

For My Sins

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S HE HADN'T SEEN this coming. She had expected someone gaunt and grave.

The sin-eater was a fat man with curly, almost bouffant grey hair that made Lexi think of Donald Trump. He wore a bomber jacket and denim shirt that carried stains from long-ago meals, faded into the fabric like patchwork. When he spoke, Lexi saw that his teeth were bent and crogged.

"Miss Blythe, is that right?" The sin-eater pushed past without waiting for an answer. He didn't bother either to take off his boots or to wipe them, and messy footprints appeared on the hall carpet as he strode. "Can I trouble you for a cuppa?"

"Yeah," Lexi said following him, a woman with a soft face and a good body, billowing hair and sharp eyes. She brewed coffee and took two mugs out to where the sin-eater sat in slants of sunlight from the French doors looking out onto the garden. The mugs had CHROMOSAL TEC logos on them.

"Fucking good view up here," the sin-eater remarked. "Can see right downt' Abbey."

"It's great for parties when summer comes," Lexi said. "So, can we get to the point? How does this work exactly?"

She wanted to move things on: the sin-eater had the style of a man who would talk away the afternoon about nothing. And she was tired.

"Did Mr Day not tell you anything? Terrible remiss of him. Still, he ain't a reliable man. Sold a bunch of bad pills that killed his best friend at Global Gathering. Police never traced it back

to him, of course, but it's *the dark night of the soul* that gets you, don't you find that, Miss Blythe?" The sin-eater had a giggly, rollicking voice that was out of sync with the morbid nature of his words. "Terrible guilt that young man went through. Mr Day almost took the jump, did he tell you that? OD'd, had to have his stomach pumped at the LGI. Terrible. Still, I got to him in time, and now he's fine."

"He didn't tell me any of that. We were talking at a party, he just recommended you. He didn't tell me what the treatment actually involves. Are you like an alternative health guy?"

When the sin-eater talked his teeth waggled like piano keys.

"Nah, I ain't new age. I been around a long long time, before Jesus even. This ain't about reflexology or sticking pins in your head or paying fifty quid for a bottle of water. This is serious shit, Miss Blythe." The sin-eater drank down half his coffee as if it were water. "You need to tell me everything. And I mean everything. *Feed me*. It's pretty intense, I warn you. I seen grown men crying over this."

"I just want the guilt to end," Lexi said. "I want to be able to wake up without feeling afraid and to sleep through the night. I have my house, my money, my social life, I should be able to enjoy all that without the guilt."

"Once you've given your full account, you take a little blood from your hand – no way around this, I'm afraid, so it's tough luck if you're squeamish – and mix it into the food you're gonna prepare for me."

"Does it have to be a particular kind of food?"

"Nope." The sin-eater tossed back the rest of his coffee. "Can be anything. But I like burgers."

Lexi grew up on the Hawkswood estate. Her best friend was a girl called Kelly Dales. As teenagers they wagged off school, got drunk down at the Aire with the popular crowd, sledged on Toboggan Hill when it snowed, and did everything they could to fight the atmosphere of tedium and bitterness that pervaded the Hawk. Kelly's passion was computers. She could make little arcade games and personal websites, and showed Lexi how. By the time they were fifteen both girls could code to industry

standard. They used this talent to hack into the school computers so that they all crashed at the beginning of the lesson, displaying an error message that read '404 Error: Mr Schofield bends it'.

When Mr Schofield found out what Lexi and Kelly had done, he did not punish them as they had expected. Mr Schofield asked them how they had done the coding. Mr Schofield got very excited and started talking about algorithms and systems and domains. He said that when they left school they should go to college and do a degree in programming. Then they could get jobs at Google or Microsoft. There was loads of money in computers, he said.

