

JOHN PURCELL

The Girl
on the
Page

FOURTH ESTATE

Chapter 1

Wednesday, 27 July 2016

‘They’re here,’ said Helen, who had been watching from the window of her West London terrace. Her husband, Malcolm, was standing in the doorway to the sitting room waiting for this news. He strode down the corridor and pulled open the front door.

Parked outside the house was a black Citroën estate car. A man in his late forties with sparse sandy hair was standing by the open driver’s door, arms raised in a luxurious stretch. He began to yawn and then saw Malcolm walking towards the front gate.

‘Hi, Dad,’ he said, mid yawn, adding, ‘Hi, Mum,’ when he saw Helen at the door.

‘Good trip, Daniel?’ asked Malcolm.

‘Fair,’ he answered. He opened the back door, reached in, took out his tan blazer and put it on. ‘The weather’s better here. It’s been miserable in Edinburgh. This is glorious.’ He glanced briefly at the blue sky. When his gaze returned to Malcolm, he added, ‘You’ve had the house painted. Looks like all the others now. I didn’t recognise it. Lucky I remembered the number.’

Malcolm nodded and was about to say something when the passenger door opened and a woman in her late twenties emerged. She gave Malcolm and Helen a tight smile and then opened the back door and helped two little boys out. The boys stood on the pavement in matching jeans and ruby red jumpers

and stared up at Malcolm. They looked like they had been woken from a nap.

Helen opened the gate and crouched down. 'Hello, boys!'

The boys stared at Helen, expressionless. After a moment, the younger of the two decided it was best to bury his face in the heavy material of his mother's charcoal skirt.

'Hello, Geraldine,' said Malcolm as he watched his wife try to coax the remaining boy into a smile.

Geraldine stepped forward awkwardly, the little boy still clinging to her, and gave Malcolm a quick kiss on the cheek. 'The boys and I have been asleep.'

'It's a long drive,' said Helen, admitting defeat with the boys and standing up. She was struck by how much Daniel had aged. He was almost twenty years older than Geraldine and it was more evident than ever. Geraldine, always attractive, had become a dark beauty. Her face was thinner and more defined. And though shy in this moment, her eyes showed that she had matured and was more herself than ever.

'We did it in seven hours,' said Daniel. 'And we stopped for lunch. The boys can watch DVDs in the back. They were great, weren't they?' Geraldine nodded. 'What's the best movie ever, Charlie?' he asked touching the boy's shoulder.

'*Frozen*,' came the muffled reply from within the folds of his mother's skirt.

'Geraldine, go in with the boys. I'll help Daniel with the bags.'

'No rush, Dad, we'll get them later. I'd kill for a cup of tea.'

Malcolm ushered the visitors into the front room, while Helen went off to make tea. Entering the room, he pointed out the train set Helen had set up on the floor for the boys. The boys clung to their parents tenaciously.

'That was once Daddy's train, Samuel,' said Daniel, leading the elder of the two by the hand, 'from when I was a little boy like you.'

Both Geraldine and Malcolm watched in silence, still standing by the door, as Daniel got down on his haunches and showed

Samuel how it worked. Charlie left his mother's skirt and went over to see, too.

When Helen returned with a full tray of tea things, Malcolm and Geraldine still hadn't thought to sit down. It became obvious to both that they had been behaving awkwardly. Malcolm hastened off to the window, passing his son and grandsons on his way, and proceeded to check the weather. Geraldine took the tray from Helen and placed it on the coffee table, allowing Helen to return to the kitchen to see to the now boiling kettle.

Once the tea was poured, and everyone was settled, the adults watched the two boys playing with the train. Daniel had remained on the floor but now turned to the coffee table to stir his tea and take a few tentative sips.

'I'm sorry we couldn't get down for Christmas. Geraldine's parents always put on a big family Christmas and the look of disappointment on their faces when I floated the idea of spending Christmas in London was too much. I know your views on religious ceremonies and thought you both wouldn't mind too much,' said Daniel, his eyes travelling from Geraldine, alone on the sofa to his right, to his mother and father, seated on his left.

