

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Oh Dear Sylvia

Written by Dawn French

Published by Penguin Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

*Oh Dear
Silvia*

DAWN FRENCH



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd) Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street,
Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,

Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Michael Joseph 2012

Published in Penguin Books 2013

001

Copyright © Dawn French, 2012

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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

ISBN: 978-0-141-04635-8

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For Biggs,
My anchor, and my true love.

Scribentem morbus cepit, dolor, amor.

I am puzzled as the newborn child,
I am troubled at the tide.
Should I stand amid the breakers?
Should I lie with death my bride?
Hear me sing,
'Swim to me, swim to me, let me enfold you:
Here I am, here I am, waiting to hold you.'

'Song To The Siren', Tim Buckley

ONE

Ed

Wednesday 10am

He sits with a sense of being watched, although he himself is the watcher. Momentarily, the others have stepped outside so he is suddenly, shockingly, alone with her. It's odd for there to be no voices. No sound, save those of two human beings just being alive. He becomes acutely aware that for the first time in a very long time, he feels irrefutably more alive than her. She's always making sure you know she's chock-full o' life. She lives big and loud. Right to her fingertips. Her presently somewhat swollen fingertips. Look at them. Someone, perhaps a nurse, has tried to remove the coral-red varnish, but it is stubborn and has bled into her skin, revealing the nails beneath to be unbeautiful, nicotiney. Blotchy red fingers. Yellow nails.

She wouldn't like him to see such a personal thing, so he tries to stop looking . . . but of course he can't. He is transfixed by the unusual sighting. He feels her watching, and although

she isn't and although he so wants to remain defiant, he looks away.

So. Here they both are again. Alone. They haven't been alone in a room for . . . well, since they were married. What's that? About . . . God . . . What is it now? Five years? Something like that.

There she is. Breathing.

Here he is. Breathing.

That's it.

Pretty much like it was at the end of the marriage, really. Two people occupying the same air. Nothing else in common. Just oxygen. He remembers when sharing breath with her was exciting, intimate. He would lie close to her in the night, happily breathing in what she breathed out. The breath of life, their joint breath from their joint life.

This breathing now, though, is very different.

He hears his own. It's quick and halting. It fits with his heartbeat, which is anxiously fast and occasionally missing altogether, when he finds himself holding his breath whilst urgent frightening thoughts distract him.

Her breathing is entirely unfamiliar. It's regimented and deep. Her lungs are rhythmically resonating loudly around the room, chiming in with the bellow-like wheezing of the machine. She's being breathed for, through a huge ugly tube in her throat.

Because Silvia Shute, despite all the supposed life in her, is in a coma.

TWO

Jo

Thursday 2pm

Adervish is whirling around Silvia's bed, gabbling and gesticulating wildly. Her explosion of curly grey hair bobs about busily as she moves. The too many strands of assorted, expensive but meant to look casual beads dance on her bosom, and the clack of her posh but meant to look like working boots resounds off the sparkly-clean-polished-all-the-way-under-the-bed-twice-a-day-check-it-on-the-time-sheet-no-bugs-here-mate floor. This is Jo, Silvia's elder sister. Her mouth has mistaken itself for a machine gun.

'It just bothers me darling, that when you do eventually wake up, I'm not even going to be able to tell you what happened because nobody seems to bloody know! You are probably the only one and will you even remember? God knows. Well obviously God knows, whichever God one chooses to align oneself with, of course. I can't remember now

if you even believe in God, do you? Oh God, that's awful. No. I don't think you do. I think you're a hundred per cent not quite sure, aren't you? I remember you once saying you thought Jesus wore a blindfold to decide who would get the poorly babies, and how that was terribly unfair, but you were eleven, so you may well have updated your thinking since then.

'I know you like Christmas and weddings and church and stuff, but does that necessarily make you a Christian? It's probably got more to do with fabrics and lights and catering if I know you. Do I know you? That's the big question darling, because I can see all this . . . this hellish situation, there's going to be some major decisions I will probably have to make on your behalf.

'Oh God. Why did this happen?! What the hell were you doing out on your balcony? In the freezing cold? On your own? Have you started smoking again? Oh, darling, look at you . . .'

Jo leans over Silvia's bed, smooths her cheek and runs her fingers through her little sister's hair.

'Desperately need your roots doing, darling. Oh dear. What's happened? Where are you Sissy? Come on, come on. Wake up sweetheart. Wake up and see me. I'm here darling. I'm here for you. Always here for you. Big sister to look after you. Just as it should be. Big one looks after the little one. I promised Mummy I would, and I will.

