

THE HOME

Karen Osman

For my husband, Fahad

‘Everyone has two sides, good and evil. How you treat me
will determine which side you will see.’

Unknown

Prologue

Thursday 30 November 1989

It was the smell that got me. They never tell you about that in training: how it gets under your skin. The lads at the station told me I was lucky to get such a case on my first day in CID. Once I'd finished vomiting in the nearby bushes, I didn't feel very lucky, I can tell you. After seeing the Jane Doe – or what was left of her, at any rate – I would have given anything to be back in uniform, working the traffic. The body must have been there since Bonfire Night, the people lighting the fire unaware of what lay beneath. I can only hope that she was dead before she was dumped. The body was so burnt there would be no chance of identification. You could almost imagine she wasn't human if not for the long strands of brown hair that lay as dead as their owner. But one thing survived the fire: a silver bracelet on the right wrist, its single chain home to a tiny hummingbird charm. I bagged it up, knowing even then that my first investigation was destined for the cold case pile.

Evelyn

Fifteen Months Earlier

Evelyn climbed the three flights of stairs to her flat, trying to ignore the thump of music that drifted down the open stairwell from flat 3A. Charlie, her beloved Yorkshire terrier, was trotting behind her. It was only half-past eight in the evening but she knew the noise would go on to the early hours of the morning, as it had been doing since her new neighbours moved in a few weeks ago. If she was lucky, she would manage to get a few hours of sleep. She felt her teeth start to grind in irritation and her right hand twitched for a cigarette. She had done everything possible to get them to turn down the volume. Everything except calling the police, but she knew she was never going to get them involved. It was an unwritten rule amongst her lot to leave the filth out of it. Get in some muscle, pay a gang to rough them up a bit, but never, ever call the police.

Reaching the small landing of the third floor, she delved into her handbag for her key while shooting a murderous look at the flat opposite her own. The noise was making Charlie cower behind her legs. Picking him up, she held him close while unlocking 3B, where she had lived for over fifteen years. She slammed the door behind her, gave Charlie a comforting kiss on his head then put him down and watched him as he went into the kitchen, no doubt in search of some treats. Lighting up a cigarette, Evelyn followed, putting a few dog biscuits in his bowl before grabbing the ever-present bottle of vodka from the countertop. She drank it straight, letting the clear liquid soothe her.

Satisfied, she replaced the top and debated whether to tidy up a bit but decided she couldn't be bothered. If she was lucky, she might just catch the second half of *Brookside* but, turning the television on, she heard the rolling credits sing out to her tauntingly. Evelyn swore. She loved her television shows. If she hadn't spent so much time listening to Joan go on and on about her errant husband, she would have been home half an hour ago, watching the drama in her comfy armchair, nightcap in hand.

The loud techno beats went up a few more decibels and Evelyn swore again. It wasn't even decent music – what was wrong with The Beatles, Frank Sinatra or Elvis? She knew that dance music was all the rage but to her ears there was no enjoyment to be had from listening to the hammer and clobber of a synthesiser.

Evelyn felt her patience finally snap and she stormed out of her flat across the hallway to 3A and knocked loudly on her neighbour's door. When nobody answered, she started banging, shouting every obscenity she could think of, releasing her frustration, tiredness, and irritability with every thump of her fist.

'Oi! Shut it! You're making more racket than them, you silly bitch!'

Evelyn stopped abruptly and leant over the railing. Billy, who lived in the flat beneath hers, was standing in his doorway wearing only a pair of greying, saggy underpants.

'For God's sake, Billy, will you put some bloody clothes on? As if I don't have enough to put up with without you parading around in your undies,' shouted Evelyn.

Billy turned round and bent over, pulling down his pants. Evelyn rolled her eyes and ignored him. At the foot of the stairs, she saw a couple of druggies light up spliffs and she turned away, silently counting to ten. She'd been clean for a number of years now, but it was still a struggle, especially when surrounded by it on a regular basis. She had begged the council to give her a flat in a more reputable postcode, but it didn't look like that was going to happen. Once a month, she went to the council office to follow up and every time, the advisor – Alan, his name was – told her the request was in the system and he would be in touch if anything became available. Every. Single. Time. She wondered if Alan was as bored by the interaction as she was. He didn't even pretend to check the file any more. Either way, she was pretty certain Alan didn't live on a rough council estate like Harrington.

Giving her neighbour's door one last thump with her foot, she felt only slightly mollified when some of the paintwork fell off. Back inside her flat, she went into the kitchen and decided that the only way to drown out the noise was with another shot of vodka.