Helen almost spoke. She almost said that it didn't matter. Her head and shoulders lifted almost imperceptibly, in order to speak. But it had mattered. And consciousness of this fact kept her silent.

Malcolm, thinking he was about to hear the words he knew Helen must say, remained silent, too. So real was his premonition of her speech, he'd thought he'd heard it. But only for the shortest of moments.

'We didn't handle it well,' admitted Geraldine. 'To make arrangements with you and then to break them at the last minute wasn't ...' Her words died on her lips.

Daniel gave his wife a reassuring smile. He was glad she hadn't said anything more. He knew his parents were waiting for an apology and Geraldine had almost given them one. But he knew better than anyone how much she had been dreading that Christmas

visit to London, almost as much as she had been dreading this current visit. If anyone deserved an apology it was Geraldine. His parents had never made any effort to get to know her.

‘It was difficult,’ said Malcolm.

‘I don’t want to speak about it,’ said Helen, instead of the words that had come to mind. These had made her feel uncomfortable. They were so ordinary. *We were both hurt*, she might have said. But she recoiled from the idea. They weren’t people who said such things. Or felt such things. She was facing behaviour that was so distressingly ordinary that only ordinary speech and emotion applied. But she wouldn’t stoop. Daniel and Geraldine were singularly selfish and unrepentant. To proceed, that fact would have to be agreed upon by all present. And that wasn’t going to happen.

‘What can we speak about then?’ asked Daniel. Helen knew the tone of this question well. It never took long before the facade of the good son crumbled.

‘I read your article on the library closures in Scotland,’ said Malcolm.

‘We both did,’ said Helen.

‘I don’t want to discuss my writing with either of you. I was compelled to write. In my work I see first-hand the deterioration of literacy standards. But writing, I have no ambitions in that direction.’

Geraldine, alert to her husband’s tone, spoke before either Helen or Malcolm could. ‘Daniel said you’ll be celebrating your fiftieth wedding anniversary in October.’

‘Yes, we will,’ answered Malcolm, unhelpfully.

‘And your work, Geraldine, will you be returning now the boys are older?’ asked Helen.

‘I never really stopped. Clients still come to the house. The boys are very good. They know when I’m working. Sometimes they join in. I’m now thinking about running yoga classes designed specifically for children.’

Neither Helen nor Malcolm could find a reply to this. Helen wondered why she had asked. She looked down at the boys and felt none of the joy she had expected to feel. The excitement generated by the anticipation of the visit was smothered by the reality.

Daniel was adept at reading the direction of his mother's thoughts. He was not so adept at comprehending their cause. He didn't need to look at his wife to know that she'd be hurt by his parents' failure to show sustained interest in her. The visit was going just as he had expected it to.

As the silence lengthened it grew uncomfortable.

'No one would ask for you two as parents,' Daniel said quietly, looking at the surface of the coffee table. He glanced up at Malcolm and added, 'Some might, I suppose, not knowing you. Thinking they know you. But they don't know you.'

Malcolm sighed and sank back into the sofa while observing Helen closely. The expression on his wife's face pained him. With a hint of weariness, he said, 'The same old Daniel. Desperate to be a real boy.'

'Why shouldn't I want that? I know the difference now,' Daniel continued. 'I've seen what I've missed. My boys won't miss out. I won't refuse my sons the privilege of normality.'

Malcolm repeated the phrase to himself softly, 'Privilege of normality.'

'They'll miss out,' said Helen, sharply, 'just as you have. Not on the things you're referring to. Whatever your concept of *normality* is. But that doesn't matter. It really doesn't. Not these days. Perhaps not ever.' She had failed to convey her meaning. She blamed her audience. She didn't know how to talk to Daniel when he was being so wilfully obtuse. She lifted the plate of biscuits and held them out to the boys. Each took a chocolate one.

'I didn't want exceptional parents. I don't want exceptional parents. I want a normal mum and dad.'

