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Opening extract from

The Last Kiss of the Butterfly

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1

Here with me.

I would give anything – my breath, my body, my soul, my life, to reverse time; to hold the world with both my hands and spin it gently backwards on its journey round the sun. I would stop it on its axis at the time I am tiny, curled up on your lap while you read me stories about heroines and happy endings in the heat of the day. You hold me until my eyes close, lulled by the rise and fall of your words on the warm summer winds under the shade of the apple tree.

I want to be your heroine now. I would do anything – walk a tightrope over an abyss of fire, wander in frozen wastes without hope of reaching home, sail through unending storms with waves skyscraper high, leap from the Empire State Building, crawl through trenches of mud and blood, allow doctors to dismantle me to donate my organs, immerse myself in liquid nitrogen, drink a potion like Juliet, to change the clock, to disable its momentum.

We're moving slowly through traffic and I'm not taking my eyes off you. On the other side of the glass, which is separating me from the normal world, pedestrians, kids in buggies, dogs, toddlers, stiff mannequins in shop windows, a man slumped in a doorway, half in a sleeping bag, pass by in the soft focus of my outer vision. Some people stare in our

direction. Others look away, not wanting to intrude. Many don't see us at all, their faces vacant, minds on a mission to avoid body contact with anyone else.

Only you are in focus, a short distance ahead, smiling at me, throwing your head back, laughing, surrounded by lavender and sunflowers. The sound of your voice in my ears takes me by surprise, makes me catch my breath. The heavy thing that sits inside my chest, as solid as tree bark with twisted roots, is suddenly pushed up my throat, through my mouth and out into the world. Shards of pain shoot down my abdomen and up my spine.

'Jaz, it's OK.' Dad is holding me tight, trying to soothe me. I am rigid, like a feral creature, trapped in an alien environment, barely breathing, my heart at the point of explosion. My body softens under Dad's touch. The dam behind my eyes breaks and my tear ducts are pumping pure sea water.

'Cry Me A River' is one of your favourite songs. I remember that humans have the same water-to-salt ratio as the sea – nine parts to one. Today, I am your river flowing into an ocean, washed away by the pull of the tide.

I thought if I were strong, strong enough for two, even three, we would win. The brave and valiant Ballantynes. Dad calls us 'the Three Musketeers'. No matter what confronts us, we always 'ride out to face another day'. We're the three permanent sides of the triangle, but the damaged angles have skewed and flexed and changed the shape of us.

Dad must think of a new name now.

We've driven down this road so often, you and me. We usually turn left just ahead and pull into the pay-and-display car park, the start of a shop-fest (if I have my way) or a book-fest (if you have yours). If I close my eyes, I can hear our indicator ticking, like a metronome, keeping time with *The Lark Ascending* on our CD player – your favourite classical piece. I'm longing to feel a swerve as the wheels change direction, to hear you hum the melody, but today we continue onwards, past the round sign displaying a capital P and two more sets of traffic lights. The engine is so quiet, it feels as if we're in a bubble, blowing through other people's lives. Unreal, surreal and real relentlessly entwined.

'Nearly there,' says Dad softly, kissing my forehead. The thorn from the yellow rose I am holding is scraping my skin. The flower is from our garden, freshly picked.

Time is moving us forwards, Mum. There is something else I want to tell you before the bubble bursts and it's no longer just the three of us. When I close my eyes, I am standing in your marshes, under a wide, sun-streaked sky, singing a single note for all eternity.

I am calling you. And you are here with me.

2

'You could stay here with me,' says Mum softly.

'I have to go and let my aggressive tendencies out – and, by the way, I can't breathe,' I reply, my voice muffled by her fluffy, short-sleeved top. Mum wraps her arms around me even more tightly and squeezes.

'I could give that Lioness a run for her money,' she says, pleased with herself.

The Lioness is Sarah, my tae kwon do instructor. She who must be obeyed.

'Er, I don't think so,' I respond, disentangling myself reluctantly from Mum's embrace.

'Rubbish!' declares Mum, flexing a small bicep at me.

'She's a Third Dan,' I sigh, picking up my kit bag.

'That's a strange name for a girl,' quips Mum, pulling a face at me.

For two pins, I would happily curl up with Mum on the sofa and chat some more about my day at school – she loves all the gossip about my mates, 'the Urban Chicks', but I'm supposed to train at least twice a week. And I know that if I go out, Mum will do some more cello practice. She's trying so hard to get back up to standard for the orchestra's next concert. And now she's so much stronger, Dad says I have to 'hang up my angel's wings'

and get back to doing my own stuff.

I don't like leaving her, even so.

