

Chapter 1

Monday, 3 March 1997

ALL THAT INTERESTS ME IS the narrative, the story, and who controls it. As a glory-seeking journalist, I sometimes reveal scandals. But more often I try to find out what the powerful in politics and business are planning, so that I can reveal it before they have the opportunity to impose their interpretation, their spin. In my more pretentious moments, I justify what I do as empowering ‘the people’ to make up their own minds about how they are governed. Most of the time I am just having fun, pissing off ministers, chief executives, their minders, putting their secret schemes on the *FC*’s front page. If London is a collection of villages, I am the pedlar who wanders between the communities of politicians, financiers and businessmen, trading nuggets of information until I have enough to tell a tale that you’ll pay to read. Britain’s capital is vast *and* claustrophobically small. Everyone who matters knows everyone else who matters. My job is to eavesdrop, then share it with you.

Tonight, I have an appointment that I hope will furnish me with a grade B scoop. Not something wholly unexpected, but in this time of general-election fever, a nugget that will sizzle at

the top of the front page of the influential newspaper that pays me to make mischief. So on this windy wet evening in early March, I am peddling south-west down Shaftesbury Avenue, past Formica-furnished Chinese restaurants and all-night supermarkets, rainwater cascading down my cycle helmet, blurring my contact lenses. The English winter is blowing itself out with a cathartic storm that is sweeping the pavements clean. Commuters struggle with umbrellas, black cabs' headlights are the mournful eyes of the hounds of Andersen's Tinder Box.

I swerve left to avoid the mirrored surface of a water-filled pothole, right around the stationary 38 bus. Fiennes and Binoche are snogging on the side for *The English Patient*. I catch the driver's eye. It's a superstitious thing I do, giving thanks that he didn't swing out and flatten me. He stares, just for a second. He's wondering why on earth I would be out here under these curtains of water. I only half notice the rain because I am plotting how to land my mackerel; a story about the new darling of British politics, the prince of hope, Labour's immaculately groomed and smooth young leader, Johnny Todd.

I know something is up, that Todd is planning one of his trademark policy coups, because my calls to his advisers are not being returned. My hunch is that they'll want to announce whatever it is on Thursday morning, to set the agenda for one of the last Prime Minister's questions before the looming election. Which means they'll place it on Wednesday night in friendly newspapers – via the political hacks who take their dictation – to set the agenda for the *Today* programme the following morning. It will be a wheeze to woo the right-wing press, to reinforce Todd's big claim that his party of the left won't punish success and the successful. Or maybe Todd will wrap himself in the Union flag.

One Nation, that's the conceit he wants to steal from the Tories, I mutter, as I glance left at the oncoming traffic, weigh the odds, and swerve right into Dean Street. It's only when I am heading to the junction with Old Compton Street that I curse my risk assessment: I could have skidded under the wheels of the approaching Mondeo.

My obsession is blowing up all politicians' best-laid plans, regardless of party or ideological allegiance; to nick the information first, interpret it in my own way and blitz it on the *FC*'s front page. My reward? The knowledge that when the *FC* first edition drops, my scoop will prompt night editors to ring up my rivals, pissed or asleep, to bollock them for missing the story. To earn this joyous *Schadenfreude*, I have to deploy shameless skills of persuasion, to persuade one of Johnny Todd's colleagues that I know more than I do and that I'm doing him a favour by listening to him. It's a spiel, but it usually gets me there.

I shoot across Old Compton Street, checking traffic in both directions. The revolving door of The Groucho Club is on my right. Even in the pissing rain, the vagrant who always asks for neither more nor less than 50p is in his spot next to the entrance with his right hand outstretched; no anorak, sodden in a fraying brown polyester jacket, flowery shirt and purple-stained flared trousers, new when Bolan was God. 'Gimme 50p,' he says. 'Fifty pence for a cup of tea.'

