PREVIEW EDITION



A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

In 2016 or so, playing around with character, voice and style, I wrote the first two chapters of what has now become *My Name is Jodie Jones*. The document sat in my laptop for years along with all the other snippets, experiments and beginnings of things that seem like random fragments but are often precious gems. Years later, on an Arvon trip, I found the chapters, liked them, went home, and with no outline or plan, let Jodie and her story unfold as I wrote.

My lifelong love of language and literature has found a happy home in Jodie Jones, and her rebellious, questioning mind and fierce desire for freedom remind me of how I was as a teen. (And not just as a teen, let's be honest). Welcome to the world and mind of Jodie Jones.

Emma Shevah

UNCORRECTED PROOFS

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To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music that words make.

Truman Capote

I am a free human being with an independent will.

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

1

I don't know. Maybe bubble or fluff.
Maybe elixir or hodgepodge.
Or murmur or piffle or shade.
Mmm. Shade. I like shade.
Actually, I can't choose.
I really like 'actually', actually.

It's definitely not hatchet.
Or vomit or mucus or snack.

2

Dr Kumar is still waiting for me to answer but I can't, so I sit looking at him, kicking my legs. I don't have a favourite word. Why do I have to choose one when I like so many?

'Five, then,' he says. 'Five you especially like.'

I kick my legs some more until my mother puts her hand near my knees to indicate that I should stop. I desist for a minute because the gesture is so arresting, and she returns her small hand to her lap. When they revive their kicking, she lifts her chin, looks at Dr Kumar and shakes her head almost imperceptibly, but not imperceptibly enough for me not to notice.

Dr Kumar is tall and thin, as if he's shot up overnight, like boys do when they hit thirteen, and although he's an adult, he hasn't grown adult-shaped yet, which is when you grow sideways and puff up. His shoes are suede and beige with rubber heels worn at the edges. It's hard to get over the hairiness of his arms. He has long, flat hands with short, clean fingernails. Thick, spidery lashes surround his bushbaby eyes.

'Lash,' I say, and stop kicking.

'Oh, yes. Lash is a lovely word. I like that one, too. Not if it's a lash from a whip, though.' He laughs, but then frowns and folds his lips inwards. He is no doubt contemplating the appropriateness of this comment. Mental-health professionals are exceptionally concerned with correctness. He's quite young – about the same age as Becca's sister, Amaryllis – and he's more like a woman than a man. I can picture him in a dress and make-up, which you can't say about all men. It's something about the way he moves, in a gentle gliding drift, and the way he blinks and crosses his legs.

'Lash,' I say.

'Yes, you've said "lash". Any others?'

'Lash.'

His head docks and his gaze fixes on me more closely. My legs kick again. I'm not sure why; they just fire up, and off they go. My mother shifts position and pinches the bone on her nose, so I know she is bothered by my behaviour. She grips and un-grips her fingers, then flattens the furrows on her skirt. Her hands are astonishingly talkative, but then so are Dr Kumar's.

'This,' she says to him in a tone I can clearly hear. 'This is what she does.' She smiles demurely and gives him a telling look, as if they've discussed my misdemeanours already.

'If you wouldn't mind, Mrs Jones,' Dr Kumar murmurs, reminding her that he isn't talking to her now, he's talking to me. Then he smiles expectantly, hoping for more of my favourite words. I don't submit any further offerings. Telling him four more isn't going to make him get it. It isn't about choosing five, or having a favourite – it's about the way they sound, and the way they feel in your mouth and in your mind, and if they don't know that by their age, I'm not sure they ever will.

'Health-wise?' he asks, when my legs take a rest, and the seconds of silence become minutes. 'Do you eat well?'

'Depends what you mean by "well". I don't feast on life's delights like some rambunctious king, if that's what you mean.'

'Mmm. Rambunctious.' He nods, keenly. 'That would be one of mine, I think. No, I suppose by "well" I mean "healthily".'

'I eat food that has been chosen for me, like everything else in my life,' I tell him.

My mother's sigh is an irritated one. More a fractious sniff followed by a brisk downhill nostril sweep. I'm clearly being disrespectful and ungrateful, and she is not happy about either of those things. I *am* being honest, though, and she should be pleased about that, at least. Parents are exceptionally concerned with how honest their children are, even though they lie to our faces from birth about tooth fairies, Father Christmas and how babies arrive in bellies.

Dr Kumar considers his notes with a 'Hmm.' He hmms a lot. It must be a psychiatrist thing. I wonder which book he'd give me for my birthday. Something by Oliver Sacks, at a guess, about the uncanny mysteries of the brain. He isn't getting very far with this line of questioning, so he presses his fingertips together and does some doctorly digging. He's trying to work something out. I can tell by the tone of his eyebrows. 'I . . . er . . . I understand you menstruated for a year, from . . . age eleven to twelve, but you haven't had a period for the last. . . For nearly two years. Is that correct?'