Angela

Angela squeezed herself onto the Tube, trying not to breathe in the smell of sweat from the bodies pressed up against her. This wasn't where she wanted to be on the Friday night of the Summer Bank Holiday weekend, but her parents had invited her specifically. In fact, she had been slightly intrigued as to what may have prompted the invitation for her to spend the long weekend with them. Angela tried not to think too much about the Astoria nightclub. It would have been a brilliant night out and her friends had been talking about it for weeks. Angela wasn't too bothered about the drugs, but she did like the music. When you worked in a stressful industry like law, you needed a release. Besides, she thought, she worked hard and she deserved a night out once every so often. Yet here she was, jammed on the Tube on the way to her parents' home in Tetbury. It was a good two-hour journey from her office in central London and she was getting the 4.15 p.m. from Paddington, which had meant leaving work early. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been outside her law firm during working hours other than to grab a sandwich to eat at her desk. Normally, she'd be ensconced in her cubicle working at least a sixty-hour week, often going in on weekends as well.

Escaping the stifling odour of the underground at Paddington, Angela got on the mainline train, happy to have found a seat, and took a few moments to straighten her new Jaeger suit. The eye-catching shade of green was perhaps a little too much for the corporate environment of Kings Solicitors, but it went fabulously with her dark hair and she knew she pulled it off by the number of admiring glances she received. The tailored trousers and fitted jacket with shoulder pads were so flattering. Besides, she didn't want to blend in with all the other associates in the office, and this was just one way to be remembered by clients and the senior partners. Satisfied with her appearance, Angela pulled out some papers from her bag and began to work.

Angela had her own key to her parents' house, a pretty bungalow, built of traditional Cotswold stone, and as she let herself into her childhood home she inhaled the familiar aroma: a mixture of clean washing, fresh flowers, and the trailing scent of her mother's Estée Lauder perfume.

It was a few moments before she became aware of the stillness. She was used to the television being on or her mum talking animatedly on the phone about one of her various committees. Leaving her key and overnight bag in the hallway, Angela walked curiously through to the living room. Her mum and dad were sitting next to each other on the sofa, holding hands, and talking quietly.

'Hello, darling! We didn't hear you come in!' Her mum got up to embrace her and Angela gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. Normally, she would drop down on the sofa, complaining about the journey, but there was something about her mum that evening that made her think twice. While Rosemary appeared as polished as ever, with her sleek silver bob and ever-present string of pearls, her face looked worried and drawn beneath her welcoming smile. Instead, Angela turned to her dad, who gave her a hug and, as she'd known he would, asked her about her journey. He didn't trust public transport and drove his beloved Jaguar wherever he needed to go, much to her mum's frustration.

'How are you?' Rosemary asked, already walking to the kitchen to put the kettle on, Angela following behind her. 'How's work going?'

'It's fine, Mum, thanks. Busy, as always.'

'Have they given you your promotion to senior associate yet?'

'Not yet, but I'm sure they will soon.'

While Rosemary understood very little about what Angela did all day, she was so proud that her daughter had grown up to be what she called, *a career woman*. When Angela had graduated from university and got her place at one of London's top law firms, her mum had never tired of telling her how different it was from when she was growing up. *Back then*, the most common goal in life for women was to get married and have children, although Rosemary was one of the few women of her time who had been to university. Angela was part of the late baby boomer generation and, according to her mum, had opportunities that she herself had never had. Although Angela had only experienced middle-class life and all its privileges from her teenage years, she truly believed that success depended more on the drive of the individual rather than the current expectations of the day. How else could she explain her own

success? She was confident, ambitious, and slightly entitled, as so many of her contemporaries were, and her work-hard, play-hard lifestyle had sustained her through her twenties. Now, at twenty-seven, she was in her element. She had a fantastic job, earned a good salary, was about to get promoted, and partied with her friends every other weekend.

Angela pushed away the twinge of anxiety she'd felt when she saw her parents whispering. She must have been imagining things. They just wanted to spend time with her over a Bank Holiday weekend – there was nothing more to it than that.

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As they sat at the large dining table and relaxed after their evening meal, Angela could feel herself unwinding. A bottle of red wine and the roast lamb and mint-enhanced potatoes were a welcome change from the rushed meals she normally had during the week. Conversation had flowed easily, as it always did with her parents, and she enjoyed catching up with their lives and everything they had been doing. In his mid-fifties, her dad was in semi-retirement and came from a working-class family. Now, wealthy and self-made, he had his own business and owned multiple car dealerships across the country. While Angela had always had a strong work ethic, even as a young child, he was very much a living example of what could be achieved no matter what your background. Her mum, on the other hand, came from *old money* – or rather property – the recipient of inheritance passed down from generation to generation.