I blank him as I slide the U-bend of the steel lock around the stanchion of a street sign and then guide it between the spokes of my front wheel and around the bike frame. I attach the top bar of the lock, turn the key, and give it a close inspection to make sure the bike is secure. I wiggle the top bar to check it really is set properly. Even when done, I panic that I

haven't locked it properly. So I wiggle it again. And again. And once more. Definitely done.

I walk to the door.

'Gimme 50p.'

My loose change is in my trouser pocket, underneath my silver Gore-Tex waterproof trousers. I wriggle my fingers inside the elastic waist. The first coin I feel is – 50p! An omen. I drop it into his palm, careful my fingers don't brush his.

The storm is hushed as I go through the spinning door into the club's low-ceilinged vestibule. I remove my helmet, peel off the protective outerwear and check myself in the mirror. The wide-lapelled, oversize-cut jacket and matching grey trousers – Dries Van Noten – have kept dry, though there's a bit of annoying damp around the collar. My top two shirt buttons are undone, and my round-toed shoes from Trickers are scuffed. I'm unkempt, by design, just messy enough so that not everyone can spy my vanity.

'Hi, Gil,' says Petra, the jolly guardian of the signing-in book. She gingerly takes my wet outer coat and trousers, holds them in thumb and forefinger as far from herself as possible, and drapes them on a hanger to drip in the cloakroom behind her.

'I'm expecting a guest,' I say. 'I'll be in the downstairs bar.'

As I push open double doors into the long drinking room, the chatter crashes over me. It's 8.15 p.m., still too early for Jools Holland to be at the upright piano that stands between the bar and the club restaurant. I grab one of the fat sofas by the front window and while I wait, I check my pockets: two Nokia 2110 mobile phones, one for normal, one for special contacts; and my pager. I am obsessive about always being reachable. It's not uncommon for me to have three conversations on the go: one on each of the mobiles and another on the office landline. My

editor dines out on tales of me ringing him and then putting him on hold. I should be embarrassed, but no, I am flattered.

Silver Nokia in the left pocket, blue Nokia in the right. And in my right trouser pocket . . .

Nothing. I should feel the familiar bulge of the pager pressing against thigh, instead there is just a crumpled handkerchief. I pat myself all over, left pocket too. It's not there.

Could it have fallen out when I was cycling? That seems unlikely, given all my clothes were sealed by the Gore-Tex outerwear. Could it be in the pocket of the wet-weather overtrousers, or the back pouch of the waterproof jacket? I wouldn't have risked it. I check every pocket again, and a third time. I know I look mad. And then I remember. The 50p. The pager must have spilled out then when I was handing it over. It was raining so I wouldn't have noticed when it hit the ground. I run for the door. It's still pissing down and there's nothing on the wet pavement. The beggar has vanished.

I can get another pager, but that's not the point. I hate it when things aren't where they should be, it's an itch to scratch. To calm myself, I chant one of my spells. It has to be short, and repeated a specific number of times (three and seven are normally good; five works sometimes too, as does saying 'times infinity'). Under my breath, I say, *'If it's gone forever, that's OK.'* Then I mutter it twice more. Relief steals over me.

I've been using these rituals to cope since I was in my teens. I never trusted my parents to have locked the front door or turned off the gas. I would press the knob on the hob seven times, making an indentation in my finger, and then stare at it. I would do this at two in the morning, when everyone else was asleep. Mum and Dad never noticed. But my sister Clare would come down to find

her anxious little brother and steer me back to bed. It was Clare, when we were both at university, who gave my rituals a name; she asked me how I was coping with my 'obsessive compulsive disorder'. Clare usually knew more about me than I did.

In The Groucho's vestibule, I have one more thing to do. I descend the narrow staircase to the men's room. In the cubicle, I take a pinch of lumpy white powder from the cling film I've repackaged it in and begin a little ceremony with a Barclaycard on the top of the cistern. I am an unusual user; when strung out and unable to focus, this stuff calms me.