'So you've said. An unvarying insistence since you were about fifteen. We were unequal to your tenacity. Normality, any kind,

was impossible in those circumstances. Every single thing we did had to be abnormal in your eyes. And then as soon as you could, you left. Moved to Edinburgh. We haven't seen you. Any of you. You would have spent more time with your dentist than us in the last twenty-five years. And now you expect *this* to be normal?' asked Malcolm, with a grim smile. He had been hopeful of some change after reading Daniel's article. The article had mentioned both Helen and Malcolm and spoke of the importance of having been brought up surrounded by books and conversation. How he had been a regular visitor to Brixton Library as a child and the impact this had had on him. But now it was obvious their shared history had been important to his argument and nothing more.

'You know what to expect when you visit us,' said Helen. 'I don't know why we come as such a shock time and time again. Isn't it time to accept us as we are?'

'No. And I don't think I will ever be able to convince you why I think this. But if you had been with us at Geraldine's family's Christmas, you would have *seen* what I mean. We all had such a marvellous time. There were twenty-five of us in total. A real Christmas, with a tree, tinsel, carols, terrible jumpers, presents and children squealing with delight.'

'It was lovely. I wish you'd been there,' said Geraldine, without conviction.

'Really lovely,' continued Daniel. 'I couldn't bring Geraldine and the boys here. They'd miss out on all that. It wouldn't be fair.'

'What did you two do for Christmas?' asked Geraldine.

'Salman Rushdie joined us for dinner,' answered Malcolm, drily.

'That's what I'm talking about! Who does that?' asked Daniel, standing.

'I'll help you get the bags,' said Malcolm, standing as well.

'We're not staying,' said Daniel.

Both Malcolm and Helen stared in disbelief. Daniel and his family had just driven seven hours and had been planning to stay a week.

‘We’ve booked a hotel,’ chimed in Geraldine. ‘We’ve plans to see some old friends while we’re here.’

‘We’ve prepared the flat below,’ said Helen. ‘Separate entrance. You can come and go as you please.’

‘You’ll be entirely independent,’ said Malcolm. ‘Kitchenette, bathroom, two double beds. You’ll have everything you need.’

‘No, we won’t,’ said Daniel, shaking his head slowly. ‘No, we won’t.’

He bent down and lifted Samuel. The child was clutching a train engine. He rested him on his hip.

‘Don’t go. This is madness,’ said Helen. ‘How do you think any of this will get better?’

‘We need to spend some time together,’ added Malcolm with feeling.

Daniel looked around the room. He had seen the house before, just after they’d bought it and before they’d moved in. They’d spent money on it since then, he could see. Painted and decorated. While they’d talked he had noted the paintings, the ornaments on the shelves, the books, the two sofas, the sleek television, the coffee table. All of it appeared to be new.

‘You lived in Brixton in the same squalid flat for fifty years – my entire life – and now this ...’ He carried the boy to the door. He looked directly at Helen, adding, ‘You might have sold out earlier.’

Geraldine followed him to the door with Charlie, who wasn’t very pleased to leave the train set. He started to resist and then cried. Helen picked up one of the engines and gave it to him. He wouldn’t look at her, but took it all the same.

‘Let them go,’ said Malcolm, when he saw that Helen was following them out.

‘I don’t want them to go,’ she said, visibly shaken.

‘You think I do?’

They went to the window and watched the young family get into the car, buckle up and drive off.

‘They had no intention of staying,’ said Malcolm, placing his hand on Helen’s shoulder.

‘If we’d been different ...’ she began, then sighed, knowing where their self-recriminations always led, and moved away from Malcolm and the window.

Malcolm followed.

Helen started clearing away the tea things.

‘I’ll do that,’ he said, placing the cups and saucers on the tray.

Helen was left alone in the room. The train set needed to be put away. As she bent down to pick up the pieces, the phone rang. The handset was on the hall table.

‘Hello.’

‘Helen! I’ve been trying to get hold of Malcolm. He’s not answering his mobile.’

‘He’s misplaced it. What’s the matter, Trevor?’

‘He’s been longlisted for the Booker!’

‘For *A Hundred Ways*?’

‘Yes, Helen.’

‘Hold on.’

Helen covered the mouthpiece with her hand and called down the hallway towards the kitchen, ‘Malcolm. Malcolm!’