I nod nonchalantly. It's awkward talking to a man and a doctor about the period I now don't have. I'm embarrassed, when there's no need to be. I didn't choose to be a female or to menstruate. The word 'menstruate' is misleading – 'struate' sounds like you're forcing something out in a constipated way,

when it flows freely regardless of effort or consent. And why does it have 'men' in it at all?

'Menstruation can often stop after a shock or an ordeal,' Dr Kumar explains, never having menstruated himself and therefore not being the world's leading expert. I don't ask him about his bodily functions so I find it unfair that he can ask about mine.

'What's slightly unusual, though, is that your menstrual cycle began as normal when you were eleven, which was a year after the . . . er . . . incident, you had it regularly for a year, and *then* it stopped.' He pauses, his forehead furrowed. 'Which might suggest . . .'

He doesn't suggest what it might suggest, leaving it open for suggestion. As it's not officially a question, I don't officially have to answer, but he looks at me all the same.

To mask my discomfort, I gaze around his office. It's furnished with two unexciting blue sofas at right angles and a yellow felt armchair, which is slightly more exciting but still somewhat disappointing, on which Dr Kumar is seated. My mother and I are sitting on an unexciting sofa each. Behind him is a scuffed, white desk, a grey net-backed swivel chair, and a computer monitor facing the opposite way so we can't see the secrets on the screen. My mother's unnecessary gift to him – a green ceramic bowl of pointy, plumy and orbicular plants, the names of which I don't yet know – sits uneasily on the edge of his desk. The only books on the shelves are on psychological disorders, childhood development and trauma – no novels, travelogues or biographies – with some titles stacked horizontally across the line of upright spines, which rattles and clatters rowdily in my brain. I feel sad for him and his forlorn bookcase. I hope this is merely a work bookcase, and he has a more satisfying and orderly one at home.

My mother is uncomfortable, I note. On the other hand, Dr Kumar doesn't seem to mind these awkward, wordless pauses. In fact, he creates them. That's also a psychiatrist thing. He goes extensively quiet in the hope I'll elaborate, which I have no intention of doing. As he waits for me to tell him more, I watch rain descend in cold slants onto the asphalt path and think about sentences instead.

The first time I cried over a sentence was when Champ was in the toilet. A book he was reading lay open on the table as I skipped past to get some staples. No one was looking so I leaned over and sneaked a peek. Actually, there were two sentences. I only had time to read those two (I heard the toilet flush) but they were the most beautiful sentences I'd ever read. They made me cry. Not just pooling, welling, eye drops, either. It was as if they squeezed something deep inside me that ruptured my eyes and my lungs to lift and waft into the air above my head.

Waft. Some words you just have to say again and again.

I heard Champ close the toilet door and walked away so he wouldn't see my crumpled face.

I didn't see the name of the book, but I realized then that it wasn't just words that made me feel that way. Words are a sky full of snowflakes, individual and free. But sentences are ribbons tied to a pole, flapping and dancing in the breeze.

From then on, I collected sentences like other people collect keyrings. I searched for them everywhere and wrote them down. Words as well.

See?

'Words as well' sounds so nice. I need to write it down so I don't forget.

*

Later, I'd asked Champ what he'd been reading.

'Gatsby, Twit Face,' he said.

I paused, unsure. 'Is that what it's called? "Gatsby Twit Face?"'

His laugh flicked out like a forked tongue. 'Seriously, how stupid are you?'

I didn't know the answer. Was it a measurement or a number? If someone asks, 'How heavy are you?', you answer in pounds or kilos. If they ask, 'How tall are you?', you say it in centimetres or feet. If they say, 'How clever are you?', the answer might be 'Very clever', 'Quite clever' or 'Not very'. But if you say, 'I'm not very stupid', it means you still are a bit. Does anyone know how stupid they are? Is there a stupid scale? I gawked at Champ trying to work out what to say.

'Ex-actly,' he said, and walked off.

I'm not stupid. If he'd asked, 'Are you stupid, yes or no?' the answer would have been no. But 'How stupid are you?' is an entirely different question.

He's the one who's stupid, because he thought the novel was boring.

I remembered that the sentences were at the beginning of Chapter III, so the next time he left the book lying around, I picked it up and memorized them. Then I wrote them down in my new journal, the one I'd started especially for sentences.

They went like this.

There was music from my neighbour's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens, men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars.

I read it over and over. Slowly. Each time changing the rhythm, and pausing momentarily at a different word. The best places to pause were after 'gardens' and 'moths', but any way you read it, it was beautiful. Summer nights. Blue gardens. Whisperings. Stars.

I wanted to take the book to my wardrobe, but Champ was working on it for a controlled assessment and would have gone ballistic, which has to do with the way things fly so I don't know why it means angry.

I wanted to read the words repeatedly and learn a better life from them.

It's called '*The Great Gatsby*' by the way.

There's no 'Twit Face' in the title.

Just in case you wondered.