'Gotta go,' I say, kissing her on the forehead. She wraps her arms around her slender body, in that way which makes her look so young and vulnerable. But then she snarls like a wild cat and reaches out as if to claw me.

'Very funny,' I say. 'See ya later.' I give her a Korean bow, a mark of respect, which she copies. She's in a funny mood today – mischievous, with a sparkle in her hazel-green eyes.

'Love you,' she mouths through our tall windows as I jog past. She looks beautiful and serene, in a blaze of late afternoon sunshine – like a portrait in the space between the struts of freshly painted white wood.

I wave back and quicken my pace. The Lioness doesn't accept lateness and I'm not in the mood for an extra fifty press-ups – her usual punishment for crimes against courtesy.

'*Hana, dool, set, net*...' I count to try to get my legs into a rhythm, but there's something about the stillness of the afternoon, the lazy hum of the cars near the Heath, the long shadows under the trees, the warm air scented with mown grass, that is intercepting the message from my brain to my muscles.

And the image of Mum in the window is filling my head, superimposed over other memories of her in bed in a room with pink curtains at the end of a long, carpeted hospital corridor, wired up to tubes and monitors, battling

to recover from hours of surgery. And a few weeks before that, holding my hand on our sofa, telling me things which felt like someone was turning out all the lights, one by one.

'Can you be strong, Jaz?' she asked. She should have known that fighting would come naturally to me. When it's a question of survival, your mind and body become your strongest weapons. But in Mum's case, the enemy was within, unseen, hidden in the lining of her stomach wall, her own cells mutating and cloning themselves, forming a malignant mass with a mindset for murder. In terms of launching a counteroffensive, Mum didn't know where to begin. She couldn't even call it by its name.

She told me she hoped it was just a Krispy Kreme doughnut that had got stuck. Dad even managed a small smile at this, but I saw that he was gripping her hand in his so hard that it was leaving white marks on her skin.

That was the day I came face to face with cancer – a year ago this week.

It was also the start of some mega-strops on my part. When I took the tae kwon do oath, I promised to 'build a more peaceful world'. That doesn't include yelling at doctors and kicking bedpans about. I've done both of those things. The trouble is, they told Dad and me to 'accept the things we can't change'. But Mum asked me to be strong, so, from day one, I decided to fight and not to accept. I would grip her hand and order her to squeeze mine really

hard, with all her might, and to keep that feeling running through her body.

Dad's approach has been slightly different. He reads her poetry – all her favourite Shakespeare sonnets, and T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Mum knows them off by heart now. And we loaded her favourite music onto a new iPod – a mixture of orchestral work, soulful jazz solos and those terrible country and western songs she loves, whose lyrics centre on lovers dying of broken hearts, or murdering their rivals, or suffering unbearable loneliness in some desolate town surrounded by desert and one cactus plant.

People say that going through rough times makes you stronger. I'm not sure about that. You wouldn't say that cows benefit from a trip to the abattoir or that war-torn countries recover completely from their wounds. I think I've turned inwards, rooting around for anything that could stop the feeling of freefall. And in some ways, I've become a model student in one specific area.

To the amazement of Bella, Olly and Tasha – the 'Chicks' – I'm a disciple of perseverance, one of tae kwon do's five tenets. I've stayed up late researching cancer treatments on the internet, everything from bathing in kelp and walking over hot coals holding hands with a shaman, to adopting a total detox diet in far-flung private medical centres in America. Dad sometimes appeared in my doorway, bleary-eyed, woken from a deep sleep by me

phoning experts from all over the world in the early hours, explaining my mum's symptoms, asking for information and advice.

'Mr Kenwood is considered to be the top man here for Mum's type of cancer,' Dad assured me, more than once.

'That's what most of the Yanks said too,' I agree. 'Everyone seems to have heard of him.' It was only when Mum said she wanted us all to put our faith in him that I relented.

'We're in the best hands,' said Mum, stroking my forehead, the night before her operation. And fifty-two weeks, one gastrectomy and gallons of chemotherapy drugs later, we still have her with us. And I can stop dreaming about needles filled with epirubicin and cisplatin and tubes dripping fluorouracil into her small frame, stop imagining them pouring like liquid fire through her veins, like phials of Merlin's ancient potions, vanquishing a faceless foe.

Her tests came back clear last month. There is no sign of cancer. That doesn't mean it won't reappear, but Mr Kenwood was 'cautiously optimistic'. So we're not hanging out the bunting, just taking each day at a time, and as the weight of the worry begins to lift slowly, all that's happened is starting to feel like a bad dream. The faster I run, the more positive I feel and the quicker it seems to recede.

