THIS CAN NEVER NOT BE REAL

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First published in Great Britain in 2021
by Electric Monkey, part of Egmont Books

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

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ISBN 978 0 7555 0033 8

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

egmontbooks.co.uk

71154/001

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Alcester, Warwickshire

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For anyone learning how to survive.
Hold on.

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‘In a murderous time
the heart breaks and breaks
and lives by breaking.’

Stanley Kunitz, *The Testing Tree*

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ONE

TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH (JOE) MEAD, 17

I was watching Ellie Kimber dance.

TESTIMONY OF VIOLET NKIRU CHIKEZIE, 16

We were watching Ellie Kimber dance. Her dress was almost too short to be called one, and glittered like a mermaid's tail in the light. Her skin shone too – legs so long it was hard to trace where they ended. My little brother's hand tugged at mine and I looked down to see him twisting about to the music the way she was. It made me smile. Beside us, my mother tutted. But she was watching, too.

TESTIMONY OF PEACHES BRITTEN, 16

Everyone was watching Ellie Kimber dance. Like the brightest streak of silver in a crowded sky. Even if you hated her, you couldn't take your eyes off her.

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TESTIMONY OF ELLIOT (ELLIE) KIMBER, 17

I was dancing. It's the best way to forget everything, you know? Eyes closed, head back. Letting it all go. I fell into the music, the way it swam backwards and forwards, in and out of focus as I turned my head. The bass was like a heartbeat, the kind you feel instead of hear. I was crowded against the barriers at the front, right by the speakers. Close enough to feel the vibration in the air.

I know: not a good idea. I'm supposed to care about protecting what hearing I've got – but even if neither of my ears worked I'd have been there for the way the music trembled the ground, pounding up through my feet, close to how it feels when I'm running but without the pain or the focus, or the guilt.

JOE

It wasn't even good music. Every year at Ambereve Festival the set list is the same: a couple of local legends allowed to twang their pitchy guitars somewhere other than talent night at the Queen's Head for a change, and then – headlining – Eric Stone. Amberside's one claim to fame. Even if his fame fizzled out, like, twenty years ago?

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PEACHES

My mum remembers Eric Stone when he was big. Big as the Beatles, but with a better haircut, she says. She threw her bra at him once. Now he lives up on millionaires' row above the town, looking down on the rest of us. I just know him as the beardy old guy who shouted at me when I messed up his mic check. Dick.

VIOLET

His music isn't something I'd listen to, but the way Ellie moved to it was beautiful. It made me almost jealous, even though I could never do that – dance like that in front of everyone. I wouldn't want to, and not only because my mother would have tutted herself hoarse if I tried. She picked my name from a children's book she was given when I was born, and it suits me too well sometimes: Shy Violet. I'm not one for dancing. I like the quieter edges, where I can watch without wondering who might be watching me. When Ellie dances it's like she doesn't care if the whole world's looking on. And why should she? There's only her in the whole world when she dances. Just her.

JOE

She moves like she's . . . I don't know. Less solid than the rest of us. Like she hasn't got bones weighing her down. It's the

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same quality that turns everyone's heads when she glides down the hall at school. I can never keep my eyes off her. No one can. And it's not just the whole 'model' thing, though I see how other girls stare at her like she's got a secret – like if they could just figure out what it was they might be able to copy it. They look at her like they'd like to climb into her skin and become her.

That's how I was watching her then. That close. Couldn't help myself.

Sam nudged me, hooking his finger under the ring pull of my can and laughing as he nicked it off me. 'Careful, or they'll pop out of your head.'

I didn't even look at him. 'What?'

'Your eyes, mate.' He laughed again, but I knew he was watching, too. We all were. She was just –

VIOLET

Beautiful.

PEACHES

What a bitch.

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ELLIE

I was waiting for the fireworks. Ambereve always runs to the same pattern: there had been stalls down the high street all day, fairground rides for the littlest kids, with staff trying to keep cider-drunk students from hogging all the carousel horses. Spiced apple handed out hot in little paper cups – both adult and virgin varieties. Toffee apples. Sweet cinder crunch twisted up inside striped bags. And then the parade.

VIOLET

The whole of Amberside always comes out for the parade. Especially this year.

