neither murderer would have any connection to his victim. There would be no discernible motive.

‘It’s a brilliant idea for a film,’ I say, ‘but it wouldn’t work in practice. I mean if you were plotting a murder and wanted to do it that way.’

‘What do you mean?’ Tilda is nestling into Felix.

‘Well you’d have to travel on trains the whole time, planning to fall into conversation with another person who also wants someone murdered. It’s not going to happen.’

‘Oh, everyone wants *someone* murdered,’ she says.

Felix rearranges Tilda so that her legs lie over his lap, his hands resting on her skinny knees, and I notice that they are beautiful people, with their fine bones, white skin and blonde hair, looking like *they* are the twins. They pause the movie to open another bottle of the same French wine and Felix says, ‘Of course you’re right, Callie, about the murder plot, but these days you wouldn’t have to travel on trains to meet another murderer, you could just find someone on the internet, in a forum or a chat room.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’

‘I suppose it’s true,’ says Tilda. ‘The internet is where psychos find each other.’

\*

We watch the final scenes, and afterwards I say I need to get home, but I’ll go to the bathroom first. It’s an excuse; I don’t really need a pee. Instead, once I’ve locked the door, I ferret around, and find that there are two toothbrushes in a plastic tumbler, and a man’s shaving gear in the cupboard over the sink. Also, the bin is full of detritus; empty shampoo bottles, little nodules of old soap, wedges of cotton wool, used razors, half-used pots of lotion. I realise that Felix has been tidying up Tilda’s bathroom mess, just as he was organising the kitchen; I’m happy that someone’s looking after her, sorting her out. I reach further into the bin, and pull out a plastic bag wound around something hard. Sitting on the toilet, I unwrap it, expecting something ordinary, an old nail polish or lipstick maybe. Instead I extract a small used syringe, with a fine needle and I’m so shocked, so perplexed, that I head straight back into the sitting room, brandishing it, saying, ‘What the hell is this?’ Felix and Tilda look at each other, faces suggesting mild embarrassment, a shared joke, and Tilda says, ‘You’ve discovered our secret. We’ve been having vitamin B12 injections – they help us stay on top of things. Intensive lives and all that.’

‘What? That’s crazy. You should be ashamed!’ I’m incredulous, and am still holding the syringe in the air, defiantly.

‘Welcome to the world of high finance,’ says Felix.

‘Really!’ Tilda’s laughing at my stunned face. ‘Really... There’s nothing to be alarmed about. Lots of successful people do it. Actors do it... Bankers do it... Google it if you don’t believe me.’



Then she adds, ‘Hang on... Why the fuck are you going through my bin?’

I can’t think of an answer, so I shrug helplessly and say that I’d better be getting home. Tilda gives me a wonky face that says *You’re incorrigible!* And she fetches my coat.

Felix says he hopes to see me again soon and as I leave he gives me a quick affable hug, the sort that big rugby-playing men give to nephews and nieces.

\*

At home, I open up my laptop and start Googling vitamin injections. Tilda’s right, it turns out, and I’m amazed at the weird things professional people do in the name of ‘achieving your life goals’. I decide to let it go and to accept that Tilda and Felix live in a different world from me. Then I start to make notes on both of them, working in the file I call my ‘dossier’. It’s a habit that I’ve had since childhood – monitoring Tilda, observing her, checking that she’s okay. I write: *Felix seems like a special person. He has a way of making you feel like you’re in a conspiracy with him, sharing a joke about the rest of humanity. I’m astonished that she let me meet him and, now that I have, I’m pleased that she’s met her match and that he is looking after her so well.*

## 2

On Wednesday, my sister phones and invites me to supper. I'm surprised because I thought she might be angry about the bathroom bin incident, but she doesn't mention it, and on my return to Curzon Street, I discover that Felix has made venison stew with juniper berries and red wine, and also a lemon tart.

'You're a genius!' I say, and he rewards me with a sexy *Get-me!* grin.

'Felix did the pastry himself,' Tilda says. 'He has pastry-making fingers, long and cold.'

He flutters his fingers while we assure him that we've never attempted pastry in our lives; we always buy ready-made. I notice that Felix has a knack for cleaning up the kitchen as he works, so that when I go to help out after the meal, there's nothing to do. The surfaces are clearer and cleaner than I've ever seen them, all the pots and pans dealt with and back in the cupboards. 'How do you do that?' I ask. 'It's like magic.'

'It comes naturally... Now, Callie, forget about cleaning, and tell Tilda that it would be a romantic idea to take a boat down the Thames on Sunday. Up towards Windsor and Bray, where the swans are.'

'What sort of boat?'

‘Something simple and wooden. Kinda English.’

‘It’s okay,’ says Tilda. ‘I’m sold.’

She’s looking at him upwards through her hair, a soft dewy gaze, and I feel a stab of pain, realising that she’s totally in love with him. She notices me watching her and says, ‘You should come too, Callie. Won’t it be lovely?’ This sort of sentimentality is entirely unlike her, and I can’t help making fun of her as I reply, ‘Oh yes, it will be very lovely... very lovely lovely.’