I check my mobile. It's 6.20. I have ten minutes to reach the Fitness Factory, change into my *dobok* and join my

class. There's just one more road to cross and a fifty metre sprint and I should just do it. The Green Man is flashing, so here goes.

'*Hana, dool, set, net, tasut, yausut, ilgope, yauldul, ahope, yaul!*' I say out loud. And suddenly, a smile spreads across my face. Bella, my best mate, gets fed up with my outbursts of Korean. But I tell her, as a blue belt, I am a plant which is maturing into a towering tree, growing towards Heaven.

I won't tell you what she says in reply.

3

'*Charyot, kyung-ye!*' cries the Lioness. We move to the edge of the *dojang*, the training space marked out by blue rubber matting. There are four of us and we take up positions, two behind two in the square, ready for the practice of patterns, the sequence of moves which form the basis of tae kwon do.

I should be focused on her commands, but I'm feeling weak with hunger and my mind is drifting to the thought of Dad cooking up a feast in our kitchen, which he manages to do most nights of the week, and especially on Fridays. He has a real affinity with food, claiming it's due to years in charge of camping rations as a young Venture Scout. I tease him that it's his feminine side craving fulfilment. Either way, he's brilliant at it. As if in agreement, my stomach emits a mahousive gurgle and Jo, the red-stripe black belt next to me, stifles a giggle.

'*Taeguk oh chang!*' orders the Lioness, referring to the particular patterns we are to perform, according to our belt status. '*Taeguk oh chang*, Ma'am,' we reply, obediently. Her eyes are searing into me. She misses nothing. I'm glad Emma and Cally, the twelve-year-old black belt prodigies, are in front, screening me. I'm the least senior in this group and the other students, a mixture of white, yellow and green

belts, are sitting in silent anticipation, hoping to learn from us. I must concentrate.

'Remember, Jaz. Tae kwon do makes you strong in your life. You will never be crushed.' The Lioness's words from a year ago echo in my head. I was explaining to her the reason for my kamikaze attack on the punchbag during training, just after Mum's diagnosis. There were times, like when the consultant told us Mum had only a thirty per cent chance of making a full recovery, that I doubted Sarah's wisdom.

'The tenets and the oath will be your backbone,' she encouraged, and she sounded so sure that for a few minutes I felt invincible, like Superman and Buffy rolled into one, ready to take on Mum's disease and smash it into dust.

'*Si-jak!*' the Lioness shrieks and we begin, punching, kicking, turning, retracting, pausing in the air, every movement precise and strong, like a flow of physical poetry. It has taken me two years to get to grips with the patterns. I know it will take a lifetime of practice to perfect them.

I'm not exactly an ideal student, so the five rules of courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit have brought their own challenges, too. Even before Mum got ill, I was a kid with a short fuse and a mahousive temper. For this, I blame the terrible twins dyslexia and dyspraxia, which were diagnosed (category 'mild') after I sat some special tests when I was ten. I was sent to an educational assessment centre after it was clear my school exam papers looked like a dumb rhino had written them. The teachers

said my anger was due to frustration. I was very bright but couldn't articulate well under pressure. They also thought dyspraxia could account for my occasional concentration lapses and clumsy phases.

Shortly after I was labelled with the 'D' words, my frustrations spilled over and my piano's lid shut itself on my teacher's fingers. (Mum confided she always thought him 'too highly strung'. She also grounded me for a week.)

Strange how things turn out. Without the piano incident, I wouldn't be here now. The school suggested to Mum and Dad that my 'aggressive tendencies' might be tamed by a contact sport, so after a little family chat, I was getting kitted out in a white suit with a white belt and attending my first session in this *dojang*.

It worked a treat. Within a month, the kids who had sniggered at me for my school work or for knocking my books off my desk (a fairly regular occurrence) had zipped it as news spread about my combat capabilities. A couple of the 'tough' boys even asked me to teach them some moves. I just made them do press-ups while I put my foot on their backs, enjoying a new feeling – something close to confidence.

'*Kihap!*' we cry victoriously. We finish in synchronicity, standing with weight down into our knees, one arm extended strongly, the other gripped to our bodies. The outburst sounds like 'ketchup' and my stomach gurgles again.

'Louder!' shouts the Lioness. 'Express yourselves with passion.'

Passion fruit sorbet, passion cake, passion fruit soda... Oh God!

'KIHAP!' I utter, the sound exploding from my lungs. As a team, we create a huge roar. Maybe Sarah isn't the only big cat in these parts.



I'm out of my *dobok* and into my trackie bums, T-shirt and trainers in no time, pushing through the glass swing doors of the reception, back onto the pavement in Hampstead High Road, setting off at a comfortable jog. My phone is making sneezing noises, telling me I have two text messages.