Mr Schofield mentioned this at parents' evening, and Lexi's mam just laughed and said that college would be too expensive, and who was going to pay for it, and that sort of thing wasn't for the likes of them anyway. Lexi knew what she meant. You didn't go to college. You left school at sixteen and had a baby and got a council house and maybe a part time job as a nursery nurse or care assistant. That was the algorithm of the Hawk.

Lexi hardly ever ate burgers and had made the sin-eater's meal out of a breakfast muffin and leftover mince from the shepherd's pie *dauphinoise* recipe she'd served to guests last weekend. The burger didn't look nice to eat.

"Is it me or is this thing *pulsating*?" she asked.

"That's your sin."

He sprayed ketchup, mustard and mayo, one after the other, on top of the throbbing meat, then demolished the patty in five minutes. The sin-eater then downed half a San Pellegrino and produced a belch like God's death-rattle.

"Much obliged. That was delish."

"How much do I owe you?"

The sin-eater got to his feet, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

"Fuck all. That's how you can tell I ain't an alt-health practitioner. It's the pain and regret and misery I like to eat, for each sin's a drop of honey to me."

Actually she'd felt nothing while she told the tale. Even enjoyed the retelling. Thinking about Kelly had been worse than talking about her. For after school let out for the last time Kelly and Lexi spent a few years working minimum wage and getting wrecked in the Bridge or LS6. Then they discovered webcamming. For a floor show lasting maybe three hours, they could clear three hundred each, even after the camsite had taken its cut. It was fun, they had their regulars and a real sense of community to the whole thing, people used to tip big when their shih tzu dog, Barney made an appearance, or when they could see Kelly's older brother watching at the door.

Lexi's mam found out about the webcamming and kicked her out, but by then they were making enough to rent a decent flat up by Beckett Park anyway. They had lunches in town and bought cool clothes and went to parties. But Kelly was not satisfied. She had always been the more ambitious and accomplished of the two, and was working on what she called a 'killer app' – something that everyone with a smartphone would want. At the same time she started going out with a lad named Pete Forrester, a big shot who worked as a web developer in the city's financial district. Lexi thought this was slightly unfair – she had met Pete Forrester first, had got off with him at Vanessa Rideout's New Year's Eve party in the hills. But aside from flirting and cockteasing Forrester when Kelly wasn't around, there was nothing she could do.

Last year Kelly had finished the app: a free game called 'Eat the Bean'. You played a cute little dinosaur that had to run around the place, eating beans that fell from the sky. The thing was ridiculously addictive, and Kelly started sending samples out to software companies. The way Lexi told it, the screentime had burned itself into her face so that Kelly had looked rough for a while, and she'd developed an awful rattly cough, even though she'd never smoked. Last summer Kelly had started to cough all the time. Then Kelly started to vomit. Then Kelly started vomiting blood. It was scary. Lexi thought she might have cancer. It wasn't cancer, though. It was something called *idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis*, and over the next six months it went about the business of killing her.

After the sin-eater had gone she went to lie down for a while, but found she couldn't get to sleep. Her heart seemed to dance with playful emotions, and marvellous universes formed and collapsed behind her eyes. She wondered why she was even in the house on such a sunny day. She went for a run around the Abbey and then hit the Clock Cafe for a beer and some nachos. The sun was out late and she wandered over to the Bridge Inn.

Most of Lexi's and Kelly's friends had been students or post-graduates or people just out of uni and casting around for some big idea. There were plenty of the old crew in the beer garden.

"Jesus, looks like we might actually get a proper summer this year!" Johan said. "It's like the bloody Strongbow advert."

"Lex," Day said, "got any holidays planned?"

"We should go to Benidorm," Fran said. "Lexi! Let's do ironic Benidorm!"

"Nah," Lexi said. "Benidorm is not good even in an ironic way. I only holiday in places with an umlaut."

They ended up at a little session at Johan's place: a session that turned into a party. She remembered lying in an attic next to Fran, and bars of strobes coming through the spaces between the beams, and the beat of something – Faithless' 'Insomnia' – pulsed in and out with the lights.