He appeared at the end of the hall.

‘*A Hundred Ways*, by someone called Malcolm Taylor, has been longlisted for the Man Booker!’

Chapter 2

Past Engagement

‘I’m serious, Amy.’

‘You can’t be.’

‘I really am.’

He placed a little black box on the table.

‘Oh, shit, you *are* serious.’

We were at the Sound Bar and had been drinking since 2 pm. It was now 6 pm and I was hungry. The bar was filling with suits coming from work. It was getting noisier and noisier. We had a booth to ourselves, thank god, but we had to sit close to hear each other.

Alan had won some big case, or something, I don’t know, and had invited me to celebrate with him. I’d been avoiding his calls for about three months but needed to see his face again, so I had accepted his invitation.

You have to know that Alan is a candidate for the best-dressed man in London – he’s always immaculately and expensively attired. And though he isn’t strictly handsome, his self-confidence and his self-command go a long way to convincing you he is.

But we have a unique relationship. I see an Alan no one else sees. He would do anything for me. Anything. As a result, I have always treated him poorly. He is like a good Christian, always turning his head so I can slap each cheek afresh. It has become

a habit, and I never tire of it. We can go months without a word and then pick up where we left off. Me taking and him giving.

And Alan had just proposed.

There was that little black box on the table.

'I am serious,' he said.

'Holy fuck.' I sat up straight.

I had been lounging in the curve of the booth with my leg draped over his knees. He moved the box closer towards me. His eyes were bright with fear and joy.

'Open it.'

'You've had this in your pocket all this time?'

'Open it.'

I picked up the shiny black box. It had weight. I tried to remember what we had been talking about before he had said, 'Will you marry me?'

I remember he had been stroking my bare thigh in the most chaste manner. It was nice. Virginal. The kind of thing he never, ever did. We were lifelong friends. It was the bravest he'd been. Most other men would have run their hand under my dress. But Alan was not like most other men.

But what we'd been saying before? A blank.

'There's a ring in here?' I asked, twisting the box in my fingers.

Alan laughed.

'Yes, I'm asking you to marry me. Open it.'

'Did you get me here under false pretences? I thought we were celebrating some boring law thing.'

'I've had this in my pocket for months, Amy.'

'I need a drink.'

I reached across the table and lifted the bottle of Bollinger out of the ice bucket. Instead of refilling my glass, I drank straight out of the bottle, but lifted it too high too fast and it flowed down my chin onto my dress.

'Dammit!'

'You're drunk!'

‘You don’t know what a drunk me looks like if you think this is drunk. This is Functional Amy. This is how I go to the office.’

‘You go to the office covered in champagne?’

I smiled at him and said, ‘Why are you doing this? Why now after all these years?’

He lifted the bottle to his lips, drank deeply then dropped it in the ice bucket upside down.

‘Aren’t you even going to open it?’

‘A ring won’t change my answer.’

‘Just open it.’

I lifted the lid.

‘Oh, god,’ I said, with a gasp. I looked up from the ring and added, ‘I was wrong. A ring can change my mind. It’s gorgeous.’

‘Put it on.’

‘No. Alan. No,’ I said, closing the lid.

‘Why not?’

‘For one, you’re Alan. My *friend*, Alan. But more importantly, I couldn’t possibly marry someone called Alan, could I? And then ...’

I paused. I didn’t really have my reasons defined.

He was unperturbed, and prompted, ‘Is that all?’

‘Isn’t that enough?’

‘Look at the ring again. I want you to take your time. I’ll get us some more champagne.’

Before I could stop him he was up and navigating his way through the suits to the bar.

I opened the box and stared at his solitaire engagement ring. I even took it out and tried it on. He’d done well. I held up my hand to see how it looked. The band was platinum, but wasn’t too heavy. The large round brilliant cut did its best to sparkle in the dim light. It had to have cost him £50,000. It was a statement of his intentions, if ever one was needed.

Though we’d been friends all our lives, he’d always had one peculiar quirk. He had always said that one day we’d get married.