'Come on now, try to wake up. The doctor says you're a long way away, but you're just asleep, aren't you? Very deeply

asleep, that's all. Wake up one day, won't you? Yes. Yes, you will. Might be tonight. Or tomorrow. Or soon, anyway. Banged your head, didn't you, silly girl? Banged it when you fell. Does it hurt? They've cleaned it up pretty well. Shaved you a bit there darling, where it's sore, but not a problem, that'll grow back in no time. You've got lovely thick hair. And straight. Always wanted yours rather than mine. Mine's a mess. Yours is sleek, shiny. How hair is supposed to be. Not like this. Mattress has exploded on my head, you said. Everyone loves yours. Loves the colour.

'Come on now, you're just being a silly girl, pretending to be asleep like this. Snoozing. While we're all awake out here. You lazybones. Idle. Selfish. Selfish shellfish. Idle bridle. Lazy Maisie. That's you, isn't it?'

Jo acknowledges the catch in her voice and for the first time alone in the clean clean room with her still still sister, she submits to the tears that have been brimming since she heard the news two days ago. She doesn't want to cry. She knows that if Silvia is at all aware, she won't appreciate this pathetic show. She'd certainly tell her to 'butch up and get a grip', as she has done many times before.

Jo can't stop it though, it's the shock. This sort of thing doesn't happen to anyone she knows, ever. When she first heard the news, she felt as if she was suddenly a character in an American medical show. 'House' was calling her to say that her sister had fallen three floors and sustained a serious

head injury. Thank you, Hugh Laurie . . . for giving me this terrible news in your inimitable forthright, some might say even cruel style. Thank God it's you, because now of course, I know it will all be alright for the simple reason that you will inevitably triumphantly and last-minutely restore my stone of a sister to full health.

Sissy might even seduce him on waking, with her unique interestingness, and win him over to become Mrs Hugh House . . . hmmm.

That first shock of the phone call was awful. But this shock today, Jo thinks, the shock of actually seeing her lying there so motionless save for the hypnotic effort of the enforced breathing, is much much worse. No two ways about it, Silvia is nearly dead.

Look at her. Her skin never usually looks pallid like this.

She must not die. After all, Jo promised their mother to always have a care for her. Silvia shall not die before Jo. Otherwise Jo is even more of a bloody failure. If that's possible . . .

'Hold on, sweetheart. Come on! Keep living. We all love you . . . Well, I do. You know I do. We've had our moments Sis, but the loving you part has never ever been in question. You always love your little sister, don't you? Yes. You do. You have to. That's what you do. You just love them. Whatever they're like. Whatever they've done. However thoughtless or insensitive they might sometimes have been . . . however much they might have hurt you, sometimes carelessly, admittedly, but

often purposely, you just keep right on loving them. Whatever you feel. You try to put their feelings first. They come first. Think of others before yourself. Always. Self comes last. Silvia must be protected.

‘So that’s what we’re going to do. Keep you going sweetheart, at all costs. I’m not giving up on you. There’ll be something that wakes you up. I’ve just got to find it darling, that’s all. I’m going to try anything and everything, you wait and see, and one day I will find it and you’ll open those beautiful big grey-blue eyes, and I’ll be the first thing you see, and you’ll know how much I cared and how much I tried, and you’ll be grateful and maybe a tiny bit less unkind . . .

‘I might well catch you looking at me often in the future, just knowingly, out of the corner of your eyes and I will know you are thinking, “Yep, there she is, my sister Jo, who saved my life, who didn’t give up on me, who kept her promise. Who is, truth be told, a bit extraordinary and to whom I owe . . . well . . . everything, really.”’

Jo picks up Silvia’s heavy dead weight of a hand, noticing the red smudged fingers, and lifts it to her lips and kisses it very much.

THREE

Winnie

Thursday 4pm

Silvia is too hot. Tiny beads of sweat above her lip are the only sign, but it's enough for Winnie, her key nurse, to bring a cool muslin flannel to dab off the moisture and to then rest it on her forehead.

Winnie checks all the machines, could anything be wrong to cause Silvia to be hot?

The ECG monitor is beeping healthily. The read-out is correct.

The endotracheal tube is clear and the ventilator is functioning.

The venous line is in properly, she's getting all her fluids.

Drip drip. That's right.

The nasogastric tube is in place.