As the wine bottle emptied, conversation turned to the past.

'I found some of my old diaries while I was unpacking,' said Angela. 'I started reading some of the entries – so embarrassing when I look back on them now!'

Earlier, she had tried to slide her empty suitcase under the bed in the room she'd grown up in and when it wouldn't fit she saw a box of her old diaries was taking up the space. As Angela thumbed through a few of the ones on top, she was taken back to a very different time in her life.

'Oh, yes, I hope you don't mind,' replied Rosemary. 'I was clearing out some things and put them under your bed. I wasn't sure what you wanted to do with them.'

'Your mum's on a massive cleaning spree! I'm just hoping she doesn't turf me out as well!' joked James.

‘Don’t tempt me!’ Rosemary smiled, giving him a kiss. ‘Besides, I need to keep you, otherwise who will do all the DIY around the house?’

‘Ah, yes, one of these days I will come back and find you with a hand drill,’ said James, referring to his wife’s aversion to a tool box.

‘You never know,’ laughed Rosemary. ‘I might just surprise you!’

Angela smiled at her parents, before returning to the topic of the diaries. ‘I’ll have a think about the diaries,’ she concluded. ‘Most of them are rubbish.’

‘But diaries are so important,’ countered her mum. ‘They remind you of things. Do you remember when you fell out of the tree in the back garden and we had to go to A&E? You were a teenager, but the look of pain on your face was heart-breaking. Your father still hasn’t forgiven me to this day!’

‘I remember,’ said Angela, sharing a smile with her dad. She’d climbed the large oak after school most days when the weather was fine, her satchel swinging from her back, filled with books and an apple. She’d felt slightly childish, but she’d loved it up there, sitting quietly, hidden amongst the branches. Occasionally, she’d bookmark her page and glance down at the sprawl of green earth below. In those moments, she’d felt omniscient and powerful. That is, until one day when she’d slipped trying to get down and broken her wrist. James had come home, seen her lying on the sofa with her arm in a cast, and dramatically declared that the tree would be cut down so she couldn’t be hurt climbing it again. It was a vivid memory because it was the first time she remembered someone being so protective over her. However, she still missed that tree and she suspected her mum had never really forgiven him for cutting it down either.

‘And let’s not even talk about the time you got your hair stuck in curlers,’ recalled Rosemary. ‘I had to cut them out. You were so distraught. I wonder if you wrote about that in your diary.’

Angela burst out laughing. She’d forgotten about that day. She’d been fifteen. They’d had to go to the hairdresser after school, but in the meantime she’d had to endure a whole day with an uneven hairstyle.

‘What was I thinking?’ grimaced Angela. ‘All I wanted was to look like Elizabeth Taylor! You’re right about the diaries, though. I’ll take them home with me and read through them.’

‘We had some fun times, didn’t we, Angel?’ said her dad, smiling at her, and she grinned at the use of her nickname. Standing, he gave her a kiss on the forehead

before beginning to clear the plates away. As he turned towards the kitchen, Angela caught the glistening of a tear in the corner of his eye. As he quickly wiped it away, she glanced at her mother, who was looking at her husband in concern, before quickly hurrying to him to take the plates, chiding him to sit down and rest.

In that moment, Angela knew that something was very, very wrong.

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Wednesday 5 February 1969

Dear Diary,

I am so cold. It will be time for lights out soon – Nasty Nora says at St Matthew’s Children’s Home we always have to follow the rules. I stole this notebook, but I don’t feel guilty. I’m writing in it under the covers in bed. It was in the cupboard under the stairs and I found it when Nasty Nora sent me to scrub the staircase again even though I did it already. I hate her. I’m going to write all my secrets in this diary. I don’t have very many but I do have some. Like I know that Mary and Peter kissed. I had to keep watch. I hope Mary doesn’t go to hell. When I told her she might, she just looked at me and said it was all a load of rubbish. Mary’s much older than me – she’s 13! I can’t wait to be 13.

A.