\*

Felix hires a sporty red Peugeot, and on Sunday we pack a picnic to take to Berkshire. It’s not far, an hour’s drive, and when we arrive we’re in another world – the river so wide and brooding, the tangled woodland coming alive with buds and the first tiny leaves of spring. The boat is just as Felix wanted, a little wooden tub, chipped red paint on the outside, all open, with a motor on the back. ‘It’s perfect,’ I say, admiring the way it’s bobbing on its rope, checking out the three benches, the emergency oars. We clamber in and chug along the river, turning our faces to the sun, and it’s glorious to feel the fragile warmth. One minute a golden caress, then gone again. I lean over the side, trailing my fingers in the black water, and shiver. ‘God that’s cold!’

We pass by open fields and then Windsor castle, by white-washed suburban mansions with lawns that run down to the water, and I spot a heron on the far bank.

Felix is steering from the back, and he says, ‘Let’s swim.’ We’re on a wide part of the river now, dense woodland on one side, a flat, empty field on the other. I look around, for people, but there’s no one.

‘It’s too cold!’ I protest. ‘And not safe. Don’t people drown in the Thames?’

But Felix and Tilda aren’t listening. Instead, Felix ties the boat to an overhanging branch, and the two of them are ripping their clothes off, frantically, like they’re in a race. Then they’re standing up, totally naked, the boat rocking madly as they position themselves to jump out. Two spindly white bodies, Tilda gripping Felix’s arm and screeching, ‘I’m bloody freezing already! I can’t do it’.

‘Oh yes you can!’

In a sweeping move, he scoops up my sister, holding her across his chest in his arms, which I now notice are muscular and strong. She yells, ‘No! No!’ and kicks her legs in scissor shapes as he flings her overboard into the water, then leaps in himself. For the briefest, heart-stopping moment, they both vanish into the black; then they are swimming and splashing about, Tilda screaming, and I can’t tell whether she’s exhilarated or furious. But she calls out, ‘Come on in, Callie! It’s amazing.’

‘You know you want to!’ Felix reaches up, pulls the side of the boat down into the water, as though he’s a monster coming to get me, grabbing at my ankle.

‘I won’t!’

My mind is racing, though, trying to figure out what to do. I don’t want to strip off my clothes in front of them – I’m embarrassed about my roundish pinkish body, and afraid that they’ll laugh at me. At the same time, I’m thinking how wonderful it would be to sink to the bottom of the river, swallowed up by the icy water. Also, I’m intoxicated by the compliment of being included and, for some reason that I don’t quite understand, I want to impress Felix. So I sit on one of the benches and take off my parka coat and my sweatshirt and jeans and socks. Then

I jump in wearing a t-shirt, bra and knickers, sinking down, just as I had wanted, shocked, numb and frozen, unable to think because my head is pounding. My feet touch the bottom, a thick slime with hard edges jutting out. I flinch, and float to the top, where I find that Felix is standing next to me, water up to his chest, and he leans into me, his hands gripping my waist. 'I have you in my power,' he says, raising me out of the water, while I pretend to struggle, my hands on his shoulders. Then he throws me backwards; in again, and under, right down to the bottom. When I emerge, I find myself screaming and laughing just as Tilda had done. I want to say, 'Do it again! Do it again!' like a child would.

But Felix has turned to Tilda, and I see that he can lift her thin body much higher than mine, and can throw her into the water much harder. Then, when her head appears, it takes only a swift push with one hand to force her back down, so cleanly that she has no chance to protest, and there is no sign of her, no arms flailing, no disturbance in the water, and I worry that he's holding her down at the bottom far too long, forcing her into the hazardous mud. 'Stop it! It's too much,' I yell.

He releases his grip, so that she comes up limp and choking, her shoulders heaving. This time he takes her gently in his arms and carries her back to the boat. 'You shouldn't have done that...,' she says, coughing out the words so weakly that I can barely hear, her head resting on his chest, her arm dangling lifelessly at her side.

Felix flops her over the side, into the bottom of the boat. 'You're fine. Now let's get dressed and have some food.'

I swim to the boat and heave myself up to look inside, to check that she's okay. Her eyes meet mine and she's blinking slowly, looking startled and empty. There's something insect-like in the

way she is folded into herself in the corner, something maimed. I'm about to screech with concern but she changes her expression, so swiftly that it's like a magic trick, and she's laughing and telling us to get into the boat before we freeze to death.

We take it in turns to use a linen picnic cloth as a towel, and as I watch Tilda drying herself I think I detect that she's still shaken, but it's hard to be sure.

Soon we're huddled in our dry clothes, eating sandwiches, and drinking black coffee from a flask that we pass around. Tilda's smiling as she says to me, 'This is what it's like being with Felix – amazing! And I'm so pleased you joined us.' Felix says that he too is pleased I came, and he leans across the boat to touch my bare ankle, just for a second. At that moment, everything is sharper, keener, more intense than I've ever known. The sky, the trees, the water – even the ham in the sandwiches.

Later, when I'm back home, I open up the dossier and write: *Tilda is in love with Felix and maybe I love him too. As her boyfriend, obviously. He's so handsome and clever and romantic. My pulse raced when he stripped off all his clothes and I saw his white, muscular body, and he jumped into the river. I was amazed that he would do something so spectacular in front of me. I can't remember such an exciting day in my life as this. I just wish he hadn't forced Tilda under the water and held her there so long.*