She clips a small grey claw on to Silvia's finger and, simultaneously, she deftly folds the large cuff around her arm so that

she can check the blood pressure and the oxygen saturations together. She places the grey plastic gun-like infrared thermometer gently into Silvia's ear, and takes her temperature. It takes a moment . . . Winnie always feels like she is pointing a pistol right into the brain of her patients when she does this. She wouldn't say, because it shouldn't, but it amuses her.

Everything is normal. Good. Tick, tick on the clipboard.

Winnie relaxes and starts to sing. She is currently learning a new song for choir. It isn't really new, in fact it's an old traditional American song, but it's new to them, not in their repertoire, which is about three years old now. It's time Calvary Voices had something new. It's coming up to wedding season and they will be asked to sing all the time, sometimes at four weddings on any given Saturday, and Pentecostal services are long. Rarely are the choir invited to the wedding breakfast, so she can sometimes sing at four weddings with only a cold sandwich from the newsagents to sustain her small frame. And is it really right, she wonders, that choirmaster Claude receives £150 for every wedding, but that the choir only receive £10 each from it, and there's only ten of them?

She tries to banish all unchristian thoughts of what an evil selfish bastard Brother Claude might well be, by remembering that Brother Claude is also the official treasurer for Calvary Voices. So presumably there are overheads? On top of which, Brother Claude actually sings with them as well as being choirmaster. He is one of the ten, so he also gets a tenner each time. So . . . that's not good then.

As she toils away, around Silvia, she sings quietly, tenderly.
She executes her work with great love.

‘As I went down in the river to pray’

She washes Silvia’s face

‘Studying about that good ol’ way’

She washes Silvia’s arms

‘And who shall wear the starry crown’

She washes Silvia’s breasts and shoulders

‘Good Lord show me the way’

She washes Silvia’s fanny, careful not to dislodge the
catheter

‘Oh sinners, let’s go down’

She changes the sanitary sheet under Silvia’s bum, and
washes her there

‘Let’s go down, c’mon down’

She washes Silvia’s legs and feet

‘C’mon sinners, let’s go down’

She straightens up the sheets and tidies Silvia’s nightie

‘Down in the river to pray’

She brushes Silvia’s hair.

When she’s finished, she speaks out loud with a pronounced
but gentle Jamaican burr.

‘Dere you are, Silvia, nice ’n’ fresh, yes? Now, we don’t want
you to be too hot, but I cyan’t open the window due to possible
cold or h’infection. BUT, mi cyan pull dis down here.’

She pulls down the blind.

‘So dere, now you have no direct sunlight on you whatsoever PLUS, mi fetch you up de h’electric fan to cool you, yes? OK.’

She pats Silvia’s foot.

She likes to stay in physical contact with her comatose patients at all times whilst she’s in the room. It must be very lonely, she thinks, to be so locked away. She has seen this state time and time again, and although she is inured to the shock of it, she still empathizes anew with each fresh patient. No, she isn’t shocked, but they are. They have just had all normal life snatched away in a heartbeat, and somewhere, deep inside the brain of this paralysed body, there is life. There are brainwaves.

Winnie saw them when the ITU intensivists and the consultant conducted the EEG scan the evening Silvia was first brought in. There were enough signs of life for them to hook her up, although she scored very badly when they measured the depth of her coma using the Glasgow Coma Scale which Winnie knows all about. It rates:

- a. Whether she can open her eyes. She can’t.
- b. Her motor response. None.
- c. Her verbal response. None.

But Winnie knows that just because Silvia doesn’t show a response, it doesn’t necessarily mean she is not aware. Sometimes Winnie notices the tiniest rise in heartbeat on the monitor when she comes into the room of one of her patients. Not Silvia. Silvia is pretty much spark out, and Winnie can’t

locate anything she could usefully feed back to the doctors or the family. That doesn't mean she won't though. You have to have two important attributes in this job: patience and vigilance. Oh, and add to those, hope.

Yes, hope, the most important thing of all.

The patients, the doctors, the families and the d'yam hospital itself will give up hope before Winnie does. Winnie's life is about hope. She brings bargain buckets of it with her to work every day. She knows that it's a certain truth, because she's seen it with her own two eyes, that often, it's only at the very edge of life and death that we truly live. Her privilege is to witness that phenomenon daily.

'Phew! You right Silvia, it too hot in here. Mi a burn up. I'll get dat fan, and some remover fi dem red fingers dere. Be right back darlin.'

The door slams shut. Silvia lies alone in intensive care suite number 5, like a marble sarcophagus.

A still, grey effigy.

Cold. But hot.