Two and a half snorts later, I'm myself. It is a wonder drug. Back upstairs, Petra tells me my guest has arrived; she shoos him to the bar. Tony Cannon, the Labour MP for Preston, is sitting by the window on the sofa I nabbed. He's my age, mid-thirties, though I carry it better. His skin is rough, the colour and texture of cottage cheese, eyes deep in his greying sockets. His suit is a size too big. Unlike mine, it's not a fashion statement. My grandmother would have told him he needs a good meal. Actually, what he needs to do is cut down the substance abuse. His red eyes dart like a cornered rabbit, obviously a line or two ahead of me.

'What do you fancy to drink?'

'Champagne?'

'Flippin' 'eck Tony. You have become the living embodiment of Todd's Modern Labour.' I catch the eye of the waitress.

If Todd is an abrupt rupture from Labour's past, Tony Cannon is an evolutionary link. Perhaps the last authentic working man at the top of Modern Labour, complete with never-pressed C&A suit, he left school to become a train mechanic, then an organiser with the Transport and General Workers' Union.



The champagne arrives and I swap it for my gold card.

‘Here’s to Keir Hardie,’ I toast.

‘Keir isn’t testing well in focus groups,’ he says grimly.

‘How’s Johnny?’ I ask, aware that I am treating Tony Cannon like the boy at school who was interesting only because his sister was hot.

‘The supreme leader is in the peak of health.’

Johnny Todd is the closest thing to Hollywood that British politics has seen since, well, ever. Cannon is Johnny’s ambassador with the trade unions, trying to allay their fears that Todd’s programme to make them electable is a despicable attempt to turn Labour into a red-tinged Tory party. Some of my colleagues in the Lobby see Cannon as Todd’s *useful idiot*. More fool them. Cannon has acute political nous and he is part of the Labour movement in a way that Todd never could be. There is a relationship based on mutual need.

What matters most about Cannon is that he knows pretty much everything that is happening inside his party. He is one of a small clique on this island at the fulcrum of knowledge. Some are bankers and corporate brokers, others are in the despised industry of PR; a handful are in politics. I’ve found and cultivated them. The innate snobbery of my journalistic colleagues – and indeed in the group that surrounds Todd – mean few take him seriously. When he leaks, no one suspects him. Perfect.

I grab a fistful of The Groucho’s stale Twiglets from the small bowl on the table and stuff them in my mouth, brushing my fingers together to remove the stickiness. ‘Much going on, Tony?’

He lowers his voice and leans across the table. ‘I’ve got a big scoop for you, Gil: there’s a bloody election coming. So yes, there’s a great deal going on.’



The election date hasn't been announced. But the maximum five-year term for Parliament is almost up. Everyone who cares knows that the Prime Minister, Sir Peter Ramsey, will go to the country at the beginning of May.

'Have you seen today's *Mail*?' he asks. Course. I read it at quarter to seven this morning, along with every other paper. Cannon pulls a battered copy out of his bag and spreads it open.

WHO'S IN CHARGE? says the headline. Below it, there's a photograph of two men standing outside an office building. One is Todd. To his left, in a brown corduroy suit, is Dennis Kenilworth. Kenilworth has his muscular arm around Todd's waist, like a wrestler's clinch. Johnny is wearing his trademark grin, but here it is the forced smile of a prisoner in a hostage video.

Cannon turns to the *Mail*'s leader column. *Johnny Todd may promise a break from the past, it reads. But yesterday the Labour leader was photographed arm in arm with the most militant socialist in Britain, Mr 'Strike first, negotiate later'. If this is the company he keeps, how can we be confident that Labour in power won't yet again revert to its true colours of crushing the enterprise that pays all our bills and taxing all of us till the pips squeak?*

'Johnny almost blew the roof off HQ when he saw that,' Cannon says. He closes the paper and puts his drink on Kenilworth's face, ringing it like a target.

'What do you expect from the *Mail*?'

'The truth would be a good start. Feels like the last election all over again, tabloids killing us with vicious scaremongering about our income tax plans.'

'Don't be so neurotic. Your lead is huge.'

‘Don’t let Johnny hear you say that.’ He actually scans the room. ‘He’s convinced the Tories will turn it around – with the help of your lot.’