As a child he'd said it. As a teen he'd said it. At university he'd said it. And yet in all that time we had never dated. We'd never even kissed. He'd never even tried to kiss me. While other 'friends' were dry-humping my leg as we watched TV, Alan never pestered me. Never tried to hold my hand, never put his arm around my shoulders. We were best friends and that was that. Nothing unusual except for the absolute confidence he had that one day we'd be married.

By the time he returned I had put the ring back in the box. I watched as he poured two more glasses of champagne.

'I saw you looking at it,' he said, as he handed me my glass. 'And saw you put it on your finger.'

'You were always so adamant we'd get married one day.'

'Yes, I've known for years. But a few months ago I dreamt you were married. I woke up heartbroken. And though I realised it had been a dream, I felt sick, a kind of vertigo, at the thought my dream could come true at any time. So I finally decided I had to do something about it. I bought the ring, but since then you've been impossible to contact.'

'You don't expect me to say yes, do you?'

'You have before.'

These three words stopped me in my tracks.

'What do you mean?'

'I've asked you before.'

'And I said yes?'

He nodded.

'We were engaged for three days,' he said.

He wasn't someone who made up stories.

'We were lovers for two of those days,' he added.

Lovers? Alan and me? This was madness. Mine, not his. He was as solid as a rock. I was the damaged one. But I never thought I was this damaged.

'When was this?'

'It was five years ago, after Max.'

After Max. After Max. After Max. ‘Don’t say another word. I don’t want to talk about that.’ I slid around the booth and stood up. ‘I need to go to the loo.’ I pushed my way through the suits, leaving Alan with his little black box.

When Max threw me out of our flat I was a mess. No, that doesn’t quite describe it. I’m a mess now. That was far worse. I just wasn’t. I was a negative. I no longer existed.

Max had been the guy. The One. We’d met at university. Nothing before, and nothing in the future, will ever be as good. And I had fucked it.

After crying until dawn on the street in front of the flat I’d shared with Max, I crawled into the forefront of Alan’s life, completely disrupting it. I can’t be more detailed, I don’t have much recollection of that time, but I know Alan’s girlfriend walked out on him not long after I moved onto their couch. So I suppose I progressed from couch to bed. Alan said I didn’t speak, barely ate. I quickly shed all my happy fat. He found it impossible to keep me from drinking. No matter how closely he monitored me I always found something. He used to lead me to the bath and bathe me. He washed my clothes, dressed me, brushed my hair and force-fed me when he could. He was soon exhausted. And I cried. He said I cried for hours each and every day. No one came for me. No one enquired. My phone didn’t ring or beep. I had betrayed Max, and thus, the world. The world would not forgive me, but Alan would.

I had to line up in the corridor to get into the ladies’. There were three girls ahead of me before the line continued through the door. The girl in front of me was sobbing silently to herself, her shoulders shaking, while she typed messages rapidly into her phone. Loud shouting and laughter was echoing out from the men’s room, the door to which was held ajar by a lookout, who was turning away men who wanted to pee.

So what if Alan had taken advantage of the situation? He had always loved me. He had been a good friend. A much better friend

to me than I had ever been to him. So what if he had proposed? So what if he had fucked me when I was at my most vulnerable? I didn't even remember it.

I'd probably be dead were it not for Alan. It wasn't that I was suicidal at the time; it was because I was numb. I was negligent. I could easily have drunk myself to death or drowned in the bath or stepped in front of a bus. The only hunger I had was for hunger. I was comforted by pain. All I wanted was to disappear. Alan's presence alone inhibited me.

So Alan told me later on. But you know, it all sounds plausible. I've been like that since. Not as bad, but I know how it goes. Especially the drinking. I've lost days to drink. Woken up beside people I'd never seen before. So it sounds like me.

I had fucked up big time. I'd betrayed Max, the one person I loved most in the world, and I was utterly traumatised. No wonder I'm sketchy on the details. I still wear the scars.

My phone vibrated.

Did you leave?

No, there's a queue for the loo.