Friday 7 March 1969

Dear Diary,

Today Nasty Nora was ill. No one calls her Matron unless it’s to her face. Fat Franny wasn’t happy because she had to look after her as well as us, and stupid Baby Carole threw her food at the wall – what a waste. Everyone was shouting, and Carole was crying a lot. But she should be thankful she’s a baby and will be adopted soon – all the babies are – they never stay long. In January, I was 8 years old. Now I am 8 years old and one month. Fat Franny told me it’s unlikely I will be adopted, and I can leave when I’m a grown up and have finished school but that’s a long way away. I asked her why my mummy would leave me at St Matthew’s and then I asked her why I wasn’t adopted when I was a baby. Fat Franny told me I asked too many questions, and if I asked any more, she would give me another clip round the ear. Fat Franny isn’t as

quick as Nasty Nora, but she's been here a long time at the home. She said we all give her a headache. How? We're only allowed to speak when spoken to and never at mealtimes.

A.

Friday 21 March 1969

Dear Diary,

Everybody is teasing me. Yesterday, stupid Peter told everyone I had nits and they all believed him, even Fat Franny, who dragged me into the bath and washed my hair with some disgusting shampoo while everyone watched and laughed. He told everyone at school about it. I hate him. I will get Peter back soon and he will be sorry.

A.

Sunday 23 March 1969

Dear Diary,

Sundays are the worst. Even school is better than spending the whole day inside at the home. We have to be silent from morning to night – no talking, no playing. Just church. It's also bath day. When Nasty Nora is on duty, she scrubs really hard with the brush and it hurts. She said she has to wash all our sins away. When I asked, what sins? I got a clip round the ear, so I stopped asking. It's also the worst day for food. Sometimes I save things up during the week, to stop me getting hungry on Sundays. This week I managed to save an apple – the dinner lady at school gave it to me. She told the other dinner lady that the poor mite looks half-starved. I don't know what a mite is. I will ask Mary.

A.

Monday 24 March 1969

Dear Diary,

I had to swap half of my apple with Mary to get her to answer my question and then when I handed it over she

laughed and told me a mite was an insect. I asked her why the dinner lady would say I was an insect and Mary stopped laughing then. She grabbed me by the shoulders and told me that us orphans are worth less than insects. My shoulders hurt – I wish I hadn't given her half my apple now.

A.

Tuesday 1 April 1969

Dear Diary,

The best day ever! I got Peter back for April Fool's and even made him cry! That will teach him to spread lies about me having nits. It was talking about insects with Mary that gave me the idea. I collected a lot of insects in a jar – flies, spiders, beetles, and I even stole a stick insect from school – and I woke him up by tipping all of them over his head! I got such a thrashing from Nasty Nora but seeing Peter cry like Baby Carole was worth it.

A.

Wednesday 18 June 1969

Dear Diary,

When we got back from school today, a new girl had arrived. Fat Franny said her name was Nelly. She has red hair and a gap between her two front teeth. Fat Franny said I had to look after her and show her how we do the chores. Maureen said it wasn't fair that I got help with my chores from the new girl. Maureen is always whining. I told her to shut her face and then Fat Franny told us all to belt up otherwise there would be trouble. We knew what that meant so we all shut up and did our chores.

A.

Wednesday 25 June 1969

Dear Diary,

While we cleaned the kitchen, Nelly told me that her last family let her play on a bicycle. I told her she was a liar – no one I know has a bicycle. She said I was just jealous and that they were the nicest foster family she had stayed with. Nelly said two families had fostered her before but they didn't have any bicycles. I asked her why she was in the home – why didn't she stay with the bicycle family? She told me that they were coming back to get her soon but she looked sad. To make her feel better, I told her that we didn't have bicycles, but I would show her the den in the back garden. We had a lot of fun playing hide-and-seek. It's much better than being indoors and Fat Franny and Nasty Nora are just happy to have us out from under their feet.

A.

Thursday 4 September 1969

Dear Diary,

The summer holidays are over. Nelly has stopped talking about her bicycle family. She has given up thinking they will come back and adopt her. Instead Nelly will come to school with me. We are in Mrs Thistlethwaite's class but her nickname is Snapper because she has a ruler that she snaps on the desk to get everyone's attention. Fat Franny took us to lost property at school to get the left-over school uniforms. Nelly is bigger than me and she found a shirt while we both got ties. Fat Franny grumbled that she would have to buy us skirts. Only one each mind, so we mustn't get them dirty or get holes in them.

A.

Thursday 4 December 1969

Dear Diary,

It's so cold in bed at night that we have pushed all the beds together in our dorm room and curl up to each other to keep

warm. Even Fat Franny felt it because she brought us some more blankets. I sleep next to Nelly but I told Maureen to go and sleep somewhere else. She smells.

A.