‘What do you mean, my lot? The *FC* said it was time for a change.’

‘I mean Breitner. The *Globe*.’

He’s winding me up, deliberately. The *Globe* is a tabloid, a megaphone for the views of its owner, the South African-born billionaire Jimmy Breitner. My paper, the *FC* – the *Financial Chronicle* – is one of the most respected business papers on the planet. Breitner owns us too, but our editorial independence is sacrosanct. Or at least, that’s how I persuade myself it’s OK to work for him.

‘*Tax nightmare if Labour wins*. We never recovered from that.’ He takes a slug of champagne. The glass looks small in his hand. Five years ago, the Conservatives snatched a win in injury time. Of course Todd is paranoid. Only losers aren’t.

But my thoughts are focusing. *Tax nightmare*? That’s the second time he’s mentioned tax.

‘When are you announcing that you won’t increase the basic rate of tax?’ I bluff, as if it’s a widely known fact.

‘Fuck off.’

Classic Cannon: a non-denial denial. Time for my first educated fib.

‘Thursday, I’m told.’

‘How the fuck do you know that?’

Bingo.

‘But what really interests me is what you’ll do on the top rate of tax.’

‘Now you can really fuck yourself.’

I smirk. 'OK. But there is another story I am working on that would be of interest to you.'

Cannon takes the bait. 'What?'

'I've got a recording of a senior T&G official telling me that Johnny promised to put your friend Kenilworth in the House of Lords.' I don't have such a recording. But there are rumours Kenilworth is in line for a peerage if Labour wins the election. 'BROTHERS IN ERMINE – not a bad headline.'

'You're not really going to write that?'

'Why not?'

'It's not true.'

'I have the recording.'

He stares at the picture of Kenilworth.

'But obviously I am more interested in your tax plans ...'

'We haven't made any announcements.' He snaps a Twiglet in half and crumbles it into splinters and dust.

'Todd can't leave himself vulnerable on this.'

'Correct.'

'So he'll say he's not putting up the basic rate. Right?'

'I am not confirming that.' But he's also not denying it.

'If I run that, will I look stupid?'

Cannon looks at his empty glass. Even with coke and champagne in his system, spilling party secrets is not second nature. He sighs.

'You won't look stupid.'

And there's the story. BASIC RATE WON'T RISE UNDER LABOUR GOVERNMENT. Not too shabby. Admittedly I prefer finding out when a cabinet minister has fiddled his taxes, or a civil servant has been entertained in a lap-dancing club by a private-sector contractor. But this is real news. Probably the splash.

I knock back the rest of the fizz, and my hand's already halfway in the air to attract the attention of the young waiter whose manner suggests she is doing me a favour by taking an order. But I am also thinking I should get to the office to write this up.

Cannon is folding his copy of the *Mail*. That story really got to Todd. He'll want to make a big noise, something that'll force the *Globe* and the *Mail* to re-evaluate their assumption that he's a socialist wolf in a Hugo Boss suit.

I turn to Cannon. 'What about the top rate of tax?'

He lifts his hollow eyes. 'What about the top rate?'

'What will Todd say about that?'

'You're a piece of work. You've got a story with the basic rate.'

A Labour party promising that taxes won't go up for nurses and teachers is important, but neither brave or all that surprising. But a pledge not to go after the incomes of bankers and stock-brokers? That would be sensational. It would be Todd sticking two fingers up to those Labour members and trade unionists for whom it is a moral duty to at least put the rich on warning that Labour is out to get them.

'In terms of symbolism, tax on higher incomes, that's more important for Labour. Todd is desperate to have business on side so he'll promise not to increase the top rate. Now I think of it, it's obvious.'

Cannon says nothing.

'You've gone quiet,' I say. 'Let's be clear, Tony, if you tell me now that it's not true, I won't run it.'

'I am not saying anything.'

'So you're not denying it?'

He stays silent.

‘Look. This conversation is not happening. We both know that. But to repeat, if I write that on Thursday Todd will set out that the party’s manifesto will include promises not to increase either the basic or top rate of taxes, is that my career over?’