But Alan and I had never lived together. I had stayed with him for a few weeks maximum. His declaration of love had probably helped me pull myself together. Like electric-shock therapy. No wonder I got the fuck out of there and didn't look back. Thank god for repressed memories.

Not that we didn't keep in touch. We kept in touch, but as friends only. We barely spoke of my breakdown. Just enough to get an idea of how shit it was. And never once in all that time did he ever mention the engagement or that he'd fucked me.

He knew it had been wrong.

The more I thought about it the more it disturbed me. It was all pretty creepy and fucked up. Better left forgotten.

When I returned Alan had an expectant air about him. The ring was still on the table. He looked up at me and smiled an old smile. One from years ago. When we were kids.

Still standing at the end of the table, I downed my glass of champagne.

Then I slid around the booth until I was right up against him.

I had to end this.

I leant in, my hand on his thigh, my mouth close to his ear, and, being a bitch, said, 'I'm your big love, aren't I?'

Alan's eyes narrowed a little. He thought he knew me well, but I could see he couldn't get a handle on my present shift in mood. I could see him sizing up the situation.

'You always have been.'

He was sincere, I saw at once. He'd matured a lot in the last few years. Life had thrown him accolades and with them responsibilities. He'd made a lot of money. He was ready for love. He was ready to settle down.

I slid back along the seat some distance from him, and looking him in the eye, said clearly, 'You're not my big love.'

'I know,' he said.

'And you're happy with that?' He took a sip of his sparkling water and then sighed. He said something I couldn't hear.

'What?'

'I'll never be happy with that.'

I didn't say anything.

He slid around to me and said, 'I'm worried about you.'

'You have no right to be.'

'You look terrible, Amy. I was shocked when you walked in. You're so thin. And there are dark circles around your eyes. And those eyes have no life in them.'

I didn't look terrible. I looked spectacular. The lighting was bad.

'I live hard. I don't want to live any other way.'

'I want to give you a home.'

'I wreck those.'

Alan smiled sadly.

He leant in closer and said, 'I've known you your whole life. I was there when your parents weren't. I've been there when you've

been blissfully happy and when you've been desperately sad, when your mind has been ablaze with new ideas and when you've cried in frustration at not getting published. You're no angel. I know that. You're more often than not a fucking bitch. You've hurt me too many times for me not to know what you're capable of. I'm not an idealist. I'm no romantic. I'm much, much stronger than Max. I can take anything you dish out. I want you in my life and I will do anything to accommodate you.'

'I'd despise myself more than I already do if I even considered what you're offering.'

'Please consider it. A home. A base. A centre. With a man who loves you.'

This is what he had come to say.

I moved away from him again. 'You really know nothing about me. If you did, you'd know that what you're offering is poison to me. If I lay down with you, I'd never rise again.'

'You do talk a lot of crap, Amy,' he said, leaning across the gap I'd made. 'You're a brilliant writer who has sold herself short. You're brilliant, period. But you've taken the easy road, the coward's path, and you know it.'

'Fuck you.'

'I blame your success. It came too easily, and too early. You haven't had to work hard.'

'I work fucking hard.'

'Not just long hours. I mean difficult hours. Challenging hours. You should be exhausted at the end of the day. But you're coasting. Yet I bet you can't sleep. Am I right?'

'You know nothing about me.'

I moved. He followed.

'I know you. A brain like yours will eat itself alive if it isn't being fed properly. You'll go fucking nuts or you'll drink yourself to death. I'm probably the only person who will say all this to you, Amy. You aren't happy and if you don't change, you're heading for

disaster. It's obvious to everyone but you. You can't live as you do without something giving out.'

It was a fucking intervention.

I shuffled out of my side of the booth, grabbed my bag and stood up. Alan watched me with a pained expression. I knelt on the seat on my side of the booth and stretched across the space between us to kiss him on the lips, lingering a moment longer than friends would, then pushed my way through the crowd and out of the bar. He made no effort to stop me.

I didn't need to hear any more of that crap. He was wrong, people *had* been telling me that shit for years. I didn't need to hear it from Alan.

I'm not reckless. I'm not self-destructive. I'm not a fucking coward. I'm busy.