"Lexi," Fran said, "you look great. For the first time in months."

Lexi knew this. Everyone had been telling her. Day had that energised unburdened look, too.

What she said was: "I *feel* great."

"I can tell. And it's good to have you back. We thought, you know, you kind of blamed yourself for what happened to Kelly."

"Maybe I did," Lexi said. "Maybe it was, like, survivor's guilt."

"Did your therapist tell you that?"

"Yes," she said, lying. Her therapist had referred her on after she'd offered him oral sex in return for codeine drugs. "It can be good. Traditional therapy. Old school."

Over the next weeks she wondered really what she had made so much fuss about. It had maybe been the stress of looking after Kelly that had fucked her up. She hadn't had to work; the app money had come through, and most of the time after buying the house she had simply lain around in it, entire days watching Netflix and reading fashionista blogs and eating takeaway, sometimes going to an event she couldn't possibly avoid or calling up an old friend with benefits for the evening. She remembered so much of the time she wanted to sleep because asleep you didn't feel the *wrongness* of yourself like a pickaxe in your chest. She had eaten a lot of chocolate, she recalled, or at least watched a lot of chocolate commercials – commercials that pitched breathless clichés of *desire* and *indulgence* and *sin*.

But now that she was up and about and socialising again, cleaning the house and buying new clothes and back on the LS6 party scene, she thought that maybe she had been too harsh on herself. After all, she had looked after Kelly for six long months. A dreary whirlwind of appointments and bureaucracy and care packages and adaptations. Of seizures and night terrors and fingers turning blue. Lexi hadn't ever had to look after a sick person before, and she was fire fighting. *The reason I moved out after the deal came through*, Lexi had told the sin-eater, *is not because it was the place she died – but because it was the place I cleaned up her shit*. (The sin-eater had just listened and nodded, looking not like the fat, rollicking man who had sat at her table, looking like something spectral and unreal.) *And once you smell shit in a place, you smell it everywhere. Shit gets under your fingernails and never lets go*.

Twenty-three was possibly a little young for the menopause, but she had tested herself, and the test came up negative. But it was a fact: she hadn't menstruated since giving the sin-eater his meal.

Summer came and passed quick. She saw Lady Gaga in Rio with Fran and the emoji crowd, spent a month in the better part of Greece with a dashing young registrar she'd met through Johan, did weekends in NYC and across the Pennines.

Although she now thought of webcamming as a thing of the past, she began again to document her life on social media, uploading YouTube fashion tutorials and pinterests and long, drunken, giggly podcasts with her girlfriends.

Then the autumn came, and brought bad news.

It came in the form of a skinny young man who approached her in the Bridge. He wore a beanie hat and the flustered expression of badly skilled criminals. He called her by name, and it took a beat for Lexi to remember who he was. Oh yeah: Kelly had an older brother called Liam, and this was him.

“Lex, how’s it going?”

“I’m alright. Still drinking the pale ale?” Lexi nodded to his glass.

Liam sat down. He was eating some kind of roast panini from the van outside.

“Yeah, I heard you’re the real gallivanter these days?”

“What can I say? I get around. And if you’re gonna sit down, can you not drop salad and shit all over my magazine?”

“Sorry,” said Liam. “Burger vans. My guilty pleasure.”

Lexi hated that expression.

“So how you doing, anyway?”

Not like she cared. It was a while since she’d had to talk to anyone this dull.

“Not so well. Morrisons paid us off, then that went, had to move back in with the old girl. Jobcentre sanctioned me, and Mam’s hassling us for non-dep charges.”

“I’ll give you fifty quid if you cut the sob story,” Lexi said.

“Actually, Lex, I was thinking you could do a bit more than that. You’re rich off that dinosaur game, and we both know that weren’t your idea. As Kelly’s grieving relative I deserve a cut, plus percentages.”