I am beginning to get the telltale adrenaline surge from landing a big exclusive.

‘I wish it was. But not this time.’

‘OK. Wow. Thank you.’

‘Do me a favour, Gil.’ He leans forward. ‘No fingerprints. And be a bit vague on the timing.’

‘No problem.’ I have the story. I can be magnanimous.

It is 9 p.m. I need a polite way to end the conversation so I can ring my news editor and see if there is any way to shoehorn the story on to the front page for the second and third editions. I hate sitting on a scoop – there is always a danger that someone else will get the story.

But Cannon is already getting up. ‘I think I’ll make a move,’ he says. ‘Back to the barricades.’ He looks as dejected as ever, despite the booze and drugs, and heads for the exit.

I start composing the story in my head. But it’s interrupted by the habitual nagging voice of self-protection. How do I know I haven’t been played by Cannon? Maybe he always planned to give me the story for reasons I can’t quite fathom. Maybe he wants to damage me by telling me a pack of lies – again for reasons I can’t quite see right now. The problem with being scoop-obsessed is that there are risks – risks of being manipulated, or just getting stuff wrong. I play the percentages. There are no guarantees I’ll be right.

But mostly I am, I remind myself.

I leave the bar to ring Mary Nichols, the *FC*'s news editor, in the underlit hall by the reception desk. Just then, the Nokia screen lights up, accompanied by the distinctive plinkety-plink ringtone. I register the digits. It is a phone number I know as well as my own, but I haven't seen for months. I hadn't expected to see it for a few more.

My thumb hovers over the keypad, moving between the green button and the red. I don't want to take this call. Even if I wanted to speak to her, I need to phone in the story. I can't waste time.

But then again, she never rings at this time. Maybe it is something important. Fuck. I'll give her five minutes. I press the green button.

'Hello, Mum.'



Chapter 2

Tuesday, 4 March

IT'S 4 A.M. AND I'M in a windowless, airless room next to intensive care in St Thomas's Hospital; the 'Friends and Relatives Room'. The pale hospital green is supposed to soothe, but has become an annoying visual muzak behind my gnawing anxiety. I've been here for six hours, the heating is giving me brain fog and the brown vinyl armchair, which squeaks each time I try to find a position of minimal comfort, has made my back ache. This is supposed to be a sterile environment but I feel as if I am in a Petri dish. I've already washed my hands three times and have spent the last half hour resisting the urge to do so again. The champagne and coke in my system have been metabolising and the whirring in my head is returning. The idea that my sister's life is in danger is a vice around my chest. Deep breaths are impossible, just shallow inhales into the top of my diaphragm. I chant 'God, let me die first' five times, to ward off the growing panic.

The moment I saw Mum's number on the Nokia's screen I knew something was up. She never rings my mobile. If I don't call her (and I rarely do), we don't speak. My first thought was something must have happened to Dad.

‘Hi, Mum.’ Before she even speaks I yawn. It’s a reflex.

‘Clare has had an accident.’ *Eccident*. My mother’s a grammar-school girl from the East End, but when stressed her accent is Buckingham Palace. ‘She’s in St Thomas’s ICU. It’s bad, Gilbert.’

‘*What?* What’s happened?’

I tried to turn away from the noise in The Groucho’s reception. I was in the corner by the slatted blinds of the tinted window and facing a YBA line drawing of a crack pipe. I must have misheard. ‘Tell me again, I don’t understand!’

‘Clare is hurt. You need to help.’

At this admission of powerlessness, I felt sick with dread. The blurry lights from the street fused with the alcohol, the din.

‘We had a call from Jeremy. He said –’

‘Who’s Jeremy?’

‘Jeremy is Clare’s PA.’ Her anxiety has made her cross with me. ‘He phoned to tell us she’d been knocked off her bike, turning on to the Embankment. It’s her head.’

‘Where’s she now?’

‘In St Thomas’s, in intensive care. I thought I said that. It’s across from where she was knocked off.’