The first is from Mum. It's just a row of smiley faces and a kiss. Aw.

The second is from Bella:

'The sun'll come out 2morrow, but only in the Kalahari Desert'

Ever since assembly, when the Head gave us his 'stuff happens and sometimes it's no one's fault' spiel and Miss Simmons waved her baton at us during the final chorus from the musical *Annie*, Bella has been sending me mad 'tomorrow'-related texts – about everything from *Macbeth* to the Beatles.

Idiot. Now I've read this, I've got to stop jogging and send her a reply. Bell says I've got obsessive compulsive disorder. I have to do things in a certain way – like fold up

my sweet wrappers neatly before I throw them in the bin and brush my hair in multiples of three (my lucky number). And I always arrange Mum's tablets – a mixture of enzymes for digestion and vitamins – in size order in the morning. I don't think that's weird. It just helps me to remember all eight. If I don't get them out, Mum forgets. She's useless until about eleven am, so I have to nag.

Bella, who will probably be a psychologist one day, has a few theories about my relationship with Mum. She teases me that I may be envious of Mum's cello because of her 'special relationship' with it. It was her 'first born', according to my demented friend, and so I feel 'displaced' and 'less worthy of her love'. Bell thinks that's why I'm skinny and tall with a long neck and a wide bum. I am trying to 'emulate' the instrument.

I dismiss my genetic freakery by reminding her I'm 'emulating' my Nana Jane, who was a model in the 1960s. If Bell ever wants to wind me up, though, she just has to draw a cello in the air.

Bell's teasing is never serious. Most of the time, she tells me I'm lucky. My mum doesn't put any pressure on me to take up music professionally. She says she wants me to do my own thing, whatever it is, and be happy. Bell's mum, who is a brilliant hat designer, has aspirations for Bella to be an opera singer and go to the Royal College of Music, like her grandmother. Bell's not sure it's for her – this 'chance of a lifetime'.

She knows her mum just wants the best for her, but the pressure to keep getting top grades and to turn up for choral and orchestral practices is a strain. Bell's just happy playing the flute and prancing about in a tutu in her spare time. Her older brother, Adam, is a dancer, too – Bell's whole family is impossibly arty. Her dad Meredith is a historical novelist who thinks he is the incarnation of King Arthur. He calls me the Lady of the Lake because I live near Hampstead Heath. Bonkers, the lot of them!

I'm texting Bella. 'Factor 1000 Desert Cream, because you're worth it,' is all I can be bothered to say. I'm not that quick at it so tend to keep my texts short. We learned about the Kalahari bushmen today in Geography. They can survive temperatures way above scorching. Their skin is tough like an iguana's. Bell wondered if we would all turn into iguanas because of global warming. Our teacher, Mr Cradditch, just looked at her and sighed. And the pathetic boys poked their tongues in and out at her for the rest of the lesson.

No reply. Bell is lost for words, or doing music practice. I love the text frenzies we have. They've kept me sane during the whole cancer scare. She's like a sister, only better, because there's no rivalry between us – except at lunch, when we see who can eat the inedible concoctions in the fastest time. And Bell can burp for England, no contest.

I'm feeling light-headed now, the result of intense exertion and starvation. Usually after training, I feel energised and ready to take on the world. It's been a brilliant battery that has

kept me charged up, even in the dark days of winter when we weren't sure if Mum would make it to Christmas, and in the early weeks of March, when her face was as white as the snow that fell and froze the lake on the Heath.

We've come through it. Luck? A miracle? It doesn't seem to matter. It's June. The evenings are long and light. Mum is into her music again. (I even heard her singing 'Don't Leave Me, Eloise' in the shower this morning.) Dad is his old, chirpy self. He's reverted to galloping out of the flat in the morning, declaring, 'The Three Musketeers ride out to face another day!'

As I jog back up Willow Road I can see Possum sitting on our gate post, washing his face with a white-edged paw. He often waits for me to return from training. His eyes are heavy from all his sunbathing, like a bee drowsy with nectar. He purrs loudly as I reach up and stroke his head. He nuzzles my fingers and arches his sleek, brown back.

'Hey, mog,' I say, rubbing his chest. A moment later, he leaps into the air, trying to pinion a white and blue butterfly, which flutters away evasively, narrowly escaping a grisly end.

Our Head is right. Stuff happens. Two small words which could explain everything, from the meltdown in the Middle East, to why really nice people get sick. I watch the butterfly flitting onto one of our yellow roses and restrain Possum from a further attack. I'm very sensitive about saving lives these days.

And trying to make sure of a happy ending.