“No way! The game was developed by the limited company. I was a co-director. You have no legal claim.”

“Maybe not. But we both know you watched my sister die, fucked her boyfriend, got rich off her hard work. Maybe others should know. Maybe the papers’d be interested.” Liam got up.

“So if I was you, I’d keep your spare change.”

She'd meant to be going to Calum and Dave's Headingley bash but had delayed it: she wanted some time alone to work this out. She took a glass of red wine and drew a long hot bath and took a shit. Twice a day this overwhelming need came upon her, but all she could produce at the bowel were these spatters of black rabbit droppings.

She lay in the bath and drank her wine and thought – what hurts isn't what he could do but the fact he *said* it. Formed words out of the regret she used to feel. This worst possible interpretation.

She made a carbonara, took it into the front room, flicked around on the TV until she found an old *Take Me Out* and munched down the carbonara, then ate a pack of mini crème eggs. *Guilty pleasures*. Another cliché. Another thing used most often about food. She finished her glass of wine and poured another. Yeah, Liam could spread lies in the papers, on Facebook and try to ruin her socially. All he could do. He wasn't getting any money – not that there was all that much left. The last time she had spoken to her financial adviser, just before the New York trip, he had told her that her capital was running low, the percentage deal hadn't been as good as she had thought, and the man had even advised her to think about 're-entering the workplace'.

I could do anything.

But Lexi couldn't imagine leaving the city. She was a galivanter, like Liam had said – but she couldn't imagine herself *living* in London or Rio or New York, where she knew no-one.

It was that he actually said it. Actually said it.

I could kill him.

She finished her meal and turned off the TV. It was time to plan what she would wear to the party.

"No. I ain't doing it."

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Lexi said. "I'm just asking you to eat the sin."

The sin-eater shook his head. They were in the Royal Park and he was eating pork scratchings.

"It's an indulgence, a big one. I don't do indulgences. I know a guy who can handle it, mate of my brother's, but –"

"Then put me in touch."

"What you're proposing is a *mortal* sin. It is murder."

"Come on. No-one's gonna miss a dipshit benefit claimant."

"I know the Hawk. It's a small estate and people don't generally leave. If this guy disappears the police are gonna notice."

"But you have power. You can protect me."

"No, I can't."

The sin-eater munched up his pork scratchings and Lexi watched him. Pork scratchings, the ultimate pub food, crunchy and wet and hard and soft all at once. How could you eat something like that?

"I cannot interfere with the laws of man. It's the Covenant. I already done enough. Look, there's stuff that's bigger than you or me. Your friend, Mr Day, he's a sick man. The wasting disease."

Lexi drank back a vodka and Coke. It was true that she hadn't seen Mark for a while – but this didn't matter now. The vodka had a cold, slimy taste, she suspected from an inferior supermarket brand.

"Well, damn lot of help you are."

"Hey, all I've ever offered is temporary ease and restment. I get in trouble enough for that. Sin is always with us. Not just the mortal and the venial but the sin of being alive, of despair and sadness and regret, what the Catholics call *original sin*."

"Whatever," said Lexi, and left.

She flagged down a cab outside Abu Bakr. When she got back Liam was already waiting outside her front door. He wore a town shirt and enough aftershave to stun a mountain lion.

"Good. You're here."

She opened the door and Liam Dales walked into the house as if he already owned it. The blackmailer walked into the front room – walking trainers all over Lexi's Pashtun rug she had picked up in Fifth Avenue – and peered at the DVDs.

"*Legally Blonde 2?* I never seen such shite."

"Well, you didn't come here to watch the movies," she

said – straining to get exactly the right note of stern flirtation into her voice. It was tricky because too much leg and cleavage would scream honeytrap, and yet he had to believe there was a chance. Her outfit for the evening had been carefully calibrated.