‘I know that, Mum. Are you OK?’

‘Gilbert, your father and I are so worried.’ She always uses my full name when she is under pressure. ‘Can you get to the hospital and let us know what’s happening?’

I felt conflicted. A part of my brain would not let go of the story. I hate myself for it.

‘But don’t you want to be there?’ I said. ‘And what about Charles? Surely he’s there already.’ Charles is Clare’s pompous American banker husband. Everything my parents should

despise, but he charms them with his claim to be the only man in the City who supports Labour, and by regaling them with stories of bankers' excesses. The way he tells it, he's waging a one-man war on the system from the inside. Luckily he's on the losing side, or his humungous bonus might shrink.

'Charlie's in New York,' my mother said. 'No one's been able to get hold of him yet. Your father's not coping.'

There's nothing wrong with my dad, but their relationship is based on the conceit that he's a frail genius who could drop dead at any minute and it's her duty to look after him.

Fuck. Mum and Dad are actually paralysed. 'OK. I'll go. I'll keep you updated.'

The senior ward sister is talking to me. She has wavy blonde hair and her watch pinned upside-down on her bosom. 'How are you doing, hon?' she asks. 'Can I get you a cup of tea?'

I shake my head. 'How's my sister?'

A small smile, looking me in the eye. It's meant to reassure, but it makes me squirm. I don't want sympathy. I want my sister to be OK.

'She's a battler isn't she. She's not giving up.'

Of course she's not giving up. Clare's the most tenacious person I've known. But the nurse hasn't answered my question. 'Is she going to be OK?'

She glances over her shoulder as if she's afraid of being overheard. 'The doctor will talk to you.'

'When?'

'As soon as he can.'

'Can you tell me anything? Anything at all?' I add a little helplessly. 'Please.' It sounds pathetic. I spend my life prising

secrets out of powerful people and yet I've been here seven hours and I can't get the prognosis for my sister.

That smile again, the unsettling eye contact. 'The doctor will fill you in.'

I sigh.

She pauses. 'I'll see what I can do.'

The moment she's gone I spring from my chair and rush to the bathroom to wash my hands. Staring into the square little mirror above the sink, I wince. Looking back are the hollow eye sockets in grey skin of my father. It is a resemblance I deny, but that's impossible tonight.

This is your fault, the reflection says to me.

'Not true.' I say it out loud. How can it be my fault? We've barely spoken for years.

I hold a paper towel while turning the bathroom door handle (*minimise contact with germs at all times*) and return to the relatives' room. My mind is at war. I feel guilty at all the missed opportunities to reconcile with Clare, but I can't quite relinquish the idea that the fault was hers. She was self-righteous. But then, what if I'd been less precious, had rung her up for a chat as if nothing had happened, maybe about our beloved Spurs and nerve-racking rumours that Teddy Sheringham would be leaving at the end of the season? *What if I'd called her yesterday afternoon, asked after her boys? Could we have met for a cup of tea?* She'd have left her teabag in the mug of course. Only a small dash of milk. We could have chatted for an hour. Half an hour. Even a few seconds would have been long enough to stop her from turning on to the Embankment at that moment. But I am fooling myself, even now. The most senior woman at the Treasury. Tipped for even greater things. If she

saw my number, she'd assume I was simply ringing to confirm a story. And she'd have been right. She would have refused to take my call.

I twist in the chair. There's no comfort. It is my fault. Everything that's gone wrong with my family always has been my fault.

The silence of the room is amplifying the unbearable noise of my thoughts. I try to drown them out. I hum. And then, when the humming is not enough, I start to sing. Mark Morrison's 'Return of the Mack'. I obsessively repeat the refrain about lying, and crying, and dying. It's what I do. Slowly, I lullaby myself into a fitful doze, where Clare and I are ten and eight, holding hands outside the school gate. There's snow everywhere, too deep to allow cars to move. No sign of Mum or Dad. We're shivering, more out of anxiety at being lost and forgotten than from the cold. 'They'll be here in a minute,' Clare says. I can tell she doesn't believe it. But I feel safer, knowing that my big sister will look after me.