ELLIE

It was cancelled last year, the parade, the festival, everything, so this year felt like some kind of release, like we were all taking one collective breath as we came together at the start of the route. The numbers were probably the same as they'd always been, but it *felt* more packed than ever. Everyone wanted to be closer than before. People pressed tight enough that it felt like we shared a single heartbeat between us. It was beautiful.

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PEACHES

They tell you to pick up a torch from outside the Guildhall and dip it in a beacon on your way past. For one day of the year no one cares that they're handing out sticks on fire to pissed-up teenagers, even if there's this one boy in my school who's famous for setting his own hair alight.

JOE

Dougie set himself on fire once. It was great. He was fine anyway, except for having no eyebrows until Christmas.

ELLIE

Then, like always, we headed up the road to Hearne House.

PEACHES

'Historic Hearne House' as they put it on the posters. We call it something simpler.

VIOLET

The house on the hill.

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ELLIE

Everyone's either in the parade or watching it. Students from Clifton Academy and Sefton College, even the ones who'd say they're too old. Parents, pretending they're supervising. Little kids hanging off people's arms, asking for a turn with the torch.

I remember wondering what we must have looked like from above. All these pinpricks of light on the move, like shooting stars reflected in a dark, winding lake. Little comets. I'd found my parents' spot in the procession half by accident, and Mum was saying that there was something nice about a bonfire on a warm night, when you can still expose enough skin to enjoy it.

Dad glanced across at me and shook his head. 'Don't encourage her.'

I laughed, and lost track of them again as we crossed the bridge and I refound my crowd: Jessa, Cori, Sutton and a few others who were hanging on round the edges, hoping to keep up. The rush of people into the field felt like opening a door and letting a burst of heat into a chilly room. We ran towards the stage.

VIOLET

We queued at the bridge over the river. The house is a dot in the middle of acres of grounds, and the only way in is the bridge. Part of the river runs underneath it and then flows

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along the inside of the boundary wall, like an inverted moat. I did a school project on it years ago. To either side of the bridge the walls are built high and deep, turning the house into a fortress. It makes you wonder who they were trying to keep out.

PEACHES

Makes you wonder who they were trying to keep in.

I wasn't carrying a torch. I'd been at Hearne House since nine a.m., along with all the techies and other volunteers from the local theatre. The deal was that Amberside Dramatics were allowed to stage shows at the house three times a year, and in return we'd help crew for the other events they held there. Weddings and conferences mostly. Ambereve was the biggest event of all. We'd set metal lighting rigs up over a temporary stage, and were still running the last of our checks as the crowds arrived. Half the town had shown up en masse, forming a bottleneck at the bridge and finally squeezing through, one by one, to be guided by stewards to where they could throw their torches on to the Welcome Fire.

It's supposed to say something about unity, the fire, but I don't think many people stop to think how warm and fuzzy this act of mutual pyromania makes them feel.

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JOE

The fire this year was massive. If there's one thing Amberside really goes all out for, it's arson. And the Welcome Fire wasn't even the main attraction. The field flooded with people waiting for the music and the lights. Dougie, Sam and me had to act fast to secure our usual spot on the southern slope, leaning our backs against the wall that separated the field from the private gardens.

When Sam passed my beer back to me the can was empty, but I wasn't really bothered. I was only pretending to drink it anyway. I'm an expert at faking it – you've got no idea the money I've blown on cigarettes I don't inhale. I was planning to get back into a proper workout schedule the next day, really do it this time, and since the month clicked over to October those early mornings start getting brutal even without a hangover. This year was already colder than usual. I wedged the can into the ground and kept watching Ellie dance, surrounded by the usual shifting crowd of girls desperate for her to notice them. We were waiting for the fireworks.

VIOLET

My mother said the display at the end of the concert was all she went for. Other people went to dance, to spend time with their friends. I went to spend time with mum. I'm not embarrassed. At home there's always so much to do:

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schoolwork, taking care of Dad, a million errands. It always seemed a small miracle to have a moment to stand aside from everything and watch the dancing. And watch Mum waiting for the fireworks.