In the kitchen she poured two glasses of wine and carried them back on a serving tray. The tray also had a sheaf of documents. She sat down next to him and smoothed her skirt over her legs, with care. With her remote she turned on Lady Gaga.

“Prefer a beer, if you got one,” said Liam Dales.

“Tonight you drink wine.”

Dales shrugged and knocked back half the glass.

“Let’s get down to it. What’s the legal shit I got to sign?”

Lexi passed the papers to him. Liam gave them a cursory scan – no more – before signing them with Lexi’s Parker pen. Lexi had used it to sign her co-directorship of Chromosal Tec, about a hundred years ago.

“Nice one. When do I get the money?”

“It’s a straightforward transfer. Be in your account in four hours.”

“Cheers, Lex.” Liam stood up, then staggered. There was an alarming glazed look in his eyes.

“Sit down, arsehole.”

Liam fell back onto the sofa.

“I always thought you was fit as all that. Like my sister. I wanted to fuck you both on the internet.”

“Well, that’s really sweet of you to say so.”

She cupped his chin and forced more wine down his throat. He wasn’t so good at keeping it in his mouth and some of the wine would have splashed over Lexi’s new Sofaworks, had she not taken the precaution of putting an old blankie down.

“Come on, you fucking lightweight. Drink to your success.”

“I think you killed Kelly, you bitch.”

Lady Gaga was singing about how *you make me wonder why, I like it rough, I like it rough*.

“No way you would of had patience to deal with her for six month when she were ill. You had the drugs.” He was laughing now. “You could of done it.”

“I could have,” said Lexi, “but I didn’t.”

It took another twenty minutes for Liam Dales to die. Lexi put *Gogglebox* on and burned the papers in the fire – useless anyway, she had just mocked something up on Microsoft Publisher. She had some wine from another bottle and got quite into the TV show. Fast-forwarding through a commercial break she glanced at Liam Dales and realised that he was no longer thrashing around or even breathing. She took his pulse. Nothing.

She picked up the phone. Now for phase two. Scatter some drug paraphernalia around and pass Dales off as an OD. The potassium would back this. There would probably not even be an inquest. Risky, and she had considered luring Dales somewhere outside – God knew Leeds had plenty of remote wilderness – but she couldn’t handle the thought of spending all night digging a grave.

Lexi dialled three nines and a voice came on the phone. Instead of asking her which service she required, the voice said:

“Oh dear, Miss Blythe. A mortal sin. You were warned.”

“Have I got the wrong number?”

“The Covenant has been broken.” This new voice was hard-accented East London. “You better stay there, Miss Blythe.”

And the phone clicked off.

Lexi spent another six minutes trying to get through to the emergency services. Her landline and both mobiles were dead, and the internet connection appeared to be down. She thought of running... but the idea of going out into that night, where the voice lived, was worse than staying in this house with her best friend’s dead brother lying face down on the Pashtun rug.

Finally there came a knock at the door.

The man at the door was tall, robed, gaunt and grave – the way she had imagined the sin-eater would look. But he spoke like a friendly bailiff... a debt collector.

“Dear oh dear, Miss Blythe.” The debt collector took off his hat and entered the hallway.

Lexi was thinking she needed to improve the quality of her house guests.

“Fuck me.” The debt collector was looking at the body of Liam Dales. “This *is* awkward, isn’t it? It’s Dickie Munslow’s fault. He’s too old school. Like the idiot Nazarene himself, who thought he could make everyone feel good about themselves with his moronic sacrifice. Not that simple, is it, Miss Blythe?”

The debt collector had taken off Liam Dales’s clothes and was setting about him with strange, old tools.

“What are you doing,” she asked, and the debt collector began to tell her but instead of his voice she heard the voice of her mam, talking of the *original sin, got above yourself, being too clever, feed me, feed me now, because all pleasures must be guilty, or else*. The collector turned. He had Liam Dales draped over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift.

“Where are you taking the body?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” said the debt collector. “We’re going to eat it.”