When I wake, my eyes are blurry because my contact lenses have been in too long and I can't read the clock. But I can hear a voice – a man's voice – in the corridor.

There have been noises all night, but this feels significant. They are the tones of someone feigning classlessness, like a BBC presenter. 'How is Clare Peck?' he asks. The nurse replies in a whisper, as if she doesn't want to be heard. She talks at length, providing more information than she gave to me. Why would she do that? It's not Charlie or Dad. Maybe it's the doctor.

But when the man speaks again, she says, 'You're welcome to wait in the relatives' room.' I hear the sound of shoes clacking

towards the waiting-room door and I sit up, blinking at its beige nothingness. The back of the door opens towards me.

‘Mrs Prince’s brother is already there,’ the nurse is saying.

The door stops moving. The handle – depressed, half down – springs back, and the man says he needs to be getting home.

I spring from my chair to see who it is, but by the time I am in the corridor, the lift doors are closing, the visitor has escaped. I return to the nurses’ station.

‘Who was that?’ I ask the nurse. My hands are on the edge of her desk.

She does not lift her eyes from the paperwork she is filling in. ‘Someone from your sister’s work.’

‘Who? Did he give a name?’

‘He did.’ She frowns. Before I can press her, a set of swing doors to the ward burst open, and a silver-haired man in surgeon’s scrubs bursts through, followed by a pair of orderlies.

The nurse says, ‘This is Mr Lloyd. He specialises in cranial fractures and brain injuries. He’s here to assess your sister.’

I follow the surgeon into the ward. In an abstract sense, I know what to expect, but I feel sick – all the tubes and sensors, the beeping screens, have turned my unconscious sister into some kind of captive of a merciless machine. I think of Gulliver, tied down on Lilliput. I try to understand what the beeps, moving electronic cursor and flickering numbers are saying about Clare’s condition.

‘Hello, Mr Lloyd. I am Clare’s brother, Gil Peck. Is there anything you can tell me?’

‘Good to meet you,’ he says. *Please save her, please save her, please save her.* ‘Your sister has suffered a traumatic brain injury.’

It is a concern to us that she's been more or less unconscious since the accident. We are going to take her downstairs now for a scan, to assess where she stands on the Glasgow coma scale.' He talks drily, as if relating the details of the weather forecast. 'Depending on what that shows, I may have to take her pretty rapidly into theatre.'

I hear but I don't understand. The noise in my head is growing louder and all I can do is stare stupidly at my sister. The nurse nudges me. 'Speak to her. Even though she is unconscious, she'll be able to sense you are here. Just feeling someone who loves her will help, so hold her hand, if you like.'

Someone who loves her. If only the nurse knew. I go round the side of the bed and gently squeeze her limp fingers, and then hold her hand as she held mine. I bend down and murmur, 'Clare, it's Gil. I am so sorry. Really I am. And you're going to be fine. You're going to be more than fine. I'll make sure of that.'

I am screaming inside but the nurse gently urges me on. 'Just chat about anything. It'll help.'

I lean in. A memory is triggered. Something about the warmth of her hand takes me to the woods behind our childhood house, aged seven and five. Holding on to each other, we are running as fast as we can from a bearded man who had something in his hand and we've decided it's a gun. Out of breath. Panting. Clare shouting 'Gil, run run run!'

Now I'm thinking, 'This time I'll save you.'

'I'm here sis,' I whisper. 'You'll be OK. I won't leave you.'

But Mr Lloyd cuts in. 'I am sorry, Mr Peck, but I am afraid I have to ask you to return to the waiting room.' They start to pull the curtains around her bed.

‘I’ll see you in couple of hours, sis.’ I am sure she squeezes my hand. Just faintly. I am certain.

I stand. At the door, I realise what I didn’t say, and it’s too late. But I can still help to rescue her. I murmur, ‘I love you, Clare’, seven times. Seven is a good number. That’ll work.