PEACHES

The fireworks are usually decent. They're more impressive than Eric Stone, anyway. But I didn't really give a shit about some pyrotechnic display, even if I had bagged myself a prime viewing spot. I hadn't wasted all day pleading for permission to spend the concert balancing on a narrow gantry above the stage for that.

It took me forever to convince the stage manager that he *needed* me on the lighting bridge, the chosen one who'd sit through the concert above it all, keeping one of our creaky follow-spots directly on Eric Stone's bald patch. He'd looked at me like I might make the whole rig bow in the middle. It didn't feel great. But it was worth it to see the whole world laid out at my feet once I was up there, so much smaller and less significant than it usually seemed. Even watching Ellie Kimber didn't feel bad with her so far below me. A complete reversal of our usual social status. Up there I could feel free of everything. Even myself.

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JOE

'Taking their time,' Dougie was complaining, tipping his head back to look up at the sky. 'Don't they usually let them off during his big finale?'

Eric Stone was playing 'Rock Saw Us', which was his biggest hit and had got him the nickname Rocksaurus with anyone who'd sat through enough of his prehistoric, repetitive sets. 'Maybe he's got some new material,' I suggested. 'Maybe they're going to bring someone decent on to finish the show.'

'Maybe whoever's supposed to be in charge of them's been distracted by that arse,' Sam said. He pointed. 'Look at it.'

My focus was somewhere else.

Ellie Kimber was wearing a short dress with sequins that flickered every colour in the lights. It could have been sprayed on. I could probably have told you exactly how many strands of hair had come loose from the high, golden ponytail she was twirling round as she danced, but the doctors said I should expect to have some gaps in my memory.

I've got no idea whose arse Sam was trying to point out to me, either. That's not my mind playing tricks on me, though. I didn't even know back then.

I shot a blank look across at Dougie and Sam, I remember that. They were smiling.

'Come onnn,' Sam groaned, 'Join in.' And I had to,

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didn't I? Dougie sprawled against Sam, laughing. Turning back to comb through the many bums being shaken in our direction, I pretended to find the one in question and give it marks out of ten.

VIOLET

The first explosion lit up the sky, and my mother's face. I watched her and kept the way she looked in my memory. She smiled so rarely that I stored away every one I caught. My little brother screamed and huddled in against me, and I let my hand rest in the tight curls of his hair to reassure him he was safe.

'Shh, Ade, it's loud but it can't hurt you. Look at the colours.' Still unsure, he wriggled until he could look up at me, and pressed his fingers to my face, telling me my skin had turned blue.

ELLIE

The sky cracked open in a shower of blue glitter. Blue sky at night, painting everyone beneath the same colour. One big explosion and a rattle of smaller cracks following it up. Better than the beat of the music. I tipped my head back to see what came next.

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PEACHES

As the fireworks started, I hooked my legs and one arm through the rails of the gantry and let myself tip forward, feeling the centre of my not inconsiderable gravity pitch and shift. Two thousand faces looked up at me. Kind of a novelty when, at Clifton, I usually felt like the lowest of the low.

I think I must have been the first to see what was happening. I had that perfect vantage point. And I wasn't watching the fireworks, just the crowd flashing colours below me. I even slipped with my spotlight for a second, and let the rock dinosaur himself fall into darkness.

JOE

Sam caught a handful of the back of my shirt. 'What's that?'

VIOLET

'You're blue, too,' I told Ade, tracing my fingertip across his cheek as the lights shifted through a spectrum of electric colours, temporarily staining our skin. 'And now you're brown again. And orange. And brown. What colours am I?'

PEACHES

People had their arms in the air, eyes on the sky. They were swaying with the music, so it took a moment to register the

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other ripple of movement that started to pass through them. It was wrong somehow. Moving against the flow.

ELLIE

The world was noise and light.

JOE

Sam pulled me up by my shirt. He was on his knees behind me all of a sudden. He said, 'Joe, look.'

VIOLET

Ade grinned, reaching up to touch his fingertips to my chin. 'You're every colour, V.'

PEACHES

It was such a small thing at first. It was like watching a breeze skimming across a cornfield, snapping a few tall stalks in its wake. The crowd shifted beneath me, breaking away from the beat of the music, pressing closer together, confused.

Then something started to scythe a path right through.

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